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## **Costa Rica and the “Electric Fence” Mentality: Stunting Women’s Socio-economic Participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>**

By Amy Osborne<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Costa Rica is regarded as the “top democracy” in Latin America, exceeding basic developmental standards in most categories. The nation’s achievement is evidenced by women’s strong enrollment and retention rates within the nation’s education system. However, Costa Rica’s overwhelming gender disparity in the labor force reveals significant developmental deficiencies and contradicts fundamental democratic ideals. The pervasion of an “electric fence” mentality stunts women’s socio-economic engagement by restraining them to traditionally prescribed gender roles. To better understand women’s economic detachment, special attention must be paid to those institutional practices that perpetuate cultural norms and discriminatory tendencies. Costa Rica’s education system has a historic proclivity toward social conditioning, having undergone substantial reform to embed democratic allegiance into its national discourse. Socialized norms, imbedded in the education system, have discouraged women’s economic aspirations and fostered gender disparity. The following essay integrates observational fieldwork and research to analyze trends in Costa Rican women’s socio-economic engagement.

*Key words:* gender inequality, gender disparity, Costa Rica, Latin America, educational reform, democracy

### **Introduction: Costa Rica & the ‘Electric Fence’ Mentality: Stunting Women’s Socio-Economic Participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

During my weekly visit to Centro Educativo Bethaba, I asked my sixth grade class with hidden skepticism, “Who hopes to attend college in the future?” To my surprise, several students shouted out their resolute ambitions: “I want to be a doctor for children!” “I want to work with animals!” and “I want to be a lawyer!” A burst of enthused conversation filled the classroom as students told me about their favorite classes, those they disliked, and which college they’d like to

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Osborne is a graduate of Communication Studies from Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. As a recipient of a Provost’s Grant, Amy was able to pursue research in women’s affairs in Costa Rica in early 2011. Amy is currently employed at a government relations and advocacy firm in Boston and remains passionate about women’s issues. She aspires to obtain a Ph.D. in International Policy and Development and advocate for women’s empowerment through education and grassroots campaigns.

attend.<sup>3</sup> Although this experience momentarily clouded my perception of women's roles in Costa Rica, reality soon surfaced: only four of my students would ever enter the work force.<sup>4</sup>

Through my analysis of Costa Rica's development, I found striking gender disparities inconsistently represented throughout various dimensions of developmental achievement. For instance, rates of female graduates from secondary school have increased and recently exceeded that of their male counterparts. However, only 56% of Costa Rica's female population is currently engaged in the work force.<sup>5</sup> Though a majority of the population aspires to occupational success, most women forfeit their professional ambitions to fulfill domestic responsibilities. In contrast to the American dream of a 'white picket fence' luring some women into full-time domestication, Costa Rican women actively pursue the education and skills required for professional achievement. However, with their ultimate goal in sight, most women refrain from confronting the final obstacles in the way of occupational success. I refer to this phenomenon as the "electric fence mentality." Despite the nation's portrayal as a democratic leader, this attitude supports that Costa Rica does not represent gender equality.

## Objective

Contemporary trends in globalization signify changes to the international hierarchy defined as simply "under-developed", "developing" and "developed" nation states. Many nations are experiencing socio-economic advancement by institutionalizing Western methodologies. With democratic ideals at the forefront of developmental discourse, these nations subsequently assume political reformation and women's rights to be mandates for high developmental achievement. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) created the Human Development Index (HDI) to monitor countries' relative progress in reaching fundamental developmental standards, highlighting three dimensions of measurement: health, education, and living standards.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past two decades, Costa Rica has undergone comprehensive, statewide reform to emerge as the most well developed nation in Latin America. The nation's efforts to provide high standards of health and education have been extremely successful, and in 2012, Costa Rica replaced Chile as the country with the highest level of "democratic development" in Latin America.<sup>7</sup> However, human development indicators alone cannot sufficiently prove a nation's democratic superiority. Examining the levels of gender disparity pervading a nation's social and economic systems also plays an important role in demonstrating its true measure of democracy. Despite Costa Rica's developmental progress, an overwhelming gender disparity in the national labor force persists. This paper aims to explore this striking deficiency as it pertains to the nation's fulfillment of democratic ideals.

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<sup>3</sup> Sixth Grade Class. (2011, March 31). Interview by AO Osborne [Personal Interview]. Civic and occupational ambition. , Centro Educativo Bethaba.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2011). Human development report: Labour force participation rate (Ratio of female to male shares).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, United Nations Development Programme. (2011). Human development report: Country profiles, Costa Rica.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Development Programme. (2012). *Human development reports*. Retrieved from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

<sup>7</sup> Costa Rica leads democratic development index in Latin America. (2012, Nov 20). Inside Costa Rica. Retrieved from <http://insidecostarica.com/2012/11/20/costa-rica-leads-democratic-development-index-in-latin-america/>

Questions to guide this analysis include: What are the motives of the Costa Rican government in promoting democratic ideals? Has the education system been specifically targeted as a mechanism for ideological dissemination? Does adopting democracy imply a fundamental shift in cultural perspective? To what extent can gender equity be reached if paradoxical motives are paving the way for Costa Rica to join the “First World”? To best answer these questions, this essay will focus on the current state of gender parity in Costa Rica, with special emphasis on the national education system as a natural medium for cultivating cultural and political ideologies.

