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## Women's Labor Markets in Costa Rica

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WOMEN'S LABOR MARKETS  
IN COSTA RICA

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
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## **I. Introduction**

In this paper I explore the factors affecting women's labor force participation and wages in Costa Rica. First, I will investigate the role of education in women's labor markets. Second, I address the impact of dual labor markets and government policies on the participation and earnings of women. Finally, I recommend possible policy changes for Costa Rican labor law to benefit women.

### **A. Overview of Country**

Costa Rica is a Central American country located between Nicaragua and Panama. As of 2008, Costa Rica's population was roughly 4.2 million with a literacy rate of 94.9 percent. Although Costa Rica is a small country, around the size of West Virginia, it contains five percent of the world's biodiversity. Costa Rica's wildlife, rainforests, beaches, and volcanoes attracted two million tourists in 2008 (CIA World Factbook, 2009). The majority of tourists were Americans who were attracted to the country's beauty and political stability.

Costa Rica has one of the most stable democratic governments in Latin America and has enjoyed a peaceful history since 1948, the year the government abolished the army. Because of its economic and political stability, the country is frequently referred to as the "Sweden" of Central America. The economy is dependent on tourism, agriculture, and electronics exports. Costa Rica's 2007 GDP is estimated at \$50 billion, which translates to \$11,900 per capita. In contrast, Costa Rica's per capita GDP is the same as Panama (\$11,900) and much higher than Nicaragua (\$3,000), its closest neighbors. Sixty-three percent of Costa Rica's GDP stems from the service sector which employs sixty-four percent of the labor force (CIA World Factbook, 2009).

Costa Rica's main exports are bananas, pineapples, coffee, electronic components, and medical equipment. In 2007, Costa Rica exported the most goods to the United States. The country's main imports are raw materials and consumer goods. The highest number of imports come from the United States and Mexico (CIA World Factbook, 2009). Table 1 provides a cross-sectional comparison of Costa Rica with its closest neighbors, Nicaragua and Panama.

**Table 1: Cross Sectional Comparison**

	<b>GDP-per capita (PPP)</b>	<b>Literacy Rate</b>	<b>Life Expectancy at Birth</b>	<b>School Life Expectancy</b>
<b>Costa Rica</b>	\$11,900	94.9%	77.4 yrs.	12 yrs.
<b>Nicaragua</b>	\$3,000	67.5%	71.2 yrs.	11 yrs.
<b>Panama</b>	\$11,900	91.9%	76.88 yrs.	13 yrs.

## **B. Overview of Costa Rican Labor Market**

The most recent Costa Rican census data is from 2000. The census surveys the country's documented workers. The workers are members of either the public or private sector. The public sector of Costa Rica is comprised of persons employed by the government. Both public and private sector employees receive benefits mandated by the law and are subject to regulated working conditions. There are men and women who make up the informal labor market, which consists of undocumented workers. Informal market work is not represented within the census data. Between 1990 and 2000, 60 percent of jobs created in Latin America were in the informal sector (Abramo and Valenzuela, 2005). During the 1990s, a higher percentage of Latin American men joined the informal labor market, but women constitute the majority of workers in the informal market (Cunningham 2001). Table 2 reports the different subdivisions of labor men and women who were employed by the public and private sectors during the 2000 census. Men are

concentrated in agriculture, manufacturing and automotives. Women are concentrated in manufacturing and automotives. Teaching and domestic work are highly dominated by women.

