

# The ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ in Costa Rica: To What Extent a Conundrum?

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Quantitative data from Costa Rica suggest that poverty is ‘feminising’, especially in respect of female-headed households, who, since the early 1990s, have constituted a progressively greater share of the population classified as poor. This presents something of a conundrum given significant attempts on the part of the state to promote gender equality and to direct public expenditure to low-income women. Some light on this apparent paradox is shed by qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Guanacaste province where female headship seems to have become a more viable, and sometimes, preferred, option among women on account of its role in enhancing well-being. This is largely on account of social and legal changes that have contributed to making women less inclined to tolerate gender inequalities at the domestic level. The 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.

Keywords: Costa Rica, feminisation, gender, households, poverty, women.

## 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 recent years 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 featured prominently. Scrutiny of quantitative data suggests that the greater share

of female heads in poverty 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. By the same token, it remains important not only to consider the reasons why female household heads continue to stand a disproportionate risk of poverty, but also to examine why, despite this, their numbers have undergone such a dramatic increase in the last ten to fifteen years. In order to gain insights into prevailing trends, I draw on primary qualitative fieldwork gathered through individual interviews and focus group discussions with 73 poor women and men from different age cohorts in Guanacaste province.

The first section of the article introduces the concept of the 'feminisation of poverty'. The second provides a brief overview of poverty and gender in Costa Rica. This includes examination of quantitative evidence for a 'feminisation of poverty', together with policy interventions that have attempted to arrest this process. The third section explores views about the 'feminisation of poverty' from fieldwork with 73 low-income women and men in Guanacaste province, and seeks to distil some of main reasons for an increase in female household headship. In the fourth and final section, I summarise the findings of the article and contend that the 'feminisation of poverty' in Costa Rica is not such a conundrum when embracing a more multidimensional concept of poverty that takes into consideration women's subjectivities and experiences.

## Introduction: 'The Feminisation of Poverty'

The three most commonly identified elements of the 'feminisation of poverty' are: (a) that women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world's poor; (b) that this trend is deepening; and (c) that women's increasing share of poverty is linked with a rising incidence of female household headship (Moghadam, 1997, 2005; Cagatay, 1998; Davids and van Driel, 2001, 2005; Chant, 2003; Asgary and Pagán, 2004). The problem of using income as a key indicator of gender gaps in poverty constitutes a major issue in this article, mainly on account of the fact that it fails to capture dimensions of poverty that appear to be most meaningful to women. Also relevant to my argument, and meriting brief discussion here, is that the three constituent elements of the 'feminisation of poverty' are quite problematic to handle without some disaggregation. First, although all female household heads are women, not all women head their own households, and thus they cannot be treated as one and the same (Chant, 2003, 2006). A second problem is that many people take the assertion 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 that may not actually be an outcome of a *trend* for more women to become poor relative to men over time (see Medeiros and Costa, 2006: 3). Indeed, women could still be a disproportionate share of the poor even if poverty was 'masculinising' over a particular time period (Chant, 2007: 18).

Although determining trends in most of the Global South is severely hampered by the dearth of longitudinal panel data (see Johnsson-Latham, 2004: 18; Nauckhoff, 2004: 65; Chant, 2006), Costa Rica is fortunate enough to possess quite long-term

sex-disaggregated data for income and other relevant variables such as household headship and age. That this has allowed for analysis of trends is important, as Costa Rica's last published report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform For Action (BPFA) singles out one of its main challenges as the reduction of 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 twenty years of age' (CR, 2004: 9). Such processes certainly seem to have provoked considerable consternation as evident in the assertion of Olsen de Figueres (2002: 2) 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', require some qualification, as discussed below.

## **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 because of expansion in industry, services and information and communications technology (ICT), much of which has been driven by foreign direct investment (see Chant, 2007: Chapter 6). Costa Rica scores highly on human development, and is on track to achieve most Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 (CSG, República de Costa Rica and Sistema de las Naciones Unidas en Costa Rica, 2004: 116–117). Yet despite these encouraging trends, since 1994 around one-fifth of the population has been poor (Barquero and Trejos, 2005; Monge and González, 2005) (see also MIDEPLAN, 2005).

