

Primary Source Packet

1. Quantitative Evidence, 1920-1940 Census

The census of the population is an important source for the study of women in society. Comparing census data over long periods of time allows us to see changes in patterns. This data shows, for example, that the number of women in the work force almost doubled from 1920 to 1940, and also that the number of women doing needlework at home more than tripled during the same period. Notice also the change in numbers of women working in needlework factories. Contrasting the growth of women working in needlework with the decline of women working in tobacco suggests that women's work was moving away from agricultural work, and towards manufacturing work.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth census of the United States taken in the year 1920, Volume IV, Population, Occupations Report*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921-1923.; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Censo de Puerto Rico: 1935: Poblacion y agricultura*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938.; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth census of the United States taken in the year 1940*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941-1943.

Compiled Census Data:

Women over the age of ten working in needlework or tobacco stripping, 1920-1940

	1920	1935	1940
Women in labor force	86,462	138,707	147,560
Female needleworkers at home	12, 650	49,587	45,732
Female needleworkers in factories	3,568	16,771	15,183
Female tobacco strippers	8,573	10,709	2,424

2. Quantitative Evidence, 1940 Census

This particular census table describes the types of jobs done by men and women. It illustrates how roles are assigned on a gendered basis. After the Great Depression of 1929 the world economy was in crisis. The United States promoted agriculture to improve the economy and the lives of its citizens. Puerto Rico, as part of the insular possession of the United States, was included in this plan. Thus, an economic plan was implemented to increase the agricultural output of the island. The sugar and tobacco industries became the main source of labor. Men usually worked in the fields while women did other tasks in the factories, such as rolling tobacco leaves.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth census of the United States taken in the year 1940*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941-1943.

TABLE 3. Employment status of persons 10 years old and over, and principal industry groups of employed workers, by sex, for Puerto Rico: 1940

(Preliminary figures)

Employment status and industry	Total	Male	Female
<u>Population 10 years old and over</u>	<u>1,337,163</u>	<u>668,200</u>	<u>668,963</u>
In labor force	607,714	460,154	147,560
Percent of population 10 years old and over	45.4	68.9	22.1
Employed (except on public emergency work)	516,730	385,583	131,192
On public emergency work	24,111	23,259	852
Seeking work	66,873	51,357	15,516
Experienced workers	46,886	36,012	10,874
New workers	19,987	15,345	4,642
Not in labor force	729,449	208,046	521,403
<u>Percent distribution</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>
In labor force	85.0	83.8	88.9
Employed (except on public emergency work)	4.0	5.1	.6
On public emergency work	11.0	11.2	10.5
Seeking work	7.7	7.9	7.4
Experienced workers	3.3	3.3	3.1
New workers	516,730	385,538	131,192
<u>Employed (exc. on pub. emergency work)</u>	<u>516,730</u>	<u>385,538</u>	<u>131,192</u>
Agriculture	229,754	223,613	6,141
Sugar-cane farms	124,076	123,041	1,035
Tobacco farms	18,323	16,684	1,639
Coffee farms	25,770	25,055	715
Other farms	61,585	58,833	2,752
Construction	15,963	15,892	71
Manufacturing	102,286	37,357	64,929
Sugar mills	19,539	19,364	175
Tobacco manufactures	6,023	3,599	2,424
Needlework at home	46,217	485	45,732
Other textile mill and fabricated textile products	16,951	1,768	15,183
Other manufacturing industries	13,556	12,141	1,415
Transportation, communication, and other public utilities	20,250	19,570	680
Trucking service	4,221	4,205	16
Other transportation	13,288	13,116	172
Communication and utilities	2,741	2,249	492
Wholesale and retail trade	53,764	47,075	6,689
Domestic service	44,189	6,956	37,233
Government	12,567	10,796	1,771
Other industries, and not reported	37,957	24,279	13,678

3. Photograph, Needleworker

This photograph illustrates a home needleworker in the streets of San Juan around 1903. At this time, and afterwards, almost all needlework was done at home. Working at home allowed women to negotiate their own contracts with agents, who commissioned certain types and styles of work. In the best situations, a talented worker could command a salary commensurate with her skill. In the worst situations, an agent could exploit women workers. Compare the working conditions here with other sources showing women's work in factories in the 1930s and 1940s.

Source: Martínez-Vergne, Teresita. *Shaping the Discourse on Space: Charity and Its Wards in Nineteenth-Century San Juan, Puerto Rico*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1999.



