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**‘Never Forget Syphilis’:
Public Health, Modernity and
Gender in the Discourse of
Previsión Social during the
*Trujillato***

Melissa Madera



DOMINICAN
STUDIES INSTITUTE

Research Monograph

**‘Never Forget Syphilis’:
Public Health, Modernity and
Gender in the Discourse of
Previsión Social during the
*Trujillato***

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CUNY Dominican Studies Institute Dominican Research Monograph Series

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Foreword

Melissa Madera's "Never Forget Syphilis" offers a cogent and enticing introduction to the study of public health as a key site for seeking to understand the multiple ways State-sponsored ideologies are caused to trickle down to the various social strata of the population. The essay shows how the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, who ruled the Dominican Republic criminally from 1930 through 1961, sought to advance the regime's agenda of patriarchal modernity through the design of apparently innocuous public health policies. The view of nation, sovereignty, progress, and Christian morality that the regime embraced practically required the confinement of women to the private domain of the home, invariably casting them in the roles of meek daughters, subordinated wives, and fertile mothers. With the support of the Catholic Church, the medical establishment, and women's organizations that called themselves feminists in Dominican society at the time, during the 1940s the Trujillo regime undertook to regulate women's reproductive rights, sexual mores, and social lives. Couched in a discourse that ostensibly promoted the physical well-being of the population, the State's commitment to regulate women's bodies was evinced by the ideological orientation of the public health campaigns promoted by the Departamento de Previsión Social y Asistencia Pública, whose periodical publication *Previsión Social* served as a primary vehicle for the regime to disseminate its health-related dogma to the citizenry. Madera uses to great advantage her access to extant issues of that serial publication to show how the regime made women responsible for the health of the nation and the advancement of society by placing their bodies at the service of the State's agenda of patriarchal modernity. With her area of research, Madera shows herself to be a young scholar with great potential for making a lasting contribution to our understanding of the relationship between health, gender, and politics far beyond the reach of Dominican Studies.



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This paper was presented at the 1st International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Dominican Studies Dedicated to Don Pedro Mir “Where We Are and Where We Want to Go: Charting a Course,” Eugenio María de Hostos Community College, City University of New York (CUNY), Bronx, New York, May 12-13, 2006. This Conference was sponsored by the Asociación de Estudios Dominicanos/Dominican Studies Association, the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at The City College of New York, Comisionado Dominicano de Cultural en los Estados Unidos, the Division of Academic Affairs at Hostos Community College, Dominican American National Roundtable, the Hostos Dominican Republic Study Abroad Program, the Latino-Latin American Studies Program at Syracuse University, and the Serrano Scholars Program at Hostos Community College.

“La asistencia social moderna considera a la familia la institución fundamental de toda colectividad y sus esfuerzos tienden a su afianzamiento.”

Previsión Social (September/October 1956)

Introduction

Throughout the Trujillo dictatorship the Dominican government implemented profoundly gendered public health initiatives aimed at upholding a Pan-American vision of modernity and furthering national progress by attempting to manufacture a socially healthy, patriotic, Christian and cultured national citizenry that would in turn build a progressive modern nation.¹ Public health initiatives allowed the state to regulate family life and gender relations. The need to manage life relied on health policies capable of diminishing infant mortality rates, preventing epidemics and bringing down rates of endemic diseases (Rabinow 1997: 71). This project for social hygiene reform, carried out by the Department of Previsión Social y Asistencia Pública (Social Prevention and Public Assistance), promoted the construction of reformatories and prisons, the repression of prostitution, the regularization of common-law marriages, and health policies geared towards mothers and children.

This paper examines maternalist, pro-natalist, and anti-prostitution campaigns that served to control female bodies. The

1 Public health as a field of study has largely been ignored in Dominican historiography. This paper is part of a larger project to expand on studies about the *Trujillato* that have mainly focused on politics, the economy and Trujillo's relationship with the U.S. government, but have not principally examined gender and sexuality or the importance of social hygiene reform and the regulation of sexual behavior, despite its usefulness in highlighting the implications of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization under Trujillo. Throughout my dissertation I note the emergence of what Foucault refers to as a biopolitical state in the Dominican Republic during the *Trujillato* and the implications of increasing state intervention in the life of the individual, especially women, and the 'private' domestic sphere. My work follows the growing body of scholarship on Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe that has highlighted the importance of profoundly gendered discourses of public health to modernizing and nation-building projects. See for example, Bliss (2002), Engelstein (1994), Findlay (1999), Guy (2000), Roseblatt (2002), Stepan (1991), and Stoler (2002).

discourse of Previsión Social dictated the terms of citizenship and promoted maternal and infant healthcare, and sexual hygiene and education, in order to control citizens' reproductive lives, control the status and role of women in society, eliminate threats to Dominican nationality and racial health, consolidate the nation, moralize men and women, and strengthen the family. Although this was an elite male discourse, working-class men and women were able to use the discourse of Previsión Social to negotiate with the state and voice their own opinions in their daily lives. Dominican citizens responded to the state's discourse and initiatives through various means in hopes of attaining meaningful social reform beyond the scope of what the regime was ready or willing to offer.