### *Poverty Trends in Costa Rica*

Households in Costa Rica have traditionally been classified as 'poor' when their per capita incomes are unable to meet basic survival needs such as housing and clothing, and as 'extremely poor' when they cannot afford a basic food basket (see Barquero and Trejos, 2005: 2; Brenes Camacho, 2005: 6). Data on poverty are collected through household surveys conducted by the Costa Rican Institute of Statistics and Censuses

(Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos – INEC), most notably the National Household Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Hogares – ENH) and the Multi-purpose Household Survey (Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples – EHPM). 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 per cent sample of the population on an annual basis.

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 per cent of Costa Rican households were poor, but by 1984 this had declined to 40 per cent, and in 1994 to only 20 per cent (Barquero and Trejos, 2005: 34; see also Figure 1). Yet, despite ongoing attempts to tackle poverty on the part of the state (Chant, 2007: Chapter 6), stagnation in poverty reduction in the last decade is attributed to the fact that economic growth has not given rise to generalised improvements in real wages, but instead contributed to mounting inequality, that continued immigration has tended to increase competition at the lower end of the labour market<sup>1</sup> and that a dip in secondary school completion rates during the crisis of the 1980s had an adverse effect on human capital attainments (Barquero and Trejos, 2005). Another proposition is that the growth of the 60 plus age group, who have not benefited from

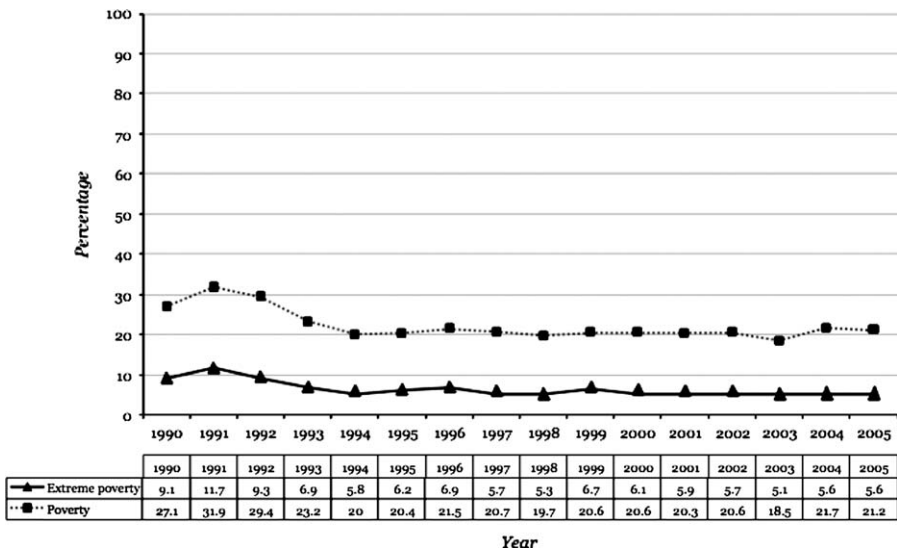


Figure 1. Costa Rica – Percentage of Households in Poverty and Extreme Poverty 1990–2005. Source: INEC (2005a: Gráfico 1)

1 Popular discourses emphasising the negative aspects of immigration centre mainly on Nicaraguans who have long been maligned for taking Costa Rican jobs (Sandoval-García, 2004, 2007).

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). On top of this, gender seems to be persisting as a major axis of inequality in the country, with the increase in female household headship having plausibly 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 somewhat paradoxical given that as of 2002, it ranked among the top three developing countries 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 40th position in the world since 1994, 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.

While 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 (Centro Nacional del Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia – CMF) 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 (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres – INAMU). 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 INAMU has been plagued by shortfalls in budgetary pledges and rather frequent ministerial turnovers, the efforts of Costa Rica's state machineries for women 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 article, there is greater protection and advocacy for the rights of vulnerable women and more flexible notions of 'family' than are often found elsewhere (Chant, 2002). Aside from the fact that Costa Rican women have long had fairly ready access (in principle) to divorce and legal separation (Chant, 1997: 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 post-1990 legal reforms in relation to domestic violence, consensual unions, acknowledgement of children born out of wedlock and women's entitlements to property (Chant, 2007: Chapter 6). Of 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).

