

Programa Graduado de Demografía



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P O V E R T Y   A N D   P O P U L A T I O N

T H E   S T R U G G L E   I N   P U E R T O   R I C O

BY: DAGMAR SCHULTZ\*

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\*She studied at the Free University of Berlin and earned a Master of Arts degree at the University of Michigan. Presently she is an analyst at the Office of Economic Opportunity in Puerto Rico.

"IT APPEARS THAT IN PUERTO RICO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS MORE INFLUENCE WITH THE POLITICIANS THAN IT DOES WITH THE PEOPLE."

It is almost axiomatic among liberal thinkers that poor countries cannot achieve significant economic growth when they have to contend with over-burgeoning populations. India and Mexico are examples of place where earnest economic efforts have shown little in the way of real gains because additional mouths have come along and consumed the extra harvests produced by government programs.

Puerto Rico is seriously concerned about economic growth and the efforts that have been made over the past 25 years in connection with "Operation Bootstrap" have accomplished something. In 1940 the per capita income in Puerto Rico was \$121 a year. Today it is \$900. That is a considerable advance but it is still a long way from "affluence."

Family Planning programs have been operative, from time to time, on the island and deserve some of the credit for the economic development that has been achieved. Migration to the mainland has been of some help also but cannot be counted on to solve the population problem in the future. It is the conviction of various civic leaders that the government of Puerto Rico will now have to sponsor a vigorous and continuing program of planned parenthood.

The kinds of obstacles that have stood in the way of family planning efforts in Puerto Rico are similar to those found throughout Latin America and in other parts of the world. It should be useful to review the struggle that has taken place here over the past 40 years and to see what the prospects are for the future.

As early as 1925, Dr. Lanauze Rolón founded a Birth Control League in the city of Ponce for the purpose of disseminating information among the poor. However, the organization lasted less than a year because of public indifference and the opposition of the Catholic Church.

Seven years later a Birth Control League was organized in San Juan and actually opened a clinic which gave contraceptive services to low income couples. Lack of funds and attacks from the Catholic Church put an end to that effort in 1934.

Then the U.S. government established the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration and the first real attempt was made to introduce birth control practice to the great mass of people living in extreme poverty. At that time, officials in Washington became aware that large amounts of federal funds would simply be thrown "down the drain" unless the high rate of population growth could be curtailed.

The Relief Administration organized a maternal health program and operated 67 clinics which provided service to over 10,000 couples in rural areas. But in 1936, an election year, the program was terminated because of pressure from the Catholic Church.

The Catholic hierarchy could not, however, stop civic leaders - who had participated in the previous program - from getting together in 1937 and forming the Maternal Health Association. This organization opened 22 birth control clinics and provided services to 4,000 couples.

In the same year, the Legislative Assembly passed two bills despite the bitter opposition of the Church. One bill deleted from the Penal Code the penalty for publicizing or giving contraceptive services. The other piece of legislation enabled the Commissioner of Health to organize contraceptive services in Public Health Units and Maternity Hospitals of the island.

An upswing in family planning efforts followed, spurred by the enthusiasm of Health Commissioner Dr. Eduardo Garrido, who considered contraceptive programs indispensable in dealing with Puerto Rico's problem of extreme poverty and over-population. Within a year, 122 contraceptive clinics were functioning in public health units and medical centers. Unfortunately the program was not wholly successful because the poor were not quite ready for it and the educational efforts were not strong enough to sufficiently motivate people. Also, the contraceptive methods available at that time were more complicated and less effective than those available today.

Following the success of the Popular Democratic Party in the elections of 1940, a new Health Commissioner was appointed - Dr. Antonio Fernós Isern. Neither he nor the new Governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, were willing to use birth control as a way of curbing the population increase. The public program that had started with great enthusiasm began to gradually wane away.

Female sterilization had become popular on the island, beginning in 1925. This practice has continued to some extent. By 1950, 6,846 women had been sterilized in the general hospital under the control of the Department of Health. The total number sterilized in municipal and private hospitals during this period is not known but is reported to have amounted to 5,427 cases in one year (1949).

#### No Official Program

The next Commissioner of Health, Dr. Juan Pons, was favorable to birth control and advocated the use of district hospitals once or twice a week to perform 50 voluntary sterilizations a day. Shortly after Dr. Pons' statement was published in a local newspaper, El Mundo, he announced publicly that no official sterilization program existed and that he was not in a position to implement such a program.

His reaction was followed - and explained by a declaration, issued by the Governor's public relations assistant, and published in El Mundo:

It is not the policy of the Government of Puerto Rico to try to solve the problem created by the imbalance between the resources and the population of the country by contraceptive means and much less by sterilization. Persons who express views to the contrary, although members of

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this government, speak strictly as private individuals. This government is trying to solve the discrepancy between resources and the number of inhabitants by means of the "battle of production."