Modernity and Motherhood in the Trujillato's Social Hygienic Discourse

Like other twentieth-century dictatorships, the Trujillo dictatorship identified women as an important national resource and intervened in the "private" domestic space in order to implement its population policy.² During the Trujillo regime, citizens witnessed a proliferation of maternalist and pronatalist discourse as well as an increase in public health initiatives related to mothers and children. The centrality of motherhood and childbearing in the evolving idea of modern Dominican nationhood throughout the Trujillo regime is made clear in "Message To Dominican Women" written in 1942 by Dr. Darío Contreras, Secretary of the State of Sanitation and Beneficence. A native of Santo Domingo, Contreras was a Dominican surgeon and gynecologist educated at the University of Paris. Contreras was a well-known doctor who, according to an article in *La Revista de la Cruz Roja Dominicana*, was "a specialist in women's diseases and childbirth... who has earned the title of the doctor with silk hands" given to him by *damas* who visited him. The secret of his success as a doctor was not only attributed to the softness of his hands but also to the "quickness of his operations" (January 1936).

2 See for example, De Grazia (1992) and Koonz (1988).

Contreras' education at the University of Paris undoubtedly shaped his anti-abortion and pro-natalist views as well as his ideas about the role of women in society. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century populationist discourse equating demographic strength with international prominence, civilization and modernization became increasingly important throughout Europe. Demographic decline caused by the casualties of the First World War and low birthrates exacerbated French anxieties concerning population decline and led to a particularly strong pronatalist discourse. As Elisa Camiscioli (2001) notes, the pronatalist movement in France provided a unique opportunity to remake the citizenry body by focusing on the health and well-being of the general population, especially of children and mothers, in order to control the reproductive potential of citizens. Like his French counterparts, Contreras promoted a conservative rhetoric of pronatalism which promoted procreation as a national obligation and heralded patriarchal authority, maternal virtue, fecundity and traditionalism (595). He also followed other pronatalists in criticizing feminism and liberalism for producing 'modern' women who abandoned their prescribed domestic roles as wives and mothers (Camiscioli 2001; Roberts 1994).

Contreras' speech was reproduced in women's publications and read at women's meetings throughout the nation in order to publicize the regime's pro-natalist discourse. This speech was read by Carmita Landestoy, head of the Sección Femenina del Partido Trujillista (women's branch of the Trujillista Party), at an event organized for women in the country's capital city. Carmen Stengre, a prominent novelist and feminist, applauded Contreras' speech as a "noble sentiment... of high human value" addressed to "mothers who only want a tranquil home in order to give life to many strong, healthy and happy citizens" (Stengre 1942). These citizens, Stengre hoped, would contribute, with their hard work and knowledge, to the exaltation and prosperity of humanity.

Contreras, along with other Dominican government officials and doctors of his time, believed that the main function of any successful government was to increase and foster population growth in order to strengthen the nation. He argued that the Dominican

government would only succeed in this endeavor by constructing government structures that would protect maternity and infancy. According to Contreras, this could only happen through the construction of medical dispensaries, hospitals, maternity wards, milk stations and orphanages which would “serve to conserve the health of the individual” (5–6). He praised Trujillo for his support of these policies, which the Department of Sanitation and Beneficence, of which he was the director, promoted and implemented for the protection of mothers and children across the nation. But although he praised Trujillo, he acknowledged women as the primary force behind these initiatives and their ultimate success. With their help, argued Contreras, the programs to protect the mother and child would be perfected so that they could be taken advantage of by future generations of Dominican women.

Contreras validated the traditional role of women as mothers while also inserting them into the nation and the state’s modernizing project. According to Contreras, women were at the center of the formation of a modern and stable nation. Contreras’ words embodied the government’s social hygienic, pro-natalist and nationalist discourse. He wrote:

Wives today prefer to limit the number of their children to one or two as in France. Maybe this limitation is one of the causes of the setbacks that are now being suffered by France. That is why it is necessary for our density of population to be numerically well balanced... A healthy birthrate and good health: here are two of the conditions that make nations great and respected. With good birthrates we will obtain the sufficient number of citizens to defend the rights and liberty of the Fatherland... Dominican [women], let this be your slogan: For my health and for my homeland I will not let a conceived child be snatched from my entrails (8-11).

For Contreras and Previsión Social, women’s traditional role as mothers was necessary for the survival of the nation. Contreras echoed the government’s goals of protecting maternity and children as its most important public work, but maintained that it would not be fruitful if mothers did not contribute to this work themselves. He called women to be functioning members of society by rejecting

abortion, being good mothers and wives, and rejecting the promise of a career outside the home.

