



Costa Rica: A Model Country?

Costa Rica is one of the oldest democracies in Latin America and one of the few countries in the world that has abolished its military. With this in mind, one might presume that Costa Rica has progressive, pro-women policies to allow Costa Rican women, also known as *ticas*, to advance economically. Indeed, in a study of more than 100 developing countries' progress toward gender equity in social institutions, Costa Rica ranks near the top,ⁱ and the country is known for having strong government-funded social and welfare programs in areas such as education and health. By many standards, Costa Rica is a model for progressive social policies that protect women.ⁱⁱ However, Costa Rica faces longstanding gender inequities that limit growth opportunities for women, especially when it comes to employment.

Impact of the Economic Crisis

Costa Rica has not been immune to the global economic crisis. Recent statistics show rising levels of unemploymentⁱⁱⁱ and a struggling tourist economy, both of which have greatly affected women's work.

"For Costa Rican women, this crisis was a crisis inside the permanent crisis they face due to gender inequalities," adds Maria Florez Estrada Pimental, from the Agenda Económica de las Mujeres UNIFEM Program. There is a "consistent income gap—women earn around 19 percent less than men due to discrimination," she notes.

The crisis has hit working *ticas* harder than men. Unemployment statistics confirm that levels of unemployment among Costa Rican women reached almost 10% in 2009, whereas 6.6% of men are unemployed. Over 80% of working Costa Rican women work in the service sector,^{iv} primarily within tourism (one of the top three leading industries in the country).^v For the thousands of women who work in tourism, rising unemployment can be attributed to the decrease in foreign tourists, especially from the United States.^{vi}

Household Employees

Beyond the tourism industry, women also frequently find employment as domestic workers. Thirteen percent of working women in Costa Rica are paid household maids, and they earn just 36 percent of the average income for women in Costa Rica.^{vii} Domestic work is often looked down upon and working conditions are often unstable or abusive.^{viii}



Many of these household maids are migrant women. In fact, only 14 percent of all domestic workers are Costa Rican, and the majority of domestic workers (37 percent) are Nicaraguan.^{ix} Immigration, particularly from Nicaragua, is an increasingly important issue in Costa Rica and has increased as a result of the global financial crisis. As of 2010, fully ten percent of Costa Ricans are immigrants,^x and 80 percent of those immigrants are from Nicaragua.^{xi} Nicaraguans come to Costa Rica in search of economic opportunity; indeed, the average income in Costa Rica is double that of Nicaragua.^{xii} On the bright side, Costa Rica has new policies introducing minimum wage laws for domestic workers.^{xiii} In addition, contracted domestic workers are allowed maternity leave,^{xiv} and there are also organizations advocating for domestic workers' rights, such as Costa Rica's Domestic Worker's Association (ASTRODOMES).^{xv}

Turning Toward the Sex Industry

Faced with unemployment, women sometimes risk their health and safety in order to earn money in sex work and sex tourism. Although tourism industries (including sex tourism) were affected by the crisis, the downturn led to a swell in the number of women seeking jobs as sex workers. Through organizations and activist groups, women are working toward finding safe alternatives to the industry as well as demanding greater protection of labor and human rights for the sex workers.^{xvi}

Sex work is not prohibited in Costa Rica, meaning that sex workers cannot be arrested. However, they lack the protection and job benefits afforded those working in regulated fields. Alongside sex work comes the issue of illegal sex trafficking, which is prevalent in Costa Rica. The country is a "source, transit, and destination country for women and children" vulnerable to being trafficked, especially for forced prostitution.^{xvii} The economic crisis seems to have exacerbated the problem: in 2008 the US Department of State placed Costa Rica on its watch list because of an increase in sex trafficking. Since then the country has been removed from the list, in part due to increased efforts by the government to combat the problem, but Costa Rica continues to struggle with this form of modern day slavery.

Women in Agriculture

Agricultural work in Costa Rica continues to be dominated by men. Indeed, only five percent of employed Costa Rican women work in agriculture.^{xviii} Yet more *ticas* are turning to this important industry looking for work opportunities. There has been a considerable uptick in the number of women-led agricultural work cooperatives, particularly in coffee production. Many of these cooperatives have been tied to the global fair trade network, which promotes the production of goods free of social and environmental harm. They include Coocafe, an organization which strives to employ more women and which offers educational programs for women and children. Labor



organizations are also encouraging women to work in agriculture: recently the National Union of Small and Medium Cost Rican Agricultural Producers (*Upanacional*) trained 19 groups of women and families to cultivate their own produce and food.^{xix}

The support of cooperatives and unions is essential for stability for workers in times of crisis, when prices can be volatile. Agricultural exports diminished in the face of the financial crisis, harming women working in the fields, as well as those women whose husbands may feel compelled to leave home in search of better work. As a result, many wives and children have been left behind to operate the farms without pay as well as balance the demands of home, school and other daily responsibilities.^{xx}

The “Driving Force” in Recovery

Costa Rican women are earning more respect as potential leaders in the economic recovery. Recognized for their creditworthiness and responsibility in managing money, the National Bank recently issued a credit card just for women^{xxi} and created a program entitled “Banca Mujer” which provides women access to an array of financial services including millions of dollars in new loans to businesswomen.^{xxii}

Along with proving themselves financially responsible and starting work cooperatives, Costa Rican women also are surpassing men in education. Journalist Gabriela Mayorga, who writes on women’s financial situation for one of Costa Rica’s leading newspapers, notes that these savvy businesswomen have attracted the attention of financial institutions post-crisis due to their exceptional financial responsibility, and says that Costa Rican women are the “driving force” of the economy.^{xxiii}

But some experts say that Costa Rican women will have to work especially hard for gender equity as the country recovers from the crisis, because the government still lacks a strong labor policy against gender discrimination.^{xxiv} In addition, foreign investors are less concerned with gender discrimination and frequently “only look at how to increase competitiveness” without concern “for women as subjects with rights of their own,” notes Florez Estrada.