The precursor to the Law for Women in Conditions of Poverty of 1998 was a major programme for female household heads,<sup>2</sup> coordinated by the Social Welfare Institute (Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social – IMAS). Launched in 1995, and operating under the title of ‘Programa de Formación Integral para Mujeres Jefas de Hogar en Condiciones de Pobreza’ [Comprehensive Training Programme for Female Household Heads in Conditions of Poverty], this offered – over a three-year period – some 25,000 women a modest *asignación familiar temporal* [stipend] 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, 1997: 151; Marengo, Trejos, Trejos and Vargas, 1998: 52). Thereafter, the 1998 Act on Services for Women Living in Poverty 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]. The basic format of the original programme was retained, but Creciendo Juntas became a major inter-agency venture and was extended to all women in poverty, albeit with priority for female household heads (see below). The economic incentive was set at 30 per cent 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 in order to promote greater labour force insertion (Jiménez, 2002). The programme has also been broadened to include completion of basic education and housing benefits.

Selection of Creciendo Juntas candidates, comprising groups of 15–30 women, is made through a database operated by IMAS known as the Information System for Target Populations (Sistema de Información de la Población Objetivo – SIPO), which registers poor and extremely poor individuals in potential need of social assistance. The target population to be reached by the new and more elaborate programme was set at 5,000 per annum, with 25 per cent of these being female household heads (IN-AMU, 2005: 12), notwithstanding that SIPO definitions of female headship are looser than in the census (see Note 2) referring only to ‘a woman who has the responsibility for the family’. Although the new programme only reached an estimated 17 per cent 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 2002–2004, a further 13,640 women were catered for by the programme, again with an estimated 43–50 per cent being household heads. 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 targeted for help with house-building and acquisition (CR, 2004: 7).

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2 For census purposes, household headship in family-based households in Costa Rica is defined as the person (fifteen years or more) who is considered to be the household head by other members, or who earns the largest share of economic resources. Headship tends only to be ascribed to women where they lack a co-resident male partner (INEC, 2000: 58).

Two other programmes complementing the above, and motivated largely by concerns about persistently high rates of teenage motherhood, were introduced in 1999: 'Amor Joven' [Young Love] and 'Construyendo Oportunidades' [Building Opportunities]. Amor Joven'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 (IMAS, 2001; PDR, 2001). The annual target is in the region of 2400 teenage mothers (interview with Maria Leiton, IMAS, 2005).

Another initiative designed to alleviate the burden of lone motherhood was the 2001 Law for Responsible Paternity (Ley de Paternidad Responsable). In order to uphold the rights of children to paternal recognition and economic assistance, the Law for Responsible Paternity 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 (Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social – CCSS). 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; Budowski and Rosero Bixby, 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 relatively limited achievements to date.

### *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 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 (Chant, 2007: Chapters 1 and 3).

That women are a disproportionate share of the poor 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 Figure 2). By the same token, that there