It is clear that Contreras, and by extension the regime, was extremely concerned with the effect that 'modern' women had on appropriate family values and population growth. Contreras worried that women's lives, particularly their roles as mothers, was being complicated by their changing roles in society. Contreras was most concerned about the effect that 'modern' women who rejected a "simple life" had on the nation. These women were no longer satisfied with their roles as wives and by being surrounded by their numerous and healthy progeny in the home. Contreras stated:

Today, social evolution obligates women to have an active life, to work, to play sports that were formally unknown to them and since their rights have become equal to those of men, they occupy a seat in the legislative body... and other elected posts. Their social obligations are now greater than before and this has had repercussions on progeny (8).

According to Contreras, women were choosing to have fewer children because they could now work outside of the home. He argued that if women did not help increase birthrates, their children would be condemned to a "disastrous future." As I discuss below, the Trujillo regime only approved of female activism and work outside the home if women were implementing social programs on their behalf, and promoting its nation-building and "modernizing" efforts.³

Contreras argued that women would only receive the benefits offered by Previsión Social through its diverse programs and work towards strengthening the nation's social structure, for the good of the family, by creating a population "boom" and rejecting abortion. For many government officials, doctors, and statisticians abortion was a destructive force that kept the country from achieving its numerical goals. Contreras blamed women for not neutralizing the damage that abortion caused to the health of the nation. Contreras feared that women did not realize that

³ Deutsch (May 1991) argues that in Argentina the Peronist discourse emphasized these same ideals.

they were committing a crime by visiting the doctor's office and "cold-bloodedly... hand[ing] their children over to the medical executioner... and then return[ing] home satisfied and happy" (11). He asked women to prevent the damage he feared that they were causing to the nation by "expelling from their entrails the fruit of their affairs as soon as they become aware [of carrying] a future citizen..." (9). Contreras maintained that pregnancy was a patriotic duty that women were rejecting while enjoying a sexually free lifestyle.⁴ Women were blamed for keeping "medical executioners" in business and helping to destroy "future citizens" (9). He asked Dominican mothers to safeguard the nation's future by devoting themselves to the nation's "struggle for greatness, happiness and defense of the Fatherland" and condemning the professionals who dedicated themselves to committing this crime.⁵ For the state, abortion had become a serious social problem that could only be stopped with the cooperation of women since doctors would not have the opportunity to commit these heinous crimes if it were not for the women who were soliciting "the immobilization of their blossoming fruit" (9). Abortion, in other words, was viewed as a major obstacle to the State's nationalistic goals.

Previsión Social in Action

The Trujillato's pronatalist propaganda was accompanied by legislation that encouraged natality and the reduction of the infant mortality rate. The regime promoted important modern public health services such as Mothers Clubs, Maternity Wards and Milk Stations for the protection of maternity and infancy in the Dominican Republic. In order to consolidate the social hygienic reforms promoted by the government, the Trujillo regime established the Department of Previsión Social y Asistencia Pública

⁴ Contreras is making reference to women whom he deemed 'modern', unfeminine and sexually available. Since the early twentieth century, Dominican society had been targeting women who it imagined to wear short, bobbed hair, short dresses and who they feared were becoming increasingly liberal in attitude. These women were not prevalent in Dominican society but intellectuals and government officials feared their growing presence.

⁵ The statistics on abortion are unclear, but it is clear that the government was preoccupied with this issue and viewed abortion as a threat to national progress.

in 1947. This department was established in the hopes that social reform programs, many of which were previously implemented and carried out by feminists, would be more effective. The goal of Previsión Social was to “foresee and remedy the necessities of the poor” through its social programs (Acosta 1948: 23). The department of Previsión Social was publicized as a “profound Dominican mission” applied by Dominican personnel who were to respond to the realities and necessities peculiar to Dominicans (*Previsión Social* October 1948). Government officials argued that the tragedy and problems of the individual were now those of the nation and publicized Previsión Social as the culmination of a “supreme patriotic effort and vision” expressed by public services. Most importantly, the department of Previsión Social was to continue to “offer ample protection to maternity and infancy” through its various social services (*Previsión Social* May 1948: 3).

A few months after the department of Previsión Social was established the government launched its magazine titled *Previsión Social*. The first issue of *Previsión Social* was appropriately dedicated to “her Excellence” the first lady of the Republic, Doña Maria de los Angeles Martínez Alba de Trujillo Molina whose “great example [made] the campaign for [social] betterment and the well-being of society more effective” (“Dedicatoria” May 1948). Trujillo’s wife and his mother, Doña Julia Molina Vda. Trujillo, were the most publicly visible women in the Dominican Republic during the *Trujillato* and were viewed as important female role models. The regime continually publicized their dedication to social reform in hopes that more women would follow their lead.⁶

According to *Previsión Social’s* editor, the magazine’s purpose was to publicize and illustrate “the diverse duties of the new government institution to the masses” (“Nuestra Misión” May 1948). In the closing remarks of *Previsión Social’s* inaugural issue its authors observed: “It is not the time to lament about the past, instead it is time to take advantage of the energy of the present

