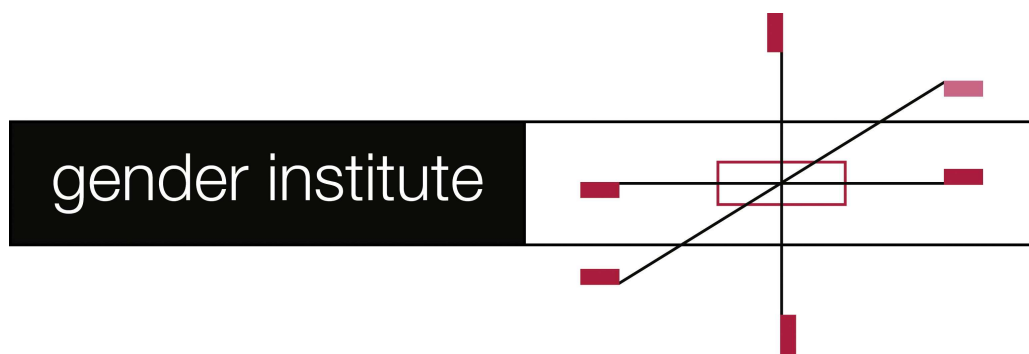


THE CURIOUS QUESTION OF FEMINISING POVERTY IN COSTA RICA: THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDERED SUBJECTIVITIES

Sylvia Chant

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Sylvia Chant is Professor of Development Geography at the London School of Economics. She has worked in Costa Rica, Mexico, The Philippines and The Gambia on a range of issues relating to gender and development, including migration, poverty, employment, household livelihood strategies, lone parenthood, youth, and men and masculinities. Her most recent books are *Mainstreaming Men into Gender and Development: Debates, Reflections and Experiences* (with Matthew Gutmann) (Oxfam, 2000), and *Gender in Latin America* (in association with Nikki Craske) (Latin America Bureau/Rutgers University Press, 2003). Under the auspices of a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship (2003-2006), Professor Chant has recently published a book entitled *Gender, Generation and Poverty: Exploring the 'Feminisation of Poverty' in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Edward Elgar, 2007). (s.chant@lse.ac.uk)

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**The Curious Question Of Feminising
Poverty In Costa Rica:
The Importance Of Gendered
Subjectivities**

Sylvia Chant

The Curious Question Of Feminising Poverty In Costa Rica: The Importance Of Gendered Subjectivities

ABSTRACT

Costa Rica is one of the few countries in the Global South where there is apparently 'hard' evidence that poverty is 'feminising'. In particular there was a steep rise in the share of poor households headed by women in the 1990s which has not yet abated. This is somewhat anomalous in light of significant attempts on the part of the state to promote gender equality and to direct public expenditure to low-income women and female household heads. Yet while gender-sensitive policies may not have been adequate to arrest an apparent 'feminisation of poverty', the processes by which this is occurring require closer scrutiny. Since quantitative data suggest that this is mainly accounted for by the growing share of households headed by women, and not a greater probability that poverty will afflict this group *per se*, it is important to consider the reasons why so many more households are headed by women today compared with 10-15 years ago. Some indications are provided by qualitative fieldwork with over 70 poor women and men in Guanacaste province. While female heads are widely perceived to stand a greater risk of income poverty than their male counterparts, female headship seems to have become a more viable, and sometimes, preferred, option among women on account of its role in enhancing well-being. Many women feel they are now in a stronger position to survive alone because various aspects of the social, legal, and even economic, environment are perceived to be more favourable to them than in the past. This, in turn, seems to have contributed to making them less inclined to tolerate gender inequalities at the domestic level. These findings underline the importance of embracing gendered subjectivities in analyses of the 'feminisation of poverty' and invite caution about the latter being a unilaterally negative phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Costa Rica is one of the few countries in the Global South where there is apparently 'hard' evidence to suggest that poverty is 'feminising'. While around one-fifth of the population has fallen below the official poverty line since the early-to-mid-1990s poverty seems to have become more concentrated among women over time. In particular there was a steep rise in the share of poor households headed by women in the 1990s which has not yet abated. This seems somewhat paradoxical given Costa Rica's high ranking on aggregate gender indicators such as the GDI and GEM, and that in the last decade and a half several initiatives have been introduced to promote gender equality, as well as to direct public expenditure to poor women among whom female household heads have been a key target group. Yet while gender-sensitive policies may not have been adequate to arrest an apparent feminisation of income poverty, and this needs to be addressed, the processes by which female heads seem to be bearing a greater share of poverty require closer scrutiny. Quantitative data suggest that this is mainly accounted for by growth in the number and proportion of all households headed by women, and not a greater probability of poverty within the group per se. It is accordingly important not only to consider the reasons why female household heads continue to stand a disproportionate risk of poverty, but, in light of this, to examine why female headship has undergone such a dramatic increase in the last 10-15 years. Quantitative data show that this is associated with declining rates of formal

marriage, an increase in divorce and separation, and a rise in out-of-wedlock births. However, they cannot reveal why such trends are occurring. In order to gain insights into the reasons underlying these trends I draw on primary qualitative fieldwork gathered with over 70 poor women and men of different age cohorts in Guanacaste province.¹ While female heads are widely perceived to stand a greater risk of income poverty than their male counterparts, female headship seems to have become a more viable, and sometimes preferred, option for women on account of its role in enhancing well-being. Many women feel they are presently in a stronger position to survive alone because the social and legal, and even economic, environment is perceived to be more favourable to them than in the past, and partly because women are less disposed to tolerate gender inequalities at the domestic level. These findings indicate that women's increasing headship of households may be a matter of choice as much as constraint, thereby underlining the importance of embracing gendered subjectivities and the multidimensionality of poverty in analyses of the 'feminisation of poverty'. They also indicate where greater policy attention may be focused to reduce gender inequalities among low-income groups.

The paper is divided into five main sections. The first introduces the concept of the 'feminisation of poverty'. The second provides a brief overview of poverty in Costa Rica together with policy interventions which have attempted to alleviate poverty and/or close gender gaps. Section 3 reviews quantitative evidence for the 'feminisation of poverty' in Costa

Rica, how this is linked with the ‘feminisation’ of household headship, and why female-headed households continue to be more prone to poverty than male-headed households. In section 4 I explore views about the ‘feminisation of poverty’ from fieldwork with 73 low-income women and men in Guanacaste province, and, in particular, attempt to distil some of main reasons for an increase in female household headship. In the fifth and final section I summarise the findings of the paper and make the case that the ‘feminisation of poverty’ in Costa Rica is not so curious a phenomenon when embracing a more multidimensional concept of poverty which takes into consideration women’s experiences and perspectives.

I INTRODUCING THE ‘FEMINISATION OF POVERTY’

Although people often use the term ‘feminisation of poverty’ without any elaboration, the main referent is income poverty, and its three most commonly identified elements are: i) that women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor; ii) that this trend is deepening, and iii) that women’s increasing share of poverty is linked with a rising incidence of female household headship (Chant,2003; also Asgary and Pagán, 2004; Cagatay, 1998; Davids and van Driel, 2001,2005; Moghadam,1997). The problem of using income as a key indicator of gender gaps in poverty (see Chant,2006), constitutes a major issue in this paper, mainly on account of the fact that it fails to capture dimensions of poverty which

appear to be most meaningful to women. Also relevant to the focus of this paper and meriting brief discussion here, is that although the three constituent elements of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ identified are inter-linked, they denote rather different things, and are quite problematic to handle without some disaggregation. Two main reasons stand out here: first, although all female household heads are women, not all women head their own households, thus despite some overlap it is inappropriate to conflate them as is so often the case (see Chant, 2003). The second problem is many people refer to the first element – namely that women are a disproportionate share of the world’s poor – as evidence of a ‘feminisation of poverty’, when in actuality feminised poverty only describes a condition which may not actually be an outcome of a trend for more women to become poor relative to men over time. As Medeiros and Costa, (2006:3) have summarised:

‘In spite of its multiple meanings, the feminisation of poverty should not be confused with the existence of higher levels of poverty among women or female-headed households... The term “feminisation” relates to the way poverty changes over time, whereas “higher levels” of poverty (which include the so-called “over-representation”), focuses on a view of poverty at a given moment. Feminisation is a process, “higher poverty” is a state’.

Leading on from this, women could still be a disproportionate share of the poor even if poverty was ‘masculinising’ over a particular time period. Yet few studies interrogate the issue of trends, even in light of widely circulated orthodoxy emanating from the 1995 UN Conference for Women at Beijing that 70%

of the world's poor were female and that this level was rising. Over and above the fact that this original estimate was improbably high², that the figure is still in circulation over a decade later may suggest that women are not becoming poorer than men over time, or even that a revised (and more accurate) estimate might indicate a reversal in the process and thereby undermine the hard-won visibility that the 'feminisation of poverty' has won in respect of putting gender on the poverty agenda (see Chant,2006b)

Given the emphasis on trend implied in 'feminisation of ' nomenclature, I feel that more attention should be paid to examining the second two, more dynamic, tenets of the construct – namely that more women are becoming poor relative to men over time, and that women's increasing share of poverty is linked with rising female household headship. Although determining even recent trends is, for most of the Global South, severely hampered by the dearth of longitudinal panel data (see Chant,2006; also Johnsson-Latham, 2004b:18;Nauckhoff, 2004:65), Costa Rica is fortunate enough to possess sex-disaggregated data for income and other relevant variables such as household headship and age over a longer time series than many countries. That this has allowed for analysis of trends is important since the Costa Rican government's 2004 report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform For Action (BPFA) singles out one of its main national challenges as reducing the 'feminisation of poverty', which is '...basically characterised by the presence of female heads of household in poor families; a phenomenon that is

closely linked to the high percentage of children born outside marriage, the large number of children without a declared father, and a rising proportion of births occurring to mothers under 20 years of age' (CR,2004:9). Such processes certainly seem to have provoked considerable concern as evident in Olsen de Figueres' (2002:2) assertion that:

'The increase in births reported by minor mothers in 2000 greatly limits the present and future possibilities of both the young single mother and the female child who will grow up in the midst of serious needs. Single parent homes headed by women are the most poor and precarious. With the increase of poverty and misery, the feminisation of poverty is self-evident and growing. The percentage of poor households headed by women has increased in recent years and presents a profound and damaging structural obstacle to women'.

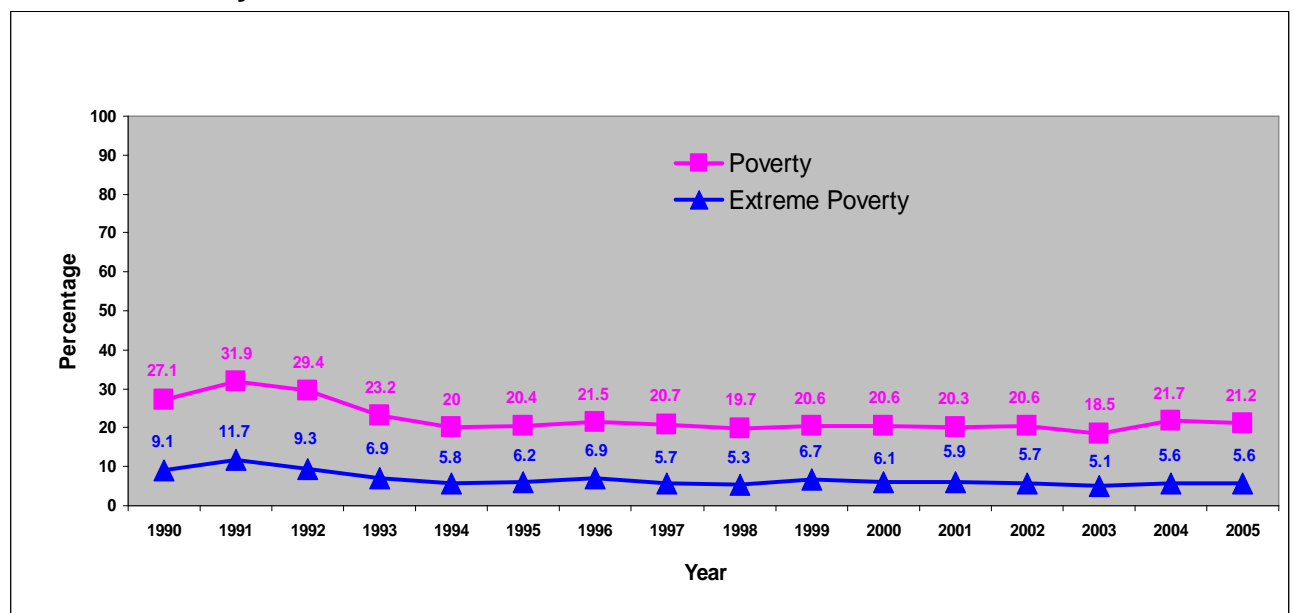
While not taking issue with some of the above pronouncements, others, such as the emphasis on young unmarried mothers, the 'increase of poverty and misery', and the claim that the 'feminisation of poverty is self-evident and growing', merit some qualification, as discussed below.

II POVERTY AND GENDER IN COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is a small, but relatively wealthy, country which in the last two decades has succeeded in reducing its dependence on the export of primary commodities. This is largely due to expansion in industry, services and ICT, much of which has been driven by foreign direct investment (see Chant,2006b:Chapter 6). Costa Rica scores highly on human development, and is on track to achieve most Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 (CSG et al, 2004:116-

7).³ Yet despite these encouraging trends, in the last decade it has not been able to reduce the proportion of the population in poverty, with computations based on official income figures showing that since 1994 around one-fifth of the population has been poor (Barquero and Trejos, 2005; Monge and González, 2005). Indeed, in 2005, 21.2% of Costa Rican households were in poverty, which is slightly higher than in 1994 (see Fig 1; also Table 1).

Figure 1 Costa Rica: Percentage of households in Poverty and Extreme Poverty 1990 - 2005



Source: INEC (2005a: Gráfico 1)

Table 1 Total, Urban And Rural Poverty In Costa Rica, 1987-2004

	Households in poverty						
	1987	1990	1994	1997	2000	2002	2004
Total	29.0%	27.0%	20.0%	20.7%	20.6%	20.6%	21.7%
Urban	22.9%	23.6%	15.5%	16.3%	17.1%	17.3%	18.9%
Rural	34.4%	32.8%	25.9%	24.1%	25.4%	25.4%	26.0%

Sources: INEC (2004b: Cuadro 1); MIDEPLAN (2005).

Note: Data pertain only to households with known or declared incomes

Poverty Trends and their Measurement in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has traditionally relied on a poverty line approach whereby households are classified as poor when their per capita incomes are unable to meet basic survival needs such as housing, education, clothing and transport, and as 'extremely poor' when they cannot afford a basic food basket (see Barquero and Trejos, 2005:2; Brenes Camacho, 2005:6; INAMU, 2005:4). Data on poverty are collected through household surveys conducted by the Costa Rican Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC/Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos), most notably the National Household Survey (ENH/Encuesta Nacional de Hogares) and the Multi-purpose Household Survey (EHPM/Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples). The first ENH was carried out in 1966,

and since 1987, following the launch of the EHPM, basic social, economic and demographic data have been gathered for a 1% sample of the population on an annual basis (see Brenes Camacho, 2005:6).