## **Fieldwork**

From mid-January to May 2011, I embarked on a sociological study of Costa Rica enabling and aided by my immersion into the nation’s cultural and political economy, as well as its education system. For the duration of my five months abroad I lived in Curridabat, a residential neighborhood in San Jose. I spent a majority of my weekends travelling throughout the country to both urban and rural communities to gain insight into the commonalities that unite these diverse populations. I found that the people who inhabited these places were all very much the same. Even in the most isolated regions, the desire for quality education as a tool for poverty evasion was pervasive, and often palpable. A tour guide in Tortuguero, a notoriously swampy region with only wide canals as roadways, offered a simple explanation of the community’s priorities: “To make a town you only need a church, a school, a football field, and a bar – and we attend them in that order, every day.”<sup>8</sup>

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Costa Rica’s education system in relationship to its female population, I observed a representative sample of institutions. While in San Jose, I paid regular visits to the Universidad Latina de Costa Rica (ULatina) to observe courses in Human Development, including Development from a Gender Perspective. With the help of a Provost’s Grant from Northeastern University, I volunteered each week at an urban primary school, Centro Educativo Bethaba, teaching English to a sixth grade class. This experience allowed me to observe students’ behaviors, gain insight into the resources and policies prescribed to urban educational institutions, and conduct formal interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students. I applied this knowledge as a basis for comparison of educational institutions in decentralized locations such as Tortuguero, Puerto Viejo, and La Argentina. Additionally, I engaged in informal discussions with community members, students and professors at the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR).

Through a combination of formal interviews and informal interactions, I became aware of cultural pressures restricting women to traditional gender roles. The citizenry’s enthusiasm for education—specifically among women—is apparent. However, pedagogical and cultural influences thwart their willingness to transition academic success to professional achievement. Costa Rica’s gender disparity in the labor force has grave implications for the nation’s long-term development, as United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) defines “economic participation” and “economic opportunity” among five important dimensions of female empowerment.<sup>9</sup> Perpetuating restrictive gender roles is paradoxical to Costa Rica’s progress as a stable and prosperous democracy, as it impedes women’s empowerment.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview by AO Osborne [Personal Interview]. Tour of education in Tortuguero, Costa Rica.

<sup>9</sup> Lopez-Claros, A., & Zahidi, S. World Economic Forum. (2005). Women’s empowerment: measuring the global gender gap measuring the global gender gap. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum.

## Literature Review

Past research supports the centrality of socio-economic empowerment to relinquish women from their traditional roles within the household. In “The ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ in Costa Rica: To What Extent a Conundrum?” author Sylvia Chant examines the persistence of poverty among Costa Rican women despite two decades of gross economic growth. Chant recognizes that Costa Rica receives consistently high marks in gender parity, among international systems of measurement such as the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM). Yet, despite this fact, “[Costa Rican] women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor” and this trend is deepening. Chant specifically dedicates her research to examining poverty as complimentary to the growing incidence of poor families with women fulfilling the role as head of household.<sup>10</sup>

“Love in the Time of Neo-Liberalism: Gender, Work and Power in a Costa Rican Marriage” reflects the significance of evolving household dynamics and their economic implications for women. Author Susan Mannon analyzes the status of women through personal interviews focused on their occupational choices and changing roles within the context of “homemaking and breadwinning.” Mannon concludes that working women do not generally use their financial power to renegotiate division of labor within the home. Rather, a majority of Costa Rican women enter the work force through the informal sector, applying domestic skills that coincide with prescribed, traditional gender roles.<sup>11</sup>

In 2001, the World Bank released a Policy Research Working Paper entitled “Female Wage Inequality in Latin American Labor Markets.” This analysis is focused on statistical differentials related to employed female workers in Argentina, Brazil and Costa Rica. The report asserts a generally indistinct relationship between education and increased income, as “female workers with less human capital saw wage gains relative to female workers with more human capital.”<sup>12</sup> This analysis includes data from the “pre” and “post-reformation” periods (1989 and 1995-1997, respectively), to demonstrate changing trends in female employment related to democratic reform. This study reveals a lack of incentives for Latin American women to pursue an education or enter the professional workforce, exacerbated by the institutionalization of democracy.<sup>13</sup>

## Education: A Metric for International Development

According to the most recent HDI report released by the United Nations Development Programme in 2011, Costa Rica is ranked 69<sup>th</sup> in overall development, compared to the United States which is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> out of 187 participating countries. HDI is an international measure of the basic human capacities or average quality of life within a given country, including education as one of three indicators. The significance of education as a metric for development is further evidenced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as Article 26 asserts, “Everyone has the right to education” and that it “shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental

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<sup>10</sup> Chant, S. (2009). The ‘feminisation of poverty’ in Costa Rica: To what extent a conundrum?. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 28(1), 19-43.

<sup>11</sup> Mannon, S. (2006). Love in the time of neo-liberalism: Gender, work, and power in a Costa Rican marriage. *Gender and Society*, 20(4), 511-530.

<sup>12</sup> Saavedra, L. A. The World Bank, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, Gender Sector Unit. (2001). Female wage inequality in Latin American labor markets (Policy Research Working Paper 2741)

<sup>13</sup> Saavedra.

stages”.<sup>14</sup> In achieving global gender parity, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) sites equal access to education and collaborative resources as a priority in eliminating gender discrimination.<sup>15</sup> More recently, universal education and gender equality were deemed complimentary objectives, as two of the eight pillars of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) identified as integral to eradicating global poverty.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to serving as a powerful benchmark of developmental achievement, education also serves as a means to achieving its own end. Prior research supports education as a medium by which social and political ideologies are instilled throughout a citizenry. In “What Poverty Does to Girls’ Education: the intersection of class, gender and policy in Latin America,” the author specifically identifies “schooling as a site where gender asymmetry is reproduced and yet may also be contested”.<sup>17</sup> In compliance with international development standards, Costa Rica has experienced a significant rise in women’s educative attendance and retention. Exploring ways in which cultural and political values are inculcated through the Costa Rican education system provides insight into women’s limited autonomy within the nation’s political economy.

