

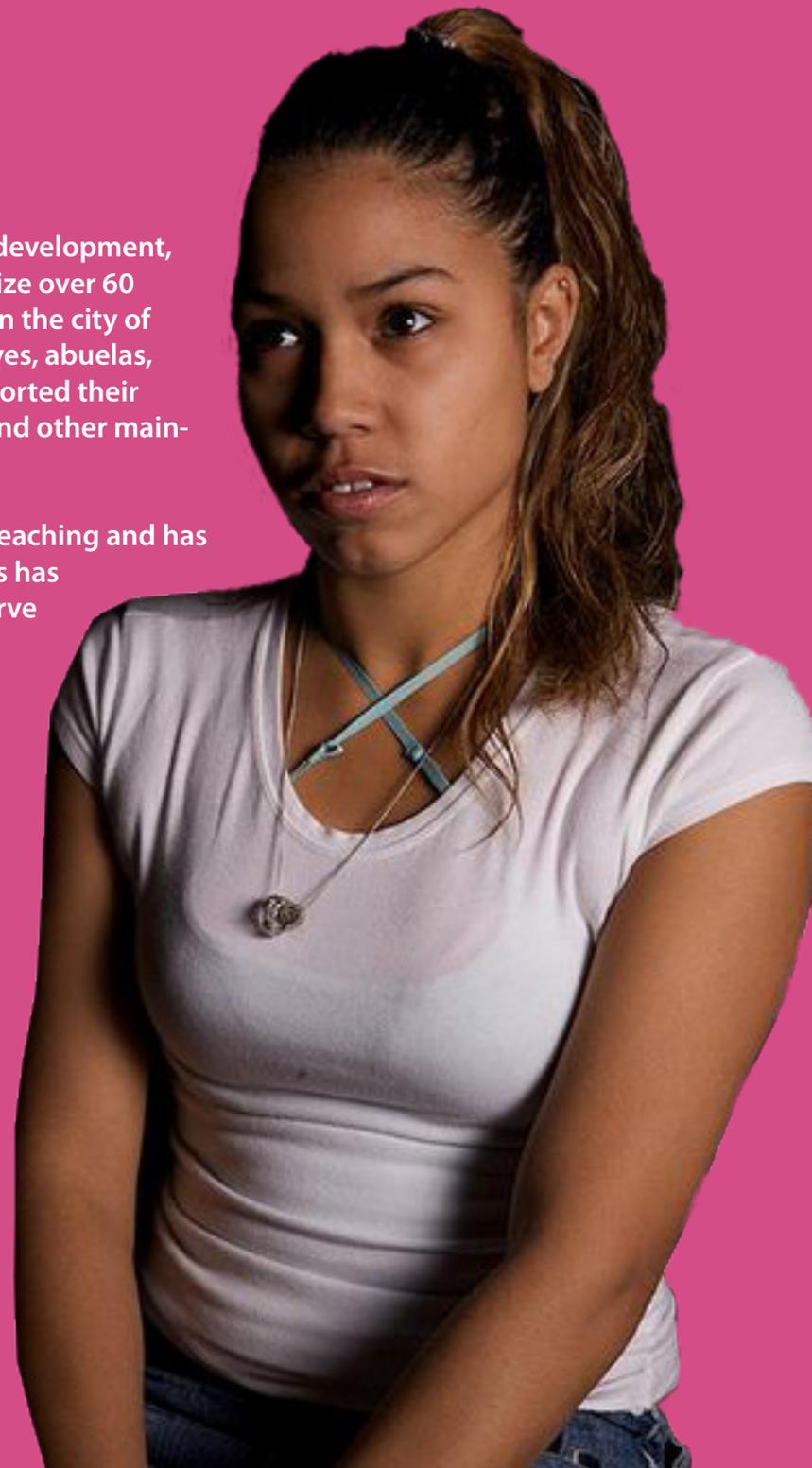
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WOMEN

Family and Community - Puerto Rican women have been a major force in the history, development, and growth of Chicago's Puerto Rican community. In fact, it is very difficult to summarize over 60 years of community involvement, struggle, and participation by Puerto Rican women in the city of Chicago in just a few pages. Puerto Rican women have labored quietly as mothers, wives, abuelas, tias, and other roles. Within a multiplicity of family arrangements, they have also supported their families in Chicago and transnationally, creating links between Chicago, Puerto Rico, and other mainland communities.