The Popular Democratic Party has maintained this policy during the 25 years that it has been in power. And the controversy over poverty and population is still lively today. Arguments appear regularly in the press that the utilization of fertilizers, oceans, and solar energy can provide food for many more millions of people. These science-fiction possibilities do not, however, make today's poor feel less hungry.

Puerto Rico is an island of 3,423 square miles with a population of 2,713,200. About 40% of the land is productive, including steep mountain slopes that are being utilized for tobacco and other crops. The population density is 770 persons per square mile, one of the highest in the world. About 12% of the labor force is chronically unemployed, not including approximately 100,000 youths who neither attend school nor seek work.

The population of the island is growing at the rate of 2.4% annually. Puerto Rico has a high birth rate and a low death rate. Probably the population will double within the next 30 years unless there is a new wave of migration or an effective birth control program.

At present there are 31.8 live births per thousand in Puerto Rico. This is in contrast to recently reported birth rates of 21.2 in the United States, 18.7 in the Kingdom, 18.1 in France, 18.5 in Germany, 20.0 in Italy, 40.6 in Mexico, and 47.7 in Guatemala.

#### Strictly Private

The government of Puerto Rico continues to succumb to the pressure of the Catholic Church and, therefore, regards birth control as a strictly private matter - not a program to be officially promoted or supported. Although the government has maintained this moderate position, the Church has continued to demand the repeal of the "neo-Malthusian" laws of 1937 which authorized contraceptive instruction and sterilization.

During the election campaign of 1960 the Church went so far as to establish a Christian Action Party its purpose being to coerce Catholics into voting against the Popular Democratic Party and Governor Muñoz Marín. Despite repeated declarations on the part of the PDP that the birth control laws were not compulsory but only permissive, the CAP continued its pressures. Archbishop James P. Davis, together with Bishops McManus and Aponte, actually tried to prohibit Catholics from voting for the PDP.

Despite the highly critical attitude of the press and other public media toward a pastoral letter which was read in all church services, the bishops declared:

For a Catholic to vote in favor of the Popular Party is to vote in favor of the anti-Catholic morality proclaimed by the Popular Party, is to vote in favor of the destruction of the Ten Commandments of the Law of God... If the faithful should not heed the warning of the bishops, that is a matter for their consciences, but they... are committing a sin.

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Most of the Catholics in Puerto Rico turned out to be "sinners" when Governor Muñoz Marín, himself a Catholic, captured 788,607 votes compared to 51,295 polled by the Christian Action Party. Included in the CAP total were 3,000 cases of fraudulent registration - found in an investigation called for by the Legislative Assembly.

The experience of this political disaster brought about some degree of moderation on the part of the Catholic Church. Statements made by the San Juan chancery that Catholics were to be refused the sacraments or services of the Church, for having disobeyed the hierarchy's voting instructions, were denied by Archbishop Davis. In 1964, he and Bishop McManus were replaced by bishops native to the island.

#### Government Reluctance

Because of the reluctance of the government to push birth control in Puerto Rico in recent years, it was necessary to bring into being a private organization - the Family Planning Association of Puerto Rico. This group was formed in 1954 by a number of demographers professors, public administrators, and physicians. Research was conducted and educational programs were carried out. The organization distributed contraceptive materials and provided financial assistance for sterilization.

By this time it had become clear that only a vigorous and continuing government-sponsored program, making use of the facilities of the Health and Education Department, could effectively curb the population growth. Therefore the goal of the FPA was to establish a successful program that would convince the government of the need to take action.

In 1956 the Association undertook a research program on oral contraceptives with the help of the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology and Medicine. Later that year, the Sunner Foundation supported a farreaching program of education and service. The generosity of the Foundation made it possible for the FPA to function through 1965. A competent staff was hired, headed by Mrs. Celestina Zalduendo, a social worker who had directed for many years the Welfare Division of the Department of Health.

Various approaches were tried out until, in 1959, the Association departed from the usual clinic set-up. Instead a new method of organization was developed, to serve the most remote localities more effectively.

The island was divided into 20 areas, each consisting of three or four municipalities-including urban and rural sectors. There was a central office and a supervisor for each area. It was his task to recruit volunteers to assist him. In 1961, at the highest peak of the program, about 1,500 volunteers were out talking with people in slums, housing projects, and rural localities about family planning methods. The volunteers distributed contraceptives, primarily a vaginal foam "Emko" which was supplied free of charge by the Sunner Foundation.

