

# ONE

## Needlewomen under the New Deal in Puerto Rico, 1920–1945

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**D**uring the month of October 1935 Hijinia Cruz machine-sewed cotton underwear, as she had from the time of her first pregnancy five years earlier. She earned what amounted to fifty cents for thirty hours of work spread over a six-day week, or about one and a half cents an hour. Cruz resided in an extended household—with her twenty-four-year-old unemployed husband, three small children, widowed mother, and divorced brother—in Peñuelas, a *barriada* (neighborhood) of Ponce, in the southern part of Puerto Rico. She typifies one major group of Puerto Rican needleworkers—mothers of small children—whose homework proved a necessary, though hardly sufficient, part of the family economy. While her mother owned their three-room house and its lot, the family still had to travel a quarter of a kilometer for water and depend upon kerosene for lighting. Her wage augmented the \$1.50 a week her brother earned as a street vendor. The family also relied upon their two pigs, cow, and four chickens, which probably supplied them with meat, milk, and eggs to trade than with food to eat. Sometimes she had to walk three kilometers to the home of the needlework subcontractor to receive additional work. Hijinia Cruz thought that needlework prices were “lower than ever” following the suspension of the New Deal’s industrial codes under the National Recovery

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Administration (NRA). Like other needleworkers, she believed that homework should be regulated rather than transferred to the factory. "Every worker should be given a fixed quantity weekly for a fixed salary," she told a Spanish-speaking federal investigator.

Sara Agraciani earned sixty cents for her thirty-six-hour, six-day-week, working for the same subcontractor. But while Hijinia Cruz received five cents for a dozen garments, Agraciani earned a rate of twenty cents a dozen. She had to machine-sew, finish by hand, and embroider each piece of cotton underwear. She paid her sixteen-year-old sister sixteen cents a week to help her with the embroidering. As a daughter, rather than a mother, Agraciani represents the other major group of women needleworkers in Puerto Rico at this time. She lived with her fifty-six-year-old father, who earned a dollar a week working on a farm; her fifty-year-old mother; her thirty-six year-old widowed aunt; and her four siblings. Six members of this family read Spanish and three read and spoke English.

Sara Agraciani had to walk five kilometers to reach the Peñuelas home of Casilda Santiago, the thirty-six-year-old married mother of four who served as a subcontractor for R. M. Fernández Suez, a leading needlework contractor in Ponce. Santiago's husband earned six dollars a week as a chauffeur, and she earned one dollar for parceling out cotton underwear to five homeworkers. Generally, she received three times per dozen as much as the homeworkers. For each dozen pieces of needlework she distributed she would pay five cents for machine-sewing, ten cents for embroidery, and twenty cents for all other operations. Like her homeworkers Sara Agraciani and Hijinia Cruz, Santiago owned a sewing machine. Living in her own five-room house that was equipped with electric light and water, the owner of two horses, one automobile, and a radio, Santiago "works very little because she has to take care of the household," reported an interviewer. A subcontractor for a decade, she had witnessed the Great Depression's impact on prices in Puerto Rico, relieved by the NRA codes, which had regulated production, prices, wages, hours, and other conditions for only a short time. For the present, Santiago believed that "prices are so low that there is no margin for a living income no matter what size order you take." She paid her workers a consistent price, depending on how many operations they performed; but while the contractor, Fernández, gave out his work for a rate of sixty cents per dozen to his other subcontractors, Santiago, who had to travel thirty-two kilometers to pick up her work, earned considerably less for her efforts.<sup>1</sup>

These women were among the seventy thousand needleworkers who embroidered, sewed, and finished women's garments in Puerto Rico or served as subcontractors, distributing work to other women, during the early 1930s. Most of these workers lived in cramped and drafty shacks in outlying mountain regions, on sugar and tobacco haciendas, and along the swampy outskirts of towns. Receiving their bundles of work from subcontractors known on the island as *comisionistas*, homeworking needlewomen labored for piece rates equivalent to one or two cents an hour in order to eke out a cash income in an economy that offered them few other opportunities. In the 1930s they became the focus of concern of trade unionists, New Dealers, and women social reformers, who saw them "paying the price for the rest of the world that insists on finding exquisite hand work on the bargain tables."<sup>2</sup> Both to protect mainland jobs and to alleviate economic exploitation, these groups desired to put an end to the homework system and to substitute local workshop centers in the rural regions for this industry. But home needlework was central to the Puerto Rican economy of the 1930s and could not be prohibited without causing severe dislocations.<sup>3</sup>

At this time in Puerto Rico, homework signified not only the gendered division of industry but of social roles as well. Less than 40 percent of the homeworkers were mothers, and single daughters composed about the same percentage. Most subcontractors also were women. The division of labor within households facilitated women's availability for homework. As one observer explained, "During the day the mother will take care of the home—cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the smaller children, while the daughters between 12 and 16 years of age will sew on the garments." The presence of grandmothers or older female relatives in many families also freed the mother to sew. Yet homework existed in Puerto Rico not so much because women preferred such labor but because they had no other choice: employers had organized needlework on the island in that manner. Contributing to this organization was Puerto Rico's economic underdevelopment, especially its lack of roads, which made rural workers inaccessible, and the absence of alternative employment for women. The colonial status of the island also made it possible for U.S. firms to exploit these factors.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines the political and ideological battle over the labor of Puerto Rican women needleworkers under the New Deal. It presents these women as active agents in the construction of their lives and

not as passive objects of government investigators. From the vantage point of Puerto Rican needlewomen, homework was a necessary, albeit exploitative, means of making an economic contribution to the family. Their desire to change the system rather than abolish it put some of them in opposition to island trade unionists who accepted mainland labor's call for prohibition of homework. This challenge to the right of *puertorriqueñas* to do homework in the context of their social role as homemakers reveals the construction of gender identities among women needleworkers in the 1930s under Puerto Rico's colonial economy.