Despite the fact that variations in the calculation of the 'basic basket' of goods and services over time undermine the reliability of longitudinal comparisons (see Brenes Camacho, 2005:6-7), there is little doubt that Costa Rica made considerable strides in poverty reduction between the 1960s and the early 1990s. In 1961, for example, 51% of Costa Rican households were poor, but by 1984 this had declined to 40%, and to only 20% by 1994 (Barquero and Trejos, 2005:34; see also Table 1). Although, as noted above, the level of around one-fifth of households – equating to just under one-quarter of the population (Barquero and Trejos, 2005:6n) -- has stayed roughly the same since then, this still compares favourably with the average in Latin America, which after a decade of similar stasis, stands at 44%. (ECLAC, 2004b:18). Moreover, extreme poverty in Costa Rica virtually halved from 11.7% in 1991 to 5.6% in 2004. This, again, is much lower than the 20% mean for Latin America (World Bank, 2004:10). In light of this, the World Bank's (1997:i) accolade that Costa Rica has had '..remarkable success in reducing poverty and improving the social welfare of its population' (World Bank, 1997:i), is by no means unfounded. Since the New Constitution of 1949, which, inter alia, abolished the army, gave the vote to women and to people of Afro-Caribbean origin, Costa Rica has stood out in Central

America and beyond as a model of social democracy with a strong welfarist orientation (Brenes Camacho, 2005:4). Supported by sturdy public intervention and expenditure (in part facilitated by the absence of military investment , and in part by the existence of ‘quasi-Weberian civil service’ marked by meritocratic recruitment and routinised decision-making and promotion -- Sanchez Ancochea, 2005), subsidised health care, low-cost housing, child welfare, minimum wage laws, nationalised banking, and free and compulsory education (including a university system), have stood out as important hallmarks of Costa Rica’s post-war ‘modernisation’ (see Lara et al, 1995:4-5; Vargas, 2002:1540). On top of Costa Rica’s strong record on universal social programmes, dedicated attempts to reduce poverty have been especially prevalent since the 1970s. In 1971 the Social Welfare Institute (IMAS/Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social) was created, and in 1974, the Social Development and Family Assignment Fund (FODESAF/Fondo de Desarrollo Social y Asignaciones Familiares) (Castro, 2004; Trejos, 1995). These entities have funded a plethora of initiatives for vulnerable groups relating to food and nutrition, health, education, training, housing, and income-generating initiatives. In the 1990s they were also foremost in re-invigorated efforts to tackle poverty, notably in the form of the National Plan to Combat Poverty (PNCP/Plan Nacional de Combate a la Pobreza) introduced by during the PLN (Partido Liberación Nacional) regime of President José María Figueres (1994-1998), and the National Solidarity Plan (PNS/Plan Nacional de la Solidaridad) introduced under the PUSC (Partido Unidad Social Cristiano) administration of

Miguel Angel Rodríguez (1998-2002). A subsequent national plan 'Plan Vida Nueva' (PVN) launched by the PUSC regime of Abel Pacheco de la Espriella (2002-2006) has continued in the vein of its predecessors in attempting to reach the poor through a combination of universal schemes for social development and poverty alleviation related to education, training and employment, and targetted programmes of social assistance to vulnerable groups, among whom women feature as a key priority (Castro,2004:34; Montero and Barahona, 2003:44).⁴

During the 1990s public spending grew by 70% in real terms, with the share spent on the social sectors rising from 59% to 63% - the most rapid growth being in education and pensions (World Bank, 2003:3). On average, between 1.5% and 1.8% of GDP (cUS\$250 millions) is expended annually to protect vulnerable groups and/or to deliver a wide range of social programmes (World Bank, 2004:13). This said, in real per capita terms, social spending was actually 20% less in 2004 than in 1980 (PEN,2005:15), and in the first two years of the Pacheco administration the public expenditure budget was slashed by 40% (CR,2004:10).

The latter possibly helps to account for the failure of poverty incidence to decline from 1994 onwards. Notwithstanding the observation that individual households can move in and out of poverty quite frequently (see Castro,2004:11; also Slon Montero and Zúñiga Rojas, 2005)⁵, reasons offered for stagnation in Costa Rica have included the fact that economic

growth has not improved real wages across the board, that continued immigration has tended to increase competition at the lower end of the labour market⁶, and that a dip in secondary school completion rates during the crisis of the 1980s had an adverse effect on human capital achievements (Barquero and Trejos, 2005). Another proposition is that the growth of the 60 plus age group, who have not benefited from state social investments in education and so on to the same extent as younger generations, form a caucus of 'hard core' poor who have been poor throughout their lifetimes and not just as a result of old age (Brenes Camacho, 2005:17; see also below). Last but not least, although the level of inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient, which in 2004 stood at 0.4530 and renders Costa Rica one of the least polarised countries in Latin America, inequality has been growing since 1990 (from 0.3758), indicating a skew in the benefits of recent economic growth to wealthier households (Montero and Barahona, 2003:13). Since women-headed households have long been more prone to poverty than their male counterparts, it is perhaps no surprise that gender persists as a major axis of inequality in the country. Indeed it also seems likely that the increase in female household headship has contributed to the lack of national income poverty decline in the last decade.

Gender and Gender-sensitive Poverty Initiatives in Costa Rica

That gender should persist as a major axis of inequality in Costa Rica seems almost paradoxical given that as of 2002 it ranked among three developing countries (the others being Argentina and South Africa) with the highest levels of gender equality and 'women's empowerment' according to the selected indicators for MDG 3 (UNIFEM,2002:13). In respect of its GDI score and rank, Costa Rica has hovered around the 40th position in the world since 1994 (Table 2), and in terms of the GEM Costa Rica has made especially good progress in more than doubling the seats in parliament occupied by women between 1994 and 2004, as well achieving similar strides in women's representation as legislators, senior officials and managers (Table 3). In an index compiled by the World Economic Forum (WEF) on 'gender empowerment' for a total of 30 OECD and 28 developing countries in 2005, Costa Rica ranked 18th overall (first in Latin America and the rest of the South), occupying an especially high position (9th) in political participation, if only 49th in economic participation (Lopez-Claros and Zahidi,2005:11).⁷ This mirrors a pan-Latin American pattern for women to have negotiated major advances in terms of political rights and citizenship, but to lag behind in respect of economic, social and cultural rights (Arriagada, 2002:158).

Table 2 Gender-Related Development Index (GDI): Latin American Countries

	<i>Gender-related Development Index (GDI) 2001-2</i>	<i>Life expectancy at birth (years) 2002</i>	<i>Adult literacy rate (% aged 15 years or more) 2002</i>	<i>Combined primary, secondary & tertiary gross enrolment ratio (%), 2001-2</i>	<i>Estimated earned income (PPP US\$)² 2002</i>	<i>HDI rank minus GDI rank 2001-2</i>	
	<i>Rank¹</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Female Male</i>	<i>Female Male</i>	<i>Female Male</i>	<i>Female Male</i>	
Argentina	36	0.841	77.6 70.5	97.0 97.0	98 90	5,662 15,431	-3
Bolivia	92	0.674	65.8 61.6	80.7 93.1	82 89	1,559 3,463	0
Brazil	60	0.768	72.5 63.0	86.5 86.2	94 90	4,594 10,897	-1
Chile	40	0.830	78.9 72.9	95.6 95.8	79 80	5,442 14,256	0
Colombia	59	0.770	75.2 69.0	92.2 92.1	70 67	4,429 8,420	1
Costa Rica	44	0.823	80.5 75.7	95.9 95.7	66 67	4,609 12,577	-2
Cuba	--	--	78.6 74.7	96.3 94.6	77 72	-- --	--
Dominican Republic	78	0.728	69.2 64.4	84.4 84.3	81 73	3,491 9,694	0
Ecuador	79	0.721	73.4 68.2	89.7 92.3	71 73	1,656 5,491	1
El Salvador	84	0.709	73.6 67.6	77.1 82.4	65 66	2,602 7,269	-2
Guatemala	98	0.635	68.7 62.8	62.5 77.3	52 59	2,007 6,092	1
Honduras	95	0.662	71.4 66.5	80.2 79.8	61 64	1,402 3,792	-2
Mexico	50	0.792	76.3 70.3	88.7 92.6	74 73	4,915 12,967	-3
Nicaragua	97	0.660	71.8 67.1	76.6 76.8	66 63	1,520 3,436	2
Panama	53	0.785	77.3 72.2	91.7 92.9	75 71	3,958 7,847	-1
Paraguay	75	0.736	73.0 68.5	90.2 93.1	72 72	2,175 6,641	-2
Peru	74	0.736	72.3 67.2	80.3 91.3	88 88	2,105 7,875	-3
Uruguay	41	0.829	78.8 71.5	98.1 97.3	90 81	5,367 10,304	2
Venezuela	58	0.770	76.6 70.8	92.7 93.5	66 64	3,125 7,550	-2

Source: UNDP (2004: Table 24)

Notes:

1. Rank out of 144 countries; top -- Norway (0.955); bottom= Niger (0.278).
2. See Anand and Sen (2000)

-- = no data

Table 3 Gender Empowerment Measure (Gem): Latin American Countries

	<i>Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) 2004</i>	<i>Seats in parliament held by women 2004</i>	<i>Female legislators, senior officials & managers 2004</i>	<i>Female professional & technical workers 2004</i>	<i>Ratio of estimated female to male earned income 2004</i>	
	<i>Rank¹</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>(as % of total)</i>	<i>(as % of total)</i>	<i>(as % of total)</i>	
Argentina	21	0.645	31.3	26	53	0.37
Bolivia	41	0.524	17.8	36	40	0.45
Brazil	--	--	9.1	--	62	0.42
Chile	58	0.460	10.1	21	52	0.38
Colombia	48	0.498	10.8	38	50	0.53
Costa Rica	19	0.664	35.1	53	28	0.39
Cuba	--	--	36	--	--	--
Dominican Republic	40	0.527	15.4	31	49	0.36
Ecuador	50	0.490	16	25	44	0.30
El Salvador	60	0.448	10.7	26	46	0.36
Guatemala	--	--	8.2	--	--	--
Honduras	70	0.355	5.5	22	36	0.37
Mexico	34	0.563	21.2	25	40	0.38
Nicaragua	--	--	20.7	--	--	--
Panama	52	0.486	9.9	38	49	0.50
Paraguay	63	0.417	8.8	23	54	0.33
Peru	42	0.524	18.3	27	44	0.27
Uruguay	46	0.511	11.5	37	52	0.52
Venezuela	61	0.444	9.7	27	61	0.41

Source: UNDP (2004:Table 25)

Notes:

1.Rank out of 78 countries

--= no data

Although women in Costa Rica have technically been entitled to the same rights as men since the New Constitution of 1949, it was not until the mid-1980s when efforts to promote gender equality really got underway. In 1986 a Centre for Women and the Family (CMF/Centro Nacional del Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia) was established as a semi-autonomous

body with its own legislative powers, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified. This saw the start of a decade of sustained momentum for gender equality initiatives, leading, inter alia, to Act 7801 of 1998 which replaced the CMF with a National Institute for Women (INAMU/Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres). This gave the national apparatus for women its own legal status, an enhanced budget, and directorship by an appointed Minister for Women's Affairs. In 2001 Costa Rica also became one of the first signatories to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW which allows women to pursue legal action at an international level to defend their rights (CEDAW, 2003:27;CR,2004).

Although there have shortfalls in fulfilling financial pledges to INAMU since its inception, together with two internal ministerial changes in the current administration alone (CR,2004;PEN,2005), the efforts of the Costa Rica's state machineries for women have earned praise in the fourth periodic report submitted to CEDAW (2003) for achievements in education, employment, healthcare, political participation and legal resources. Beyond this, and important in the context of the present paper, there is greater protection and advocacy for the rights of vulnerable women, and more flexible notions of 'family' than are often found elsewhere (see Chant 1999, 2002). Aside from the fact that Costa Rican women have long had fairly ready access (in principle) to divorce and legal separation (see Chant, 1997a:137), the material and social viability of 'non-standard' households

(notably those headed by lone or non-formally married mothers) has been bolstered in various ways by legal reforms.

One seminal piece of legislative bedrock was the Law Promoting Social Equality of Women (Law no. 7142) of 1990. Oriented not only to promoting, but guaranteeing, women's equality with men, specific provisions of the law included compulsory joint registration of property in marriage (or in non-formalised unions, registration in the woman's name), greater rights for victims of domestic violence to evict the perpetrators from their homes, more opportunity for women to decide on the custody of children, prohibition of sacking on grounds of pregnancy, and increased funding for daycare centres, (see Badilla and Blanco 1996; IJSA, 1990; Vincenzi, 1991).⁸ The Social Equality Law set the scene for several subsequent legislative and policy initiatives with important implications for women's personal rights and entitlements within and beyond the household. These included a National Plan for the Treatment and Prevention of Violence (PLANOVI/Plan Nacional para la Atención y la Prevención de la Violencia) launched in 1996, amendments to articles 84, 85, and 89 of the Family Code, recognising children born outside marriage (Law no. 7538, 1995), the addition of articles 242–246 acknowledging the legal validity of consensual unions, and reform of article 5 eliminating the equivalence of women and minors (see CMF, 1996:22; Colaboración Area Legal, 1997; IMAS, 1998). More recent developments with particular relevance to female household heads, and worthy of discussion in their own right, are the Law for Women in

Conditions of Poverty (Law no. 7769), the Law for the Protection of Adolescent Mothers (Law no. 7739), and the Law for Responsible Paternity (Law no. 8101) (INAMU, 2001; see also Box 1).