4. Photograph, Workers' Celebration

When Americans arrived on the island, the labor movement in Puerto Rico was in its infancy. Labor leaders were aware of the reputation of the U.S. labor unions, so they worked to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as early as 1899. Local labor unions adopted the celebrations and rituals of similar unions in the United States and around the world. Thus, it is not surprising to see Puerto Rican workers, including women, celebrating Labor Day in 1918. In the wake of their colonial status under a new power, Puerto Rican workers struggled with new political developments and this kind of celebration was used as a vehicle to remind them of the union's commitment to the cause of the working class. This photograph depicts a tobacco stemmers (*desapilladoras*)

union. Notice that the banner contains words in English, which may indicate their affiliation with U.S. labor unions.

Source: Gonzalez, Lydia Milagros, and Angel G. Quintero-Rivera. "Tobacco strippers celebrating Labor Day." 1918. Vol. 1 in *La otra cara de la historia: La historia de Puerto Rico desde su cara obrera*. Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: CEREP, 2000.



5. Magazine, Eleanor Roosevelt

After her trip in the Caribbean in the summer of 1934, Mrs. Roosevelt, who had a column in the magazine *Women's Home Companion*, recorded her impressions of Puerto Rico, including the island's people and culture. She assessed the precarious living conditions of the islanders, and the impact of the Depression. Mrs. Roosevelt also highlighted the role of Puerto Rican women in the labor force. The First Lady describes the needlework Puerto Rican women do at home as beautiful, but underpaid. She claims that factory needlework provides fair wages. Compare that claim with other sources.

Source: Roosevelt, Eleanor. "Our Island Possessions." In *Woman's Home Companion*. Oct., 1934.

MRS. ROOSEVELT'S PAGE OUR ISLAND POSSESSIONS

MANY TIMES I wonder whether the people of the United States have any real interest in our insular possessions. I doubt if many of us even know that we own the Virgin Islands

or Puerto Rico or Hawaii. We do realize the Philippines are in our possession chiefly, I think, because we have disagreed so much as to whether they ought to be given their freedom or not; and I think it is generally realized that we control the Canal Zone, particularly since the fleet came through!

Occasionally when our navy planes make a flight to Hawaii someone says, "I suppose we do have some interest in that island in the Pacific." A few people every winter take a trip to Puerto Rico or the Virgin Islands and discover that they do not have to have passports, but even so, few of us fully take in the fact that these islands are a part of the United States of America and that what befalls them and their people is of great interest to us as American citizens.

Last winter I took a trip by air, leaving Miami early in the morning, spending a night in Haiti and arriving at three o'clock the next afternoon in the Virgin Islands after stopping only for a few minutes in Puerto Rico. I had been told that the Virgin Islands had been costing our government each year a little more until finally Congress had become convinced that it would be more economical to spend enough to rehabilitate the people and try to make them self-supporting. They have, therefore, begun to work out a real plan.

THE POPULATION of these islands is partly white and partly colored. The last owners were Danish and many of the customs and habits are those inherited from Danish rule and many, many of the people have been accustomed to turning to the government or to the heads of big plantations for complete guidance and care. So the first thing that needs to be done is to build up a sense of self-reliance and initiative.

On landing at St. Thomas, which is on the whole the loveliest of these islands, we drove over a road made by C. W. A. labor to the top of a mountain where we could look down on the sparkling green water of the bay beyond. There are beautiful beaches for bathing on St. Thomas and apparently sharks do not frequent the waters, at least near the shore, for I bathed there the following morning without receiving any warning as to these dread animals.

We visited the hospital for children, held a meeting of the women in the school, went to the operative stores which will, I think, be more successful as the workers get better teaching, then drove off to what will shortly be a new hotel. It is being erected in a most charming spot, on top of a steep hill where the old tower known as Bluebeard's Tower looks across at another hill where Blackbeard's Tower stands... Bluebeard's Tower is being preserved so visitors may walk to the top and get a view of the harbor. The hotel is being built around three sides of a square. The dining room is to have a porch for dining *al fresco*. I can hardly wait to go down and stay in this hotel and I hope that the methods of travel both by air and by water will shortly be improved so that a trip to St. Thomas will be a pleasant winter holiday, financially within the reach of anyone of moderate

means.

THERE are two other islands within easy reach of St. Thomas: St. John where the bay trees grow which once produced the bay rum our fathers used, and St. Croix. We visited St. Croix which has two small towns and some agricultural land, flat and not as interesting but more productive. Here agricultural and housing experiments are being tried.