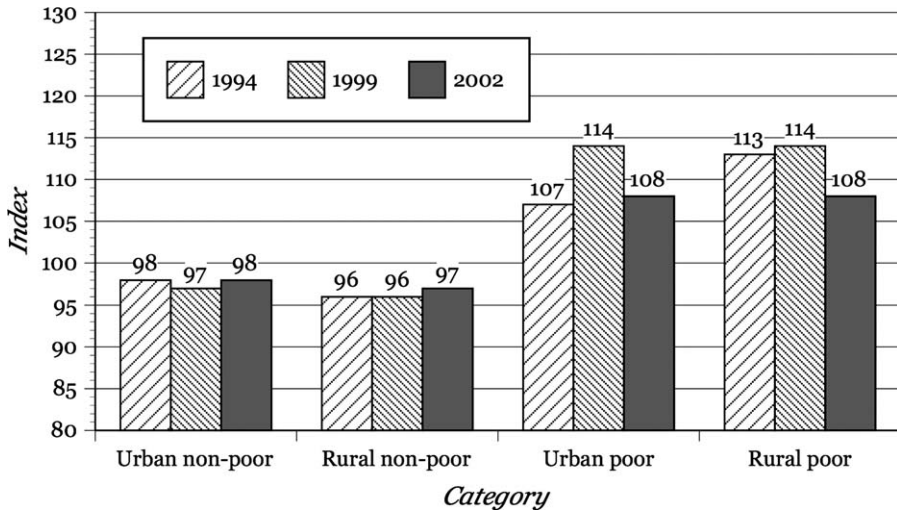


was some decline in the femininity index between 1999 and 2002 would suggest that the ‘feminisation of poverty’ as *process* (see above) is in more doubt.

In less dispute, however, is the seeming link between the ‘feminisation of poverty’, and the ‘feminisation’ of household headship. Women-headed households have not only made up a consistently greater proportion of all households in Costa Rica since the 1970s, but their representation among households in poverty has also increased over time. In 1987, for example, when female-headed households were 16.8 per cent of households, as many as 19.6 per cent were poor, but by 2005, when women-headed households were 27.0 per cent of the national total, they were 33.5 per cent of households in poverty (see Figure 3).

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 reduction in poverty during this period (see Figure 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.

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. During the period 1990–2005, just over one-third of net additions



**Figure 2.** Index of Femininity in Households by Year, Urban/Rural Residence and Condition of Poverty in Costa Rica 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>)



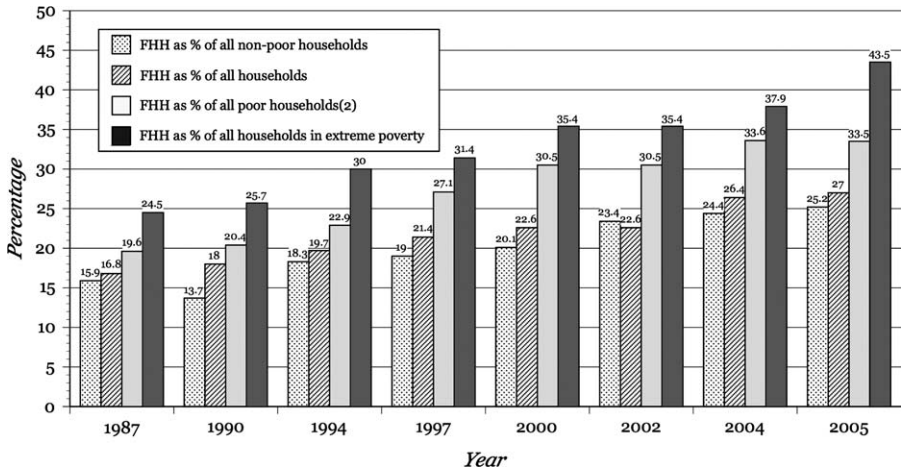


Figure 3. Female-headed Households (FHH) as a proportion of all households, and according to poverty status in Costa Rica (1987–2005). Sources: [WWW Document]. <http://www.mideplan.go.cr/sides/social/09-02.htm>; INEC (2005b: Cuadro C03). Notes: (1) Data relating to poverty categorisation relate only to those households with known or declared income and (2) Percentages for poor households include those in extreme poverty

to the household population were female headed, such that while 1 in nearly 5 households was female headed in 1990, by 2005 this had risen to 1 in 3.7.

Despite no discernible increase in the vulnerability of women-headed households to poverty in general, extreme poverty figures reveal a more worrying trend. Although the share of all Costa Rican households in extreme poverty dropped from 9.1 per cent to 6.1 per cent during the 1990s, and to 5.6 per cent by 2005, the proportion of female-headed households in this category ascended from 25.7 per cent in 1990 to 43.5 per cent by 2005 (see Slon Montero and Zúñiga Rojas, 2005 and Cuadro: 2; see also Figure 3). 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 ongoing.