6 Doña Maria de los Angeles Martínez Alba de Trujillo Molina’s mission was fulfilled further by the publication of her book *Meditaciones morales* which was praised for its moralizing message to women. Excerpts from the book were frequently published in newspaper and government publications in order to reach large numbers of women from all social classes.

in order to confront the future” (*Previsión Social* May 1948). The government hoped that its social programs would be recognized by the public and the media as a representation of a “true evolution” in the Dominican political system. Trujillo’s government maintained that it had created a vision and government institution that was not only good for the Dominican people but would also situate the administrative machinery of the government on the same plane occupied by more “civilized and cultured” nations. *Previsión Social*’s social welfare policies were publicized as giving the nation a “massive path to progress and constituted the greatest deeds of the Dominican government” (*Previsión Social* May 1948: 3).

The publication praised Trujillo for establishing *Previsión Social* and spreading a sense of patriotism that was being “deposited in the sensibilities of all citizens.” *Previsión Social*’s editor explained that the social reforms carried out under Trujillo could be credited with the “profound change in our social consciousness” which the magazine was entrusted with publicizing. Moreover, the magazine’s mission was to bring a full understanding of the humanitarian policies that were evolving in the nation to “every home and mindset.” He maintained that the civilized, democratic and Christian reforms offered by *Previsión Social* would give even those who were the most afflicted by misfortune a voice and power within the government (*Previsión Social* May 1948: 3).

The mother and child were the center of the Trujillo regime’s social hygienic discourse and public works. Government officials continually argued that “the future of [the] country [was] dependent on the type of family that children [grew] up in and the physical, moral and social care that they received during their growth” (*Previsión Social* July 1948). The regime promoted a proper family structure and attempted to establish welfare policies and programs to help single mothers and working-class families offer better care to their children. Women were recruited to help reformers and medical professionals run these programs.

The regime expected middle-class women to carry out these reforms, which targeted poor and working class Dominicans, especially mothers and children, in order to further its nation-building project of producing a healthy body of citizens. Women

were both the tools utilized to promote social reforms and the main objects of the reformist projects. The government instructed all its citizens, especially women, to take part in the social progress and modernization directed by Trujillo. It depended on women, especially feminists, to participate in the implementation of social reform programs. Women, the publication argued, possessed a “profound vocation for goodwill, piety and love” and their intervention in the work of Previsión Social would always be “splendidly fruitful” (*Previsión Social* September 1948).

One of the programs that aimed to integrate women into the government’s social and public works as well as help poor women were Mothers Clubs. Like mothers clubs in the United States, they provided a forum for maternal education and female interaction in non-traditional environments.⁷ These clubs gave middle-class women the opportunity to advise their less fortunate ‘sisters,’ working class and poor women, on proper child care practices. These clubs also provided poor women throughout the nation with pre-natal, post-natal and medical care during childbirth. The state argued that these initiatives were necessary because poor women were the “worst enemy” of children since they could not afford medical attention, were uneducated in proper childcare practices, and lived in unhygienic conditions (*Previsión Social* October 1948). These clubs were to contribute to the government’s objective of defending the health of mother and child. Infants would benefit the most from these clubs since their main focus was to ensure that children were born healthy and well developed (Acosta 1948). Protecting children, whom the State viewed as a valued portion of the nation’s “human capital”, was an important aspect of Previsión Social’s work.⁸

Another of the regime’s projects aiming to protect maternity and infancy were milk stations established throughout the nation. The purpose of these stations was to provide essential nutrients to poor families and newborn babies whose mothers were poor

7 See for example, Apple (2006).

8 *Previsión Social*, October 1948. Previsión Social, as a biopolitical structure, served to assure the strength of the state through healthy birthrates which would lead to a healthy workforce.

and had no other way to feed them.⁹ These stations were under the supervision of a pediatric doctor who vaccinated, examined and established a dietary regimen for the children (*Previsión Social* May 1948: 15). *Previsión Social* hoped that these stations would lower the infant mortality rate and encourage the development of a healthy population. The government also offered weekly medical exams to children who were registered under the program. *Previsión Social* reported that children who took part in the program gained four to twelve ounces per week and in some “special” cases up to one pound (15).

The regime also publicized the Premio Julia Molina de Maternidad, an award, named after Trujillo’s mother, conferred to women who had large numbers of living children. This Premio not only glorified mothers but also helped them financially. For example, in 1951, señora Ana Rosa Sánchez de Santana, a forty-two year old mother of twenty living children was awarded this prize, along with a check for one hundred pesos, in front of a group of six hundred and twenty six other mothers who were also competing for the prize.¹⁰ The publicity for this prize was used to stimulate the growth of households “with numerous offspring, and to encourage the formation of Christianity... [that would teach] children the practice of work, and respect for laws and morality” (*Boletín de Sanidad*: 21). Sánchez de Santana’s home embodied these ideals and the regime hoped that more women, of all social classes, would emulate her and help the nation reach its full potential.