Despite challenges, Costa Rican women have the advantage of living in a country with a long history of unique, progressive policies. If *ticas* are empowered—through government, private sector, and social changes— to participate more fully in the economy, the country will no doubt reap the benefits.

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- ⁱ Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. [Social Institutions and Gender Index](#).
- ⁱⁱ In fact, Costa Rica has a number of labor laws providing more protection for domestic workers, mothers that work and other women than the United States. It also has specific laws against domestic violence and ensuring women have equal access to land.
- ⁱⁱⁱ [International Labor Organization](#), accessed 6 Oct 2010. Statistics show rising unemployment from 2007 to 2008 for the general population and men, but a decline for women. Comparing these numbers to the estimated 6.7% unemployment for 2010 by the [U.S. State Department](#), there does seem to be a rise since 2007. Accessed 6 October 2010.
- ^{iv} [World Bank Data](#), accessed 06 Oct 2010.
- ^v García, Ana Isabel; Barahona, Manuel; Castro, Carlos; Gomaríz, Enrique.(2002) “Costa Rica: Female Labour Migrants and Trafficking of Women and Children.” Genprom Working Paper, No. 2. Series on Women and Migration, International Labor Organization, pg. 1.
- ^{vi} Interview with Maria Florez Estrada Pimental, Professor and Researcher of the University of Costa Rica and Technical Coordinator of the Agenda Económica de las Mujeres UNIFEM Program, 17 August 2010.
- ^{vii} García, Ana Isabel; Barahona, Manuel; Castro, Carlos; Gomaríz, Enrique.(2002) “Costa Rica: Female Labour Migrants and Trafficking of Women and Children.” Genprom Working Paper, No. 2. Series on Women and Migration, International Labor Organization.
- ^{viii} García, Ana Isabel; Barahona, Manuel; Castro, Carlos; Gomaríz, Enrique.(2002) “Costa Rica: Female Labour Migrants and Trafficking of Women and Children.” Genprom Working Paper, No. 2. Series on Women and Migration, International Labor Organization. And International Labour Organization, “Decent Work for Domestic Workers” International Labour Conference, 99th Session, 2010, Report IV (1), Fourth Item on the Agenda, International Labour Office: Geneva., pg. 18.
- ^{ix} Roman, Isabel, Sociologa, Investigadora, Programa Estado de la Nación, “Servicios de cuidado para niños y niñas: Cuántas mujeres no pueden trabajar porque sus obligaciones familiares so lo impiden?” en *La Nación*. 23 February 2010.,pg. 18.
- ^x <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/activities/americas/central-america-and-mexico/costa-rica>
- ^{xi} García, Ana Isabel; Barahona, Manuel; Castro, Carlos; Gomaríz, Enrique.(2002) “Costa Rica: Female Labour Migrants and Trafficking of Women and Children.” Genprom Working Paper, No. 2. Series on Women and Migration, International Labor Organization., pg. 4.
- ^{xii} Ibid, pg. 8
- ^{xiii} International Labour Organization, “Decent Work for Domestic Workers” International Labour Conference, 99th Session, 2010, Report IV (1), Fourth Item on the Agenda, International Labour Office: Geneva., pg. 18. Here it states that the Costa Rica’s National Institute for Women (INAMU) and Gender Equality Unit “have taken action action to ensure” this equalization of wages “and that the National Wages Board approves a percentage increase.”
- ^{xiv} International Labour Organization, “Decent Work for Domestic Workers” International Labour Conference, 99th Session, 2010, Report IV (1), Fourth Item on the Agenda, International Labour Office: Geneva., pg. 64
- ^{xv} International Labour Organization, “Decent Work for Domestic Workers” International Labour Conference, 99th Session, 2010, Report IV (1), Fourth Item on the Agenda, International Labour Office: Geneva., pg. 89.



^{xvi} Rivers-Moore, Megan. "Trabajo Sexual y Valentia: Debemos definir el trabajo sexual como lo que es: un trabajo" 15 May 2010. Recently, a group of activists marched on the international day of work, May 1st, calling for recognition of their sex workers rights as a worker and human.

^{xvii} United States Department of State, [Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 - Costa Rica](#), 14 June 2010, Accessed 17 August 2010.

^{xviii} [World Bank Data indicators](#), accessed 08 Oct 2010.

^{xix} Silva Coto R. "[Mujeres se capacitan en agricultura y ganadería](#)" 7 Sep 2010. Accessed 8 Oct 2010.

^{xx} Adams, M.A. and Ghaly, A.E. (2007) "Determining Barriers to sustainability within the Costan Rican Coffee Industry" *Sustainable Development*, 15, 229-241.

^{xxi} Mayorga, Gabriela. "El Banco Nacional apela a las mujeres para incrementar el uso de tarjetas de crédito. Ayer present un plastic dirigido solo a las feminas."

^{xxii} Mayorga, Gabriela. "[Empresarias son mejores pagadoras que los hombres](#)" 24 June 2010 *La Nacion*. Accessed 08 Oct 2010.

^{xxiii} Interview via internet with Gabriela Mayorga, journalist of the La Nacion. Interpretation assistance from Veronica Bartch

^{xxiv} Interview with Maria Florez Estrada Pimental, Professor and Researcher of the University of Costa Rica and Technical Coordinator of the Agenda Económica de las Mujeres UNIFEM Program, 17 August 2010