Box 1 Costa Rica: Key Reforms To General And Specific Laws Relating To Gender Approved By The Legislative Assembly, 1995 – 2005

Act no	Title of legislation	Year of approval
7476	Act on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and Educational Establishments	1995
7491	Reforms to Article 95 of the Labour Code (followed by 7621 (1996) (establishing right to paid leave for maternity and child adoption)	1995
7499	Approval of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Sanctioning and Eradication of Violence Against Women	1995
7532	Regulation of <u>De Facto</u> Unions	1996
7586	Act on Domestic Violence	1996
7600	Comprehensive Act on Persons with Disability	1996
7653	Reforms to Electoral Code (to ensure 40% female participation)	1996
7735	Services for Teenage Mothers	1997
7739	Code on Childhood and Adolescence	1998
7769	Act on Services for Women Living in Poverty	1998
7794	Municipal Code (creation of permanent commission on the situation of women in municipalities)	1998
7801	Act creating the National Institute for Women	1998
7817	Act creating the Amor Jóven and Construyendo Oportunidades programme	1998
7880	Reform of article 33 of the Political Constitution replacing the term 'man' with 'person'	1999
7899	Act on Sexual Exploitation of Minors	1999
7935	Comprehensive Act on the Older Adult	1999
7940	Authorisation for IMAS to grant total and partial forgiveness of mortgage loans on social housing	1999
7954	Creation of the Women's Gallery (to celebrate achievements of outstanding women)	1999

7950	Reform of the National Housing Finance System Act	2000
8089	Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	2001
8017	Comprehensive Childcare Centres	2000
8101	Responsible Paternity Act	2001
8107	Reform of the Labour Code (incorporation of principle of non-discrimination in the workplace)	2001
8128	Creation of the Domestic Violence Court in the Second Judicial Circuit of San José	2001
8129	Creation of Domestic Violence Courts in the Circuit of Heredia, in the First Judicial Circuit of Alajuela and the Initial Circuit of Cartago, and a Criminal Court in the Canton of La Unión, Cartago Province	2001
8184	Act on Services for Women Living in Poverty (creation of a trust fund)	2001
8261	Act on Young Persons	2002
8312	General Act on Protection of Teenage Mothers (reforms)	2002

Sources: CEDAW (2003: Table 1); CR (2004:2-4 & 44-5);
<http://www.inamu.go.cr/derechos/>

(accessed 18 May 2005)

The precursor to the Law for Women in Conditions of Poverty of 1998 was a major programme for female household heads⁹, coordinated by IMAS, and launched in 1995 as part of the '*Promujeres*' (Pro-women) branch of the National Plan to Combat Poverty (see earlier). Going under the title of the 'Comprehensive Training Programme for Female Household Heads in Conditions of Poverty' (Programa de Formación Integral para Mujeres Jefas de Hogar en Condiciones de Pobreza), this offered women a modest stipend ('asignación familiar temporal') for up to six months during which time they were expected to take courses in personal development

(including the building of self-esteem) and in employment-related training (Chant, 1997a:151; Marengo et al, 1998:52). Although there were problems with general coordination and with the vocational element, the human training component reached a total of 25,000 women between 1995 and 1998 (Marengo et al, 1998). Thereafter, the Act on Services for Women Living in Poverty of 1998 made it a state obligation to assist women in poverty. This led to the Comprehensive Training Programme being revised and re-launched under the name 'Creciendo Juntas' ('Growing Together').¹⁰ The basic format of the original programme, emphasising a combination of personal development (oriented around human and political rights) and vocational and technical skills was retained, but Creciendo Juntas became a major inter-agency venture and was extended to all women in poverty, albeit with priority to female household heads (see below). The economic incentive was set at 30% or more of the basic minimum wage, and in January 2002, another article was added to Law no.7769 to provide for micro-enterprise initiatives as part of the objective of promoting greater labour force insertion (Jiménez, 2002). The programme has also been broadened to include completion of basic education and housing benefits (see IMAS, 2001).

Selection of Creciendo Juntas candidates is made through SIPO data (as opposed to pre-selection through communal committees as in the case of its predecessor), with groups of 15-30 candidates not only having to be registered on the SIPO data base, but to possess identity cards, to be living in

conditions of poverty or extreme poverty, and to willing to participate in all parts of the programme.¹¹ The target population to be reached by the new and more elaborate programme was set at 5000 per annum, with 25% of these being female heads of household (INAMU,2005:12), notwithstanding that SIPO definitions of female headship are looser than in the census (see Notes 9 & 11) referring only to 'a woman who has the responsibility for the family' (which can clearly apply to de facto as well as de jure female heads of households, not to mention female spouses in male-headed units).¹² Although the new programme only reached an estimated 17% of female-headed households classified as poor between 1999 and 2001, around half the 15,290 beneficiaries were household heads (Jimenez, 2002). In the period 2002-4, a further 13,640 women were catered for by the programme, again with an estimated 43-50% being heads of household.¹³ Despite the fact that funding shortfalls have led to some tailing off in recent numbers of Creciendo Juntas clients (CR,2004:12), between 2002-2006 nearly 24,000 female heads in poverty and extreme poverty were targetted for help with house-building and acquisition (ibid.:7).

Two other programmes complementing the above, and motivated largely by alarm at persistently high rates of teenage motherhood, were introduced in 1999: 'Amor Jóven' ('Young Love'), and 'Construyendo Oportunidades' ('Building Opportunities'). Amor Jóven's main objectives are to encourage healthier and more responsible attitudes among young people towards sexuality, thereby preventing early

motherhood. Construyendo Oportunidades seeks to (re)integrate teenage mothers into education, and to equip them with personal and vocational skills to enhance their own lives and those of their children (see Chant,2002; IMAS, 2001; PDR, 2001). The annual target is in the region of 2400 teenage mothers.¹⁴

Costa Rica's interventions in respect of gender and the family have not just been confined to women as evidenced by the 2001 'Law for Responsible Paternity' ('Ley de Paternidad Responsable'). Momentum for the law came, *inter alia*, in response to the high number of children without named fathers, which had serious implications for children's well-being given that only children formally acknowledged by fathers and with the right to use their surname had entitlement to paternal support (Budowski and Rosero Bixby, 2003). In order to uphold the rights of children to paternal recognition and economic assistance, and to alleviate women's financial, social and emotional burden of lone motherhood, the Responsible Paternity Law requires men who do not voluntarily register themselves as fathers on their children's birth certificates to undergo a compulsory DNA test at the Social Security Institute (CCSS/Caja Costarricense de Seguridad Social). If the result is positive they are not only obliged to grant use of their surname, but to contribute to the costs of pregnancy and birth, and to cover their children's food expenses during their first year of life (INAMU, 2001; Menjívar Ochoa, 2003). This initiative is heralded as an 'historic landmark in the struggle by women's organisations and the

National Mechanism to eradicate offensive discrimination in the field of filiation and family responsibilities' (CEDAW, 2003:181). It looks likely to go some way to improving the economic conditions of lone mother households and may well encourage men to refrain from unprotected sex. However, whether it will be sufficient to substantially change long-standing patterns of paternal neglect remains another issue (Chant, 2003). Indeed, although there has so far been no formal evaluation of the programme, 'objective' indicators of women's poverty, particularly relating to female household heads, together with 'subjective' views of poverty and gender at the grassroots, indicate that it has this not had much direct impact to date, as detailed below.

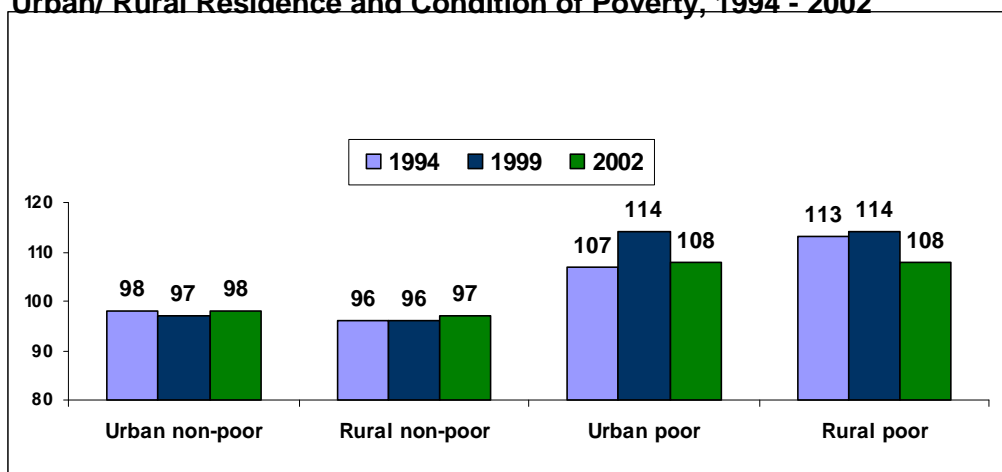
III QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE FOR A 'FEMINISATION OF POVERTY' IN COSTA RICA

CEDAW's (2003:103) assertion that the disproportionate representation of women among the Costa Rican poor '...is steadily increasing – the feminisation of poverty is a process, not simply a state of affairs that exists at a particular historical juncture', would seem to have more support from official figures than is often the case in other parts of Latin America and the Global South. This applies both in terms of the quality of sex-disaggregated panel data, and in terms of what the data actually show (see Chant,2006b:Chapters 1 & 3).

Recalling that one major, if potentially contestable, tenet of the 'feminisation of poverty' is that women are a disproportionate

share of the poor¹⁵, this is certainly borne out by available headcount data. Despite Costa Rica's sex ratio being slightly feminine overall – at 102 women per 100 men -- there are only 97-98 women per 100 men in non-poor households, but 108 in poor households (see Fig 2). By the same token, that there was some decline in the femininity index between 1999 and 2002 would suggest that the second element of the 'feminisation of poverty', notably that women's share of poverty is increasing over time is in more doubt.

Figure 2 Costa Rica: Index of Femininity in Households by Year, Urban/ Rural Residence and Condition of Poverty, 1994 - 2002

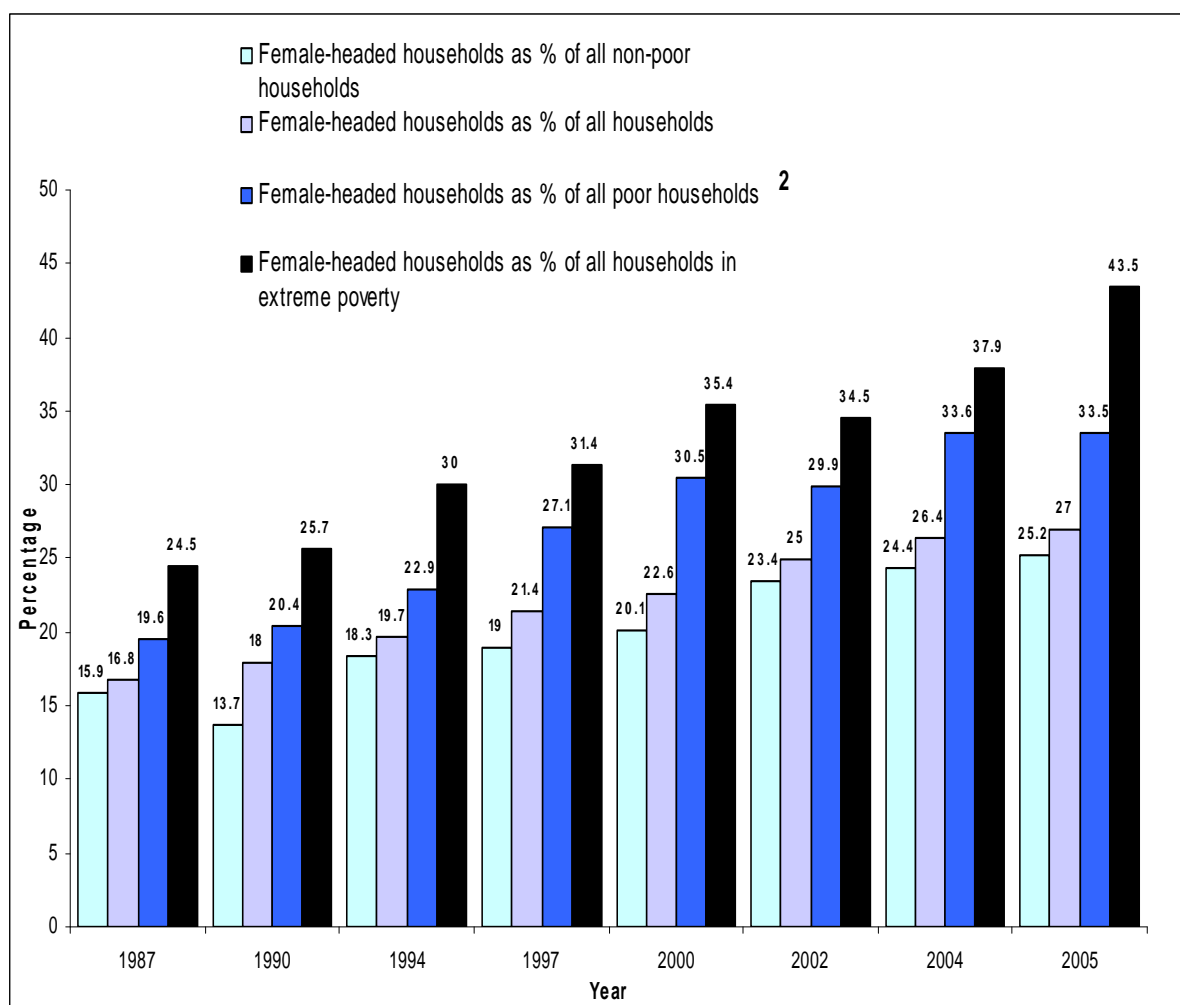


Source: Monge and González (2005: Gráfico 4.5), based on figures from CEPAL, Unidad Mujer y Desarrollo (<http://www.eclac.cl/mujer/proyectos/perfiles/comparados>)

However, if we look to the third tenet of the 'feminisation of poverty', namely that this is linked with a feminisation of household headship, then an on-going and rising trend can be identified. Female-headed households have not only made-up a consistently greater proportion of the household population in general in Costa Rica since the 1970s, but their representation among households in poverty has also

increased over time.¹⁶ In 1987, for example, when female-headed households were 16.8% of households, they were 19.6% of the poor, and in 1990 when they were 18% of the population, they were 20.5% of the poor. While poverty overall in Costa Rica declined from 31.9% (1991), to 20.4% (1995), women-headed households increased their share among households in general to 20.3% and among the poor to 26.7% (Tejos and Montiel, 1999; also INEC,2005a:Cuadro 5). By 2000, when 22.6% of households nationally were female-headed, female-headed households made-up 30.5% of poor households, and in 2005, when women-headed households were 27% of the national total, they were 33.5% of the poor (see Fig 3). In absolute terms the number of poor female-headed households has nearly doubled between 1997 and 2005 (from 37,584 to 73,941), whereas the growth in poor male-headed households has only been by about half that level (from 101,102 to 146,780).

Figure 3 Female-headed Households as a Proportion of All Households, and According to Poverty Status 1987-2005 ¹



Sources: <http://www.mideplan.go.cr/sides/social/09-02.htm>; INEC (2005b: Cuadro C03)

Notes:

1. Data relating to poverty categorisation relate only to those households with known or declared income
2. Percentages for poor households include those in extreme poverty

These data would certainly seem to suggest that there is a link between the ‘feminisation of poverty’ and the ‘feminisation of household headship’. Yet despite the progressive increase in the share of female-headed households among the poor over time, the probability of poverty among female-headed

households actually declined from around 1 in 3 in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to 1 in 5 in the mid-1990s, possibly as an effect of the general decline in poverty during this period (see Fig 1). Moreover, even if there was an upturn in the likelihood of female-headed households being poor from 1997 onwards, differentials in poverty according to sex of household head have remained about the same – at around 1 in 4 among women heads, and around 1 in 5 among men. This corroborates another study based on comparisons over an even longer time period (1990 and 2001) undertaken by Medeiros and Costa (2006) which found no increase in poverty gaps between male and female household heads. In short, although the ‘Constituency Principle’ whereby poverty has an intrinsic importance to those it afflicts is undoubtedly significant (see Subramanian, 2005), and in absolute terms there are more female household heads suffering hardship today than in the past, gender differences in the probability of being poor (the ‘Likelihood Principle’) have not shifted.