### *Reasons for Persistent Poverty among Women and Female-headed Households*

Costa Rica's eleventh State of the Nation Report pinpoints a number of persistent structural problems related to the 'feminisation of poverty'. These include lack of recognition of women's work; unfavourable conditions of workforce entry and labour market segmentation; discrimination in education (especially subject choice at higher levels); 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) propose four main reasons disposing them to greater poverty. The first is that they have less capacity to generate income than male heads. Second, female heads are on average older than male heads, which means more problems of labour force insertion. Third, more female heads are dependent on others' incomes and, fourth, female heads have lower levels of education than male heads.

Official quantitative data would certainly seem to bear out the assertion that female-headed households have less capacity to generate income than their male-headed counterparts. One reason is their lower levels of economic activity – as of 2002, for example, only 38.5 per cent of Costa Rican women were economically active as against 73.3 per cent of men. Another factor is that 46.4 per cent of female workers are in the informal sector compared with 39.6 per cent of men (see CEDAW, 2003: 12). This undoubtedly helps to explain why the gender wage gap stands at 35.4 per cent, with female heads on average generating only half the income of their male counterparts (Monge and González, 2005). A plausible contributory role is played here by the fact that despite emphasis on education (and training) in recent national initiatives to lift women and female household heads out of poverty, between 1994 and 2003 the average years of schooling among poor women aged fifteen or more only rose from 5.2 to 5.4 (Sauma, 2004, cited in Monge and González, 2005).

Women's age 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 per cent of women aged 60 or more had had no education or had not finished primary school, compared with only 15.5 per cent of 40–49 year old women, and only 8.2 per cent of 20–24 year olds (the corresponding figures for men being 47 per cent, 13 per cent and 10 per cent) (INEC, 2001: Cuadro 7). In turn, older women's education deficit undoubtedly compounds discriminatory practices in the labour market, with only 7 per cent of women aged 65 or more being economically active, compared with 33 per cent of men (see Monge and González, 2005). Added to this, only 35 per cent of women aged 60 or more are covered by pensions compared with 45 per cent of men (CELADE, 2002: 68). Women's lower involvement in continuous, formal sector employment means that they are less likely than men to receive contributory pensions from the state – which are worth about four times more than their non-contributory counterparts. For these reasons it is perhaps no surprise that elderly women are usually identified as being more vulnerable to poverty than their younger counterparts (CR, 2004; Monge and González, 2005; see also Table 1).

Potentially exacerbating the risks of poverty among elderly women, the proportion of female heads aged 70 or more rose from 14.9 per cent to 17.8 per cent between the early 1990s and 2000, compared with a decline in male heads in this age cohort from 7.5 per cent to 7 per cent. Yet as noted by Monge and González (2005), 60 per cent of female-headed Costa Rican households are actually at a 'middling stage' of the family lifecycle, by which time female heads may already be experiencing labour force discrimination, as well as having to support adolescents and younger children. Moreover, it has been widely observed that female household heads under 35 years old, may be at greatest risk of poverty on account of having pre-school and school-age

**Table 1.** Gender, Age and Poverty in Costa Rica

	Total	Age groups (years)				
		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)

children, and therefore higher dependency ratios (CEDAW, 2003: 104; Barquero Torres, 2005: 16).

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 per cent to 38.4 per cent, as against a decline from 59.9 per cent to 54.4 per cent 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 per cent to 14.3 per cent between 1990 and 2000, and the share of female one-person households from 28 per cent to 33 per cent of all one-person households under 60 years between 1987 and 2002. Even if the rate of female headship declined from 57 per cent to 53 per cent among one-person households aged 60 or more during the same time period (Monge and González, 2005), female heads were still more than half this group which may well help to explain why as of 2002, single-person units aged 60 plus had a 30 per cent greater incidence of poverty than single-person units overall (Monge and González, 2005). Moreover, lone parent households headed by women ascended from 44.5 per cent to 49.9 per cent 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, such as children or other relatives, who could bolster well-being.

### *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, 2004).

As far as demographic ageing is concerned, it has already been noted that 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 per cent) in comparison with their male counterparts (3.5 per cent) (INEC, 2001: Cuadro 9).

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. In 2003, for example, the gross participation rate of women was 35.2 per cent in urban areas, but only 22.4 per cent in rural areas (the respective figures for men being more even at 55.9 per cent and 56.7 per cent) (CSG, República de Costa Rica and Sistema de las Naciones Unidas en Costa Rica, 2004: 35).