### *Toward a Gendered Political Economy*

The United States occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898 diverted whatever tendency had existed on the island toward nationalist capitalist development in the waning years of Spanish rule. A monocultural export economy, with sugar as the major crop, emerged under U.S. domination.<sup>5</sup> So did the absorption of peasant plots into large landholdings, a marked rise in absentee ownership, and the draining of profits from the island to the mainland. Export production of sugar, and to a lesser extent coffee and tobacco, removed land from the production of food so that by the early 1930s over 80 percent of food was imported. In addition, by 1930 basic necessities cost 8 to 14 percent more in Puerto Rico than in New York City, where wages were four to ten times higher. As families became increasingly dependent on wage labor, and as male employment suffered from the seasonal nature of sugar production while coffee and tobacco cultivation continued to decline, more women became incorporated into the paid labor force. And, as is typical of many Western economies, they entered a gender-segmented labor market, with needlework as its cornerstone.<sup>6</sup>

The origins of the needlework trade in Puerto Rico lay in the commercial crisis brought on by World War I, which forced a halt in the export of finely sewn and embroidered garments and linen from Europe. After the war, immigration restrictions compelled American manufacturers to seek alternative sources of skilled, low-wage labor, which they found in the colonies of the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Since the days of Spanish rule, Puerto Rican women—including those of the urban, more prosperous classes—had learned fine lace and drawn work, in conformity with the traditional European ideology that regarded needle-

work as an appropriate economic activity for women to undertake within the shelter of their homes.<sup>7</sup> Most girls and young women learned to do needlework from older female relatives, but others were trained in Catholic convents or public schools. Beginning in 1909, Puerto Rico's Department of Public Instruction organized classes in crochet, embroidery, and sewing in some of the island's school districts.<sup>8</sup> In 1918, the public schools in Mayagüez adopted a needlework curriculum for all of its schools. But one Chicago department store owner, anxious to increase the import of needlework to the United States, felt that not enough workers could be trained to produce fine work in the quantities and at the low prices needed for the mass market. He therefore relied upon hastily trained workers to produce large quantities of "stamped designs [of] wreaths and sprays of leaves, petals, and flowers." Thus, Puerto Rican women's traditional needlework came to be defined by these conventional designs, many of which were geared to the developing chain-store trade of the 1920s. Most manufacturers, using these designs, contracted Puerto Rican women to embroider women's and children's apparel, handkerchiefs, towels, and household linens.<sup>9</sup>

United States firms supplied garments, usually precut with designs already stamped onto them, to contractors to distribute to home sewers and embroiderers. Some contractors ran workshops as well. A few mainland firms set up operations in Puerto Rico, while some sent a representative to the island with cut garments, to act as a contractor until he retrieved finished goods from homeworkers. Mayagüez, with its thirty or forty contractors of "recognized standing," became the center of the industry, with Ponce and San Juan as the other distributional points. Because many of the homeworkers lived in isolated rural regions, the contractor would often hire subcontractors to distribute the piecework and collect the finished garments. Work was irregular and contractors preferred spreading it out in small batches. NRA investigators understood that "the industry in Puerto Rico dealt only in labor—it never owned the goods received and had no problem of selling the finished article." Moreover, as Caroline Manning discovered in her 1934 study for the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, "there was no standard agreement that controlled the agents' business arrangements with the home workers. Whatever they could make for themselves they did." With contractors and their agents keeping from 12.5 percent to 33.5 percent of the price given by the mainland firm, homeworkers could receive



as little as 55 percent of the price per dozen. At an extreme, agents withheld pay or reimbursed laborers with food or other goods, sometimes even forcing homeworkers to buy items at a "company store."<sup>10</sup>

The organization of the needlework industry thus reflected the dependent status of Puerto Rico, its place as a nascent "off-shore" production facility for the mainland industry, and its position as a cheap colonial labor market for U.S. manufacturers. The nature of needlework production in Puerto Rico further developed out of the struggle between workers and employers in the context of growing socialist and feminist movements. During the first decades of the century, working-class women fought for universal suffrage, conducted strikes, and actively debated class concerns. The bourgeois suffragists of the Liga Femenina de Puerto Rico lobbied for restricted suffrage in part to keep the vote away from those, like many needlewomen, who were poor and potential Socialist Party supporters. The Socialist Party counteracted by founding the Popular Feminist Association in 1920. Meanwhile, although labor and reform supporters gained a minimum-wage law in 1919, this was a hollow victory for needleworkers for the law excluded tobacco strippers and homeworkers, the most oppressed of all women workers on the island. About 75 percent of needlework employers responded by closing factories and parceling out the work to homeworkers. Early struggles against economic exploitation increased the amount of homework as employers attempted to circumvent workers' demands.<sup>11</sup>

With the coming of the Great Depression, needlework prices in Puerto Rico declined further since manufacturers could get work produced on the mainland for two cents an hour and also avoid extra freight charges, delays, and the cumbersome contractor system on the island. The Puerto Rican Socialist Party, part of a coalition government with the Union Republicans, the employers' party, introduced legislation to regulate home needlework in 1933. But it backed down when its coalition partner objected that regulation would lead to greater unemployment and hurt families dependent on the labor of homeworking women.<sup>12</sup> Though the state failed to aid them, Puerto Rican needlewomen protested Depression-era cuts in pay. In August 1933 the needlewomen of Mayagüez, both home and factory workers, struck. "[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," the socialist paper, *Unión Obrera*, re-