### **Institutionalizing Democracy: History and Context**

In 1948, political tension within Costa Rica resulted in a 44-day Civil War marking the country’s bloodiest uprising of the twentieth-century. The result, however, was a new constitution for a reformed democracy, under which national hero, Jose’ Figueres Ferrer, was elected President in 1953.<sup>18</sup> Shortly after his election, during the height of the Cold War, President Ferrer proclaimed Costa Rica’s allegiance to upholding democratic ideals defined by the United States. President Ferrer spoke to the people of San Jose’, Costa Rica’s capital, explaining two reasons for his resolution:

“1) “We suffered the outrages of Communism” [before the 1948 civil war, in which a Communist-supported regime was ousted], “and can testify that Communism is an attempt to destroy democratic institutions”; and 2) “It is clear that Communism and Russian aggression are identical, and it is our duty to stand where the hemisphere stands.”<sup>19</sup>

Through this assertion, President Ferrer agreed to “adhere to any inter-American resolutions...for the betterment of democracy,” affirming the assimilation of the United States’ democratic values into Costa Rica’s political system.<sup>20</sup> In the same year, President Harry S. Truman acknowledged the United States’ role as champions for democracy in his nomination

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<sup>14</sup> The United Nations, The United Nations. (1948). *The universal declaration of human rights*

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme, (1979). *The convention for the elimination of discrimination against women*. An agenda for national action to end gender discrimination. UN General Assembly.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2011). *Millennium development goals report 2011*. Geneva: United Nations

<sup>17</sup> Stromquist, Nelly P. (2001). What Poverty Does to Girls’ Education: the intersection of class, gender and policy in Latin America. *Compare*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Santiso, C. (2003). Another lost decade? The future of reform in Latin America. *Public Administration and Development*, 23, 297-300.

<sup>19</sup> The stay-away vote. (1954, April 05). *Time*, 63(14).

<sup>20</sup> The stay-away vote.

acceptance speech, proclaiming, “Today, in 1948, we are now the defenders of the stronghold of democracy and of equal opportunity...”<sup>21</sup>

Today, the United States’ Department of State defines democracy according to twelve principles, including the following notion: “Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as...the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.”<sup>22</sup> The U.S. Department of State also emphasizes the significance of the national education system in instilling these rights, stating:

“[The] educational transmission process is vital in a democracy because effective democracies are dynamic, evolving forms of government that demand independent thinking by the citizenry. The opportunity for positive social and political change rests in citizens’ hands. Governments should not view the education system as a means to control information and to indoctrinate students.”<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, the U.S. State Department succinctly states, “Education is a universal human right...and an empowering social and economic tool.”<sup>24</sup> Given the historical alignment of Costa Rican democracy under the United States’ political model, these principles serve as metrics for the effective institutionalization of democracy.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing Costa Rica’s appropriation of these standards is central to assessing gender equity within the nation’s political economy.

During a period of national reform, Costa Rica similarly targeted education as an asset in assimilating democratic ideals. The Costa Rican education system is a state-operated institution managed through a coalition of the Ministry of Education, national universities and the *Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje* (INA). Together, these organizations compose the National Education Council (NEC) responsible for curriculum development, uniform teaching methodology, administration and financial support, as well as educational assessment at the preschool, basic and secondary levels. Costa Rican private schools are solely administered by the Ministry of Education, and Universities have the authority to act autonomously.<sup>26</sup> The NEC references compulsory education as a series of cycles: Cycle I (comparable to grades 1-3), Cycle II (grades 4-6), and Cycle III (grades 7-9). Curriculum development for all Costa Rican schools is the primary responsibility of the Ministry of Education, including the inspection and approval of all textbooks to ensure a uniform national discourse.

In the 1980’s, Costa Rica faced the worst economic depression in its history which reversed developmental growth and forced many middle class citizens below the poverty line.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Truman, H. S. Public Broadcasting System (PBS), American Experience. (1948). Democratic nomination acceptance speech, 1948.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Information Programs (2005). Principles of democracy. Retrieved from website: <http://usinfo.org/enus/government/overview.html>

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of State, (2005).

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Comparisons between the United States and Costa Rica’s definitions and implementation of democracy are made within the text of this comparative study, incorporating and examining views of these nations and throughout Latin America. This is not meant to suggest that the United States’ actions or views of democracy supercede that of other nations, or that the U.S. provides an international measure for true democracy.

<sup>26</sup> Costa Rica. In (1994). T. Husen & T. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Education* (2nd ed. pp. 1141-1145). Tarrytown, NY, USA: Pergamon.

<sup>27</sup> el Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica. 47ª Sección de la Conferencia Internacional de Educación, UNESCO. (2004). *El desarrollo de la educación en Costa Rica*. Ginebra, Suiza

To initiate reconstruction, the Ministry of Education began developing a comprehensive action plan for educative reform in 1990, entitled *Plan General de Educación*. The Ministry's plan, implemented nationally in 1994, emphasized the significance of "teaching using democratic approaches, active and participatory learning and assessment focused in products as well as process."<sup>28</sup> To compliment this mission, the Ministry of Education published its own teacher's guide, *The Teaching and Learning Processes in a Democratic Society*, and new textbooks for immediate and mandatory adoption.<sup>29</sup> The educative philosophy of Costa Rica's institutional leaders in the 1990's suggests contrived adherence to Western ideology, contradicting the democratic ideal that education is necessary to "demand independent thinking by the citizenry."<sup>30</sup> The gravity of this distinction is evidenced by the Ministry's admission; "Decision-making is informed by political and other considerations and technical analysis plays a relatively unimportant role in this process."<sup>31</sup>

