

FORUM: PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES AT CRITICAL JUNCTURES

Linked Histories of Welfare, Labor, and Puerto Rican Migration

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On December 13, 1950, the eighteen-year-old Sofía López wrote a letter from Chicago to her mother in Puerto Rico asking for help. López had been institutionalized for three years at a psychiatric hospital and now wanted to be released. In the letter she described her experience being overworked and far from home, saying “it is so sad to work and not make money.”¹ Together, mother and daughter enlisted the help of an aging politician named Simplicio J. Cordero from their hometown of Juncos, Puerto Rico. Cordero wrote to the Puerto Rican resident commissioner in Washington, DC, about López, who had come to the U.S. as a part of a household worker labor program that had been co-sponsored by a private government agency and the Puerto Rican government. She had been “absent for three years having gone to live in Chicago, leaving Puerto Rico on an expedition in which many young girls left the island to work in the houses of families in this state,” he wrote, enclosing López’s own letter and demanding her case be investigated.²

Despite the long and intertwined development of Puerto Rican and United States social welfare institutions, their history has remained underexamined in scholarship on the U.S. welfare state and social work.³ This oversight has obscured the colonial legacy of U.S. social welfare institutions in Puerto Rico and left unexamined the continued unequal treatment of Puerto Ricans under U.S. social policy. It has also failed to provide a full picture of how Puerto Rican migrants were affected by state institutions when they arrived in the continental United States as a part of the mass migration of workers after World War II. Stories like that of Sofía López shed light on such experiences.⁴ They highlight in particular the outsized—yet often overlooked—role of Puerto Rican social workers in this history.⁵ Looking closely at how López engaged with social welfare institutions reveals how new bureaucratic connections between Puerto Rican and United States social welfare agencies were forged after the war, and how they had lasting impacts on Puerto Rican migration in the decades to come.

After 1947, the Puerto Rican government expanded its work promoting and regulating labor migration to the United States through the establishment of the Migration Division of its

¹Her name has been changed. Case File, folder 1, box 2262, Office of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States, Migration Division, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY, New York [hereafter OGPRUS].

²Simplicio J. Cordero to Antonio Fernos Isern, January 25, 1951, 1, box 2262, folder 1, OGPRUS.

³See, for example, Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999).

⁴Recent monographs that examine Puerto Rican contract labor migrations include Jorge Duany, *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Eileen Findlay, *We Are Left without a Father Here: Masculinity, Domesticity, and Migration in Postwar Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC, 2014); and Edwin Meléndez, *Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States* (Columbus, OH, 2017).

⁵See, for example, Emma Amador, “Women Ask Relief for Puerto Ricans: Social Workers, the Social Security Act and Puerto Rican Communities, 1933–1943,” *LABOR: Studies in Working Class Histories of the Americas* 13, nos. 3–4 (Dec. 2016): 105–29.

Department of Labor. Beginning with a state-managed employment agency in New York, the Migration Division soon expanded its work by establishing branches throughout the United States. The program's Social Service Section, which helped Puerto Ricans navigate U.S. social service institutions, was staffed by a group of bilingual social workers trained in the United States, many of whom had previously worked for the Department of Public Welfare in Puerto Rico.⁶ The Migration Division's social workers linked together welfare programs on the island with those in the United States by circulating information about clients and programs in both locations. They also provided a wide range of services to Puerto Rican clients, including offering referrals to social service programs, working as translators and interpreters, and investigating incidents and claims of racial and ethnic discrimination by those seeking assistance.

When Sofia López's case came to the attention of the Migration Division, she was only one of numerous migrant workers who had devastating experiences while participating in the post-war contract labor program for household workers. Participants commonly faced discrimination upon arrival. They were underpaid and sometimes mistreated by employers.⁷ If these women and girls quit their contracted jobs and left the homes where they worked, they were treated as deviants and delinquents by the media and local officials. Some of the workers were later arrested by the police and accused of being prostitutes.⁸ Shortly after López quit her employers' home, she was picked up by police, worked briefly at multiple other jobs, and was committed to the psychiatric hospital after getting into an altercation with some other women. The superintendent at the Chicago hospital said that López's employer had claimed she was "very childish, could not adjust, refused to take orders, and insisted on having things her own way."⁹ Institutionalized at fifteen years old, she became one of many individuals who, because of their race, class, age, gender, or sexuality, often became targets of the disciplinary power of hospitals and social welfare agencies.¹⁰

When workers who arrived as a part of the Puerto Rican government's promotion of labor migration discovered that their labor contracts would not be upheld, many of them walked away from those jobs and organized for labor rights with the support of other Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. Their cause in turn caught the attention of a Puerto Rican social worker named Carmen Isales in Chicago, who had close ties to the Puerto Rican government, and officials at the U.S. Children's Bureau of the Department of Labor. Investigations by both uncovered systematic mistreatment of Puerto Rican workers and breach of labor contracts.¹¹ They also exposed how U.S. police and social welfare agencies had racially profiled, arrested, and institutionalized numerous workers. These investigations in turn were used as a catalyst for expanding the Migration Division, which would later investigate López's case and the cases of others like her.