On the third day of the trip I visited Puerto Rico. If you want to know anything of this island and its people you must spend several days there, and you will enjoy all these days and wish you could stay longer for its scenery is beautiful and varied. Mountains, rich valleys, seashore and plains are all combined in an island one hundred miles long and thirty miles wide. Puerto Rico has a better rainfall than the Virgin Islands and we hope that the frequent hurricanes of the past three years are not going to continue for hitherto she has only suffered occasionally from these. They have done a great deal of harm, practically ruining the coffee plantations and citrus and coconut groves.

On this account many Puerto Ricans have gone from the rural districts into the outskirts of the cities where dangerous slums have been formed. The population of about 1,600,000 people cannot be fed by what is produced on the land no matter what improved methods of agriculture are instituted. We are at last waking up to the fact that a long term plan must be made for this island and it is at present being worked out, including all the government departments concerned and a committee of Puerto Ricans themselves.

There are questions of education and questions of health and economic questions that we could discuss at length, but the industry which largely employs women will probably be of primary interest to the women of our country. This is the needlework industry. In some districts even little girls in the school are never without their needlework. When the women are not doing housework and as soon as a little girl has eaten her lunch between school sessions, this handwork is taken up. To make it more profitable, the women should be taught to work with more exactness and perhaps with greater perfection and detail, although many of them do very beautiful work now. A few of them who work in the factories earn fair wages, but for sewing done in the home they are paid absurdly low wages. For drawing threads and cutting a dozen handkerchiefs out of a piece of cloth, a woman receives one and one-half cents a dozen; for whipping the edges and doing a small embroidered design in each corner, a woman receives three cents per dozen.

The finished handkerchief is sold for seven cents a dozen in a retail shop in the United States. The material used is so poor that it will certainly not last as long as would a machine-made handkerchief of slightly better material. Another example is the nightgowns scalloped on neck and sleeves with a hand-embroidered design and hand sewn seams.

A woman receives two dollars a dozen for these and spends two weeks making them. The manufacturer sells them to a distributing agent in United States for somewhere around eight dollars a dozen and you buy them from a department store for one dollar and ninety-five cents each, twenty-three dollars and forty cents a dozen.

THE STANDARDS of living in Puerto Rico are low. The population is increasing rapidly. This island is closely tied to our country the people are constantly coming here to establish themselves and we are sending some of our own people to Puerto Rico to work and live on the island. Therefore, let us take a more intelligent interest in our beautiful possession with its possibilities for a happy people who unfortunately have been buffeted by nature and exploited by man. So women let us think a little about our future citizens in all these islands and try to bring about wherever our flag lies conditions of which we can be proud.

6. Official Document, Women's Employment

The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was a New Deal response to the Depression to stabilize and energize the economy of the United States. One function of the NRA was to set industry standards for products, production methods, and wages. The codes developed for U.S. garment workers were applied to Puerto Rico in July 1933, and by August there were already major strikes.

The code had very negative effects in Puerto Rico. Home needleworkers had previously been paid by the number and quality of pieces they produced, and were contracted by intermediate agents. Under the U.S.-imposed codes, the structure remained the same, only workers were paid by the hour. A major shift occurred, as needlework was no longer considered skilled labor, or the work of artisans, but rather unskilled labor. Recognizing the failure of the code and danger of strikes, the report below was commissioned to try to find ways to adapt the codes to the local situations of Puerto Rico.

Source: Manning, Caroline. "The Employment of Women in Puerto Rico," *Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 118*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934, p. 20.

FACTORY EMPLOYMENT IN THE NEEDLE TRADES

Before the World War the needle-trade industry in Puerto Rico was of little importance, but since that time it has doubled and in some lines it has trebled in value. Even in the present depression, shipments of cotton garments to the mainland increased from 1,382,000 dozen in 1932 to 2,264,000 dozen in 1933.⁴

The Cotton Code Authority calls attention to the fact that this development was particularly marked in the last months of the year after the N.R.A. code for the cotton garment industry became effective on the mainland.

With this gain in production there has been an increase in employment. The census of 1920 showed roughly 16,000 in the cotton garment industry; the census of 1930 showed 40,000. In each case it was estimated that not over a fourth of these were employed in factory work, the great majority—over 75 percent in 1920 and over 80 percent in 1930—being home workers.