Despite a slight decline in female bias in the national urban sex ratio over time, in 2000, there were only 95 men per 100 women in towns and cities, compared with 107 men per 100 women in rural areas (INEC, 2001: Cuadro 1). In turn, 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 per cent of the rural poor, but as many as 40.3 per cent of the urban poor (MIDEPLAN).

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 6.1 in 2000, to 5.5 in 2004. This downward trend seems largely to do with a decline in marriage among young persons, since although as many as 73.7 per cent of the population in conjugal unions in 2000 were formally married, this applied to only 57.0 per cent 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 1 in 11 in 1984, to 4 in 10 by 2001 (Palmer and Molina, 2004: 361).

As part and parcel of these trends, official figures indicate that the proportion of births outside marriage in Costa Rica increased from 23.0 per cent in 1960, to 38.0 per cent in 1985, to 51.5 per cent in 1999, and to 59.0 per cent in 2004 (MIDEPLAN). That at the turn of this 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 above) 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 33.0 per cent of mothers in the 15–19 age group were lone parents as against 28.0 per cent of mothers as a whole (INEC, 2001: Cuadro 16).

Even though rates of adolescent fertility (the number of births per 1000 women aged between fifteen to nineteen) have declined from 106 per 1,000 in the early-to-mid-1970s to 81 per 1,000 between 2000–2005, the proportion of under-eighteens who had given birth slightly increased during the inter-censal period 1984–2000 (from 11.0 per cent to 12.0 per cent). 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 seventeen 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).

## **Perspectives on the 'Feminisation of Poverty' in Guanacaste**

### *Brief Background to Guanacaste*

Grassroots interviews by the author with low-income women and men were conducted in a total of six urban localities in Guanacaste, which is one of Costa Rica's seven provinces (also equating with Chorotega, the name given to one of the country's six planning regions; see Figures 4 and 5). One of main reasons for the selection of Guanacaste was that it is one of the poorest parts of Costa Rica. Although poverty and extreme poverty in the area have declined since the late 1980s, in 2005, when 21.7 per cent of households nationally were classified as poor, the incidence of poverty in Chorotega was 29.3 per cent (Figure 4). A second reason for situating the research in the area is because my fieldwork in Costa Rica since the late 1980s had been based in local towns, providing ready access to contacts and informants.

Guanacaste has traditionally been one of Costa Rica's major farming regions, but in the last twenty years has undergone massive transformation as a result of tourism. Indeed, as of the late 1990s, 56.0 per cent 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 per cent to 35.3 per cent, while the share engaged in the tertiary sector rose from 39 per cent to 49.7 per cent. 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 per cent in 1987 to 30.2 per cent in 1999 (Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2000). 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 per cent) in the country, but one of the highest rates of temporary and permanent out-migration (Chant, 2002).

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 (Chant, 1997). According to census data, Guanacaste, after San José, has held joint second place nationally in terms of the proportion of households headed by women since the early 1980s, at 22.0 per cent.

### *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



Figure 4. Guanacaste: Case Study Localities

aged between ten and 29 years (classified as ‘youth’), 24 aged 30–49 (‘middle adults’), and ten aged 50 or more years (‘senior adults’), with the corresponding breakdown among male participants being ten, six and ten. 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.

Interviewees were recruited on the basis of existing contacts on the part of the team (for example, through previous research or professional work) and the focus groups, through non-governmental organisations (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 above).