**Table 2: Percentage of Labor Force Employed by Sector**

<b>Employment Sector</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
Agriculture	24.9%	4.3%	29.2%
Fishing	0.7%	0.1%	0.8%
Mining	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%
Manufacturing	16.9%	16.6%	33.5%
Utilities	1.8%	0.8%	2.5%
Construction	8.7%	0.5%	9.1%
Automotives	16.9%	15.5%	32.4%
Restaurant and Hotel	3.4%	8.4%	11.8%
Communication and Transportation	7.1%	2.2%	9.3%
Finance	2.0%	2.8%	4.8%
Real Estate and Property Rentals	4.7%	5.4%	10.1%
Public Administration	4.8%	5.6%	10.4%
Teaching	2.7%	13.5%	16.3%
Health and Social Care	2.0%	7.2%	9.2%
Other Community and Personal Services	2.6%	4.3%	6.8%
Domestic Workers	0.5%	12.6%	13.2%
International Organizations	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%

Over the past few decades female labor force participation has increased throughout the world. Some factors that affect female labor participation are educational attainment, a need for income, marital status, and fertility (Yang, 1992). In Latin America, the female labor force participation rate increased from 39 percent in 1990 to 44.7 percent in 2000. Costa Rican female participation rates increased from 39 to 46 percent between 1990 and 2002. The increase in participation can be associated with an increase in the informal sector. In 2002, Panama and Nicaragua had female participation rates of 54 and 52 percent, respectively (Abramo and Valenzuela, 2005).

Costa Rica has one of the lowest and most stable rates of open unemployment in Latin America. Unemployment for 2008 is estimated to be 5.6 percent (CIA World Factbook, 2009).

Traditionally, Costa Rican women have experienced higher rates of unemployment than men. In 2002, women's unemployment rate was 7.9 percent while men's was 5.6 percent (Global Policy Network, 2004). Costa Rican women are more likely to be unemployed than men, and they earn less income than men on average. Male and female wage inequity exists within the labor market (Yang, 1992). Women on average earn 65.9 percent of men's earnings in the private sector and 90.8 percent of men's earnings in the public sector (Yang, 1992).

## **II. Labor Force Participation**

### **A. Education**

Educational attainment, especially beyond primary school, is an investment in human capital. An individual may invest in education, taking on the initial costs, with the expectation of higher future earnings as a result of higher human capital. Increased human capital should benefit an individual when she enters the labor market. A higher level of human capital should theoretically increase productivity in the workplace or in the home if she chooses not to perform market work. Typically, an individual invests in education because the increases in future earnings will be higher than the initial costs of the education. The returns to education may not be as high in a home setting as they are in marketplace work.

Female education in developing countries has recently been promoted as a means to increase household productivity, reduce fertility, improve child health, and build the labor force (Lincove, 2004). Costa Rican women have higher levels of educational attainment than men, on average. The country's fertility rate is also relatively low for a developing country at 2.17 children per woman. Panama has a fertility rate of 2.57; Nicaragua has a rate of 2.63. The fertility rate in the United States is 2.1 (CIA World Factbook, 2009). The fewer children a

woman has, the lower her opportunity costs of entering the labor market, all else equal. While the fertility rate in Costa Rica has decreased and the level of women's education has increased, the changes have not been associated with increases in female labor force participation as we have observed in other developing countries.

Table 3 highlights the average education attainment of working women and men and non-working women. The data is from the Costa Rica 1989 Household Survey (Gindling, 1992; Yang, 1992). Costa Rican women have, on average, an educational attainment of 1.81 years higher than men. The education of non-working women is very close to the educational attainment of working men.

**Table 3: Average Educational Attainment**

	<u>Working Men</u>	<u>Working Women</u>	<u>Non-working Women</u>
<b>Mean Years of Schooling</b>	6.66	8.47	6.18
<b>Sample Percentage with:</b>			
No education	7.0%	3.0%	8.0%
Incomplete primary	16.0%	9.0%	17.0%
Completed primary	43.0%	35.0%	43.0%
Incomplete secondary	13.0%	13.0%	11.0%
Completed secondary	11.0%	20.0%	12.0%
University	5.0%	11.0%	5.0%
Graduate School	3.0%	6.0%	0.04%

The attainment of a secondary degree in Costa Rica does not correlate with increased labor market participation as it does in other Latin American countries. After a Costa Rican woman completes primary school, education does not have a significant impact on labor participation (Duryea et al., 2001). Duryea et al.'s (2001) study of women's labor participation in Latin America throughout the 1990s illustrates this point. They focused on urban women ages 30 to 45. Latin American countries such as Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela saw a 15 percentage



point increase in labor force participation upon completion of a secondary degree. Costa Rican women exhibited less than a 5 percentage point increase in participation (Duryea et al., 2001).