The past 18 years has witnessed a great change in the quality of work shipped from Puerto Rico. As most of the garments have grown coarser and cheaper the work too has become poorer. Eighteen years ago the needle work was fine, but today much of the commercial embroidery is inferior. From the workers' point of view there is justification for this. In the "palmy days" of 1920-21-22, the home workers often earned as much as \$1 a day, occasionally \$1.50, but now if they earn 10 cents a day they do well and the time and incentive for nice work are things of the past. With this mushroom development of the needlework industry workers have been recruited who have had little experience and have but slight skill in handling the needle, and the industry has been too busy to train employees. The managers have taken whom they could get, and whereas formerly all the work was done in the towns, it now is scattered in the country districts and hills. The loss in production time in having it so scattered is said to vary in some small lines from 4 to 6 weeks.

Thus far in this report, emphasis has been laid on home work in the needle trades, because it seems to overshadow most other lines of women's employment both in abuses and numbers involved. However, the establishments that are distributing centers for the home work usually have a few inside employees engaged in laundry operations, stamping, examining, sorting, and so forth, and the following is a brief analysis of the current wages of factory workers in the five most important branches of the needle-trade industry.

⁴ Monthly Summary of Foreign Commerce of the United States, pt. II, December 1933, p. 61. U. S. Department of Commerce.

7. Newspaper, Needle Worker Strike

This is an excerpt from article published in the newspaper, *La Democracia*. This article shows how the labor press was an important source of information for the working class. The use of the press created a sense of solidarity among the workers on the island and around the world. In this article, the needleworker women's union and local employers failed to reach an agreement in salary negotiations. When no salary agreement was reached, employers set a fixed rate which the union felt was inadequate, so the women voted to strike. Women organized into unions to strengthen their power to demand better working conditions. Notice that other unions from around the island supported the needleworkers in Ponce by also striking.

Source: "The women needleworkers in Ponce decide to go on strike." *La Democracia* (Puerto Rico). February 27, 1934.

THE WOMEN NEEDLE WORKERS OF PONCE AGREE TO GO ON STRIKE They reject the salary minimum of \$1.50 and fixed maximum of \$3.50.

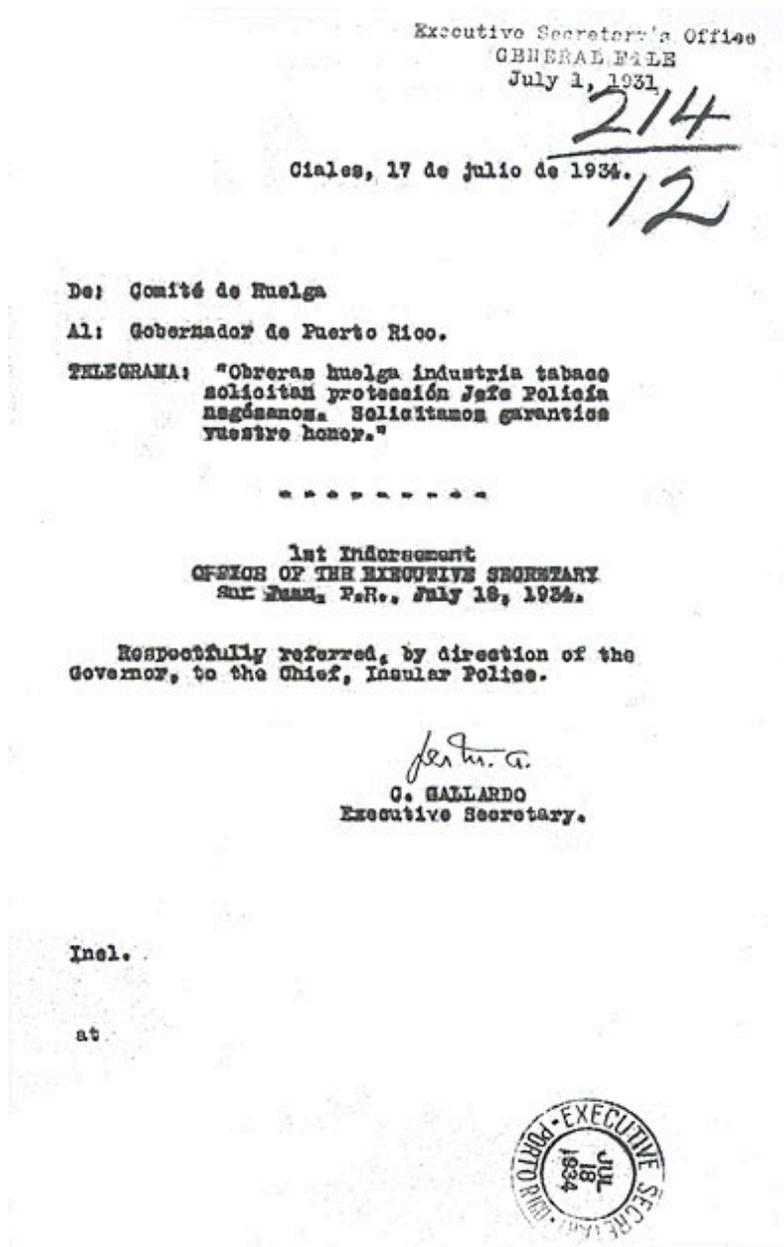
Ponce, February 4. The President of the Local Needle-workers Union, Ms. Clara Marta Concepción, in a meeting that took place last Thursday in the City Hall of Ponce, after it was made public that the Needle Industry has fixed salaries at a minimum of \$1.50 and a maximum of \$3.50, announced that the union along with others from the island had agreed to strike beginning on this coming Monday (today).