Leading on from this it seems that the growing share of women-headed households in poverty in Costa Rica is largely accounted for by the fact that the numbers of female-headed households in general have been increasing at a greater rate than their male counterparts. While numbers of female-headed households nearly tripled between 1990 and 2005, more than doubling between 1997 and 2005 alone -- from 138,823 to 280,776 – male-headed households only grew from 519,914 in 1990, to 530,820 in 1997 to 759,137 in 2005 (i.e. by a factor of 1.4). During the period 1990-2005, just over

one-third of net additions to the household population were female-headed, such that while 1 in nearly 5 households was female-headed in 1990, this has risen to 1 in 3.7 in 2005.

If poverty in general is not so much an issue, extreme poverty figures arguably reveal a more worrying trend in terms of becoming progressively more concentrated among female-headed households over time. Although the share of all Costa Rican households in extreme poverty dropped from 9.1% to 6.1% during the 1990s, and to 5.6% by 2005, the proportion of female-headed households in this category ascended from 25.7% in 1990, to 31.4% in 1997 to 43.5% by 2005 (see Slon Montero and Zúñiga Rojas, 2005: Cuadro 2; also Fig 3). Although the share of all female-headed households in extreme poverty had declined to 7.5% by 1997 (from 13.9% in 1990) this has crept up again to 8.9% by 2005. In contrast, the respective figures for male-headed households have shown a sustained decline, from 8.5% in 1990, to 4.9% in 1997 to 4.3% in 2005. While the probability of being extremely poor among female-headed households has hovered around the same level, at around 1 in 11 since 1994, among male-headed households the likelihood has diminished: from 1 in 19.9 in 1994, to 1 in 20 in 1997, to 1 in 23 in 2005. While the increase in the relative share of female-headed households in the extremely poor category is, again, largely accounted for by the overall growth in numbers of female-headed households, it is clear that gender gaps in poverty have remained stubborn. These need some

explanation prior to considering why the growth in households headed by women is on-going.

Reasons for Persistent Poverty among Women and Female-headed Households

In the recent 11th *State of the Nation Report* a number of persistent structural problems related to the ‘feminisation of poverty’ were identified. These include lack of recognition of women’s work, unfavourable conditions of workforce entry and labour market segmentation, discrimination in some aspects of education, particularly subject choice at professional level, violence against women, difficulties of unseating traditional gendered cultural norms and practices, scarcity of resources for women’s initiatives, and lack of effective gender mainstreaming (see PEN, 2005). In respect of female-headed households more specifically, Monge and González (2005: Chapter 4) propose that this group are likely to be poor for four main reasons: 1) because they have less capacity to generate income than male heads; 2) because female heads are on average older than that male heads which means more problems of labour force insertion; 3) there is more dependence in female-headed households on others’ incomes, which may not be guaranteed; and 4) female household heads have lower levels of education than their male counterparts. The vulnerability of female-headed households is also noted by Monge and González (2005) as increasing with the number of children they have.

With regard to female-headed households having less capacity to generate income than male-headed households, this would certainly seem to be borne out by quantitative data. Although there was a 143% rise in female labour force participation between 1980 and 2000 (CIDA, 2002:3), and between 1980 and 2001 the share of the workforce made up by women rose from 24.3 % to 35.7% (PEN, 2002), in 2002 only 38.5% of Costa Rican women were economically active as against 73.3% of men. Moreover, although the labour force participation rate of poor female household heads increased overall – from 31.2% to 33.6% -- between 1990 and 2000, this was not as high nor to the same extent as a) women in general, and b) non-poor female household heads (from 48.2% to 55.8%).

Beyond the issue of labour force insertion per se, is the nature of work which women do. Because of the need to juggle different responsibilities, many Costa Rican women only undertake part-time, informal and/or seasonal income-generating activities. Indeed, 46.4% of female workers are in the informal sector compared with 39.6% of men (see CEDAW, 2003:12; also Table 4). In turn, it is no surprise that female household heads continue to be involved primarily in the informal sector whereas male household heads feature more prominently in formal sector and self-employment (see Cunningham, 2000).

Table 4 Costa Rica: Mean Monthly Earnings Of Men And Women According To Branch Of Activity¹

<i>Branch of employment</i>	<i>Mean male earnings (colones, 2004)²</i>	<i>Mean female earnings (colones,2004)</i>	<i>Mean female earnings as proportion of mean male earnings</i>
Agriculture & stock-raising	98,143	77,280	78.7%
Fishing	110,639	90,600	81.9%
Mining & quarrying	198,140	144,255	72.8%
Manufacturing	184,438	119,462	64.8%
Electricity, gas & water	240,379	309,127	128.6%
Construction	150,499	149,799	99.5%
Commerce	167,805	115,202	68.7%
Hotels & restaurants	161,035	103,246	64.1%
Transport, storage & communications	190,873	215,079	112.7%
Financial services	365,982	250,626	68.5%
Business & real estate	209,867	184,914	88.1%
Public administration	259,645	250,945	96.7%
Teaching	265,865	224,486	84.4%
Health & social welfare	305,255	239,106	78.3%
Community & personal services	181,174	113,049	62.2%
Domestic service 72,859	51,982	71.6%	
Extra territorial organisations	358,812	322,433	89.9%
Unclearly specified activities	318,362	130,000	40.8%
Total	173,921	142,358	81.

Source: INEC (2004a: Cuadro 18).

Notes:

1. Excludes non-remunerated workers
2. Exchange rate July 2004: US\$1 = 430 colones

On top of the fact that the gender gap in remuneration is often bigger in informal than formal employment, there has been little diminution in gendered wage gaps in general in recent years. Despite the fact that the period 1990-2003 saw women's real wages increasing by 31.1% compared with 28.5% among men (CSG et al, 2004:37), as of 2001 the gender wage gap stood at 35.4%, and 28.3% of women workers earned less than the minimum wage compared with 20.4% of their male counterparts (ILO, 2005). In turn, of the 94,425 working female heads in 2000 (excluding domestic servants and retired persons), nearly one-quarter (24.8%) earned in the bottom two deciles, compared with 18.7% who earned in the top two deciles, whereas out of 561,529 working male heads only 11.4% earned in the bottom two deciles as against 24.8% in the top two. For these reasons it is no surprise that in poor households in 2002 female heads on average generated only half the income of their male counterparts (Monge and González, 2005).

Notwithstanding rising education levels among women, these have not been sufficient to eliminate inequality of opportunity in employment (Pérez Echeverría, 2005:15). Bearing in mind that as of 2003 heads of poor households had an average of only 4.2 years schooling, vis-à-vis 8.2 among the non-poor (Castro, 2004:6), according to recent SIPO data out of 28,000 female heads under the poverty line, 16.8% had no education, and a mere 7.8% had completed secondary school (WCVR, 2004:64). This mirrors a more general tendency for low educational achievements among poor women. In 2003, for

example, nearly two-thirds (62%) of poor women had only studied to primary or sub-primary level (6 years or less), and only 12% had completed or gone beyond secondary education (12 or more years) (Monge and González,2005:24). Whereas just over one-third of women with incomplete primary were poor in 2003, the rate was one-quarter for those with complete primary, and only about one-tenth for those with a high school qualification (ibid.:Gráfico 4.10). While education and poverty generally show an inverse relationship, education seems especially important for women to break the gender-poverty trap. This is mainly on account of the fact that while women's and men's labour force participation is lowest at sub-primary level, gaps in labour force participation between women and men are greater among those with between 1 and 6 years education than those with post-primary schooling (ibid.,Gráfico 4.11). Indeed, Monge and González (2005) assert that for women to substantially increase their labour opportunities 12 years of education or more are necessary. While this is one reason why education (and training) have undoubtedly been emphasised in recent initiatives in Costa Rica to lift women and female household heads out of poverty, they have not had much impact to date given that between 1994 and 2003 the average years of schooling of poor women aged 15 or more only rose from 5.2 to 5.4 (Sauma,2004 cited in Monge and González, 2005).

Women's age profile is also pertinent to education insofar as older women have not benefited from the latter to the same extent as their younger counterparts. According to the 2000

census, for example, as many as 51.5% of women aged 60 or more have had no education or had not finished primary school, compared with only 15.5% of 40-49 year old women, and only 8.2% of 20-24 year olds (the corresponding figures for men are 47%,13% and 10%) (INEC,2001: Cuadro 7). In turn, older women’s education deficit undoubtedly compounds discriminatory practices in the labour market, with only 7% of women aged 65 or more being economically active, compared with 33% of men (see Monge and González, 2005). Added to this only 35% of women aged 60 or more are covered by pensions compared with 45% of men (CELADE, 2002:68).¹⁷ These would appear to be persuasive reasons why elderly women are usually identified as being more vulnerable to poverty than their younger counterparts (CR,2004; Monge and González, 2005: Chapter 4), with women aged 60 or more being at particular risk in relation to 20-59 year old women, as well as against men in the same age cohort (see Table 5).¹⁸

Table 5 Gender, Age And Poverty In Costa Rica

	Total	<u>Age groups (years)</u>				
		0-6	7-12	13-19	20-59	60+
Urban						
Males in poverty (%)	16.8	25.9	26.3	19.6	11.3	15.2
Females in poverty (%)	19.2	26.8	25.2	21.5	15.1	20.4
Rural						
Males in poverty (%)	20.8	29.7	29.5	16.8	15.3	24.3
Females in poverty (%)	23.8	29.3	31.5	22.3	19.2	29.0

Source: CEPAL (2002: Table 6a)

Bearing in mind that old age in general tends to be a predictor of poverty in Costa Rica -- the average number of people aged 60 or more in poor households being 67% greater than in non-poor households, and the mean age of heads of poor households (as of 2002) being 48.2 years, compared with 45.3 years among the non-poor (Monge and González, 2005: Chapter 4) -- it should also be noted that as of 2000, as many as 17.8% of female-heads were aged 70 or more (up from a level of 14.9% in the early 1990s), compared with only 7% of male heads (down from 7.5% during the same period) (see also later).

Yet the pertinence of demographic ageing is not only confined to women in the 60 plus age group, but to women as young as their late 30s and early 40s whose households are likely to be undergoing what Barquero and Trejos (2005) have termed 'stabilisation' and 'dismembering' -- 'stabilisation' referring to having an older child over 18, and the youngest child under 18, and 'dismembering', where the youngest child is 18 or more. As noted by Monge and González (2005), 60% of female-headed Costa Rican households are at this stage in the family life cycle, which at one extreme can mean the injection of remittances from co-resident or non-co-resident older children, but at the other, major costs attached to supporting adolescents and younger children, and at a time where the age of the female head herself is unlikely to be propitious in terms of labour force insertion. By the same token it has been widely observed that female-headed households are at particular risk of poverty when their heads

are under 35, mainly on account of having pre-school and school-age children, and therefore higher dependency ratios (CEDAW, 2003:104; see also Barquero Torres, 2005:16; Monge and González, 2005). Even if teenage female heads of household may not have large numbers of dependent children, incomplete schooling is clearly an additional risk factor.

Although heads are by no means the only workers in households, and the proportion of other household members working actually rose in poor female-headed units between 1990 and 2000 -- from 26.7% to 38.4%, as against a decline from 59.9% to 54.4% among those headed by men -- not all households benefit from the labour supply of others. As such, another conceivable reason for persistent poverty among female-headed households is that the proportion constituted by women living alone grew from 11.3% to 14.3% between 1990 and 2000, and the share of female one-person households from 28% to 33% of all one-person households under 60 years between 1987 and 2002. Even if the rate of female headship declined from 57% to 53% among one-person households aged 60 or more during the same time period – Monge and González, 2005:Gráfico 4.3), female heads were still more than half this group which may well help to explain why as of 2002, single person units 60 plus had a 30% greater incidence of poverty than single person units overall (ibid.). Moreover, lone parent households headed by women ascended from 44.5% to 49.9% of all female-headed households between 1990 and 2000, which, together with the

high level of one woman units, meant that fewer female-headed households contained other members (e.g. children or other relatives) who could bolster well-being. Although overall female-headed households have a lower dependency ratio (3.9) compared with their male-headed counterparts (4.3), this can clearly conceal extremes (Monge and González, 2005).

Interestingly perhaps, the civil status of female heads seems to bear little relationship with poverty, with only marginal differences in the proportions of female heads between poor and non-poor categories in urban areas (see Table 6).

Table 6 Civil Status Of Women And Men In Urban Households In Costa Rica According To Poverty Status, 2002

Civil status	<u>Poor</u>		<u>Non-poor</u>	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Couple	11.4%	90.6%	13.4%	90.7%
Single	20.7%	3.8%	22.9%	4.0%
Separated or divorced	42.9%	3.1%	41.0%	3.8%
Widowed	25.0%	2.5%	22.6%	1.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Monge and González (2005: Cuadro 4.2), elaborated from data from CEPAL, Unidad Mujer y Desarrollo (<http://www.eclac.cl/mujer/proyectos/perfiles/comparados>).

Reasons for the Growth of Female-headed Households

The tendency towards a 'feminisation' of household headship in Costa Rica mirrors a pan-Latin American pattern, and for similar reasons, including an increase in single parenthood, falling marriage rates, rising separation and divorce, migration, demographic ageing and increased life expectancy, and mounting levels of female labour force participation (see Arriagada, 2002; ECLAC, 2004a; Lavinás and Nicoll, 2006; Monge and González, 2005).

As far as demographic ageing is concerned, it should be noted that Costa Rica's 'ageing index' (which refers to the number of people aged 60 or more per 100 children under 15) stood at 24.1 in 2000, which is one of the highest in Latin America (PAHO/MIAH, 2004:2). This owes not just to declining fertility, but to exceptional gains in life expectancy - from a mean of 42 years in 1930 to 78 in 2000 (Brenes Camacho, 2005:5). We have already seen that relatively speaking more female heads in Costa Rica are in the 70 plus age cohort than their male counterparts which at some level undoubtedly reflects the fact that women's life expectancy (80 years) is higher than men's (75 years) (WHO,2005:Annex Table 1), and that in the 65 year plus age cohort, the sex ratio is feminine, with only 90 men per 100 women (CELADE, 2002:60). That a surplus of women in upper age groups may precipitate female headship is compounded by the fact that, in common with other countries in the Latin American region and beyond, a greater proportion of Costa Rican women aged 60

or more are widowed (13.5%) in comparison with their male counterparts (3.5%) (INEC,2001:Cuadro 9). That female headship may become progressively concentrated in upper age groups in future is likely given that although at present only 8% of the population is aged 60 or more, and 5.5% 65 years plus, the elderly constitute the country's fastest-growing population segment (WHO, 2005:174). Given the historical unevenness of pensions and employment opportunities between older women and men, this may well exacerbate rather than diminish the tendency towards an association between female headship and poverty.

