KEYWORDS

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Female-headed single-parent households and poverty in Costa Rica

T.H. Gindling and Luis Oviedo

Average real family incomes rose in Costa Rica in the late 1990s and at the start of the new decade, but poverty rates did not fall. Here it is argued that economic growth in the country did not translate into reduced poverty during this period because of changes that took place in household structure and in the labour market, and that these changes had an important gender dimension Specifically, a rising proportion of female-headed single-parent households led to an increase in the number of women with children entering the labour force, many of them for the first time. Many of these mothers were unable to find or unwilling to accept full-time work in the higher-paying formal sector and ended up unemployed or working part-time as self-employed workers. These labour market phenomena contributed to low incomes for vulnerable households, especially single-parent households headed by women.

T. H. Gindling
University of Maryland
Baltimore County
and Visiting Researcher at the
Economic Science Research
Institute
University of Costa Rica
gindling@umbc.edu

Luis Oviedo
Economic Science Research
Institute
University of Costa Rica
loviedo@cariari.ucr.ac.cr

I
Introduction

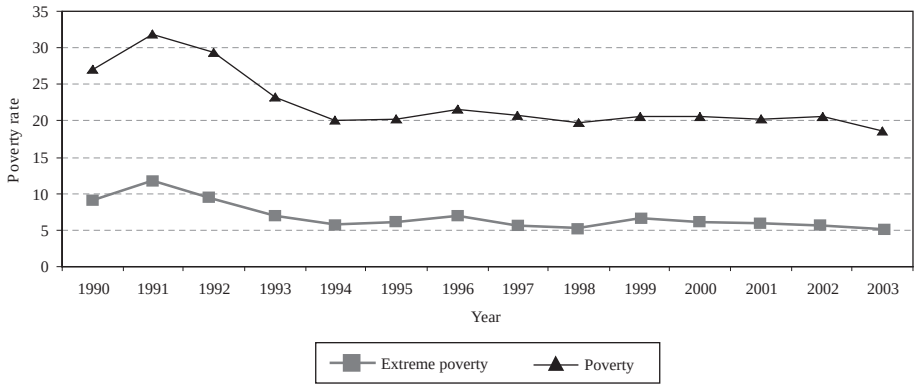
From the 1970s to the early 1990s poverty in Costa Rica was counter-cyclical, falling during expansionary periods and rising during recessions. From 1996 to 2003, however, despite increasing average real household incomes, the poverty rate stagnated (figures 1 and 2). This paper argues that faster economic growth in Costa Rica did not translate into reduced poverty because of changes that took place in household structure and in the labour market, and that these changes had an important gender dimension. It is further argued that the changes in family structure and those in the labour market were related. Specifically, a rising proportion of female-headed single-parent households[1] in Costa Rica was associated with an increase in the number of women with young children entering the labour force. Many of these mothers, new entrants to the labour force, were unable to find or unwilling to accept full-time work in the higher-paying formal sector and ended up unemployed or working part-time as self-employed workers. These labour market conditions helped to worsen inequality and unemployment and hold down the incomes of vulnerable households, especially single-parent households headed by women.

ECLAC (2004) notes that: "The most significant trend [in household structure in Latin America] has been the increase in single-parent households headed by women". This paper contributes to the understanding of how this change in household structure has contributed to poverty and to changes in the labour market in one Latin American country.

The structure of the rest of this paper is as follows. Section II describes the changes in the labour market that led to stagnating poverty rates in the 1996-2003 period in Costa Rica. Section III examines changes in household structure in this period and argues that these were important causes of many of the labour market changes that led to increasing inequality and flat poverty rates. Section IV draws some conclusions and suggests some possible policy measures.

FIGURE 1

Costa Rica: poverty and extreme poverty rates, 1990-2003



Source: Estado de la Nación, Costa Rica, 2006, available at www.estadonacion.or.cr.