Gender, the State and the Diseased Body

In addition to its proscriptive pro-natalist discourse, another important aspect of *Previsión Social*’s social hygienic discourse was that against prostitution and the control of venereal disease. Over the 1920’s and throughout the Trujillo dictatorship, prostitution and female criminality, more generally, became much talked about topics of conversation in the Dominican Republic. From a social

⁹ The May 1948 issue of *Previsión Social* reported that from July 1947 through March 1948, 339,205 bottles of milk (1,372,569 biberones/baby bottles) were distributed to poor families throughout a number of milk stations throughout the nation.

¹⁰ *Boletín de Sanidad y Previsión Social*. 1 (1951): 21 and *La Nación* May 27, 1951.

hygiene standpoint the repression of prostitution was imperative to state officials because they believed that prostitution spread venereal disease, contaminated honorable citizens, and weakened the national body. The prostitute was depicted as an immoral, sexually deviant and unproductive member of society who threatened the nation's path to social order and progress.

In the Dominican Republic, the "problem of prostitution" was debated with frequency. Government officials regarded prostitution as a "permanent and grave danger" in the transmission of venereal disease whose regulation caused an increase in disease while its abolition decreased it. Government officials argued that brothels helped in transmitting venereal diseases or that at least the majority of the contamination was located in them and was sexual in nature. But they also noted that men, not just women, were to blame for the dissemination of venereal disease. It was argued that men who cohabitated with prostitutes were the "most efficient disseminators of venereal disease" and that a logical consequence of this behavior was the spread of this disease into the marriage bed with consequences to their future progeny. But, as I discuss later, it was women, not men, who were publicly targeted by the state and community as vectors of disease and immorality.

Government officials viewed the repression of prostitution and campaigns to combat venereal disease as a necessity for biologically purifying the reproduction of populations. Venereal disease was viewed as chronic and contagious illness that would endanger the heredity of offspring and the population.¹¹ Previsión Social warned citizens to "never forget syphilis" and let it "take over the body." The regime urged those afflicted with the disease not to be "careless, neglectful or embarrassed and let the ailment progress into a grave and difficult situation" and explained that there were now treatments for the disease that would "take them out of danger in just a few days." But, the State warned, if they were to ignore the danger of the disease it would cause "madness, produce a complete paralysis and even premature death" (*Boletín de Salud Pública*: 38).

11 Nancy Leys Stepan (1991) discusses this eugenic discourse in other Latin American countries that hoped to also portray themselves as similarly modern.

Historically, the control of prostitution and the public space has been associated with the creation of stable “modern” nations.¹² The Dominican Republic, along with other Latin American nations, participated in numerous Pan-American sanitary conferences that promoted initiatives aimed at controlling prostitution and eradicating venereal disease.¹³ In 1951, at the 5th Annual Symposium for the Study of Venereal Disease which took place in Washington D.C., Dominican officials suggested that the repression of prostitution was not only necessary in order to stop commercialized prostitution, diminish the facilities dedicated to “carnal commerce,” and control the spread of venereal disease, but that it would also end ‘white slavery’, public disorder, clandestine activities, hooliganism, and other vices associated with prostitution, such as homosexuality, drug addiction, and alcoholism.¹⁴ At the Symposium, representatives of the Dominican Republic explained that the government’s anti-venereal disease campaigns had been very successful by making the transmission of venereal disease a criminal offense and isolating those who were contaminated. Representatives attributed the country’s success to its sanitary legislation, which they believed made its fight against venereal disease effective. This legislation included preventative measures, such as asylums, anti-venereal disease hospitals and dispensaries, penal institutions, anti-prostitution initiatives, sexual education campaigns and the establishment of sanitary brigades run by medical experts.

‘Public’ Women and Public Protest in Trujillo’s ‘Modern’ State

But while the Trujillo regime created the image of a ‘modern’ society through social hygienic discourse and social reform campaigns, ordinary citizens shed light on the inadequate implementation of social reform policies. Working-class citizens

12 See for example, Bliss (2002), Caulfield (2000), Engelstein (1994), Findlay (1999), Guy (1995), and Hershatter (1997).

13 See for example, Guy (2000) and Stepan (1991).

14 “El Control de las enfermedades venéreas en la República Dominicana.” División de Venereología, Secretaría de Estado de Salud Pública y Previsión Social, Ciudad Trujillo, 1951, 9-10.

wrote countless letters to newspapers, and local and government officials illuminating immoral and unhygienic conditions in their neighborhoods and denouncing State irresponsibility. Residents throughout the country wrote letters to government officials to complain about government corruption, local prostitutes, bars and cabaret owners, and loud noise in their neighborhoods. Although the government maintained that it was repressing prostitution, citizens were unsatisfied with the government's ability to keep prostitution from spilling over into the lives of citizens who identified themselves as moral, honest workers in Trujillo's urban neighborhoods. For residents of poor neighborhoods, the state seemed unsympathetic to the everyday struggle they faced to raise their children in a safe, hygienic and moral environment. Many residents also felt threatened by corrupt government officials who exercised their power for their own financial gain.