As for migration, this also seems to have played a part in increasing female household headship. Long-term or permanent migration from rural to urban areas in Costa Rica has traditionally been female-selective, largely as a result of the dearth of employment opportunities for women in agriculture compared with other sectors. Urban women have always had greater rates of labour force involvement than their rural counterparts, and in 2003, for example, the gross participation rate of women was 35.2% in urban areas, but only 22.4% in rural areas (the respective figures for men being more even at 55.9% and 56.7%) (CSG et al, 2004:35).

Although there has been a slight decline in the female bias in the sex ratio in urban areas over time (for example, in 1991 there were only 91 men per 100 women in towns and cities), in 2000, the urban sex ratio remained feminised, at only 95 men per 100 women, compared with 107 men per 100 women

in rural areas (Chant,1997a:132; INEC,2001:Cuadro 1). While 60.5% of Costa Rican women lived in towns in 2000, this was the case with only 57.6% of men (ibid.). In turn, female-headed households have long been more common in urban than in rural areas in Costa Rica. For example, in 1987, 20.9% of urban households were headed by women, as against 13.4% in rural areas, and by 1995, the urban rate had ascended to 30.9% as against a rural level of 20.5%. While 57% of all female heads were living in urban areas in 1987, this was 69% by 2003 (as against 36% and 54% of households in general).¹⁹ While only 1 in 3.7 urban households were headed by women in 1987, by 2003 this had risen to 1 in 2.9. Consistent with the progressive 'urbanisation' of female household headship, in this latter year women-headed households constituted 24.9% of the rural poor, but as many as 40.3% of the urban poor, and 56.1% of urban households in extreme poverty.²⁰

Diminishing rates of marriage are evidenced in the fact official data show the number of marriages per 100 people as dropping from 8 in 1984, to 7.4 in 1990, to 6.1 in 2000, to 5.5 in 2004.²¹ This downward trend seems largely to do with a decline in marriage among young persons, since although as many as 73.7% of the population in conjugal unions in 2000 were formally married, and as much as 79% of those aged 30 or more, this applied to only 57% of those aged 29 or under (INEC, 2001: Cuadro 11). While postponement of marriage may be an issue here, it is also the case that conjugal instability is on the increase with the number of marriages

ending in divorce escalating from one in eleven in 1984, to four in ten by 2001 (Palmer and Molina, 2004:361).

As part and parcel of these trends, official figures also indicate that the proportion of births outside marriage in Costa Rica increased from 23% in 1960, to 38 % in 1985, to 51.5 % in 1999 (Budowski and Rosero Bixby, 2003; INAMU,2001:8), and to 59% in 2004.²² That at the turn of the century nearly one-third of children born in Costa Rica also had a '*padre desconocido*' ('unknown father') is significant insofar as until the Law for Responsible Paternity (see earlier), only formally (and voluntarily) acknowledged children had legal entitlement to paternal support. In 2000, two-thirds of births from unreported fathers occurred to women under 19 years of age (INAMU, 2001:8), and 33% of mothers in the 15-19 age group were lone parents as against 28% of mothers as a whole (INEC, 2001:Cuadro 16).

Even though rates of adolescent fertility (the number of births per 1000 women aged 15-19) have declined from 106 per 1000 in 1970-1975, to 89 per 1000 in 1990-1995, to 81 per 1000 in 2000-2005, Costa Rica's current level remains higher than the average of 72 per 1000 for Latin America as a whole (Monge and González, 2005: Gráfico 4.24). Moreover, between 1990 and 2000, births to women under 20 years old rose from 15.8% to 21.2% of total births, and the proportion of under-18s who had given birth slightly increased during the inter-censal period 1984-2000 (from 11% to 12%), Despite mounting awareness of, and access to, contraception, out-of-

wedlock pregnancy remains especially common among young women from lower-income groups, with the probability of motherhood at age 17 or less being four times higher among the poorest third of the population than the wealthiest third (Rodríguez Vignoli, 2004). Currently the annual total of births to teenage mothers living in conditions of social risk is 14,500 (CR,2004:18).

IV QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE 'FEMINISATION OF POVERTY' IN GUANACASTE

Brief Background to Guanacaste

My grassroots interviews with low-income women and men were conducted in a total of six urban localities²³ in Guanacaste, which is one of Costa Rica's seven provinces (also equating with 'Chorotega', the term given to one of the country's six planning regions) (see Figs 4 & 5). One of main reasons for the selection of Guanacaste is that it is one of the poorest parts of Costa Rica. Even if poverty and extreme poverty in the area have declined since the late 1980s, in 2005, when 21.7% of households nationally were classified as poor, the incidence of poverty in Chorotega was 29.3% compared with only 17.3% in the Central Region (Fig 4). Moreover, the respective levels of extreme poverty were 10.1% and 3.9% (INEC, 2005b:Cuadro 4). Not only does Chorotega have the lowest coverage of social services, and highest housing deficit in the country (see IFAM, 2003; WVCR, 2004), but along with other peripheral regions such as

'Huetar Atlántica' and 'Pacífico Central' (Fig 5), Chorotega scores low on a new local Human Development Index (IDH/*Indice de Desarrollo Humano Cantonal*) calculated for Costa Rican cantons (administrative sub-divisions) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (see PNUD, Costa Rica, 2005). A second reason for situating the research in the area is because of my fieldwork in Costa Rica since the late 1980s had been based in local towns, providing ready access to contacts and informants.



Figure 4 Guanacaste: Case Study Localities



Figure 5 Costa Rica: Planning Regions and Proportion of Households in Poverty, 2005
 Source: INEC (2005a)

Guanacaste has traditionally been one of Costa Rica's major farming regions, but in the last 20 years has undergone massive transformation as a result of tourism in its coastal zone. Indeed, as of the late 1990s, 56% of national tourism investment was concentrated in this area (Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2000). While Guanacaste continues to be Costa Rica's main producer of rice, and of key export crops such as sugar and melon, the face of employment in the locality has changed substantially. For example, between 1987 and 1998 the proportion of the regional labour force in agriculture

dropped from 47.8% to 35.3%, while the share engaged in the tertiary sector rose from 39% to 49.7%. This seems to have been associated with an opening-up of employment opportunities for women, in number, if not in quality, with the female share of the regional labour force rising from 21.6% in 1987 to 30.2% in 1999 (ibid.). Yet despite the progressive tertiarisation of the Guanacasteco labour market, its basis in tourism has meant little reduction in the seasonality of employment. Not only does Guanacaste persist in having one of the highest levels of underemployment (17.9%) in the country, but one of the highest rates of temporary and permanent out-migration (see Chant, 2002).²⁴

Pronounced demographic mobility has often been linked with Guanacaste's historically above-average incidence of out-of-wedlock births, serial consensual unions, and female household headship (see Chant, 1997a). According to census data for example, after San José, Guanacaste has held joint second place nationally in terms of the proportion of households headed by women since the early 80s (see Table 7).

Table 7 Households Headed By Women In Costa Rican Provinces, 1984 And 2000

Province	Proportion of Households Headed by Women (%)	
	1984	2000
San José	21	27
Alajuela	15	19
Cartago	14	19
Heredia	16	22
Guanacaste	18	22
Puntarenas	15	20
Limón	15	20
National average	18	23

Source: Census data, 1984 and 2000 (<http://inec.go.cr>).

Brief Background to the Fieldwork on Poverty

Out of the total of 73 low-income respondents interviewed individually or in focus group discussions, there were 47 women and 26 men. Thirteen of the women were aged between 10 and 29 years [classified as ‘youth’], 24 aged 30-49 [‘middle adults’], and 10 aged 50 or more years [‘senior adults’], with the corresponding breakdown among male participants being 10, 6 and 10. The ‘female bias’ in the sample mainly reflects the fact that the focus group attendance rate of female participants was much higher than their male counterparts. For example, at one meeting in Villareal to which a group of male and female adults had been invited through a parent-teachers’ association (‘Padres de Familia’), only the *madres* (mothers) turned up! Interviewees

were recruited on the basis of existing contacts on the part of the team (for example, through previous research or professional work in social psychology), and the focus groups, through NGOs, schools and government institutions. The latter included IMAS, through which we were able to interview a group of female participants in Creciendo Juntas (see earlier), and the National Children's Agency (PANI/Patronato Nacional de la Infancia) in connection with their outreach work in local schools.

The sessions with respondents included the gathering of basic socio-economic details pertaining to work, fertility, marital and household characteristics, followed by discussions of varying length on people's thoughts on poverty (the meaning and evocations of the term generally and personally, its evolution over time and so on), gender, the family and poverty alleviation programmes.²⁵ A core objective was to elicit views on which groups of the population were most vulnerable to poverty (for example, women, youth, the elderly, youth, female-headed households etc), and whether they felt that relative to others these groups had always been poor, were getting poorer, and/or were being displaced by other groups at risk over time.

Although the main focus in the sections which follow is to explore the reasons why female household headship is on the increase, examining perceptions of poverty and its gendered and generational dimensions provides a critical base. This is mainly because gender disparities and dynamics in poor

households seem to be increasingly encouraging women either to form their own households, or to continue living independently once relationships terminate.

Grassroots Perceptions of Gendered and Generational Poverty

When asked to identify which groups of the population were most vulnerable to poverty²⁶, the elderly, women, and female-headed households were most commonly identified among male and female respondents alike.

In respect of income poverty, the elderly were deemed to be at a distinct disadvantage relative to other groups. One of the main reasons given was the discrimination faced by older people in the labour market. Despite the fact that senior citizens often have valuable skills and work experience, as opined by Paulo (47 years), a Nicaraguan nightwatchman in Tamarindo: *'ya les cuestan encontrar trabajo'* ('they find it difficult to get work'). On the surface this applies just as much to older men as women. Not only do men feel that they are more at risk of poverty because 'pretty young women' find work easier than them, but because elderly men cannot even establish their own business venture due to lack of commercial credit. As Pablo (81) from a focus group of elderly men in Santa Cruz said: *'Ya no le dan plata a uno'* ('Now they don't give you money'), and as a fellow member, Leandro (81) echoed: *'Ya no somos sujetos de crédito,*

aunque tengamos la visión ('Now we are no longer creditworthy, even if we have the vision').

By the same token, while many men seem to be able to carry on working until formal retirement age (between 60 and 65), and even into their 70s, for women, as indicated earlier, their possibilities often start shrinking dramatically as early as their 40s and 50s.

Calixto, a 47 year old separated male musician, for example, talked about women over 40 standing little chance of getting a job because 'they don't look good enough' to present a 'good image'. This was corroborated by Ixi, a 40 year old separated mother heading a 5-member household who had recently been sacked from her job selling imported Colombian underwear on grounds of what she suspected was ageism. Although some felt that employers were also reluctant to recruit women in this age group because of their family responsibilities, more plausible reasons over and above their physical appearance, was that older women tend to have less education, and fewer vocational, let alone professional, skills and less job experience, mainly because in the past most women stayed at home. As Gloria, a 50 year old married housewife with two children from a Santa Cruz focus group said: '*si no tienen profesión, no las contratan*' ('if you don't have a profession, no-one contracts you').

Another factor identified as having a major bearing on poverty among older women was that they are unlikely to be covered by contributory pensions due to lack of continuous -- if any --

employment in the formal sector. While the contributory pension is around US\$90 a month, representing about one-third of the minimum wage of a general unskilled worker, non-contributory pensions are only around one-quarter of this (see also Notes 17 & 18).

Even people with contributory pensions find it hard to survive alone. For example, one widower, Juan de Dios (78) from Santa Cruz, had retired on a police pension but professed that he was only able to make ends meet because he was sharing a home with two working daughters in their 40s, and a granddaughter.

In living with his children, Juan de Dios counted himself fortunate compared with other elderly men in the survey. While many male (and female) respondents recounted that they looked after their own parents until they died, the general perception was that older people, especially men, could not rely on care from their families as in the past. From the perspective of Danny, a 13 year old schoolboy from Liberia, for example: *'El grupo de hombres que se encuentra más vulnerable a la pobreza es el grupo de adultos mayores, porque la familia no los quiere y los deja botados'* ('Men most vulnerable to poverty are elderly men because the family doesn't love them and kicks them out'). This corroborated a recent national study undertaken by the National University's Institute of Social Studies in Population (IDESPO), which explodes the notion that the elderly are supported by their children as a 'myth'.²⁷ Indeed, as one example in

Guanacaste, among eight male participants aged 65-91 in a Santa Cruz focus group, as many as six lived alone in rented rooms, even if in some cases this was because they had no children on account of sterility induced by work on banana plantations.²⁸

That other relatives had not taken these men in was in part defended on grounds that they did not want to be a burden on others, and in part because they had pensions on which they could subsist. Additional reasons centred on the observation that people were becoming increasingly individualistic with families opting for nuclearisation and independence. This was sometimes attributed to the fact that both spouses tend to work now, meaning that fewer women are around to look after elderly persons, who, as a result of living longer, often have specialist health needs. One of the members of a senior female focus group in Santa Cruz, Antonina (59), reported that she had actually advised a neighbour of hers that she should put her extremely frail 90 year old father in a '*hogar de ancianos*' (old people's home) for his own good because she was not there during the day to take care of him.²⁹

Although some respondents spoke rather cynically of the fact that some elderly people were only taken-in by their families when they had pensions and/or property to leave behind, elderly women in Guanacaste, who usually either have no pension or only a minimal non-contributory pension (Note 17), are actually more likely to live in extended households, usually with married sons or daughters and grandchildren, but

sometimes with brothers or sisters too. All three single or separated female survey participants in the 'senior' age group, for example, lived with kin, whereas this was the case with only four out of ten men. While these numbers are small, they typify a pattern established by 2000 census data, whereby only 41% of lone person units among the over 60s in Guanacaste consist of women, which is lower than the corresponding national average of 47%. In turn, even if as many as 31% of female heads of household in Guanacaste are aged over 60, compared with 19% of male heads, only 39% of women aged 60 or more head their own households, a mere 40% of these consist of women living alone. Among men over 60, by contrast, 83% head their own households, and 54% of these are one-man units.

Older women's greater incorporation in extended households in Guanacaste (either as heads or other members) conceivably owes partly to the fact that they can provide a valuable service in respect of childcare, especially with so many mothers working. In addition, given the widespread practice of child abandonment or neglect by fathers in the province, and because women have usually been the major parenting figure in children's lives, affective ties with mothers are often greater (see Chant,2002).