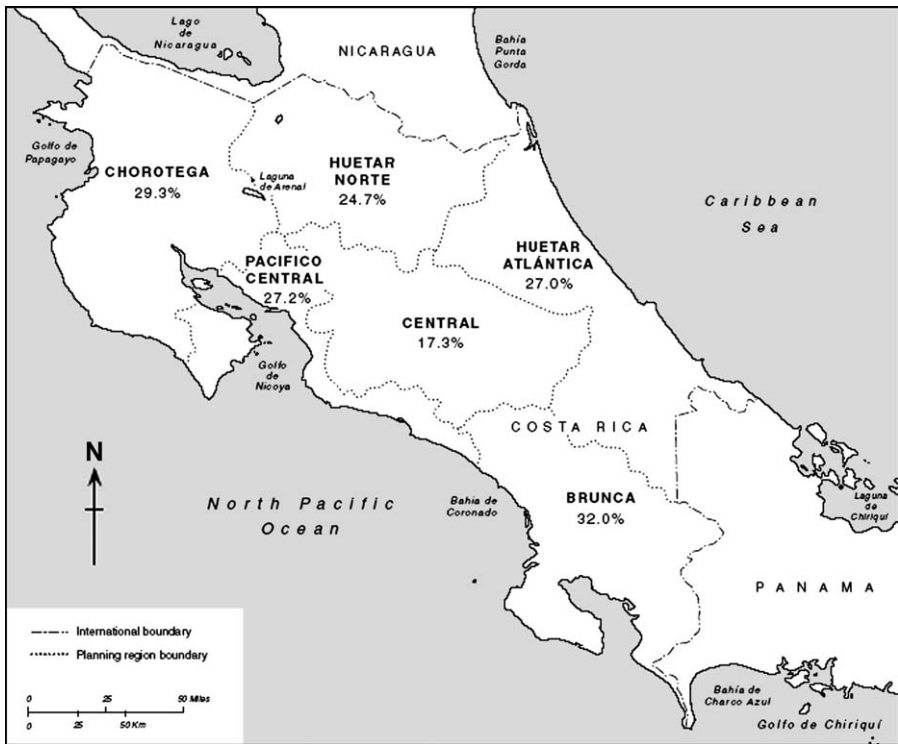


Figure 5. Costa Rica: Planning Regions and Proportion of Households in Poverty, 2005. Source: INEC (2005a)

### *Grassroots Perceptions of Female Household Headship and Poverty – and Disjunctures.*

In interviews and focus groups discussions, female-headed households were almost unilaterally identified as at greatest risk of poverty. This was mainly because of women's disadvantage in employment and earnings, although it 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 (see Figure 6).

Yet despite these views, there was also widespread recognition that women can and do 'get on' without men. According to Juanita (67) from Santa Cruz, for example: 'even when women are alone, they still manage to survive'. In addition, it was recognised that women's battle against poverty was often conducted alone even when they lived with men, and sometimes under greater constraints. Paulo, a 47-year-old Nicaraguan night-watchman 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 *el güaro* [liquor]. A similar view was expressed by Geovany (39), who stated: 'Women must suffer more because they think about feeding their children, not just about themselves'.



Corroborating findings from my earlier research in Guanacaste (Chant, 1997), and similar studies in other countries (Bradshaw, 1996, 2002; Dwyer and Bruce, 1988; González de la Rocha, 1994), men demonstrate a propensity to retain earnings for personal use, which is frequently injurious to 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: '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, referred to the practice whereby: '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 is often diverted to *vicios* [vices] such as alcohol was repeatedly flagged up as evidence of their limited regard for the well-being of their families. As pointed out by Eida, a 52-year-old separated female head from Santa Cruz:

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.

In addition to the income poverty to which women in *male*-headed households are often exposed, they frequently have to make huge efforts to compensate for lack of male participation 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 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 at the same time allow them to exercise authority (Chant, 2000, 2002).

Owing in part to the persistence of feminine norms of altruism and subservience, in many cases women resort to extreme self-sacrifice in order to fulfil the needs of their children. As María Ester, a 27-year-old mother of one in Filadelfia, pointed out: '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 adds an extra layer of obligation. 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 that 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, 2007 and below). In light of the above, it is no surprise that many women express bitterness about having to bear the brunt of, if not sole, responsibility for their families while men detach themselves from their obligations. As summed up by one senior respondent, Elba (66 years old): 'Women are compromised with their children, and are those who end up beaten up, abused and without employment.'

'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*

'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*

'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*

'A poor woman 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 their families. 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*

'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?'