In September 2004, the Ministry of Education released "El Desarrollo de la Educación en Costa Rica" to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), highlighting their plans for educational reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The document is primarily focused on past achievements, listing benchmarks attained since the implementation of the *Plan General de Educación* in the early 1990's. Among these achievements is "Justness in the Curricular Development" assuring "the access of educational services to...the most vulnerable populations," of which the "Program of Justness of Gender" is highlighted. Institutional offerings identified to promote pedagogic gender equality include flexible modalities for pregnant adolescents and mothers, the incorporation of women within diverse vocational specialties, and the increased availability of tutoring services.<sup>32</sup>

Within Section 2.1.3: "Specific measures to promote the equality of gender," the Ministry of Education refers to the deficiency of economic engagement among the female population and proposes tangible remedies. Included in their proposal are items aimed at economic empowerment, such as employing five Regional Directors to guide women's access to competitive careers, integrating 30 % of the female population in poverty into the public education system, and creating of a Commission to modify gender policy in support of labor services. These suggestions illustrate the Ministry of Education's commitment to catalyzing an increase in women's economic engagement, and their recognition that females represent a majority of Costa Rica's poor population. However, their commitment is dubious, as the Ministry asserts within the same section, "The empowerment of women is fomented from...the improvement of their [own] capacities and that they become actors of its own process of change."<sup>33</sup> In claiming that empowerment is an individual responsibility, the Ministry of Education compromises the integrity of their preceding proclamation to promote gender equity through institutional programs and outreach. This contradiction justifies concerns about the state's motives in addressing women's economic inequity as a fundamental deficit.

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<sup>28</sup> "Ministerio de Educación Pública Ministerio de Educación, (1994). 1990b Plan General de Educación. San Jose"; "Ministerio de Educación Pública Ministerio de Educación, (1991). 1991b Sintesis de la Política Curricular. San Jose."

<sup>29</sup> Ministerio de Educación Pública Ministerio de Educación, (1991)

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of State, (2005).

<sup>31</sup> T. Husen & T. Postlethwaite (Eds.), pp. 1141-1145.

<sup>32</sup> el Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, (2004).

<sup>33</sup> el Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, (2004).



## Current Conditions: A Statistical Analysis

To gain insight into the breadth of Costa Rica's economic shortcomings, it is vital to examine statistical trends in national development since the early 1990's. A 1991 report from the Ministry of Education revealed a consistent decline in retention rates among all school children correlated with increasing age, from 90-97% of the eligible population ages 7-9 (Cycle I) to 40-45% of the nation's 13-15 year olds (Cycle III).<sup>34</sup> In 1999, dropout rates reflected a similar trend, as 55% of the rural population age 15-19 and 30% of urban youth the same age prematurely discontinued their education.<sup>35</sup> However, the United Nations (hereafter, "UN") reported overall primary school drop-out rates had decreased substantially to just 11.2% in 2009.<sup>36</sup> Substantial improvement in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects the efficacy of the Ministry's *Plan General de Educación*.

Statistical analysis similarly supports increased gender parity as a result of the Ministry of Education's educational reformation. In 1990, Costa Rica's pedagogic Gender Parity Index (GPI) was 0.973, with 1, representing perfect parity and a GPI between 0 and 1 representing a disparity in favor of males. Following a decade of reform, women became a majority among students as the GPI increased to 1.03, reflecting a slight disparity in favor of females.<sup>37</sup> In 2009 the UN reported primary school attendance favored females, with a dropout rate 2.24% lower than their male counterparts (9.97% and 12.37%, respectively).<sup>38</sup> The steady increase in women's attendance following the implementation of educational reform supports the program's success, as well as the nation's commitment to achieving international development goals. The United Nations Statistics Division for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNESCO) highlights these statistics as evidence of Costa Rica's progress in achieving Target 3.A of the UN's Millennium Development Goals: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015."<sup>39</sup>

However, women's employment lags significantly despite their gains in education. Women's educative and economic engagement should be complimentary forces and are equitably vital for the comprehensive development of a nation, beginning with nuclear families and spreading throughout communities and nation-states.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, analyzing the statistical framework of women's participation in the national labor force is necessary to fully comprehend national gender parity. In 1991, the UN conducted a collaborative study revealing that only 28.3% of Costa Rican women ages 15 or older were engaged in the labor force. By 2006, the percentage of economically engaged women had risen slightly to 35.8% of the population.<sup>41</sup> The 2011 Human Development Report reflects a similarly disparate landscape in measuring the labor force participation rate. This indicator is defined as the "ratio of female to

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<sup>34</sup> Ministerio de Educación Pública Ministerio de Educación, (1991).

<sup>35</sup> Ocampo, J. A. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, (2002). Social panorama of Latin America 2001-2002.

<sup>36</sup> Primary education (isced 1) drop-out rate. In (2011). *UN Data* Retrieved from [http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=drop out rates&d=UNESCO&f=series:DR\\_1](http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=drop out rates&d=UNESCO&f=series:DR_1)

<sup>37</sup> International Human Development Indicators, United Nations Development Programme. (2011). *Population with at least secondary education (ratio of female to male rates)*.

<sup>38</sup> Primary education (isced 1) drop-out rate.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, A. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, United Nations Development Programme. (2011). *UNESCO: Millennium indicators*.

<sup>40</sup> Dollar, D., and R. Gatti. 1999. "Gender Inequality, Income and Growth: Are Good Times Good for Women?" Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 1, World Bank, Washington, DC.