The lack of participation may be due to the cultural context for middle class women in the country. The cultural norms in Costa Rica could be discouraging women from entering the labor force after their education is completed. This may be due to a social stigma around women laborers from certain social classes that do not “need” the additional source of income for their families.

Another reason that education past primary school does not translate into increased market participation could be the types of jobs women perform. Yang (1992) related the irrelevance of women’s education on labor force participation to the fact that there is little educational value in the service work that employs many women. This means women may seek education for reasons outside of increased market productivity. Types of employment and cultural norms may help to explain why increased education does not result in increased participation in Cōsta Rica as in other countries (Yang, 1992).

## **B. Dual Labor Markets**

Labor markets in less developed countries are divided into sectors. The broad terms used to describe the sectors are the informal labor market and the formal labor market. The formal labor market is comprised of laborers who are subject to rules and regulations determined by a government. The informal market is outside the realm of government regulation. The two sectors can further be divided into public and private employment. All public jobs are within the formal labor market, while private jobs can be classified as either formal or informal. An example of this would be a person who does custodial work. If that person were to be employed by the government, he would be a formal worker within the public sector. If he were employed by a

lawfully operating business, he would be a formal laborer within the private sector. If he acts as a domestic worker for a household, he would be an informal laborer in the private sector.

Barriers that prevent persons from moving freely between formal and informal employment cause what is known as labor market segmentation (Gindling, 1991). Studies have shown that many developing countries are subject to labor market segmentation (Cunningham, 2001). The segmentation in developing countries is a result of the dualism. Dualism describes the nature of developing countries' economies. The urban setting of a developing country is very similar to a developed country. The developing country's economy is dependent upon the labor intensive work that has prevailed for centuries. Within the developing country, very capital intensive work also exists, employing persons in careers similar to a developed country. The dualism is represented in the informal and formal labor markets of developing countries. Labor market segmentation prevents a worker in a lower sector of employment from having full access to a job in a higher sector, regardless of skills (Gindling, 1991).

Labor market segmentation exists in Costa Rica. The country's labor market is segmented into public and private-formal sectors and also into private-formal and informal sectors. The private-formal sector is comprised of Costa Rican non-government employees who are documented workers. The existence of segmentation implies that Costa Rican workers do not have full access to all sectors of the labor market. The sector determines a worker's pay and benefits (Gindling, 1991).

Despite the fact that Costa Rican women, on average, are more educated than men, many of them work in the informal labor market that pays less and has less social protection. Cunningham (2001) compares labor market data from 1989 and 1995. She finds that in both years, a higher educational attainment increased an individual's likelihood to enter into the

formal sector, but the relationship between the two weakened over time. Education in Latin American is becoming less of a predictor of formal employment. This is either a result of increased attractiveness of informal jobs or fewer job opportunities in competitive formal sectors (Cunningham 2001).

### **C. Government Policies**

Costa Rican legislation exists that restricts the hours women are able to work. Specific legislation makes it difficult for employers to hire women to work between the hours of 7:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. (Costa Rican Labor Code, Ch. 7). Women's work-hour restrictions have been popular in the past in many countries throughout the world. The claimed objective of such legislation is to protect women's safety and morality, while allowing them to spend more time in the home. Such restrictions on women's labor hours may reduce the hours they work and result in participation rates that are lower than they would be without legal restrictions (PRENote, 2004). Beginning in the 1950s, industrialized countries have lifted restrictions on women's work hours in order to allow women to enter the labor market with the same freedoms as men.

Restrictions are still prevalent in developing countries (PRENote 2004). Theory states that restrictions on women's labor hours will reduce the female workers' working hours. As a result of the restrictions, employers demand more male labor and men work more hours than they would have had no restriction been present. The use of male labor in lieu of female labor causes a higher men's average working hours (PRENote, 2004).