The success of this approach was due to the fact that local people were utilized who were themselves interested in family planning and who were not afraid of the Catholic Church. People accepted birth control information much more favorably from members of their own community. And the effect of attacks on the program was lessened because people knew and respected the volunteers who were pushing the program.

The accomplishments of the FPA were impressive. Three years after the launching of the program, some 30,000 couples had received birth control information and services. By 1965 it was estimated that 100,000 men and women were using contraceptive methods as result of FPA efforts. Sterilization operations had been performed on 8,026 women and 3,011 men.

The educational campaign attracted widespread attention throughout the island. Books, pamphlets, and a film were produced and distributed in Spanish - the language of the people.

During all these efforts, there was constant opposition from the Catholic hierarchy. Mrs. Zalduondo said that whenever the FPA would organize chapters "the pulpits would begin to thunder." One priest told his congregation that "a woman with a satanic purpose in mind has been visiting the community." Then he threatened to bar from the church any members who attended birth control meetings.

Since the government of Puerto Rico did not indicate any interest in an official program on behalf of family planning. Mr. Sunnen announced in 1963 that he would withdraw his funds in May 1965. By then the Foundation had contributed a total of \$1,065,970 to the Association.

#### A Limited Basis

Thus the Association started to dismantle its organization. Area offices were closed gradually until only one remained active. The Association has been able to keep going, on a limited basis, with saving from local Sunnen funds and with the help of local contributions. Three demonstration centers are being operated on funds supplied by the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

After 40 years of struggle, the prospects for family planning in Puerto Rico did not look very bright to members of the FPA at the end of 1965. It seemed that President Johnson's anti-poverty program was the only possible source of substantial funds. Thus the Association submitted a proposal to the Office of Economic Opportunity and received a grant of \$402,290 in June 1966.

The new program which has been funded by the OEO will be similar to that carried out previously, with some improvements. The recipients will have access to a wide variety of medically approved contraceptives. After receiving instruction from a nurse, each individual will choose the method he or she prefers and then see a physician. An effort will be made to provide women with at least one yearly gynecological examination, with special attention to the prevention of cervical cancer.

All married couples, including both legal and consensual marriages, will be eligible for the services. Consensual marriages are recognized in Puerto Rico and twelve to fourteen percent of the families are founded on a man and woman simply living together.

#### No Blind Obedience

Considering that 90% of the residents of Puerto Rico have some degree of affiliation with the Catholic Church, it is significant that birth control campaigns have been received favorably in most communities. Studies in social psychology have shown that the influence of organized religion in this field is relatively small and that few people think of birth control as objectionable, even in theory. Almost everyone on the island now knows at least one method of family planning and has little reluctance to use it. The problem in Puerto Rico, at present, is mainly one of keeping people at it once they have started to use some way of controlling pregnancies.

Two factors help to explain the favorable attitude of the population toward family planning. First, only 30% of the Catholics practice their religion seriously - according to Archbishop Davis. Thus there is an absence of "blind obedience" to the Catholic hierarchy, as the 1960 election showed.

Second, where the need is great enough, social change may take place despite organized and rigid opposition. And the need is very great in Puerto Rico. Thousands of impoverished families, little affected by Puerto Rico's widely praised economic upswing, have been doomed to produce child after child - thereby remaining in their miserable living conditions. Mothers who have to cope with life in shacks made of pieces of lumber and metal signs, without any hygienic facilities, are worn out from child bearing and the struggle to stay alive. Employment opportunities for women with many children are considerably reduced.

It appears that in Puerto Rico the Catholic has more influence with the politicians than it does with the people. Eventually the politicians may become aware of the realities and become more responsive to the needs of their constituents. At that point, a large-scale government program of family planning may be brought into being and benefit the masses of the poor who cannot afford to pay for a private physician.

Recently the Department of Health organized planned parenthood services in the Northeast Region of the island (16 municipalities) on the basis of federal funds granted for maternal and child health. The FPA program, funded by the OEO, covers the other regions until the Department of Health finds itself in a position to provide island-wide service. Mrs. Zalduondo has said that it is the fervent wish of the FPA to go "out of business." Perhaps her goal will be realized in the near future if, at last, the government makes a strong and lasting move.

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#### A Better Life

Puerto Rico is regarded as a laboratory where problems of economic and cultural development are being handled in vigorous but non-revolutionary fashion. Leaders from other countries come here regularly for conferences and to see, with their own eyes, what is being done. The family planning efforts, therefore, have significance not only for the island but for other segments of humanity as well.

Puerto Ricans have gained some understanding of the interrelationships between poverty and population during the long struggle that has taken place on the island. It is to be hoped that this awareness will help people to build a better life in the future, both here and everywhere.