<sup>41</sup> Women's share of labour force. In (2008). I. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) & I. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (Eds.), United Nations Statistics Division.

male of the working-age population (ages 15–64) that actively engages in the labour market, by either working or actively looking for work,” revealing a gender disparity of .422 in 1995, which only increased to .565 in 2009.<sup>42</sup>

Today, 56% of Costa Rica’s female population is currently engaged in the work force.<sup>43</sup> However, despite marginal advancement, Costa Rica’s female representation in the labor force remains bleak in the context of global development. The nation’s HDI ranking as 69<sup>th</sup> of 177 participating countries falls to 137<sup>th</sup> when calculated solely by economic gender parity. If this variable alone represented overall development, Costa Rica’s developmental progress would deteriorate to the bottom tier of the “Medium Human Development” category, competing with nations such as Ghana, Congo and Cambodia, currently ranked 135<sup>th</sup>, 137<sup>th</sup> and 139<sup>th</sup> respectively.<sup>44</sup>

### **Exploring the Nature and Origins of Gender Disparity**

A number of cultural considerations might influence Costa Rica’s significant developmental deficiency in women’s economic progress. Firstly, socio-economic class structures place special emphasis on women’s responsibility to focus on childrearing, while men serve as the primary breadwinners, both representing prescribed roles in a stable and financially sound middleclass household. Researcher Susan Mannon supports this assertion, saying that “a woman’s retreat from the labor market after childbearing [is] a sign of middle-class status and respectability” in Costa Rica.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Costa Rica is historically acclaimed for its unprecedented economic egalitarianism, challenging the conventional hierarchy of modern democracy by maintaining a strong middle class. Another scholar once revealed in the nation’s democratic pluralism, defining “Costa Rica’s unique democracy” as “the relative equality of wealth and status that has characterized the country since colonial times.”<sup>46</sup> Relative class stability and a cultural proclivity toward mothers’ domestication after childbirth challenge the assumption that women will gain economic autonomy in the coming decade. Rather, deeply ingrained cultural values perpetuate gender inequity and conflict with democratic values.

To comprehend the extent of women’s economic deficiencies, it is also important to understand Costa Rica’s definition of “labor” relative to other countries and international institutions. The UN broadly defines labor participation as characterized by those “either working or actively looking for work.”<sup>47</sup> This definition fails to account for many women whose primary economic activity is through paid or unpaid work within the home or informal sector. The informal sector within the context of gender discourse can be defined as “salaried women working in small firms (less than 6 workers) that do not have social security,” or other benefits such as such as maternity leave and health insurance.<sup>48</sup> Work characterized as informal labor

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<sup>42</sup> United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report Office. (2011). Key indicators on the labour market: 6th edition.

<sup>43</sup> United Nations, United Nations Development Programme. (2011). Human development report: Country profiles, Costa Rica.

<sup>44</sup> United Nations, UNDP, (2011).

<sup>45</sup> Mannon, 511-530.

<sup>46</sup> Peeler, J. S. (1987). Costa Rican democracy: Pluralism and class rule. *Commonwealth: A Journal of Political Science*, 1.2, 1-31.

<sup>47</sup> United Nations, UNDP, (2011).

<sup>48</sup> “Saavedra.”; “United Nations, United Nations Statistics Division. (2011). National Benefits. Retrieved from website: <http://data.un.org/DocumentData.aspx?id=258>”

includes traditionally domestic chores such as cooking, child-care and cleaning houses.<sup>49</sup> While work within the informal sector does generate modest income, it is directly correlated with subordination, economic instability and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles.

Costa Rican women's predominance in the informal sector challenges the nation's adherence to democratic values, as fulfilling traditional domestic chores is not characteristic of equal and active economic engagement. The U.S. State Department's definition of democracy emphasizes this sentiment, insisting that all citizens enjoy "the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society."<sup>50</sup> Additionally, cultural norms ascribing women to the informal sector are detrimental to the nation's long-term development as families lack state-sponsored benefits, including health insurance and social security. Tension between democratic values and the nation's traditional gender roles offer insight into the profound implications of Costa Rica's macro-economic deficiencies.

### **Exploring Women's Economic Disempowerment**

Popular culture, educational curricula and wage incentives are deeply ingrained facets of Costa Rican society which contribute to the perpetuation of repressive female gender roles within a "reformed" democracy. Having established that Costa Rican women possess the personal motivation and educational background necessary to succeed in the labor force, these externalities are significant in explaining their ultimate disengagement and the persistence of the electric fence mentality.

#### ***Cultural Pressure:***

Cultural pressure impedes women's equitable entrance into the labor force as Costa Rica clings to traditional *machismo* attitudes. Machismo is defined as "a strong sense of masculine pride: an exaggerated masculinity," often associated with disempowering or restricting the behaviors of women.<sup>51</sup> This attitudinal trend originated among Costa Rica's Spanish and Portuguese descendants, becoming most pervasive in the 1950's paralleling the assimilation of Western democracy. A female student from the United States studying in Costa Rica explained the phenomenon from her own perspective, recalling, "In Costa Rica, a woman's role is almost always to grow up, marry, and become the possession of her husband. Women are not educated equally with men and they are frowned upon for expressing the desire to pursue individual lives away from home."<sup>52</sup> Her recollection of explicit discriminatory tendencies demonstrates the powerful pervasion of machismo in contemporary Costa Rican society.

Throughout the developing world, economic empowerment has been viewed as a means to increase women's position within the household, redefining gender roles in the most profound sense. Rae Lesser Blumberg asserts this notion in his formulation of the gender stratification theory, asserting a positive correlation between women's income generation and increased decision-making power.<sup>53</sup> However, traditional values and cultural pressures provide obstacles to achieving unadulterated gender equity. This reality is further evidenced by Mannon's conclusion

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<sup>49</sup> Mannon, 511-530.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Department of State, (2005).