The seemingly contradictory finding that older women are not as vulnerable in practice in Guanacaste as opinion portrays, also applies to a large degree to female-headed households. On the surface, this group were almost unilaterally identified

as the households with the biggest poverty problem, mainly on account of women's disadvantage in employment and earnings. The weak economic condition of female heads was also seen to be exacerbated by men's poor record of financial contributions to households post-separation, giving women most, if not the entire, responsibility for upkeep, as evidenced in the following quotations:

'...les cuesta más a las mujeres solas, porque a veces tienen que mantener a varios carajillos, y la verdad es que la plata no alcanza. Por lo menos ahora el IMAS les da casas o terrenos para que tengan donde vivir. Pero a ven fea'

('[Poverty] hurts lone women more, because sometimes they have to maintain several children, and the truth is the money doesn't cover it. At least now IMAS gives them houses or plots of land where they can live, but it's difficult').

Juan de Dios (78), widowed pensioner, Santa Cruz

'Creo que el hombre tal vez tiene más ventaja, porque casi siempre queda solo. En cambio las mujeres si tienen güilas tienen que buscar como mantenerlos'

('I think that men perhaps are more advantaged because they usually end up alone, whereas if women have children they must find ways of supporting them')

Juan Gabriel (31), single apprentice welder living in a household headed by his mother, Santa Cruz

'Se encuentra la pobreza más que todo en las mujeres que viven solas porque ellas también tienen que ver como criar a los hijos. El problema es que muchas no planifican y no se cuidan, luego los hombres las dejan solas con los hijos'

('Poverty is found above all among women who live alone because they also need to work out how to raise the children. The problem is that many don't use family planning and don't look after themselves, then the men leave them with the children').

Teodora (48), housewife in consensual union, Villareal.

'La mujer pobre no solo piensa en ella; piensa en su familia, en sus hijos, y en salir adelante. En cambio el hombre es más egoísta. Entonces, el sólo ve sus necesidades. En cambio, la mujer ve las necesidades de ella y las de sus familiares. Generalmente el hombre cuando ve la situación muy negativa tiende a irse y a dejar la mujer sola para que asuma la responsabilidad'

(A poor women doesn't only think of herself; she thinks about her family, her children, in getting ahead. In contrast, men are more selfish, only concerned with their own needs, unlike women who are thinking not only about their own necessities but those of her family. When men see a situation getting difficult, they tend to go off and leave the woman alone to assume responsibility').

Ixi (40), separated unemployed female head, Liberia.

Similar views were voiced by many young people. For example, William José, an 11 year old from Liberia, observed that women in the country suffer: *'Porque la mujer queda sola con sus hijos y el hombre con el alcoholismo'* ('Because women are left alone with their children, and men with alcoholism'). Giuiliana (10) from Santa Cruz who, along with two younger brothers (of 7 years, and 7 months) was being raised by her mother, also commented on the prevalence of men leaving women to carry the can: *'Los hombres se casan con muchachas así cuando las muchachas quedan embarazadas, se separan. Se van. Entonces como van a ser ellas para trabajar si está embarazada?'* ('Men hook up with young girls but when the girls get pregnant they leave them. They just go. So how are the women going to work if they are pregnant?'). Some young people, such as Carlos Olivier (12) living in an extended female-headed household in Liberia, viewed father absence as a source of struggle and poverty: *'porque mi papá no vive conmigo entonces se nos hace muy difícil vivir'* ('because my father doesn't live with us it is very difficult to

survive'). However, an equal, if not greater number of young respondents professed alternative opinions. For example, Giuliana conceded that while some women who felt lonely without a partner might put up with all the problems relationships tend to bring, she also felt that because men persisted in 'behaving so badly' that it was positive that more women are now opting out of unhappy unions. In her own case, Giuliana expressed relief that her family no longer had to put up with her father's drink problem, and pride in the fact that even though her 35 year old mother was only selling sweets and ice cream from home, she was managing to raise the children alone.

Perceptions and Realities of Female-household Headship

Leading on from the above, while female household headship is generally regarded as an extreme of a situation forcing women to struggle against poverty single-handedly, there was widespread recognition that women can and do survive in the absence of men. According to Juanita (67) from Santa Cruz: ‘.. *las mujeres aún estando solas siempre salen adelante*’ (‘... even when women are alone, still manage to survive’). Elieth, a 51 year old former school dinner lady from Santa Cruz, also felt that women did a much better job of this: ‘*El problema es que la mujer es más luchadora que el hombre; el hombre no puede luchar solo con la pobreza y como no puede, tiene que conseguirse una compañera para que le acompañe*’ (‘The trouble is that that women struggle more than men; men can’t fight alone against poverty, and because they can’t they have to find a woman who will accompany them’). On top of this, it was also recognised that women’s battle against poverty was often conducted alone even when they actually lived with men, and sometimes under greater constraints. Paulo, the 47 year old Nicaraguan nightwatchman in Tamarindo, for example, stated that male-headed households were worse-off than female-headed units because while women ‘*piensan en la comida*’ (‘think about food’), men are only concerned with *güaro* (licquor). A similar view was expressed by Geovany (39), who stated ‘*Tienen que sufrir mas las mujeres, porque piensan en la comida de los hijos, no sólo en ellas*’ (‘Women must suffer more because they think about feeding their children, not just about themselves’).

Corroborating findings from my earlier research in Guanacaste (see Chant 1997a,b), not to mention studies in other countries (see Bradshaw, 1996, 2002; Dwyer and Bruce [eds], 1988; González de la Rocha, 1994b; Moghadam, 2005), men demonstrate a propensity to retain earnings for personal use which is frequently injurious for the well-being of their spouses and children. As observed by Yiselda, a 43 year old participant in a focus group held in Filadelfia and former partner of an alcoholic: '*Si ellos ganan 50 mil, ellos le dan a uno 25 nada más y ellos se dejan el resto para gastarlo en güaro*' ('if they [men] earn 50,000 [colones], they give you no more than 25,000, and they spend the rest on drink'). Even where men do help out financially they tend to abrogate responsibility for making their contributions stretch to meet family needs. Roxana (37), in a focus group in Villareal, talked about: '*Que llega el hombre con el dinero que se ganó, y le dice a la señora: "tome, haga un milagro con esto, pague luz, agua, comida ...todo!"*' ('The man gets home with the money he's earned and says to his wife: "take this, and do a miracle with it, pay the electricity, water, food ... everything!").

The fact that men's discretionary expenditure often bankrolls indulgence in '*vicios*' (vices) such as alcohol and drugs was repeatedly flagged up as evidence of men's cavalier regard for the well-being of their families. As pointed out by Eida, separated female head of 52 from Santa Cruz:

'El hombre es más desperdiciado, porque el hombre tiene plata y se va a la cantina, mientras que la mujer cuando tiene plata piensa en comprar para darle a

*comer a sus hijos...el hombre se no preocupa por nada.
Sólo se preocupa por él, y no le importa si lo están
esperando en las casa'*

(‘Men are more reckless/wasteful, because when have money they go to the bar, whereas when women have money they think about buying food for their children... men don’t worry about anything. They’re only concerned about themselves, and it doesn’t matter to them whether people are waiting for them at home’).

Further to the disproportionate risk of income poverty to which women in male-headed household are often exposed is that they frequently have to make huge efforts to compensate for male negligence, not to mention take on additional burdens of labour. Even where women work outside the home, for example, they can seldom expect assistance from their spouses in housework and childcare. As Juanita (67) commented, when men marry or start living with someone what they really want is an *‘empleada’* (domestic servant). In previous dedicated research with men I had also found that many looked for what they referred to as a *‘segunda madre’* (‘second mother’) or *‘madre-esposa’* (‘mother-wife’) who would attend to their needs, overlook their faults, and yet at the same time allow them the performance of authority (see Chant,2002).

Owing in part to the persistence of feminine norms of altruism and servility, all women tend to work hard and in many cases resort to extreme self-sacrifice in order to fulfil the needs of of their children. As stressed by Juanita (67), from Santa Cruz: *‘no dejamos los hijos morir de hambre’* (‘we don’t let the kids die of hunger’), and if food is particularly short, as María Ester,

a 27 year old mother of one in Filadelfia, pointed out: '*uno prefiere que coman los hijos que comer uno*' ('you'd rather have the children eat than eat yourself'). Yet, in male-headed households, the expectation that women should be servicing husbands as well as their offspring means additional obligations. Indeed, although nominally benefiting from having a partner, women in male-headed households seem to be bearing an undue responsibility for household survival in a situation which is often highly exploitative because men are 'free-riding' on the backs of their labour. This, in turn, underlines the importance of taking into consideration women's 'inputs' as well as 'incomes' when exploring the 'feminisation of poverty' (see Chant,2006).

In light of the above, it is no surprise that most women express bitterness about being having to bear the brunt of, if not sole, responsibility for their families while men detached themselves from their obligations. As summed up by one senior respondent, Elba (66): '*Las mujeres son las que tienen el compromiso de los hijos. Son las que salen golpeadas, abusadas, sin empleo*' ('Women are compromised with their children, and are those who end up beaten-up, abused, and without employment').

Reasons for Opting For, or Conforming With, Female Household Headship

Leading on from this, it is also no surprise that many women find heading their own households a positive alternative. This mainly derives from the power conferred by independence

which allows them more choice over their occupations, greater control over household finances, and enhanced personal mobility and freedom, all of which makes it easier to cope with the structural challenges of female headship. The sense that women may be less exploited in the absence of a partner was often articulated through declarations of peace, well-being and empowerment by female household heads. For example, Nuvia (49) a female head working as a cleaner and living in a room attached to an older daughter's house from the Villareal Focus Group declared that since splitting with a violent, alcoholic spouse:

'Claro que estoy más a gusto, porque ya sé que yo consigo el arroz y los frijoles y como tranquila, mientras que cuando estaba con él, llegaba.. si se iba a las seis de la mañana a trabajar, llegaba al siguiente día a las seis de la mañana, borracho y haciéndome escándalo, y tal vez yo sin comida... No sé lo que yo he sufrido no se lo deseo a ninguna de mis compañeras'

(‘Of course I am happier now, because now I know that I can buy rice and beans, and eat in peace, while when I was with him, ... if he left at 6 o'clock in the morning to work, he didn't come back until 6 o'clock the following morning, drunk and causing me trouble, and me there perhaps without food. Whatever I have had to suffer, I don't wish that on any of my female companions’).

Floribet (49) from Santa Cruz, who has had eight children by four different fathers, admitted to having suffered as a lone mother, although she also felt that being alone for significant periods between spouses had actually given her a better opportunity to provide for her offspring. This was because she could do any job she wanted without having to undergo protracted and conflictive negotiations. In her various efforts to raise her children Floribet had worked as a waitress, as a

cleaning lady, and claims at times to have come near to prostitution. Presently she has two children still at home and makes a modest living selling '*arroz con leche*' (rice with milk) and '*tejidos*' (knitwear), receives money from a daughter whose child she minds during the day, and remittances from one of her sons. Although Floribet still worries about money, she feels more secure to be the manager of the household income, and draws comfort from the fact that none of it is squandered. By dint of hard work and sacrifice she also feels she has managed to give her children a reasonable start in life. This has given her a sense of pride in her achievements, and she is seemingly prouder still to air the decision she has made to put men behind her altogether. Floribet joined the Iglesia Bíblica de Guayaval (a small Costa Rican Evangelical sect) two years ago, and declares not only that she became '*una hija de Dios*' ('a child of God'), but also that 'the only husband for me from now on will be Jesus Christ!'

Eida (52), whose husband left her six years ago and who heads an eight member household in Santa Cruz, was also vehement about not cohabiting with anyone else in future. Observing that young people often seek out the company of older partners in the interests of having an easier life, she affirmed that: '*Yo prefiero limpiar que venderme como las jóvenes*' ('I prefer to clean than to sell myself to young men').

Sonia (44), another female head from Santa Cruz, who had made a major professional breakthrough since she left her spouse, was also extremely reluctant to relinquish her independence (see Box 2).

Box 2 Poverty And Female Household Headship From The Perspective Of Sonia

Sonia is 44 years old and lives with her three children, Javier (24), Carina (19) and Ernesto (16), in a low-income settlement in Santa Cruz. Each child has a different father, but only the youngest, Ernesto, has paternal contact. This is mainly because his father, from whom Sonia separated four years ago, lives on an adjacent plot along with two daughters from a previous union. Yet despite this proximity, and the fact that Sonia and Ernesto's father were together for a total of 15 years, the latter provides no regular maintenance, leaving Sonia, with the help of Javier, who works as a waiter in Santa Cruz, responsible for the entire upkeep of the household. At the time of interview, Sonia was in receipt of sickness benefit (equating to full pay after tax of about US\$40 a week) following an accident at the school where she has worked as a cleaner (*'miscelaneas'*) for eight years. She had been on sick leave for two months, and this has represented one of the few occasions in her life where she has not worked round the clock outside as well as inside the home. Although she suffers with the pain in her ankle and knees as a result of her fall, she is hoping that she will be signed off for longer in order to give her more time for her house and family, and, in particular, for her studies, which in the last few years have turned her life around.

In order to help her get over the split with Ernesto's father, in 2001 Sonia took advantage of free adult education in Santa Cruz, and, along with her daughter, who has also returned to study, is just entering the fifth and final year of her high school diploma (*'bachillerato'*). Although this requires a commitment of 3 hours each evening, and she does not get home until after 9pm, Sonia has managed to secure high grades, and is hoping eventually to enrol part-time on a university degree course and to become a teacher. This is a far cry from the types of jobs which Sonia has done previously, from a very early age.

Sonia was the eldest of seven children born to poor farming parents in one of Santa Cruz's rural cantons, Tempate. Straight after finishing primary school, 11 year old Sonia was sent by her mother to work as a live-in servant in the capital, San José. Although Sonia felt *'decepcionada'* ('deceived') to have been sent so far away so young, she remitted virtually all her wages to support the family back home for most of the nine years she was in San José. Once she returned to Santa Cruz, by which time she had had her first child, she combined domestic service jobs with home-based activities such as raising hens, pigs, turkeys, which in part generated income and in part provided subsistence.

Sonia never had an opportunity not to work, because although she had her first child at 20, and her second at 25, neither father wanted to know about the

children, and still less, assume financial responsibility. While Sonia had wanted her first child, she did not intend to get pregnant a second time, and only did so because the man in question insisted he was sterile and that they had no need for contraception. Sonia never pursued maintenance through the courts, preferring instead to maintain her independence. However, a few years ago, at the behest of the daughter who was the product of this second union, she used the recently passed Law of Responsible Paternity to force him to have a DNA test and to give his surname to Carina. While Sonia managed to provide for her first two children through her own work, she conceded to moving in with the youngest child, Ernesto's father, a bus driver, because she saw in this the possibility of getting her own house: '*un hogar para mis hijos*' (a home for my children). For the first three months they were happy, but thereafter the situation deteriorated, mainly on account of her spouses' drinking and violence which for several years made Sonia feel fearful of leaving him. As a preliminary step to departure Sonia purchased the plot next door in her own name. Once they had not had sexual relations for a year, Sonia felt it was easier to make the break and to divide their living arrangements. If she ever settles down with her current *novio* – a married man of 52 – she says she will need him to provide her with a house elsewhere in order that she can leave her existing property to the children.