⁶On social work in Puerto Rico, see Nilsa Burgos Ortiz, *Pioneras de la profesión de trabajo social en Puerto Rico* (Hato Rey, PR, 1997).

⁷On Puerto Ricans in Chicago, see Ana Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (Chicago, 2003); Mérida M. Rúa, *A Grounded Identity: Making New Lives in Chicago's Puerto Rican Neighborhoods* (Oxford, UK, 2012); and Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago, 2012).

⁸Rúa, *A Grounded Identity*, 22–23.

⁹E. F. Dombrowski to Government of Puerto Rico, Department of Labor, May 3, 1951, box 2262, folder 1, OGPRUS.

¹⁰For one example in Latinx history, see Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley, CA, 2012).

¹¹See Rúa, *A Grounded Identity*, 21–3; Maura I. Toro-Morn, "Género, trabajo, y migración: Las empleadas domésticas puertorriqueñas en Chicago," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 7 (June 1999): 102–25; and Emma Amador, "Organizing Puerto Rican Domestic Workers: Resistance and Household Labor Reform in the Puerto Rican Diaspora after 1930," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 88 (Fall 2015): 67–86.

Despite calls for reform, however, the Puerto Rican government continued to promote migration to solve unemployment and bolster their development programs, and workers still faced dangerous conditions in the United States. In response to the crises faced by migrants, workers and their families mobilized to pressure the Puerto Rican government to intervene in cases where individuals were mistreated. Instead of halting these migration programs or completely reworking them, the Puerto Rican government deployed social workers to investigate specific incidents of discrimination. Some of these cases were taken up by the Social Service Section of the Migration Division, which began managing a program of inter-agency services that served as a conduit for information sharing between clients and their families in Puerto Rico. López's Migration Division case file documents her mother's numerous visits to local welfare offices and officials in Puerto Rico, seeking help for her daughter. It also contains the letters that ricocheted back and forth between U.S. and Puerto Rican government offices, between Chicago, New York, and San Juan. Although inter-agency services had existed previously in the United States, these documents mapped unprecedented efforts to bind together U.S. and Puerto Rican social welfare agencies in the 1940s. They represented a robust and expansive new form of colonial state formation in Puerto Rico.

The trips that López's mother made to social welfare officials in Puerto Rico eventually resulted in officials forwarding her daughter's case to the Social Service Section of the Migration Division in New York. The agency decided to send a representative from its Chicago office to visit López in the hospital. Shortly afterward, the agent reported that López did not appear mentally ill and should be released; he added, "I also want to tell you that I don't believe it will be necessary to place her in a hospital in Puerto Rico." She was suffering, he asserted, because she was overworked. Disagreeing with the diagnosis of the U.S. officials, the Puerto Rican agent cast doubt on the objectivity of the U.S. hospital. The Migration Division later pressured the Chicago hospital to release López and arranged transportation for her back to Puerto Rico, funded by the Department of Welfare. The case file does not reveal what happened next to the young woman whose life was so deeply affected by these events. But her story does show that citizens' and social workers' actions and activism—within and beyond the state—sometimes challenged U.S. social agencies.


López's case also shows how, in some instances, social welfare became an important part of regulating labor migrations promoted by the Puerto Rican government. Her story was not an isolated one; as the work of the Migration Division expanded, Puerto Rican social workers investigated more cases like hers. Social workers were, of course, state agents who actively promoted migration, and their work could sometimes be disciplinary and overlook migrants' claims of mistreatment. But many of them became increasingly critical of the Puerto Rican government's promotion of migration as well as the unfairness of U.S. social welfare institutions. Over time, representatives of the Migration Division also became more invested in advocating for and dispelling myths about Puerto Rican youth, a "disproportionate number" of whom, the group's director Joseph Monserrate noted, were "institutionalized for incorrigibility."¹²

In the course of investigating Sofía López's case, and those of others like hers, social workers in the Migration Division developed new forms of social work practice and shaped new relationships between Puerto Rican and United States social welfare agencies. Retracing those efforts illuminates the colonial contours of the U.S. welfare state and the ways in which U.S. colonialism and labor migrations from Puerto Rico are a part of the history of the U.S. welfare state. It is more important than ever today to ask: What would it look like to have a full accounting of the bureaucratic production of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico? It would mean rewriting United States history in a way that grapples with legacies of empire, the causes

¹²Joseph Monserrate, "Puerto Rican Culture (Talk)," 1954, folder 1, box 1, Ana Ramos-Zayas Collection, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies.

and consequences of migrations, and the construction and persistence of social inequalities today. It would mean reckoning with the stories of people caught in the crosshairs of this colonial legacy. These are often devastating stories—of loved ones lost, of unbearable costs, and of the systematic violence of colonialism. Hearing them is absolutely necessary in order to fully understand Puerto Rican and United States history.

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