While the legislation was enacted with the intentions of protecting women, in today's world such restrictions may slow progress towards gender equity in the labor market (Rodgers, 1999). Employers may be resistant to hiring women because their hours are less flexible than men's. This also may translate into lower participation rates for women who only have the

option of working nights. Some women may only be available to work a limited amount of hours outside of the restricted hours. If a woman were willing and able to work between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. the restriction would limit her work to less than eight hours. In such instances the restrictions would push women into working half-time instead of full-time employment.

If workplace standards are enforced equally between the genders, Costa Rican legislation restricting women's work hours is obsolete. A law or set of standards that apply equally to every employee will help to prevent worker exploitation and promote safety while encouraging gender equity in the labor market. If this legislation were revoked it would allow women to have the same flexibility as men in determining the time of day they will work. The added flexibility in work shifts could entice some Costa Rican women to enter the labor force.

### **III. Wage Inequity**

#### **A. Education**

The Costa Rican women who do participate in market work have a higher educational attainment on average than employed men (Gindling, 1992). Their higher level of education indicates that women's human capital, *ceteris paribus*, should be higher than men's. Women are more educated than men in all professions with the exception of managers and service workers, but in every profession women earn less than men. The wage gap is more pronounced in the private sector than in the public sector (Yang, 1992). Empirical studies on Costa Rican incomes show that differentiations in women and men's earnings are due to unexplained variables (Gindling, 1992). These unexplained variables may indicate that the wage inequity is a result of

discrimination within the Costa Rican labor market (Yang, 1992). [Labor market discrimination is further discussed in Section VI].

### **B. Dual Labor Markets**

The labor market segmentation in Costa Rica may punish workers in certain sectors due to the existence of wage differentials among sectors. The limited movement between sectors due to segmentation can have a direct effect on pay. If human capital were equal, differences in observed wages for two workers could result from the separate sectors in which they are employed. Gindling (1991) showed that a wage differential existed for identical workers between the public and private-formal sectors and between the informal and private-formal sectors. For all workers, the expected wage in the public sector was higher than the expected wage in the private-formal sector. In the private-formal sector, expected wages were higher for 91 percent of workers when compared to the informal sector. The wage differentials among sectors further implies that protected-sector employers are choosing their employees from excess supply. This means that some qualified employees are unable to find work in a higher paying sector, which for most is the public sector (Gindling, 1991).

Labor market segmentation has particularly strong effects on women. Much of women's employment is concentrated in the lower-paying informal sector. As a region, Latin America has an increasing number of men joining the informal market, but women are still the majority of informal workers (Cunningham 2001). Within the informal sector, female workers receive lower pay than male workers (Abramo and Valenzuela, 2005). Married Costa Rican women, particularly those with children, are the most likely to join the informal sector (Cunningham, 2001).

The public sector has played an important role in reducing wage inequity between women and men because it is the highest paying sector in Costa Rica. The high wages are a result of the ability of government employees to unionize. Unionization has led to the demand for higher real wages (Duryea et al., 2001). Costa Rican women have benefited from the higher, more equitable pay the government provides. Women in Costa Rica are actually overrepresented in the higher paying occupations of the public sector. This most likely is a result of the government seeking highly educated individuals from the more educated female labor pool (Gindling, 1992).

The loss of government jobs through privatization in Costa Rica may further increase wage differentials between men and women. Costa Rica, like many developing countries, has experienced privatization over the last few decades. In recent years, jobs in the public sector have been diminishing, and the private sector has been unable to absorb all the workers (Global Policy Network, 2004). One major example of past privatization has been in the banking industry. Costa Rica's government used to have sole control over the banking industry, but in recent years, foreign banks have been allowed to operate branches in Costa Rica. Privatization in Costa Rica has been very gradual relative to other Latin American countries. The slow process does not mean the public employees have remained untouched. In 1995, 8,000 jobs were lost from the public sector (Arias, 2001). The decline in government jobs particularly affected low-skilled workers. Among the low-skilled workers, females were predominantly affected. A greater number of women's jobs transferred from the public sector than men's jobs (Tardanico, 1996).