<sup>51</sup> machismo. In (2012). Merriam-Webster Dictionary Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/machismo>

<sup>52</sup> Ryder, P. (2011). Abroad view: Costa Rica. Retrieved from <http://www.abroadview.org/northamerica/ryder.htm>

<sup>53</sup> Blumberg, Rae Lesser. 1988. Income under female vs. male control: Hypotheses from a theory and data from the Third World. *Journal of Family Issues*. 9:51-84.

that Costa Rican women who pursue paid work in the formal sector do not experience an increase in decision-making or financial autonomy within the household. As such, Mannon rationalizes that many Costa Rican women prefer to work in the informal sector, which “supports and maintains her traditional gender role in the family.”<sup>54</sup>

### ***Educational Curriculum:***

The reformation period of the 1990’s motivated the integration of democratic teachings into a national curriculum. However, women remain largely absent from historical texts, aside from assertions of their traditional responsibilities within the home. Sixth grade students at Centro Educativo Bethaba were unable to name any prominent female leaders in Latin American history, aside from the current president, Laura Chinchilla.<sup>55</sup> Textbooks and assigned reading in Costa Rican classrooms reflect a similar theme of women’s absence in matters of cultural significance.

Language and imagery portrayed throughout primary school textbooks, specifically those focused on social studies and history, support women’s subordination in national discourse. To further qualify this notion, I examined the sixth grade edition of “Trampolin: A Estudios Sociales” to determine the quantity and context of images containing women compared to those of men. Excluding images containing both men and women equitably, I found forty-one photographs depicting males and just eleven photographs depicting women. Of the eleven photographs illustrating females, five are included within the section designated “Women’s Rights.” Additionally, all female images reinforce cultural expectations for women’s behavior in terms of domestic responsibilities and informal labor. For instance, Chapter 2 begins with a photo of a woman working in a field to highlight the importance of agriculture to the national economy.<sup>56</sup> Subsequent photos are male dominated and depict a variety of activities within the formal sector, such as business-owners. Images of women are plain and occasionally displayed in black and white, while images of men are more vibrant and elaborate. Similarly, women are portrayed in less prestigious, more labor intensive roles while their male counterparts are represented in positions of greater wealth and power.<sup>57</sup> Understated and infrequent images of women within primary school textbooks reinforce traditional gender roles and machismo ideologies of male dominance and superiority.

The compilation and organization of a text also provides insight into the significance given to certain subject matter. For instance, as we all know, few classes ever reach the final chapters of a textbook. Not surprisingly, a majority of information and photographs highlighting women within “Trampolin: A Estudios Sociales” are compiled within the book’s final chapter titled, “Other rights related to health, work and women.” This section focuses on youth pregnancy and domestic violence as “women’s issues,” in addition to child labor and drug and alcohol abuse. Following this section are two pages dedicated to women’s rights and “The law for the promotion of social equality for women.” The chapter ends with a summary of social groups including “Women’s organizations.” This section recognizes organizations dedicated to

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<sup>54</sup> Mannon, 511-530.

<sup>55</sup> Sixth Grade Class.

<sup>56</sup> Trampolin: A Estudios Sociales. In (2009). A. (Ed.), Trampolin: A Estudios Sociales (pp. 72). Costa Rica: Santillana.

<sup>57</sup> Sequeira (Ed.).

protecting women from abuse and aggression. A complimentary photo illustrates a woman molding a large vase out of clay, a traditional activity in the informal marketplace.<sup>58</sup>

The only exception to women's inclusion outside of this section is a separate textbox in Chapter 4 that describes women's contributions to Central America's independence. Of the three sentences dedicated to this section, the role of women is ambiguous, primarily described as "collaborating" on military matters and attending to the injured.<sup>59</sup> Characterizations highlighting women's roles and "issues" reinforce the female population's obligations within the household and to their families, as well as alluding to historical restrictions on women's political and economic engagement.

Applying gender analysis to Costa Rican curriculum provides startling evidence supporting implicit themes of machismo and women's socio-economic subordination. Labeling social issues, such as youth pregnancy and domestic violence, as "belonging" to women implies that the female population has a responsibility to prevent these occurrences, when in fact men are often the primary instigators. Similarly, the inclusion of women's social equality and civil engagement as brief, disjoint summaries reinforces society's view of women's inability to compete with men in socio-economic activities. The overall tone of the text suggests women's subordination and highlights the female population's unique needs and areas of weakness.

Children's books also carry social connotation, providing insight into Costa Rica's gender discourse in relation to economic parity. Two children's novels have been especially controversial for their traditional application in primary school curricula, despite their blatant perpetuation of discriminatory gender stereotypes. In the novel "Cocorí," race and gender stereotypes are at odds, weaving together a national classic.<sup>60</sup> Though the text was removed from the national curriculum due to its offensive nature, it was reintroduced as compulsory reading in primary schools in 2005.<sup>61</sup>

The story follows a native Caribbean boy as he aims to please a white tourist girl whom he met on the coast. When the girl gives Cocorí a rose and kisses him on the cheek, she requests a squirrel monkey in return. The seventy-seven page children's book follows Cocorí through his perilous journey through the jungle as he desperately strives to bring a monkey back for the girl. Upon returning to the coast, Cocorí finds that the girl is no longer there and the flower she had given him has withered and died.<sup>62</sup>

Of the thirty-five illustrations littering the text, the white tourist girl at the center of Cocorí's venture, is only seen in a single image. While the novel is commonly criticized for its visual portrayal of native Caribbeans, including exaggerated lips and a primitive air of oblivion, the book has also been reprimanded for perpetuating gender stereotypes. The small, blonde tourist girl is depicted in a lacey dress with bows, and Mary Jane shoes. Despite her short interaction with Cocorí, she manages to seduce him with a kiss and a rose. Cocorí describes his state of entrancement digesting the perfume of the flower and the girl's sweetness.<sup>63</sup> Aware of the euphoric effect of her presence, she asks Cocorí to embark on a dangerous journey, all the while knowing she will be gone upon his return. Cocorí's blind submission to her request reinforces cultural acceptance for men's willingness to do anything for sex. Additionally, the

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<sup>58</sup> Sequeira (Ed.), pp. 264-269, 274-276.

