Matters of Choice

Puerto Rican Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom
By Iriz López
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Discussant: Rosalind Petchesky (Hunter College)
Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women’s Struggle for Reproductive Freedom, by Iris López

Iris López, associate professor of sociology and currently the director of the program in Latin American and Latino Studies at City College, uses ethnography to analyze the large rate of sterilization among Puerto Rican women for her new book, Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women’s Struggle for Reproductive Freedom. The book is a result of her 25-year-long study on Puerto Rican women and the reasons they were sterilized.

Puertorriqueñas are sterilized more than any other demographic group, López said in her recent book talk at Centro. However, she said, their understanding of sterilization and how exactly it affects the body is unclear. In her book Prof. López explores the idea of whether sterilization represents women as victims or as free agents. Her conclusion is that the leading reasons for sterilization represented neither pole, but were rather a mixture of the “personal, cultural, social and historical.”

Puerto Rico was thought to be overpopulated and the actions that were taken to relieve overpopulation were migration and sterilization. Thus, sterilization was used as a form of population control. Birth control was not widely available for women in Puerto Rico. The Catholic Church and the government were against birth control and influenced the use of sterilization as an alternative against pregnancy. It wasn’t until 1968 that Puerto Rico received government funding for birth control.

Today many generations of Puerto Rican women continue to be surgically sterilized. Older generations refer to it as “La Operación,” and women recommend it to each other. But many women still are misinformed and believe that it is an easily reversible procedure, which leads some women to regret having had it done.

Ms. Lopez’s findings also concluded that the number one reason for sterilization was economic. Prof. Lopez was asked, “What is reproductive freedom?” and she replied that it is having the freedom to choose, having options, and ample knowledge about sterilization.

by Amanda Bermudez

The complete video recording of the book presentation is available for viewing at Centro Library.