*Giuliana (10), schoolgirl living with lone mother, Santa Cruz*

**Figure 6.** Grassroots Views on Female Household Headship and Poverty in Guanacaste. Source: Interviews by Author

*Reasons for Opting for, or Conforming with, Female Household Headship*

In light of the above evidence, it is no surprise that many women find heading their own households a positive alternative. Independence 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. As articulated by Nuvia, a 49-year-old female head working as a cleaner in Villareal, who had left a violent, alcoholic spouse:

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 fellow females.

Floribet (49) from Santa Cruz, who has had eight children by four different fathers, admitted to having suffered as a lone mother during protracted periods, but claimed also that this had afforded her the opportunity to take any job she wanted, to invest in her children and to stop money being squandered. While two of Floribet's children are still at home, she is able to supplement the income she generates from selling *arroz con leche* [rice with milk] and *tejidos* [knitwear], with minding one daughter's child and remittances from one of her sons. Although Floribet still worries about money, she credits herself for being able to win through, and having converted to Evangelism two years ago, claims she would now entertain the thought of 'no other husband than Jesus Christ!'.

Sonia (44), another female head of household from Santa Cruz, and mother of three, purchased land before leaving her spouse, and since this time has not only resumed her education, but has plans to become a teacher and to leave her existing job as a school cleaner. Although she presently has another boyfriend, she is extremely reluctant to give up her material assets, or her professional aspirations, to be with him (Chant, 2007).

The fact of having assets in one's own name certainly seems to heighten the scope of female heads to dictate the terms of their intimate relationships. When I first worked in Guanacaste nearly twenty years ago, separated women would typically seek another partner to enhance their income or to gain access to housing (Chant, 1997). 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.

Further benefits identified by women as a result of freeing themselves from men included not having to put up with men's infidelity, as well as eliminating a major source of violence in their lives. As Ixi (40) declared:

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.

*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', 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 (Figure 7). While these advantages have always featured in discussions with women at the grassroots (Chant, 1997), I sense that many respondents felt that they were better able to do without men than in the past. One reason was that women generally perceived themselves more equal with men now, or at least less subordinate. For example, although some women are still forbidden to work by their husbands, many do have paid work, which gives them a basis of independence. In turn, a substantial number of young women expressed a desire to secure a profession before marriage and children, and to remain single so as not to relinquish any power. As articulated by Andreina, an eleven year old who resides with her mother and two half-brothers: '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 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.

The legal changes that have granted women greater entitlements to conjugal assets and protection from domestic violence constitute a major factor in strengthening women's position. This seems to be felt even more strongly on the part of men than women, as Victorio, 55 years old from Santa Cruz reported:

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.

Even if legislation has by no means eradicated domestic violence, and may provoke some men to take extreme measures if ousted from their homes (Chant, 2007: Chapter 6), denunciations made by women nationally in 2004 declined markedly from levels in previous years (Pacheco de la Espriella, 2005: 23).

*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 drugs and alcohol
- Freedom from the difficulties of negotiating independence and power within marriage/consensual unions
- The right to make decisions and to exercise personal control
- 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

**Figure 7.** 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

- 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)

Figure 7. Continued

## Questioning the 'Conundrum' of a 'Feminisation of Poverty' in Costa Rica

Quantitative data point to a 'feminisation of poverty' in Costa Rica, particularly in respect of female-headed households. 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. 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 over the last ten to fifteen years, rather than their greater risk of poverty per se. If it is hard to understand why female-headed households have been growing, given their disproportionate exposure to monetary poverty, qualitative evidence from Guanacaste endorses the point that poverty is 'not just about income' (Fukuda-Parr, 1999). A major motivation for female headship is the ability for women to negotiate personally profitable 'trade-offs between lower incomes and greater well-being' (Chant, 2003). Here, changes in the policy environment have played a part in creating greater awareness among low-income women of gender inequality. Enhanced social and legal resources have encouraged some women, if not all, to take radical steps to change their domestic situations.

Despite low incomes, female heads of household and their children in Guanacaste often survive better than their counterparts in male-headed households. This is partly because female headship tends to eliminate the problems of inequitable labour and uneven 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 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 (Chant,

2006, 2007). 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 to evade domestic inequalities, more could be done to incorporate men such that the need to evade these inequalities is reduced in the first place.

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