<sup>59</sup> Sequeira (Ed.), pp. 198.

<sup>60</sup> Shvoong: Book reviews. (2009, February 06). Retrieved from <http://www.shvoong.com/books/1865566-Cocorí/>

<sup>61</sup> Gólcher B., R. (2005, May 18). 'Cocorí' vuelve a las aulas. *La Nación*.

<sup>62</sup> Gutierrez, J. (2010). Cocorí. (pp. 9-77). San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial Legado.

<sup>63</sup> Gutierrez, pp. 16.

girl's portrayal as selfishly abusive and Cocorí's unyielding sexual desires reinforce traditional notions of feminine ego and objectification, respectively.

Paco y Lola is a children's novel traditionally used in first grade curricula throughout Costa Rica, however the text was removed for its severe sexism. Although the text is no longer compulsory in primary schools, it remains very popular and widely read. Emma Gamboa, Costa Rican native and author of Paco y Lola, is highly acclaimed within Latin America for her application of folklore and familiar domestic imagery to educate youth in basic Spanish vocabulary and mathematics.<sup>64</sup>

In this particular text, Gamboa introduces readers to two siblings, Paco and Lola, throughout a variety of settings, including sections titled "In the house," "At play" and "In the school." Within each of these sections, Paco participates in traditionally masculine activities, while Lola ascribes to highly feminine roles. For example, while Lola helps her mother wash the dishes, set the table and cook in the kitchen, Paco reads with his father in the living room. While "at play," Paco works with tools and plays sports and Lola plays with dolls. Similarly, "in the school" Paco runs with the boys while Lola stays indoors and plays hand games. Economic boundaries are further explicated as a section on spring activities features three different men selling produce. Women and girls, however, are limited to work within the household or playing games indoors. The book's emphasis on traditional gender roles condones women's obligation to tend to domestic work while men participate in the formal labor force and relax within the home.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, despite reinforcing discriminatory gender constraints, Gamboa was a stark advocate of "a holistic democratic education."<sup>66</sup> As a prominent influence in educating youth, she stressed the significance of children's exposure to diverse experiences and of maintaining human dignity through education. She was well-educated and enjoyed professional success, receiving her Ph.D. from the University of Ohio in 1947 and later becoming a Dean of Students at the Universidad de Costa Rica.<sup>67</sup> Given Gamboa's personal background and pedagogic philosophy, her reinforcement of sexist ideals is disconcerting. However, this paradox is also indicative of the complexities resulting from a collision of Latin American democracy and machismo ideologies.

### ***Economic Factors & Wage Incentives:***

Women face a number of unique challenges which create disincentives for those aspiring to enter the professional workforce. Despite Costa Rica's high rankings in aggregate gender indicators, women consistently represent a large majority of the nation's poor. Sylvia Chant attests that female-run households represent the majority of impoverished women, often characterized as single mothers with limited financial means. To combat this trend, Costa Rica has implemented state-sponsored benefits to support women's integration into the labor force. For instance, a UN report states that approximately 25% of Costa Rica's female population (age 15 and over) was employed part-time between 2000 and 2003,<sup>68</sup> compared to just 10% of the

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<sup>64</sup> Gamboa Hernandex, A., & Gurfinkiel Hermann, S. (1997). Unusual Costa Rican women. In I. Leitinger (Ed.), *The Costa Rican Women's Movement* (pp. 85-86). Pittsburgh: The Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>65</sup> Gamboa, E. (2011). *Paco y Lola*. (pp. 1-128). San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial LIL, S.A.

<sup>66</sup> Gamboa Hernandex & Gurfinkiel Hermann.

<sup>67</sup> Gamboa Hernandex & Gurfinkiel Hermann.

<sup>68</sup> Part-time work is defined as 15 hours per week or less

male population.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, national institutions provide adequate provisions for maternity care, including four months of full paid leave following child-birth.<sup>70</sup> These benefits are comparable to many developed nations, including France, Spain and Switzerland, and exceed that of the United States.<sup>71</sup> This comparison demonstrates that Costa Rican women receive substantial support from the state, encouraging women's employment while fulfilling domestic responsibilities. However, despite these accommodations, cultural and pedagogic pressures negatively impact women's economic engagement.

Wage incentives specific to female laborers provide insight into the cultural implications affecting women's economic disengagement. According to statistics published by the World Bank in 2001, marriage and increased age equate with significant "positive wage premiums," or increased income. Wage incentives also increase for women working in the informal sector. While other Latin American nations have reported an increasing income disparity in this category over the past two decades, Costa Rica has significantly narrowed the margin for annual earnings in the informal and formal sectors. Specifically, Costa Rican women earned 33.8% less working in the informal sector in 1989 (pre-reformation), compared with a 9.2% differential in 1995 (post-reformation).<sup>72</sup> These statistics are particularly disturbing as traditional gender roles will remain unchallenged as long as wage incentives encourage women to marry and seek employment within the informal sector. Women's complacency toward the proliferation of modern day "machismo" is evidenced by women's increasing tendency to abandon professional aspirations and resign themselves to traditional gender roles, often within the informal sector.