Puerto Rican women's involvement as community members and leaders has been far reaching and has cut across many social arenas, including public life. For example, Maria Antonia Berrios has represented the 39th District since 2003, becoming the first Puerto Rican woman to serve in the Illinois House of Representatives. Today, Iris Martinez, Senator for the 20th District, exemplifies Puerto Rican women who occupy important political positions at the state level. Puerto Rican women have also had an impressive history of political participation at the level of city politics.

Historically, Puerto Rican women were important players in the early stages of community formation. A member of the Puerto Rican Agenda since its inception recalled how Puerto Rican women in Chicago founded church groups to help address problems faced by Puerto Ricans. She noted that the women started "Las Damas del Sagrado Corazon / Ladies of the Sacred Heart," and then the young women formed "Las Hijas de Maria / The Daughters of Mary" to resist unequal treatment by local Catholic churches, many of which only allowed Spanish language worship during off hours outside the sanctuary. She continued, "Women, like my mom—I thank her so much—rebelled about being stuck in the basement...There was a certain activism that was born because of that." As the community grew, women were also at the forefront of key community issues dealing with education, work, and other social issues. As another female Agenda member put it, "having someone in your family who has been in prison or has dropped out of school, it affects you personally...I think it drives the work that we do here because we may have it in our family or we see it in the work that we do and we know we have a responsibility."



Puerto Rican women have also left their mark in Chicago as founders of community groups and supporters of key organizations. The activism of the 1970s and 1980s found Puerto Rican women leading key battles in the areas of education, work, and politics. As mothers, Puerto Rican women cared deeply about the education of their children and that drove many of them to the public sphere of struggle for educational opportunities. Many were (and still are!) at the forefront of educational struggles for bilingual education and other educational initiatives for Latinos. Ada Lopez and Hilda Fontany stand out as activists with a record of involvement in educational struggle. Puerto Rican women have also become leaders in the local struggle for Puerto Rican independence and nationalism that has been waged from Chicago. In the area of creating and maintaining cultural institutions Puerto Rican women have also left their mark. Clearly, the history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago cannot be written without taking into account the contributions of the women.

But many of these “pioneras” in community work are very critical and candid about the struggle that they have had to wage with Puerto Rican men in charge of groups and organizations, including the Puerto Rican Agenda. A Puerto Rican woman in one of the focus groups stated: “When I decided to bse a board member there were only two women on the whole board of 18 men and 2 women...all we did was fight all the time. Fight the men’s ego and mentality. Things have changed. We have come a long way, but you know? Still.”



“I have to honestly say that I’ve never felt any of those kind of pressures on my business in terms of any kind of discrimination because of my color, because I’m Puerto Rican, because I’m a woman. I haven’t felt that, and I find myself blessed to be able to say that.”

(Business Owner Focus Group)

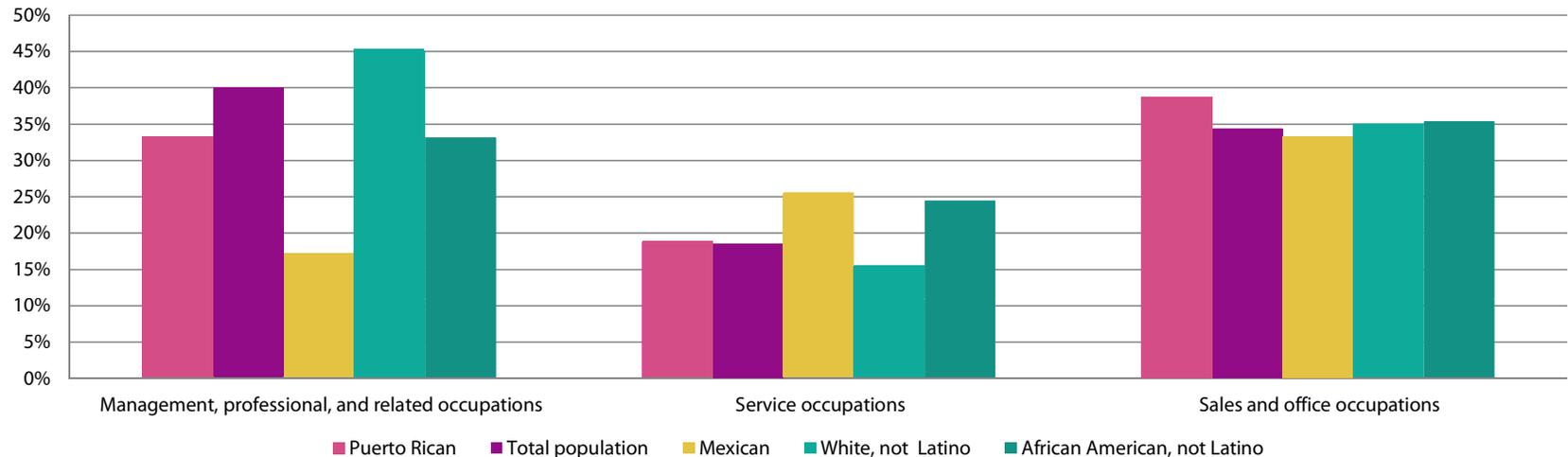
“So unfortunately—I hate to say it—but being Latina and being in the industry I’m in it’s very, very challenging for me. Very! As a female and as a Hispanic, especially in transportation.”