The goal of the strike is to protest the new salaries that it appears will be definitely approved this coming Wednesday.

8. Official Document, Women's Union Telegram

That women in significant numbers were active participants in the Puerto Rican labor movement of the 1930s did not escape the attention of the government. Women's unions demanded their rights through political channels as well as protest and striking. Of note is the political play the women used in first appealing to the Chief of Police, and then to the Governor, both of whom were appointed by the U.S. government. The telegram indicates that the strikers feared that the police were siding with the tobacco industry and failing to protect female strikers. Government interest in the activity of women's labor is also indicated by the fact that the telegram sent to the Governor was then copied to the Chief of Police one day later.

Source: Strike Committee (Puerto Rico). Telegram to Governor of Puerto Rico. Ciales, July 17, 1934.



Translation:

Ciales, July 17, 1934.

From: Strike Committee

To: Governor of Puerto Rico

TELEGRAM: "Women workers of the strike against the tobacco industry seek

protection. The Chief of Police denied it to us. Your Honor, we ask you to guarantee it.”

1st Indorsement OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY San Juan, P.R., July 18, 1934.

Respectfully referred, by direction of the Governor, to the Chief, Insular Police.

G. GALLARDO Executive Secretary.

Incl.

9. Official Document, Police Letter

This letter documents the government's continued concern about women striking, as the Chief of Police for the Island reports new labor strike figures to the Governor. In this case, 638 women working as tobacco strippers went on strike. Also on strike were 300 sugar cane workers, most likely men.

Source: "Re: Strikes." Memorandum to the Governor of Puerto Rico. July 15, 1936.

S. P. Form #12
1936

GOVERNMENT OF PUERTO RICO
INSULAR POLICE
HEADQUARTERS

2/11
RECEIVED
1936
J. B.
PUERTO RICO

RECEIVED BY THE CHIEF OF POLICE
SAN JUAN, P. R.

3/229

July 15, 1936

MEMORANDUM FOR THE HONORABLE THE GOVERNOR OF PUERTO RICO

Re: Strikes



S i r :

On the 13th instant, in Hatillo, three hundred cane laborers went on strike demanding fulfillment of the sugar industry agreement.

In Bayamón, 638 women tobacco-strippers continue on strike demanding increased wages.

Respectfully,

RS

ENRIQUE DE ORBETA
Chief of the Insular Police

10. Photograph, Sugar Cane Workers Strike

After the United States's occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, agricultural production shifted from a diverse model of production to a mono-agricultural model of growth, where sugar was the main crop. American companies' preference for cultivation of sugar over coffee and other crops broke with a long tradition of coffee *haciendas* or plantations. The growing number of sugar plantations owned by American companies displaced the *hacendados* or plantation owners from their land and power. At the same time, the focus on sugar increased labor demand, and sugarcane workers eventually composed the majority of the labor force in the island. As the demand for sugar products increased, working conditions deteriorated. For the workers, low wages, extended shifts, and poor working conditions were common features of the new economic order. Confrontations between the workers and sugar plantation managers were also the order of the day.

Workers resorted to strikes as a strategy to make their demands heard. Hundred of strikes, in which women were prominent participants—like this sugar cane workers strike—were organized during in the first 30 years of the United States's occupation.

Source: González, L.M. and A.G. Quintero-Rivera. "Sugar cane workers on strike." In *La otra cara de la historia: La historia de Puerto Rico desde su cara obrera*. Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: CEREP, 2000.