### **Recommendations:**

Social and cultural pressures consistently confine women to subordinate, traditionally feminine roles, thereby impeding their ability to fully engage in the nation's economy. Though this examination of cultural, pedagogic and economic implications provides a dubious portrayal of Costa Rica's commitment to gender equity, these areas may also offer opportunity for developmental progress. Specifically, curricular reform complimented by public relations campaigns can provide a holistic approach to encouraging women's economic engagement. Though an entire thesis may be developed in examining the most effective ways to instruct ideological change, I have chosen to focus on these areas as particularly relevant, though they are just a few solutions to increasing women's financial autonomy in Costa Rica.

Reforming educational curricula can serve as a valuable medium to challenge traditional gender roles by emphasizing proscriptive, rather than descriptive, portrayals of women. In other words, women must be featured within the context of 'idealist imagery,' or how life should be, rather than how life currently is, to inspire a cultural shift. As evidenced in "Trampolin: A Estudios Sociales," Costa Rican textbooks fail to portray women as influential figures throughout Latin American history or even within today's economy. Their overall absence and subordination within pedagogic texts is a substantial force in perpetuating traditional gender

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<sup>69</sup> United Nations, United Nations Statistics Division. (2008). Part-time employment rate. Retrieved from website: <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=GenderStat&f=inID:109>

<sup>70</sup> 100% paid maternity leave is subsidized by 50% reimbursement by social security and 50% by individual employers

<sup>71</sup> "The United States reported a maximum allowance of 12 weeks maternity leave with an unspecified plan for income reimbursement."; "United Nations, United Nations Statistics Division. (2011). Maternity leave benefits. Retrieved from website: <http://data.un.org/DocumentData.aspx?id=258>"

<sup>72</sup> Saavedra.

roles throughout the generations. Having employed a successful campaign for democratic reform, the Ministry of Education is familiar with effective tactics to inform and enlighten an ideological shift. By instating a similar methodology to support changing gender roles in society, the Ministry has the opportunity to be a champion for 21<sup>st</sup> century women's empowerment in Costa Rica.

Pedagogic curricula should reinforce the contributions of strong female leaders in the nation's political and economic progress. 'Idealist imagery' can instill recognition of women's capacity for leadership and achievement, and ultimately allow textbooks to serve as self-fulfilling prophecies. Increasing the number of images illustrating women as equally vibrant, and as physically and mentally capable as their male counterparts is vital to combating subliminal discrimination. The context of these images is as important as their content, as Costa Rican texts must integrate accurate portrayals of women as active participants visible consistently throughout diverse subject matter. As women are increasingly portrayed in positions of power and wealth equitably to their male counterparts, traditional notions of restrictive gender roles will dissipate and make way for an empowered generation of Costa Rican women.

Public Relations campaigns are also effective in explicitly drawing the public's attention to an issue necessitating national debate. A popular figure who exemplifies qualities of professional ambition and success can serve as an ideal spokesperson to inspire women's economic achievement. Considering national particularities is also significant in choosing an appropriate spokesperson who is well liked and respected among the citizenry. Choosing an individual who is controversial or has strong political opinions is often detrimental to communicating a clear and targeted message necessary to influence national discourse. An ideal candidate in Costa Rica might be President Laura Chinchilla, who can speak to the significance of women's economic engagement in the context of familial stability and national development. Popular Latin American female athletes or artists serving as local icons, such as Shakira, may also be desirable role models to motivate women's confidence in their own professional capabilities. Once a spokesperson and a clear message have been identified, the government could sponsor a Public Service Announcement (PSA) or advertising campaign to promote positive messaging and imagery in support of women's empowerment.

## **Conclusion:**

Returning to Costa Rica ten or twenty years down the road, I hope to see that the girls from my sixth grade class have risen to the challenge and beaten the odds. Whether they become doctors or veterinarians, I believe in the capacity of these young women to become successful professionals. And when their children arrive at school and are asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I will expect to hear an enthusiastic outpouring of uninhibited professional aspiration; for they will know nothing else and deserve nothing less.

An in-depth analysis of Costa Rica's political reformation, and progressive trends in women's socio-economic engagement provide insight into the nation's limited fulfillment of democracy. Specifically, women's increasing interest in education and concurrent aversion to formal economic engagement suggests a paradox in Costa Rica's political system. Women's value of education is characteristic of developmental progress, as a popular theory states; "the most powerful single influence on a child's educational success is...[a mother's] own level of education and her educational aspirations for her children."<sup>73</sup> However, the prevalence of an

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<sup>73</sup> Norton Grubb, W. (2011). Unconventional wisdom. Council on Contemporary Families, (3).



electric fence mentality deterring women from increasing their own economic stature is detrimental to developmental progress, as well as to the maintenance of a true democracy.

In 2010, Costa Rica elected Laura Chinchilla as the nation's first female president. The same year, Costa Rica was recognized as the "Most Democratic Nation" within the annual Latin American Index of Democratic Development.<sup>74</sup> Applying the notion that "inadequate or underrepresentation of women in the legislature represents a serious flaw in the functioning of a democracy,"<sup>75</sup> President Chinchilla's election represents something greater than a simple achievement in women's empowerment. Rather, her election signifies a step towards recognizing women as active participants and leaders in Costa Rican society. However, despite this milestone, traditional gender roles remain restrictive and are corroborated by the modern pervasion of machismo decades after Costa Rica's democratic reformation. Ultimately, women's disengagement in the formal labor force challenges the traditional definition of democracy and suggests there is still repressive gender inequity in Costa Rica.

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<sup>74</sup> Linder, S. (2010). Costa Rica rated top for democracy in Latin America. *Boomers Abroad*

<sup>75</sup> Phillips, A. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. New York: Oxford University Press.