Despite all the difficulties Sonia has had, including Carina having a child at 16, which she rejected and is currently being looked after by the father and his parents, Sonia has a strong sense of self-esteem which has come from raising her children with little help from men. Declaring: '*Yo puedo sola... soy la madre y el padre*' (I can go it alone.. I am the mother and the father'), she said she has proved herself to be capable without a man, and that she doesn't need to ask anyone for assistance. In turn, Sonia does not think that households headed by women are worse-off. For Sonia, the the idea that women are the '*sexo débil*' (weak sex) is a '*mentira*' (lie). '*La mujer no necesita un hombre. Ella tiene capacidad*' ('A woman doesn't need a man. She has capacity).

As highlighted in the case of Sonia, when female heads have assets in their own name this gives them more freedom to dictate the terms of their relationships with men. When I first worked in Guanacaste nearly 20 years ago, separated women would typically seek another partner to enhance their income or to gain access to housing (see Chant, 1997a). Nowadays, however, it seems as if serial monogamy of a non co-residential nature is more common, partly because rising levels of land and property titling among women have strengthened their ability to survive alone, and partly because the desire to protect assets makes them more wary of letting other men get too involved in their lives. Another factor is that although women do not have the same freedom as men to conduct multiple sexual relationships, there seems to be more tolerance of out-of-wedlock sex among women than previously.

A further critical benefit women identified as a result of freeing themselves from men, was eliminating a major source of violence in their lives. As Ixi, the 40 year old separated head of an extended household in Liberia declared: *'En muchas circunstancias es mejor estar sola por ejemplo en casos de agresión doméstica ya sea psicológica o física en cualquier circunstancia de agresión es mejor vivir sola. Mientras haya agresión no valen de nada la situación económica ni social. Si se da la agresión es mejor vivir sola'* (In many circumstances it's better [for women] to live alone, for example, in cases of domestic violence, whether this is psychological, physical, or involves any form of aggression,

it's better to be alone. As long as there is violence, the economic or social situation means nothing. If there is violence, it is better to live alone').

Another advantage of being alone stressed by many women is that they no longer have to put up with men's seemingly compulsive infidelity. This is no empty stereotype. Marian (12), whose father had left her mother for another woman, for example, deplored what she regarded as inveterate male sexual infidelity, and declared categorically that men '*sólo sirven para destruir*' ('only serve to destroy'). Men's proclivity to 'play around' was usually acknowledged by men too, with the additional rider that this could severely impoverish families. As one focus group of eight adolescent boys in Liberia concurred, the more money men had the more unfaithful they could be, which dissipated resources among all the women and children they were connected with.

Why Female Household Headship Seems to be More Viable than in the Past

Even if female household heads are popularly identified as the 'poorest of the poor', in actuality there seem to be several advantages, including greater self-determination, more control over household income and assets, and less vulnerability to secondary poverty and violence (see Box 3). While these advantages have always featured in discussions with women at the grassroots (see Chant, 1997a), I sense that many respondents feel that they are better able to do without men

than in the past. One reason is that women in general perceive they are more equal with men now, or at least less subordinate. For example, although some women are still forbidden to work by their husbands (which was the case with Ixi [40] before she separated), many do have paid work, which gives them some means for independence. In turn many young women express a firm commitment to securing a profession before marriage and children, even at the cost of not marrying at all given that the latter tends to be equated with women losing power. Mariela (15), from Santa Cruz, for example, who has never known her father and lives with her mother and two elder brothers stated: *'A mí no me gustaría que me manden. Es mejor estudiar y trabajar para que nadie lo mande a uno y no haya problemas'* ('I don't like to be ordered around. It's better to study and work so that no-one bosses you around and causes problems'). Similar sentiments were articulated by Andreina, an 11 year old who resides with her mother and two half-brothers: *'Si uno se casa ... El hombre no la va dejar hacer lo que uno quiera y salir cuando uno quiera.... Manda más a las mujeres. Las mujeres no pueden hacer lo que ella quiera'* ('If you get married, the man will not let you do what you want to do, or go out when you want to go out... Men rule women more than women rule men. Women can't do what they want'). Although the prospects of women negotiating any autonomy within the context of a union is still perceived as limited, their stronger 'fall-back' position at least makes them feel that they can cope with female household headship if the situation arises. By the same token, Abdías (14) in Liberia, was one of

many young people who cautioned that in situations of poverty, women should watch out about becoming too successful economically because men are attracted to women with money for the wrong reasons. Indeed, as noted elsewhere men often react to increases in women's income by withholding more of their own earnings (see Blanc-Szanton,1990; Chant and McIlwaine,1995; Mayoux, 2006).

Box 3 Key Advantages Of Female Headship And Factors Underlying Its Increasing Viability And/Or Appeal In Guanacaste As Perceived, Identified And/Or Experienced By Women At The Grassroots

Key advantages of female household headship

- Freedom from economic vulnerability and 'secondary poverty'
- Reduction of unequal effort in household survival
- Avoidance of diversion of household resources to personal expenditure on 'non-merit' goods such as alcohol and drugs
- Freedom from the difficulties of negotiating independence and power within marriage/consensual unions
- The right to make decisions and to control one's life
- Freedom from violence
- Removal of children from exposure to negative influences of alcoholism, drug abuse, promiscuity, infidelity, and 'irresponsibility'
- Greater ability to inculcate more gender-equal attitudes and behaviour among sons and daughters
- Escape from the pain and humiliation of conjugal infidelity

Key factors making female household headship more viable and/or appealing

- Increased employment opportunities for women
 - Diminution of gender gaps in education
 - Increased legislative and judicial support for women (for example, in cases of violence, unreported fatherhood)
 - Increased access and entitlement among women to conjugal assets such as land and property, and desire to protect these
 - Increased awareness and intolerance among women of gendered disparities in inputs to household survival
 - Lack of increased inputs to household survival on the part of men to match women's efforts
 - Apparent resistance on the part of men to countenance more equality between spouses and sometimes 'backlash' (e.g. non-cooperation, infidelity, violence) to perceived increase in women's prerogatives
 - Greater social acceptability of female household headship driven by increased numbers, and support from government programmes such as Creciendo Juntas
 - Growing social tolerance of women's sexual relationships with men outside co-residential unions
 - Growing influence of Evangelical sects which tolerate marital breakdown where partners do not eschew 'vices' and celebrate 'industry' (as opposed to Catholic emphasis on the indissolubility of marriage despite the circumstances)
-

Aside from the fact that women perceive themselves to be in a stronger position financially to survive without men, it was generally acknowledged that women were much better protected by law than hitherto which had created more possibilities for them to survive alone, especially in respect of entitlement to conjugal assets, and protection from domestic violence. This seemed to be felt even more strongly on the part of men than women. Victorio, 55 years, from Santa Cruz, for example, reported:

'Antes muchos hombres le pegaban a las mujeres, No había diálogo. Solo los trataban mal por desconfiados. Yo me acuerdo que mi papá trataba muy mal a mi mamá. Eso era feo, porque hasta a uno que estaba pequeño en ese entonces, le daba miedo. En cambio, ahora si un hombre le pega a la mujer lo demandan. Lo puedan dejar sin casa y sin mujer, porque después la mujer mete a otro hombre en la casa .. Yo creo que ahora ellas mandan porque la ley las apoya y a los hombres no'.

(‘Before many men beat their wives. There was no dialogue. They treated them badly simply because of lack of trust. I remember that my father treated my mother very badly. This was ugly, because even though I was very young at the time, it made me afraid. In contrast, if a man beats his woman now, they send him to prison, They can leave the man without a house, or woman, because afterwards the woman puts another man in the house. I think women rule now because the law supports them rather than men’)

Although Victorio’s experience as the son of a violent father had made him see some value in new family legislation, Guillermo, a 32 year married electrical repair worker living with in an extended household with his mother in Liberia noted:

'La mujer ahora no aguanta nada. Si el hombre no le sirve o la trata mal, lo deja. Por eso cuando hay muchos problemas y pleitos yo creo que es mejor que vivan aparte. A veces es el hombre él de los problemas, pero en otras es la mujer. Hay mujeres que también agreden a los hombres, pero a los hombres la ley no los protege ... es que hay algunos hombres a los que les pega la mujer'.

(‘ Women today don’t put up with anything. If the man doesn’t suit her or treats her badly, she leaves him. So, when there are many problems and arguments, I think it’s better that that people live apart. At times it’s the man who causes problems, but at others, the woman. There are women who also maltreat their menfolk, but the law doesn’t protect men .. and there are some men whose wives beat them’).

While Guillermo’s opinion was based on perception, there were some men in the grassroots survey who had come up against the law in practice. This was especially the case with older men who had taken young second or third wives and had been kicked out when their wives felt they were past-it (jokingly referred to as ‘finished flying’) –usually only after the man in question had built them a house. Rodrigo in his late 60s, for example, from Santa Cruz, pointed out that his wife had denounced him as threatening her with violence, forcing him to leave their home and preventing him from going within 300 metres of the door. As articulated by Juan de Dios (78) from Santa Cruz: *‘Ahora manda la mujer; la ley está con ellas. A un hombre hasta lo dejan sin casa. La mujer está protegida. Antes no’* (‘Now women rule; the law is on their side. Men can even be left without a roof over their heads, while women are protected. This wasn’t the case before’).

For the most part women too feel that denunciations of domestic violence will get them further, even in some cases, such as that of Nuvia (49) who resides alone in a one room annex in her daughter’s house, it is claimed that the police do not always take women’s complaints seriously:

‘..el hombre que yo tenía, el padre de mis dos hijas, yo le demandé. Llamé a la policía, en el momento que llegaba.. pero

como no me hallaron azul, como no me hallaron nada, porque yo no me deje pegar, llegaron y no hicieron nada. La policía actúa en el momento que lo matan a uno, y para qué?

(‘.. I denounced the man I was with, the father of my two girls. I called the police, but when they came and found I was not black and blue, that there was no mark on me – because I didn’t let him hit me-- , they just let, The police only intervene when they actually kill you, and why is it like this?).

Indeed, it is also significant that while the level of denunciations made by women nationally in 2004 declined markedly from levels in previous years (Pacheco de la Espriella, 2005:23), legislation has by no means eradicated domestic violence.³⁰ Indeed, in some respects punitive legislation towards men, coupled with women’s new freedoms, increased tendency to engage in paid work outside the home, and less time for their husbands, was seen to have exacerbated violence and discord within the home (see also Mayoux, 2006). One female head from Filadelfia, Maribel (42) who was looking after her four daughters alone since a recent separation from her alcoholic husband, said that while she had grown-up with the idea that women had to give men their food, and men would do nothing around the house :

‘...hoy en día parece que está cambiando por todo esto de la liberación femenina. Parece que está cambiando, para mí no se hasta que punto. Yo se que es bueno pero hay un “pero” que ahorita es la violencia doméstica, por que a causa de esto ha habido muchas mujeres muertas porque ya no queremos aguantar como antes. Queremos estar en igual condición’

(‘...nowadays it seems that this is changing because of all this women’s liberation. It seems to be changing but I don’t know until which point. I know that it’s good, but there is a “but”, and that is domestic violence, and because of this many women have died just because we don’t want to put up with things like we did before. We want to be equal’).

That pro-female laws might drive men to more extreme behaviour was also expressed by their male ‘victims’, such as Calixto (47), who felt that new legislation was seriously undermining family cooperation and unity:

‘Hay más hostilidad, porque imagínese que ese tema no me gustaría mencionarlo pero está dividiendo la familia, esa ley de ...como se llama ... “protección a la mujer”, se llama cuando las mujeres dicen me agredió mi marido ya sea física, verbal. Pero ningún juez ni ningún abogado sabe nada de psicología. Por ejemplo yo he visto casos de problemas en una familia y ninguno de ellos tiene la solución. O sea en primer lugar no sabe nada de lo que está ocurriendo en el lugar. Primero que tenía que haber salido era un psicólogo no un policía ni un juez. Entonces en vez de arreglar ese problema lo que hacen es dividir la familia, y se lo dijo por la experiencia que yo tuve, lo que me aplicaron a mí, me sacaron de la casa, perdí la relación con mis güilas, y la ley actúo totalmente mal.... Si analizar que es lo que está, porque es fácil decir que fulano es el culpable... decir que alguien es culpable es fácil, entonces eso viene a dividir más la familia. Para que vea un caso, usted ha visto el montón de mujeres que han sido asesinadas en Costa Rica, porque le dicen al marido que no se acerque ni a 300 metros de la casa y el marido está psicológicamente afectado por la vergüenza; entonces la primer reacción que tiene es matar a la esposa’

(‘There is more hostility, because, although I don’t really want to go into this, the family is becoming divided because of this law – they call – the “protection of women”, which is drawn-upon when women say their husbands have been violent towards them, whether physically or verbally. But no judge or lawyer knows anything about psychology. For example, I’ve seen cases where there are problems in a family, and neither judge nor lawyer has the solution. Or rather, they don’t know anything about what’s going on in the home in the first place. So first you need a psychologist, not a police officer or a judge. Then, instead of sorting out the problem, what they do is to split the family up, and I’m telling you this because of my own experience. They applied this law to me, they booted me out of the house, I lost my relationship with my children, and the law was completely wrong... If you think about it, it’s easy to say so-and-so is guilty...saying someone is guilty is easy .. and because of this families are being split apart. To give you an example, you’ve seen the hordes of women who have been attacked in Costa Rica, and their husbands are told they cannot go within 300 metres of the house, and the husband is affected

by shame ..well... the first reaction men are going to have is to kill their wives’).

That the law is generally perceived to be increasingly on women’s side has added to other initiatives which have attempted to fortify women’s autonomy, most notably the Creciendo Juntas programme. As observed in the Costa Rican report on the implementation of the BPFA: ‘The qualitative impact ... reveals a strengthening of women’s personal and collective capacities to defend their human rights, since they have the information and knowledge on the legislation that protects them and the mechanisms available, along with enhanced capacities and skills to demand services and resources for access to the labour market and self-employment’ (CR,2004:11-12). Although as detailed in the second section of this paper, Creciendo Juntas has been compromised by funding shortfalls, among the women in the Guanacaste field survey who had participated in the programme, Yorleny, a 43 year old food vendor from Filadelfia stated that: *‘hemos aprendido muchas cosas que no sabíamos’* (‘we have learned many things we didn’t know before), and a fellow member of the group, Marielos, a 42 year temporarily unemployed chambermaid, who heads a large extended family and whose last spouse left six years ago for someone else said: *‘Más que todo sabemos quienes somos nosotros por que antes del programa nosotras creíamos que no valíamos nada. Y nos han enseñado cosas que podemos hacer y que antes desconocíamos’* (‘Above all, we know who we are now because before the programme we

believed we weren't worth anything. And we've been taught things we can do which we didn't know before').