11. Photograph, Tobacco Workers

In addition to sugar, tobacco was important to Puerto Rico's industrial agricultural order after the arrival of the United States. Puerto Rican women and men labored in a building

called a *fabrica* (or factory). Women's jobs consisted of being seated for long hours rolling tobacco leaves—as visible in this 1945 photograph of women working as tobacco-strippers in a factory.

In addition to being the center of production, the tobacco factories served as center of gathering for both men and women to discuss many issues. Since rolling tobacco leaves is a tedious job with long hours, the workers did not have much time for relaxation. Thus, in their eagerness to learn and receive instruction while they worked, tobacco strippers established the tradition of hiring the *lectora* or *lector* (the reader), whose task was to read from newspapers and classic literary works to the workers while they performed their tasks. The workers paid the reader, who in many instances was a female.

Source: Picó, Fernando. "Tobacco-stripper women in the factory." 1945. In *Historia general de Puerto Rico*. Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1990.



12. Official Document, Sterilization

Thirty years after Mrs. Roosevelt visited the island of Puerto Rico, working women were still subject to exploitation in the industrial setting, in particular, coerced sterilization. In this excerpt from a meeting between the Governor of Puerto Rico Luis Muñoz-Marín and his cabinet, one of his advisors informed him that in some companies sponsored by the government women were hired only if they agreed to undergo surgical sterilization. The governor ordered a complete investigation. This push for coerced sterilization was in part prompted by concerns about population growth, but it also raises questions about racial discrimination, and whether working women have been forced to cede their reproductive

rights in order to secure their participation in the labor force.

Source: "Cabinet Meeting Decisions" (Puerto Rico). Oct. 6, 1960.

CONFIDENTIAL CABINET MEETING DECISIONS, OCTOBER 6

1. Prepare statistics on the government revenue collected by taxes with revenue from the decade of 1930-40, and also the savings resulting from when the Republicans lowered the salaries of teachers and other public functionaries.
2. Compare the 1940 budget made by the PER with the 1941 budget made under the PPD.
3. Sierra will write an explanation on the diverse methods of collecting statistics about unemployment and how the system used in Puerto Rico differs from that used in the United States.
4. Sierra will send facts about unemployment among 4th year graduates.
5. Cancio will report on the laws that cover sterilization.
6. [Department of] Health will report on what has been the practice and regulation of this issue [sterilization] and the ways to provide information on contraceptives, specifically on who to give it to.
7. The Department of Justice should prepare legislation prohibiting job discrimination against un-sterilized women.
8. [Department of] Justice will prepare an amendment to the Law about electoral funds so that rich candidates cannot spend their own funds in excess of \$300.
9. Agriculture will send many facts to refute the allegation that the PPD has abandoned and persecuted agriculture.
10. Moscoso will send statements of experts to the sugar industry claiming negligence on the part of Puerto Rican sugar producers in not dedicating more funds to investigation efforts.

Rafael Torrogrosa

Following are some of the issues that arose or were mentioned in debate:

1. The argument of the PER that they did not have sufficient funds in their 8 years of governing.

The Governor indicated that the PER has been using this argument as an excuse for what happened during their time in government. The counterarguments are they had more money in special funds than they claim, and furthermore, they didn't collect what they could have from personal income taxes. He asked for statistics on the government revenue collected through said taxes and also about the savings resulting from when they lowered the salaries of teachers and other public functionaries.

As a demonstration of the way in which one could govern favoring economic

development and protecting the poor, he mentioned that it would be interesting to compare the revenue made in 1940 by the PER and the 1941 revenue under the PPD.

2. Unemployment

Ferré alleges that there are currently 90,000 unemployed, and the Governor asked about the certainty of that number. Sierra said that allegation was false, and explained the many ways of collection statistics on unemployment and how the system used in Puerto Rico differs from the system used in the United States. The Governor asked him to write an explanation on this topic.

He also asked Sierra for facts about unemployment among 4th year graduates, because he had the impression that these young people had the least opportunities for work, and for that reason, they emigrate.

3. Sterilization

The Governor asked Moscoso about the allegation of Ferré that some of the industries of Cayey refused to employ women that were not sterilized. Moscoso informed him that the Industrial Association has proposed to respond to Ferré in the newspapers.

Independently of what the Industrial Association does, the Governor asked Cancio for a report on sterilization laws, and Salud for a report on the practice and regulation on this issue. Salud should also report on ways to gain information on...