The large bureaucracy operating in Costa Rica imposes a substantial financial burden on the country. The government continues to cut back on the number of people it employs. The government could privatize its monopolies in the future. The Costa Rican government currently

has exclusive control over insurance, alcohol distillation, fuels supply, telecommunication service, and electricity transmission. The government prohibits monopolistic practices, but by acting as a sole provider of many services, it greatly limits competition (Trade Policy Review, 2007).

Many Costa Ricans are in favor of the “big government” because the government has been stable, especially relative to its Latin American neighbors. The large government may eventually cause Costa Rica to fall behind other Latin American countries that are aggressively privatizing and bringing in investors. The government could be pressured into privatization as a means to increase competition and efficiency. If a stronger effort to privatize is pursued in Costa Rica, the number of high paying government jobs will decrease. A pool of women will be forced into other sectors of the labor market. The private and informal sectors may not be able to pay the high salaries and substantial benefits that women received from the government, and the wage differential between genders may increase.

### **C. Cultural Norms**

Job selection, gender norms, and life skills may be reasons why women are subject to lower paying professions. The cultural norms that influence the female labor participation rates also influence women’s career choices. There are certain cultural norms that are stronger in Latin American than the United States which equate femininity with selflessness. These norms result in economic consequences that contribute to gender inequity (Badgett and Folbre, 1999). An example of gender norms affecting women in the labor market would be the many women who participate in the majority of household work. A person acquires less human capital from such activities than from other market work. Time spent on housework over market work makes a woman less skilled when she enters the job market.

The social pressure that equates femininity with selflessness also leads women to pursue careers that society views as feminine professions. Many women are concentrated into what is labeled as “caring professions” such as teaching or nursing. Badgett and Folbre (1999) find that careers in caring professions usually have lower wages than other market work in developed countries.

Costa Rican census data reveal evidence that women are highly represented in caring positions. According to the 2000 census, over 64 percent of women’s public sector employment was either in the education or social and healthcare sector. The private sector employed over 23 percent of its female employees in the two sectors. Men’s employment in the caring sector accounted for 30 percent of men’s public employment. In the private sector, less than 2 percent of men were employed in caring professions. The figures are reported in Table 4.

**Table 4: Caring Professions 2000**

	<u>Public Sector</u>		<u>Private Sector</u>	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Total Employed</b>	107,195	88,231	815,575	290,545
<b><u>Caring Profession</u></b>				
Teaching	18,438	39,038	6,675	12,255
Health and Social Care	13,510	17,773	5,401	9,315
Domestic Servants	---	---	5,009	47,906
Percentage of Total Employed (%)	29.8	64.4	2.1	23.91

Because caring professions typically pay less on average, then the concentration of women in such professions would have negative implications on their earnings.



## **VI. Labor Market Discrimination**

Labor market studies of Costa Rica have found evidence consistent with labor market discrimination. Labor market discrimination exists if workers with identical human capital characteristics are treated differently because of the demographic groups they belong to. Gender discrimination occurs in the labor market in the form of wage discrimination and occupational discrimination. Wage discrimination occurs when an employer pays a woman less than a male with identical human capital attributes. Occupational discrimination occurs when women, with the same amount of human capital as men, do not have equal access to the same higher-paying occupations.

Two previously discussed studies suggest evidence of wage discrimination in Costa Rica. Yang (1992) estimates the earning's function for men and women. Yang analyzes how much of the wage differentials between men and women are determined by human capital endowments and how much may be attributed to discrimination. Yang's results reveal that 5.5 percent of the wage differentials between the genders are due to human capital endowments and 94.5 percent of the earnings differential may be explained by unobservable factors consistent with discrimination (1992). Gindling (1992) also investigates the differences in wages of men and women due to human capital endowments. He finds that if women were to be paid in the various sectors as men were, with equal human capital endowments, they would earn more than men, on average (Gindling, 1992).