For example, in 1951, residents of a neighborhood in the town of Barahona wrote a letter to the President concerning the persecution of prostitutes and themselves. The letter, signed by three business owners (Ercilia B. Peralta, Ana Julia Lora and Daniel H. Olivera), stated:

For many years we have maintained, in the farthest part of the center of the city... and at the most distant part of the zone of tolerance established by the [department of] Sanitation before 1930, our businesses of cafes frequented by women of a licensed lifestyle... [They] have inverted... our economies, constituting the only resource with which we count on to support our families... Señor Raúl G. González, the provincial governor, has publicly expressed that he will not rest until he gets the authorization from the Superior Governor to move our businesses to the other side of the river for the moral good of the town, meanwhile there are various houses of prostitution in the center of town which are the places where what is manifested should be considered against morality.¹⁵

15 AGN, Ref. 4/49, Records of the Interior and Police, Letter written to the President, Barahona, R.D., September 6, 1951. This discussion of "licensed" women may be a reference to the well-known fact that the Trujillo regime chose to regulate prostitution during most of the Trujillato although it remained prohibited by law and publicly criticized by the government. Most Dominican citizens recall that registered prostitutes were forced by the government to get weekly health examinations and were issued health cards. The police apprehended "clandestine" prostitutes and those who were

These three business owners wrote this letter to President Trujillo in order to expose government actions that they believed were unjust. The business owners argued that the women who lived in a “tolerance zone” and the proprietors of the businesses in that area did not deserve to be viewed as immoral or forced to leave the town since they lived far from the center of town and these women were “licensed.” They also noted the importance of the sexual labor to the economy and their own financial security. Moreover, they argued, the local government should be concerned with other more scandalous activities in the center of town that were occurring outside of what they describe as a “tolerance zone.” They also claimed that the governor was forcing them to move in order “to come into favor” with the owners of the properties to which they were being forced to relocate. They also went on to explain that it would be too expensive to move their businesses since no one was interested in buying the property that they already owned. By writing this letter, the proprietors of these businesses believed that they would get help from President Trujillo. They hoped that he would send a commission to uncover the “truth” and they had faith that *El Generalísimo*, “the benefactor of the Fatherland,” would be interested in pursuing justice for all Dominicans.¹⁶

These letters also contradict State propaganda and popular recollections that Trujillo oppressed and regulated prostitution. These letters suggest that prostitution was widespread and uncontained. For example, in May of 1951, Pedro Rodríguez wrote a letter to the Secretary of Interior and Police, José A. Hungría, in hopes of making government officials aware of “immoral” activities occurring in his neighborhood. He asked government officials to eliminate the boarding houses and brothels in residential areas where “honest and decent people lived with their school-aged children.”¹⁷ He was most disgusted by the couples who walked in and out of these establishments “like animals” in broad daylight in front of young girls who were on their way to school. Most

accused of spreading venereal disease by their clients or other citizens.

¹⁶ Clearly, these individuals believed in the government discourse and initiatives that the government promoted which were discussed earlier in the paper.

¹⁷ AGN, Ref. 4/49, Records of the Interior and Police, Letter to José Hungría from Pedro Ma. Rodríguez, May 29, 1951.

importantly, Rodríguez hoped to illuminate the deficiency of social hygiene reform in his neighborhood. Rodríguez stated: “I have been motivated to write this letter in the interest of social hygiene which you have defended so much from your high position in the government [and] we would be grateful if you could eliminate these establishments” (Rodríguez 1951). Rodríguez made it clear to Hungría that the social hygiene reforms that he and many other government officials so fervently “defended” and publicized were not widely and adequately implemented. He also brought newspaper articles, concerning resident complaints surrounding prostitution in poor neighborhoods, to Hungría’s attention.

Citizens also publicly expressed their views concerning prostitution and public decency by writing letters to newspaper editors. Residents reproduced traditional and government discourse which blamed prostitutes for spreading immorality and endangering the welfare of minors; especially young boys who they claimed were being infected with venereal disease.¹⁸ They were also worried about the bad example, which ‘indecent’ women set for young *señoritas* (young unmarried girls). Residents of San Antón, a neighborhood in Ciudad Trujillo, wrote a letter to *La Nación* stating: “[prostitution] is an offense against the decent families who live in this place and a spectacle that doesn’t deserve [to be witnessed by] the daughters of families [who live here].”¹⁹

Another newspaper, *Nuevo Domingo*, was the site of a long running column, titled “Notas”, “where week after week... the alarming” increase of prostitution in poor neighborhoods, such as Villa Francisca, where “honest” working-class families lived was revealed to all the residents of Ciudad Trujillo.²⁰ The author of this

18 In my research I have found that these kind of accusations were not unusual. In letters written to the municipal government during the U.S. Occupation (1916-24) and in the 1920’s these same accusations were made by the public and women were arrested for not only “seducing” minors but for infecting grown men with venereal disease. These men were often the ones that denounced prostitutes to the police.