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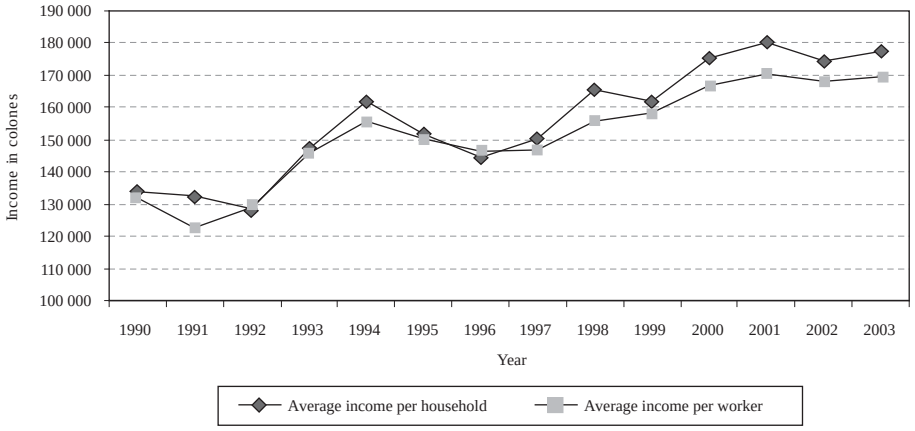
[1] A single-parent household is defined as one in which, according to the Multi-purpose Household Survey, neither a spouse nor partner is present.

FIGURE 2

Costa Rica: average real monthly household income and individual earnings, 1990-2003
(1999 colones)



Source: Estado de la Nación, Costa Rica, 2006, available at www.estadonacion.or.cr.

II
Changes in the labour market

Two labour market phenomena help explain why poverty rates in Costa Rica stagnated despite economic growth: (i) increased income and earnings inequality; and (ii) increased unemployment rates among members of poor households.

1. Increased inequality

After falling for at least three decades (in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s), earnings and income inequality in Costa Rica began to increase in the mid-1990s (see Gindling and Trejos, 2005). Figure 3 shows that household income inequality fell from 1990 to 1995, then increased from 1995 to 2003 (as poverty rates stagnated).[2] The increase in earnings and income inequality was one of the reasons why rising incomes in the latter half of the 1990s did not translate into lower poverty rates in Costa Rica.

In a study of changes in earnings inequality in Costa Rica, Gindling and Trejos (2005) conclude that the most important cause of the worsening of this type of inequality in the 1990s was an increase in the proportion of workers with a non-standard working schedule (i.e., those working part-time and over-time), which was caused largely by a rising proportion of women working part-time as self-employed workers.[3] This worsened the inequality in hours worked among workers and thus increased disparities in monthly and yearly earnings. The increase in women working part-time and as self-employed workers is also correlated with stagnating poverty; from 1996 to 2003 the proportion of women working part-time increased substantially, from 42.7% to 49.5%, while the proportion of men working part-time remained stable.[4] This pattern differed from that of the early

[2] Figure 3 presents the log variance of income, which is a measure of inequality that is sensitive to changes in the incomes of the poor. Other inequality indicators, such as the Gini coefficient and the Theil index, show a similar pattern in Costa Rica.

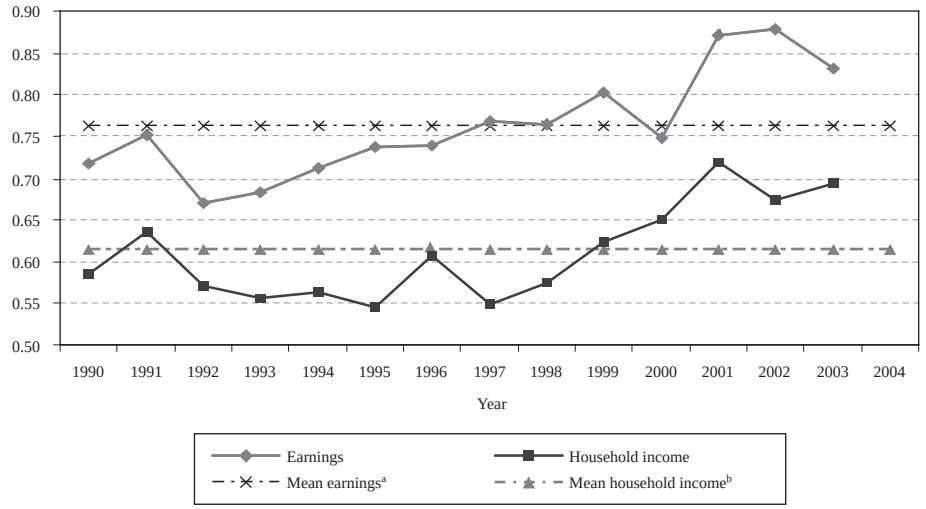
[3] Another cause of the sharpening disparity in hours worked was an increase in the proportion of men working over-time during this period.

[4] Based on the authors' calculations using the Multi-purpose Household Survey.