Gindling's work in 1991 and 1992 reveals evidence consistent with occupational discrimination against women in Costa Rica. One factor that may contribute to occupational discrimination is the labor market segmentation in Costa Rica, as discussed in Section II. Gindling finds a nonrandom allocation of workers to the labor sectors. The allocation is not due

to workers choosing a sector of employment but due sector-protected employers selecting workers from a pool of excess labor within their sector (Gindling, 1991). A worker in a lower sector will not have full access to employment in an upper sector. The labor market segmentation then implies differences in wages among identical workers across the sectors.

Gindling applies the idea of labor market segmentation in his 1992 empirical study. As mentioned, he investigates the differences in wages of men and women due to human capital attributes, but he also includes a measure of differences in wages due to access to high paying jobs. Gindling finds evidence consistent with the fact that the men in Costa Rica are also paid more than women because they have more access to higher paying jobs in the formal sector. Many women are concentrated in lowest paying jobs- domestic workers (1992).

Labor market theory identifies three potential sources of labor market discrimination: employers, employees, and customers (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2006). If an employer discriminates against women, he will act as though an equally qualified female is less productive than a male worker. The discrimination may have various economic consequences for females including less pay, refusal to hire, or underemployment. The most commonly cited source of labor market discrimination is employer based. Another source of discrimination can be employee discrimination. An example of employee discrimination is when men refuse to take orders from women or will avoid sharing responsibility with women. The discriminating employee would be dissatisfied with a boss who acted as an equal-opportunity employer. The final source of discrimination comes from customers. A customer may prefer to be served by a male rather than female. Customer discrimination may cause labor market segregation. If the "average" customer always prefers males as managers, eventually the majority of managers will be males. Badgett and Folbre (1999) reveal that society, or customers in particular countries,

prefer females in certain positions such as nursing and teaching. Cultural norms have resulted in customer discrimination concentrating women in “caring professions.”

Previous literature has lent evidence to the idea that gender wage differentials in Costa Rica are a result of labor market discrimination. The exact sources of labor market discrimination cannot be clearly identified based on the literature available.

## **VII. Conclusions**

Education in Costa Rica does not contribute to women’s labor market activity as labor market theories would predict. The female population, on average, is more educated than the male population in Costa Rica. The attainment of a secondary education in Costa Rica does not increase female labor participation to the extent it does in other countries. The dual labor markets and labor market participation have also shaped women’s labor in Costa Rica. Women’s labor participation is concentrated in the informal market, as is true for the majority of Latin American countries. Labor market segmentation may make it difficult for women to move from the informal sector to the public or formal sectors. Married Costa Rican women are the most likely to participate in informal work, and education has become less of a predictor of individuals’ likelihood to enter the formal sector.

The women who do enter the labor market are more educated than men in the majority of sectors. In every sector of employment, women are paid less. The wage differentials between men and women are more pronounced in the private sector than the public sector. The informal labor market is the lowest paying labor market and the concentration of women in the informal labor market has negative implications on earnings. Women working in the informal market earn less on average than men and have less access to social services.

The Costa Rican government plays a large role in women's labor as an employer and regulator. Current labor laws restricting women's working hours give female employees less flexibility than males in the labor market. This may cause employers to prefer males over females, disallow women from working the hours they would prefer, and discourage some women from participating in market work. The government also plays a positive role, however, in reducing wage inequity between Costa Rican men and women as an employer. Women are currently overrepresented in high paying government jobs. Currently, it seems that Costa Rica is reluctant to privatize and will remain a large employer for years to come.

The Costa Rican labor law that restricts women's working hours is obsolete. It is necessary that the Costa Rican government eliminate the legislation and focus on workplace equality, which will become particularly important as women are forced out of the public sector. It is my recommendation that the government takes a strong stance in promoting and enforcing equal pay for equal work. As a result, the government will mean that the government will need to keep a watchful eye on the private sector. The government should also explore options that create job opportunities for educated Costa Rican women. This could entice labor market participation and allow women to earn competitive salaries in professions outside of the public sector.

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