(Business Owner Focus Group)

Work - Puerto Rican women’s contributions to their families and their communities is owing in no small part to their ability to work and provide for their families. In this respect, a brief historical overview of Puerto Rican women’s changing labor patterns is important here. Puerto Rican women were recruited in Puerto Rico to work as “domesticas” for affluent families in the city (Toro-Morn, 1999). Young single Puerto Rican women came, like the men, in search of work and opportunities and to provide for their families. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico has shaped the labor force’s incorporation of Puerto Rican women in complex ways both on the Island and mainland communities. In Chicago, Puerto Rican domesticas encountered a difficult and utterly foreign work environment and many left domestic work disgusted with the abuse from employers, the long working hours, and the poor wages. Employment in the industrial sector jobs became a more desirable alternative for these “pioneras.” We know that given the changing occupational landscape of the city, Puerto Rican women worked in the declining manufacturing industry in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the rising service economy. By the 1980s, a share of Puerto Rican women found themselves working in predominantly white collar occupations such as clerical jobs, sales, management, and administration. Many found themselves among the ranks of local entrepreneurs developing business along Paseo Boricua and the suburbs. By the 1990s, changes in Chicago’s labor market showed that 63.9% of Puerto Rican women were employed in white collar jobs, which also reflected other demographic changes within the community (Toro-Morn, 2001). In 2009, working Puerto Rican women were distributed among three major occupation groups: 33.1% in management, professional and related occupations, 38.7% in sales and office; and 18.8% in the service sector.

2009: Comparative Occupations of Women in the Chicago Metro Area by Race and Selected Origin*

* The two occupations in which women are traditionally underrepresented—farming / fishing / forestry and construction / extraction / maintenance / repair—were omitted here because they composed less than 1% of employment for the women in all five comparison groups. For more on occupations, see Section 2 - Economic Development on page 32.



Issues Facing Women and Families - In keeping with their roles as working mothers and community leaders, Puerto Rican women, in focus groups and interviews, expressed concern about the social problems facing their families and communities and their ability to support themselves in a stagnant economy. There was also some concern about the future of Puerto Rican culture and identity, in particular as many witnessed their children marrying non-Puerto Ricans. But through most of the focus groups, women's concerns were reserved for the gravity of the social problems faced by young men and women in their communities. High rates of school desertion, lack of college education, the lure of gangs and police violence are issues that move women to get involved today. Their involvement may range from participating in this research, attending community summits, protesting, voting, and laboring within their families on behalf of their sons and daughters. It is clear that one problem identified in this report—District 25 had the highest number of total Latina juvenile arrests—threatens the future of young women in this community. The high rates of children in poverty and the high cost of housing make female-headed households an increasingly vulnerable population in our community.

“The violence has gotten a lot worse, where I have a 21-year-old and an 18-year-old at North-Eastern and I’m scared and they’re scared! They don’t even want to go outside and you know hang out with the guy across the street because he’s a gang banger or he hangs with the gang bangers, so there’s no sense of community anymore, nobody knows anybody. Everybody goes in their house and that’s it. And if you...if there’s a fight “oh my god what happened down the street?” but that’s it. It’s not like “Hey Judy, hey Carmen, let’s get together” there’s no more of that anymore.”

(Humboldt Park Community Focus Group)



A woman proudly displays the Puerto Rican flag during Fiesta Boricua, 2009