19 AGN, Legajo 016452, Records of the Interior and Police, Memorandum sent to the chief of the Police in the Secretary of the Interior, June 4, 1951.

20 AGN, Legajo 016452, Records of the Interior and Police, Letter addressed to Secretary of the Interior, José A. Hungría, May 29, 1951. This column, written by “Aquilino” (pseudonym), appeared to run from mid 1946 to mid 1954. The column then continued to run in 1954 under two different names (“Discurriendo” and “De la Hora”) and pseudonyms (“ODM” and “Camilo”) then again under the title “Notas” and under the pseudonym “Camilo” who later identified himself as Oscar Delanoy. Oscar Delanoy

column, writing under the pseudonym Aquilino, was concerned that cabarets and prostitution were becoming too public and uncontrolled. He wrote: “cabarets and prostitutes... with their scandalous lives, occupy central places in important neighborhoods of the city.”²¹

Many newspaper reporters and residents were concerned about the increasing visibility of “public” women. Aquilino went as far as interviewing some residents living in Villa Francisca about prostitution and what they considered to be public indecency in their neighborhood. When he asked Francisco Vargas if families were threatened by “immoral contamination” and if he would abandon the neighborhood, he answered:

I am embarrassed to live here with so many lost people. I have no other recourse but to move... [because]... if I continue to live here I will have to see my daughters sharing scandalous actions with those unhappy women. There are so many families that view prostitution as something natural now. Vice, like corruption, is contagious.²²

Vargas echoed the worries and thoughts of many other Dominican residents who did not feel that they had anyone to turn to when “indecent” women “took over” their neighborhoods. He was also concerned that prostitution was becoming commonplace and less distressing to citizens. Moreover, he believed that if prostitution was not dealt with properly it would soon infest his own daughters lives.

Another column that appeared frequently between 1951 and 1952 in *Nuevo Domingo* was titled “Prostitution vs. the Neighborhood,” written by Silvio Azeno Santos. Santos wrote:

Our country... has today been badly influenced by a number of libertine women who do not care about exhibiting, in any place, – now that they can go anywhere – their degenerate and anti-

wrote other articles for the newspaper under his own name and may have written all of the editorials beginning in 1946. Aquilino also criticized and was concerned about the changes in society that he believed was becoming immoral and the changing role of women. He continually wrote about the importance of women’s traditional role and the problem of divorce in Dominican society.

21 Aquilino, “Notas” *Nuevo Domingo* January 28, 1951.

22 Aquilino, “Notas” *Nuevo Domingo* November 11, 1951.

Christian ways of life. The competent authorities do not hear the echo of reiterated calls that are made everyday to “the power of the State,” for the name of the consecrated *pueblo*, to cultivate its citizen’s virtue (Santos 1951).²³

Santos publicly denounced the government for its inability to control public disturbances and blamed government officials for not following through with reforms promoted by President Trujillo. Like Vargas, he was also concerned that prostitution was becoming a fact of life in most neighborhoods and that women were practicing their profession wherever they chose.

Clearly, many residents expressed embarrassment about where they lived and anger at government officials by writing letters to newspapers in order to make the nation aware of their dilemma, especially when public disturbances occurred in “neighborhoods of social betterment.” These neighborhoods were one of the regime’s most visible and extensive social reform programs. According to Previsión Social, before the construction of neighborhoods of social betterment, “the worker felt uncomfortable not only because... of the distance between [his] neighborhood and factory centers, but also because there was no order [and] it was a dangerous place...” (Rodríguez 1948: 24). These neighborhoods were part of the regime’s project to civilize and improve the nation by cleansing from the milieu those factors considered to be immoral and damaging to people’s health and physical well-being which would stunt the nations’ growth.²⁴ But in some of these neighborhoods, residents were unconvinced that the changes the government was publicizing were occurring. For example, in 1951, Juan Brito Rodríguez wrote a letter to the governor of Santiago, which also appeared in the “Foro Público” section of *El Caribe*, stating:

The neighborhood of social betterment in Tabacalera, [Santiago], was inspired to develop the good of the working class [but] has a danger [within it] that threatens the public good... a cabaret,

23 Just like Aquilino, Santos was concerned that women in the country were being given too many rights and were becoming too publicly visible. These women were perceived to be becoming promiscuous and increasingly going against appropriate family values and norms.

24 Stepan (1991) makes this point for other nations in Latin America.

situated in the heart of the neighborhood, that is filled with prostitutes all day and night.²⁵

Rodríguez and other residents of this neighborhood were concerned that a neighborhood created for “honest” workers was being corrupted by the appearance of businesses that sheltered prostitutes. He further explained that he was concerned that prostitution was not only a moral problem but a sanitary problem as well. Like residents of other neighborhoods, they were disappointed that although they had complained to government officials, nothing was done about the situation. The letter further insinuated that the proprietor of this cabaret had “pull” with sanitary and public officials who turned a blind eye to public indecency.