1990s, when the proportion of women working part-time held steady (at around 42.5%). Figure 4 shows that, although the proportions of self-employed men and women both rose from 1990 to 2003, the increase was much greater for women (from 16% to 25%) than for men (from 28% to 29%). Further, the proportion of self-employed women increased faster during the period in which poverty was stagnating (from 1996 to 2003) than in the period in which poverty rates were falling (from 1990 to 1996).

FIGURE 3

Costa Rica: log variance of earnings and income, 1990-2003

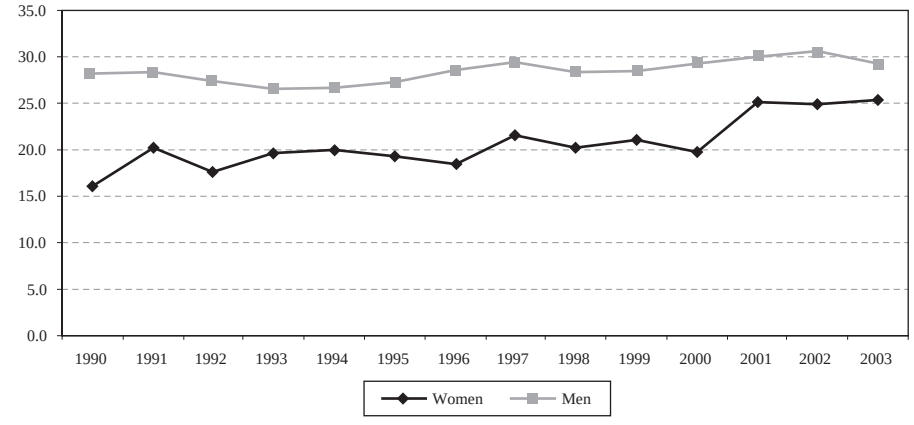


Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

[a] Average log variance of earnings.
[b] Average log variance of household income.

FIGURE 4

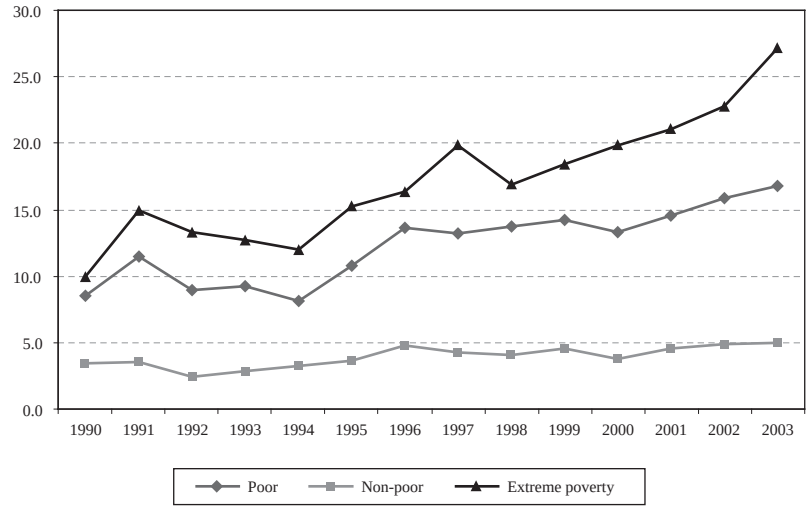
Costa Rica: self-employed workers, by gender, 1990-2003
(Percentages)



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

FIGURE 5

Costa Rica: unemployment rates by poverty status, 1990-2003
(Percentages)



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

The increase in the proportion of women working part-time occurred disproportionately among women living in poor households, further contributing to increased poverty. The proportion of women from poor households working part-time increased from 53% in 1990 to 68% in 2003; the proportion of non-poor women working part-time also increased, but at a slower rate (from 40% to 47%). At the same time, the proportion of men in both poor and non-poor households working part-time fell (while the proportion working over-time increased from 27% to 30% and 35% to 41%, respectively). From 1990 to 2003 the proportion of self-employed workers also increased fastest for women from poor households: almost doubling, from 22% to 42% (while the proportion of self-employed women from non-poor households increased from 40.8% to 47.4%).

In summary, the most important cause of the increase in earnings inequality from 1996 to 2003 was an increase in the proportion of women working part-time as self-employed workers.[5] Further, the increase in the proportion of women working part-time occurred disproportionately among women living in poor households, and thus contributing to increased poverty.

2. Increased unemployment

The enigma of rising real average earnings but stagnating poverty is also partly explained by rising unemployment rates, especially among those most vulnerable to poverty. National unemployment rates behaved counter-cyclically up to 1996, falling with the expansion from 1990 to 1994 (from 4.6% to 3.5%) and then rising during the recession from 1994 to 1996 (to above 6% in 1996). But although per capita GDP and average real earnings and incomes rose after 1996, unemployment rates remained high (6% to 6.5%) until 2003.