V THE CURIOUS QUESTION OF 'FEMINISING' POVERTY IN COSTA RICA REVISITED

Official quantitative data point to a 'feminisation of poverty' in Costa Rica. Despite stasis in income poverty and a reduction in extreme poverty among households in general in the last decade, the representation of female-headed households in poor and extremely poor categories of the population has increased over time. On the surface this seems to be a conundrum given positive scores on conventional international gender indices, and palpable efforts on the part of the Costa Rican state to promote gender equality and to alleviate poverty among women. Yet on closer scrutiny the fact that 'women are increasingly more exposed to poverty than men' (CR,2004:12) is mainly a function of the increase in households headed by women in the last 10-15 years as opposed to any deepening of poverty-generating processes pertinent to the group per se, whether as a result of significant changes in their demographic characteristics (in terms of age, for example), or an intensification of structural inequalities such as gender discrimination in the labour market. Yet while female-headed households stand a similar risk of poverty as they did over a decade ago does not negate the fact that there is a persistence in the poverty burden borne by a significant proportion of women (as stated in the BPFA), if not an intrinsically increasing one, this still makes it hard to

countenance why female-headed households have increased in number to the extent they have. By the same token, qualitative evidence from Guanacaste endorses the point that poverty is 'not just about income' (Fukuda-Parr,1999), and that one major motivation for female headship is because this enables women to negotiate personally profitable 'trade-off's between lower incomes and greater well-being (see also Chant,2003). Here, changes in the policy environment have played a part in creating greater awareness among low-income women of gender inequality, and encouraged some, if not all, to take radical steps to change their domestic situations, at least to conform with changes as they arise. Despite low incomes, female heads of household and their children in Guanacaste often feel, and actually do, survive better than their counterparts in male-headed households. This is partly because female headship tends to eliminate the problems of inequitable labour and resource inputs and outcomes. Indeed, it could well be the case that CEDAW's (2003:103) assertion that '...in Costa Rica poverty is becoming increasingly "feminised", with women being 'exposed to forms of poverty that affect men relatively less', is not necessarily a function of an increase in female household headship, but the fact that the burden of coping with poverty is becoming more skewed towards women in male-headed households. As articulated by Monge and González (2005: Chapter 4) female poverty is linked with factors which are not captured by family income poverty estimates -- women who live in poor households have to cope with high levels of physical and emotional exhaustion due to unending

reproductive chores in difficult conditions, and especially when this is coupled with engagement in productive work. As I have proposed elsewhere, trends in the 'feminisation of poverty' are perhaps best characterised as an increasing unevenness of inputs to household survival between women and men, rather than incomes (see Chant,2006,2007).

Even if women's stronger fall-back position does not seem to have given them greater power to negotiate within their relationships with men, at least they feel better able to cope with an absence of partners at the domestic level. This does not necessarily imply an improvement in the volume of income entering the household budget, but can make an appreciable difference to the regularity of income and in reducing other problems for women and children such as violence, vulnerability and exploitation

Although gender policy initiatives in Costa Rica have clearly assisted some poor women to negotiate new ways of coping with poverty which simultaneously grant them more opportunity evade domestic inequalities, there is still some way to go. One major issue that needs to be addressed is that of discrimination in employment and incomes, with the odds continuing to be stacked heavily against middle-aged and older women. Thanks to programmes such as Creciendo Juntas which is oriented to women of 'productive age', and, despite having no explicit limits, tends mainly to recruit women between their late 30s and mid-40s³¹, some women in their middle years are able to enhance their vocational skill set.

However, for older women, who face most discrimination from employers, who have few alternatives given a dearth of vocational and training opportunities in micro-entrepreneurship for senior citizens, and who also tend to be disadvantaged in respect of pensions, there is clearly an urgent need for action. Presently, elderly women, who are unaided by kin find it very difficult to live alone, and this situation can only increase as a result of demographic ageing and declining birth rates, possibly further entrenching the 'feminisation of poverty' in future.

Also critical in reducing the 'feminisation of poverty' is the incorporation of men in gender programmes. Although women's awareness of gender inequalities is increasing and the State is attempting to foment greater male responsibility for fathering in the form of initiatives such as the Law for Responsible Paternity, more attention needs to be directed to changing attitudes. Although since the early 2000s, there has been some discussion, driven partly by the demands of women at the grassroots, to bring male partners of women participants in Creciendo Juntas on board so that they too can learn about women's rights and the importance of gender equality in the home, so far this has not materialised. This may in part owe to INAMU's financial difficulties, especially given the suggestion in Costa Rica's report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action that sustained public funding for gender initiatives is vital given that many women in Costa Rica 'largely depend on actions by government bodies to optimise their quality of life'

(CR,2004:10). Whatever the case, the importance of including men is paramount. Without an infrastructure of greater male sensibility and responsibility to women and their children, women either end up with the lion's share of work in households and communities (often exacerbated by the anti-poverty initiatives which are designed to help them -- see Bradshaw,2008; Chant,2007;Mayoux,2006; Molyneux,2006,2007), or are forced into situations of conjugal dissolution because they are unable to negotiate new deals within the context of two-parent households.

Last but not least, despite official claims that greater solidarity among women is being nurtured by the likes of programmes such as Creciendo Juntas, women's struggles against poverty and gender inequality seem to be for the most part continuing to be waged on an individualised basis. This should be addressed since as articulated by Sweetman (2005:6), women need the '....time and freedom to form strong relationships with other women, which can form a counterpart to the traditional power of the family and marriage in women's lives'. There is conceivably scope for more emphasis on women to act together, and through greater collective effort beyond the reach of specific programmes, to challenge gender inequalities at the domestic and wider societal levels.

NOTES

1. This paper draws on a research project entitled 'Gender, Generation and Poverty in Africa, Asia and Latin America', funded by a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship (2003-6) (Award no. F07004R), to whom I am grateful for support. The bulk of the field research consisted of individual interviews and focus group discussions with 223 low-income women and men in different age groups in The Gambia, the Philippines and Costa Rica. In Costa Rica, specifically, 73 low-income respondents were interviewed during the autumn of 2005. For assistance in the field I would like to thank Enid Jaén Hernández, Luis Castellón Zelaya and Roberto Rojas Saborio. Gratitude is also due to John Fyson, Mina Moshkeri, Ralph Kinnear and Chris Mogridge for technical assistance, and to Guillermo Monge for allowing the reproduction of Figure 2 in English.

2. Marcoux (1998a,b) points up that the 70% share of poverty ascribed to women in 1995 is not only improbable but untenable in light of the age distribution of the global population and its household characteristics. Even assuming *a priori* that being female places persons at a greater risk of being poor, given that the sex of children under 15 is unlikely to have more than a negligible impact on gender differentials in household poverty, only single person and lone parent units could be responsible for the excess of female poverty. Yet there are simply not enough households of this type to give rise to the purported 70/30 ratio of poor women and girls to poor men and boys (see also Klasen, 2004).

3. Progress towards MDG1, which is to reduce poverty from 21.7% to 16% of household by 2015, and to reduce extreme poverty from 5.6% to 4.5%, are deemed 'satisfactory' and 'very satisfactory' respectively (CSG *et al*, 2004:116). Other MDG targets already achieved include that of equalising the ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education (encompassed in MDG3), and halting forest degradation (part of MDG7) (World Bank, 2004:3).

4. It is important to note that despite an abundant literature on the PVN, most representatives from NGOs, international agencies and even government bodies themselves interviewed in my survey claimed to have little awareness of it (see Chant,2006b:Chapter 6).

5. In the detailed investigation of the dynamics of poverty in Costa Rica in the period 2002-4 carried out by Slon Montero and Zúñiga Rojas (2005), three factors demonstrating the strongest association with chronic or repeated poverty were: i) the age of household heads (those over 50 being at particular risk; ii) heads' level of education (those with unfinished primary being especially vulnerable), and iii) sex of household headship, with female heads being at greater threat than their male counterparts. The latter resonates with a more general observation made by Moghadam (2005) that women are more likely to be persistently poor than men.

6. Popular discourses emphasizing the negative aspects of immigration centre mainly on Nicaraguans who have long been maligned for taking Costa Rican jobs (see Sandoval-García [2004] for an excellent review of Costa Rican xenophobia and ‘othering’).

7. The WEF Measure of Women’s Empowerment comprises economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being. In turn, each of these dimensions includes more criteria than that gathered for comparable elements in the GDI and GEM. For example, economic participation not only measures the gap between women and men in respect of levels of economic activity, but unemployment levels, and remuneration for equal work. Economic opportunity is concerned with the quality of women’s economic involvement, including maternity leave benefits, the impact of maternity laws on the hiring of women, the availability of state-provided childcare, and equality between women and men in private sector employment (see Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005).

8. One important childcare scheme for low-income women has been the the IMAS-administered programme ‘*Hogares Comunitarios*’ (Community Homes). These provide subsidised childcare in poor neighbourhoods through the training of local women as ‘community mothers’ (see Sancho Montero, 1995).

9. Household headship in family-based households in Costa Rica is defined in the census and national surveys as the person 15 years or more who is considered to be the household head by other members, or who earns the largest share of economic resources. When this is difficult to determine headship is assigned to the oldest individual in the household (INEC, 2000:58). Since Costa Rica is generally defined as a patriarchal society, headship in family-based households comprising a couple and their children tends to be ascribed to men, and only to women where they lack a co-resident male partner. As pointed out by Monge and González (2005) for example in 2002 nearly 90% of self-reported female heads did not have a spouse in residence. In non-family households, the head is the person who has most authority or the biggest administrative role, who is the oldest in the household, or who been in the household the longest (INEC, 2000:58).

10. This new nomenclature was spawned by the fact that women beneficiaries felt that ‘women in conditions of poverty’ was too degrading.

11. SIPO refers to the Information System for Target Populations (*Sistema de Información de la Población Objetivo*) and dates from 1999. Administered by IMAS, SIPO registers potential beneficiaries of social assistance (for example, for school bonds, housing bonds, non-contributory pensions and so on) on the basis of the relative poverty of the region in which they live, statistical analysis of poverty-related

variables (for example, income, education, existing coverage by social programmes), and a questionnaire interview with the family in question (see World Bank, 2003:50n & 166).

12. Personal communication, María Leiton, IMAS, San José, February 2006.

13. Interview with María Leiton, IMAS, San José, September 2005.

14. Interview with María Leiton, IMAS, San José, September 2005.

15. As cautioned earlier in the paper, the simple fact of women being a disproportionate share of the poor being female is not necessarily indicative of trend of a 'feminisation of poverty'.

16. While crude per capita income data (as is used in inter-household comparisons in Costa Rica), give no indication of intra-household resource distribution (see Chant,2003; Klasen, 2004), per capita income figures are clearly more finely-tuned and indicative than aggregate household incomes, which are usually the only measure available in other countries in the South (see also Kabeer, 1996,2003).

17. Costa Rica offers two types of pension – a 'contributory' scheme based on employment, and a non-contributory one designed to help vulnerable people (classified as those aged 65 or more, those with a disability, widows, orphaned children and so on whose monthly household income per capita is less than 50% of the minimum threshold for contributory pensions) (World Bank, 2003:129). Even though the non-contributory pension is operated by the CCSS, as much as 46% of non-contributory pensions are actually financed by employers' subventions, with the remainder being sourced from general tax revenues and taxes on specific items (Bertranou et al, 2004:5).

18. In general terms the Costa Rican elderly fare much better off than many of their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America. For example, 1999 saw the passing of a Comprehensive Act for the Older Adult (Law no.7935 – see Box 1), which created the National Commission for the Older Adult (CONAPAM/Consejo Nacional para el Adulto Mayor) and established rights of persons 65 years and more to health, education, housing, work, social security and recreation. Between 2002 and 2004, a total of 9,396 new pensions covering not only healthcare but cash benefits, training and recreation programmes, were granted to older adults in extreme poverty under the non-contributory pension scheme operated by CCSS (Bertranou et al, 2004:11). This said, around half the 65 plus age group remain uncovered by pensions (World Bank, 2004:Annex C,4), with social security coverage of those aged 60 or more in poor households being less than 50% than in non-poor households (Monge and González, 2005: Chapter 4). As far as gender is concerned, women's lower involvement in continuous, formal

sector employment means that they are less likely than men to receive contributory pensions – which are worth about four times more.

19. MIDEPLAN data (<http://www.mideplan.go.cr/sides/social/09-02.htm>).

20. MIDEPLAN data (<http://www.mideplan.go.cr/sides/social/09-02.htm>).

21. MIDEPLAN data (<http://www.mideplan.go.cr/sides/social/08-01.htm>)

22. MIDEPLAN data (<http://www.mideplan.go.cr/sides/social/08-01.htm>)

23. 'Urban areas' in Costa Rica are officially delimited not on the basis of size but mainly on physical and functional criteria such as identifiable blocks of housing, streets, pavements, urban services such as street lighting and rubbish collection, and economic activities (see INEC,2000). The largest urban case study locality in Guanacaste is Liberia, the capital, which according to 2000 census data had around 35,000 inhabitants. This was followed by Nicoya (14,284), Santa Cruz (10,923) and Filadelfia (5,201). Tamarindo and Villareal have the smallest populations, and as of 2000 the joint population of these neighbouring communities numbered only 3,525 (INEC,2001:Cuadro 1).

24. In 2000, the sex ratio in Guanacaste province was slightly masculine, at 102 men per 100 women, yet consonant with national patterns (see earlier), there were only 96 men per 100 women in urban areas (41.9% of the population in Guanacaste being urban), but 117 men per 100 women in rural areas.

25. Copies of the field survey instrument for the 'Gender, Generation and Poverty' project may be obtained from the author on request.

26. When asked to define poverty, most respondents stressed that this was fundamentally a matter of lack of income. However, while this usually constituted the main point of departure, it became clear in the course of the discussions that poverty related to other issues such as hard work, lack of power, and vulnerability to exploitation and violence. These are highly relevant to informants' views on gendered and generational poverty burdens as identified in the text.

27. According to IDESPO's study more than 1000 of Costa Rica's 300,000 elderly have been abandoned by families in CCSS hospitals, and 56% of the elderly support themselves from retirement funds (see *Tico Times*, 28 Oct 2005, p.9, 'Ageing in Costa Rica: A Troubling Process').

28. Between 1970 and 1985, the pesticide 'Nemagon', manufactured by Dow Chemical, was widely used on Costa Rica's banana plantations to control '*gusanos*' (maggots). Since many workers did not use gloves, the pesticide was absorbed through their skin and rendered them

infertile. In some cases workers were given compensation of US\$100, but many claims remain unsettled.

29. It is actually quite difficult to get a place in a state-run old people's home unless the elderly person in question has been abused (*agredido*). (Personal communication, Enid Jaén Hernández, Social Psychologist, Universidad de Costa Rica, Centro Regional de Guanacaste, Liberia).

30. Newspaper articles continue to abound with regard to deaths of women at the hands of violent husbands (see, for example, *La Nación*, 11 October 2005, p.13a, 'Estranguló a su compañera para evitar la separación', by Irene Vizcaino).

31. Personal communication, Maria Leiton, IMAS, March 2006.

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