Some women also invoked their authority as mothers to bring the issue of prostitution and ‘indecent’ behavior to the public arena. For example, a group of mothers living in Villa Francisca wrote the following to *Nuevo Domingo*:

We are mothers and we are confronted with this conflict: either we separate our sons from this corruption or we will have to resign ourselves to seeing them convert into *tigres* of the cabarets... since we are convinced that these women of *la vida alegre* are implanting immorality in many homes... [and] many depraved [young men] view the public woman as one of value who [without bargaining] offers them the pleasures of immorality.²⁶

These women added weight to their letter of protest by explaining that they were patriotic wives and mothers of several children who were concerned with the moral well-being of their families. They were concerned that their sons would become useless criminals because they had to raise them in an unhealthy

25 AGN, Legajo 016452, Records of the Interior and Police, Memorandum to the Governor of Santiago, October 15, 1951. Many citizens expressed their criticisms of public officials through the “Foro Público” section of *El Caribe*. According to Lipe Collado, the *Foro Público* was a site for “vexations, denunciations, information, opinions, revelations,[and] exhortations [which were] contained in letters to the Editor.” For more on the Foro Público read, Lipe Collado (2000) and Derby (May 2003).

26 Aquilino, “Notas,” *Nuevo Domingo*, 20 January 1952. These mothers feared that their sons would turn into what Rafael Damirón describes in *De Soslayo* as “El Tigre.” “El Tigre” makes the prison and brothel his home while refusing to make his living in a decent manner and rejecting any proper education.

environment that they did not have the financial means to change. In this letter, these mothers utilized Previsión Social's own maternalist discourse to legitimate these complaints and look for support from their government. They used the regime's ideology, which identified the "proper" heterosexual family structure as key to further improvement of the nation, and validated the importance of women's domestic labor and maternal role.

Fellita Mateo, a resident of San Juan de la Maguana, wrote a letter to the Provincial Governor stating that she was a married mother of seven children, "all procreated with [her] husband," and was called to write the letter "in the interest of wanting them to grow up with the necessary morality." She explained that she had previously gone to see the local sanitary official "about a group of *mujeres de la vida alegre*" but he was not interested in her complaints and instead "injured" her with obscene words.²⁷ Mateo went on to suggest that the Governor should respect La Era that they lived in and the principles of rectitude, morality and work that Trujillo had promised to uphold. She and other mothers also followed other residents in blaming prostitutes for corrupting their children, spreading disease, and for creating an atmosphere against the principles set forth by the State.

Señora Rosa Báez also echoed the struggles of the poor in neighborhoods where prostitution was profoundly visible, but, unlike other mothers, she argued that prostitutes were not the greatest threat to decency in her neighborhood. She maintained that the worst problems were the bars where corrupt men came together to drink, fight, and behave disrespectfully causing her and her neighbors to live in a "hell ignited in fire" throughout the night.²⁸ She explained that these men taught the children of the neighborhood bad language and obscene behavior, and that nothing could be done to remedy this situation since "the poor did not smell, they stunk" and people in her position could not afford to live in other neighborhoods. The women who wrote these letters used their place as mothers and as reproducers of population,

27 AGN, Interior and Police Records, Ref. 4/49 (Legajo 5231), Letter dated May 14, 1960.

28 Aquilino, "Notas," *Nuevo Domingo*, December 16, 1951.

culture, and citizenship to ask for State intervention. They also expressed loyalty to the regime and the principles put forth by it.

Conclusion

The Trujillo regime hoped to create the image of a modern nation through its social hygienic discourse and practice. These reforms, carried out by Previsión Social, redefined gender roles, regulated sexual and reproductive practice, brought the State into the domestic sphere and inserted the working-class into the nation. Women's traditional and biologically determined roles in the home were validated as a contribution to the nation while also establishing more control over female bodies, especially female reproductive functions, and controlling the status and role of women within the public and private sphere. The State also hoped to curb any behavior that was sexually deviant, unproductive to the nation, and threatened to contaminate the physical well being of Dominican society. The Dominican Republic, along with other Latin American countries, publicized and adapted social hygienic policies that repressed prostitution and combated venereal disease in an effort to project itself as similarly modern.

Dominican citizens contributed to the public debate concerning public health policies and were able to criticize the ineffective implementation of these policies throughout the nation. These public debates brought the popular classes into contact with the State and assimilated them into the nation through their reproduction and contribution to the national discourse. Instead of focusing on Trujillo's brutal force and terror in order to explain the longevity of his rule, I hope that further research will illuminate the extent to which the projects for social reform and citizen support for these policies and interaction with the State, on the part of both men and women, contributed to the endurance of the Trujillo regime. Rather than locating the poor as victims of a brutal dictatorship, I emphasize subaltern agency in the ways in which they expressed citizenship, the cross-class effort to implement a vision of the nation and the 'peoples' role in maintaining Trujillo's dictatorship.

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