The pattern of high and rising unemployment rates during the period when earnings grew but poverty stagnated is especially marked for those living in poor households. Figure 5 shows that, while unemployment rates for those living in non-poor households remained slightly less than 5% for the entire expansionary period (1996-2003), those rates increased steadily and dramatically for those living in poor households over this same period. Unemployment rates increased from below 13.6% to 16.7% among members of poor

[5] According to Gindling and Trejos (2005), other labour market phenomena that contributed to the increase in earnings inequality include: an increase in the male-female wage gap, increasing returns to education, and sharper inequality in education levels among workers.

households, and from 16.3% to 27.1% for those in extreme poverty.

Analysis of the data suggests that the higher unemployment rates had different causes for men and women. In the case of women, higher unemployment rates were driven by increases in labour force participation, while in the case of men they were related to changes in demand for labour. From 1990 to 2003, labour force participation rates increased for women and decreased for men (figure 6). Women's labour force participation rates changed very little from 1987 to 1996, but rose from 1996 to 2003 (coinciding with the period of rapid income growth but stagnating poverty). Increasing female labour force participation rates suggest that high and rising unemployment was, at least in part, supply-driven. Specifically, we hypothesize that even if demand for labour and employment were increasing, employment was not able to increase fast enough to keep up with women's increasing labour force participation.

To provide additional evidence regarding this hypothesis, we use a technique developed in Card and Riddell (1993) to decompose the increase in unemployment rates (which began in 1994) into three components: (i) changes in the non-employment rate (unemployment plus labour force non-participation as a proportion of the population over 12 years of age); (ii) changes in the probability of unemployment given non-employment (unemployment plus labour force non-participation); and (iii) changes in labour force participation rates. The last two components of this decomposition are related to increases in labour force participation rates, while the first is related to changes in the demand for labour.

Formally, let P(U|LF) represent the probability of unemployment given labour force participation (the unemployment rate), let P(N) represent the unconditional probability of non-employment and let P(LF) equal the probability of being in the labour force. Then,

$$P(U|LF) = \frac{P(N) * P(U|N)}{P(LF)} \quad (1)$$

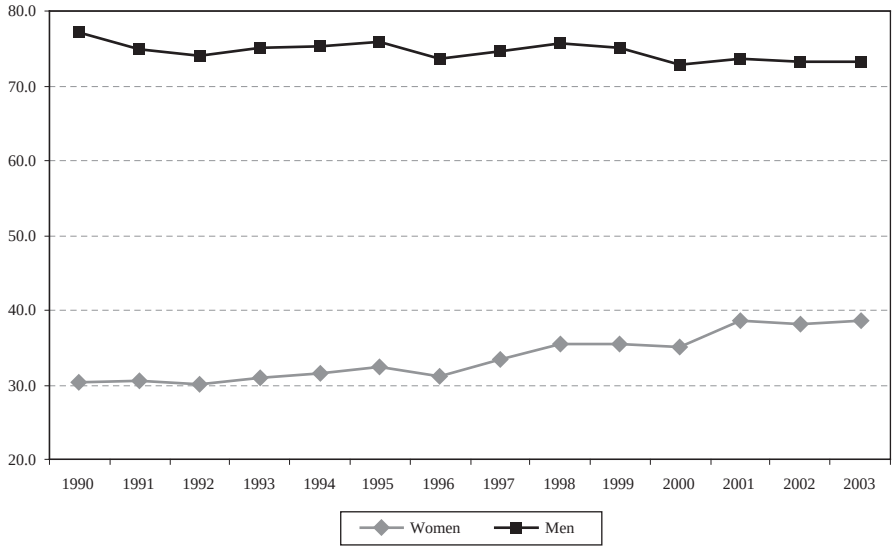
Taking logarithms,

$$\log P(U|LF) = \log P(N) + \log P(U|N) - \log P(LF) \quad (2)$$

Because labour force participation rates are increasing for women and falling for men, we calculate

FIGURE 6

Costa Rica: labour force participation rates by gender, 1990-2003
(Percentages)



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

this decomposition separately for men and women. For women, our calculations indicate that the increase in the unemployment rate between 1994 and 2003 can be attributed entirely to higher labour force participation rates. Indeed, non-employment rates (the proportion of the working-age population either unemployed or not in the labour force) for women actually fell; indicating that if there had been no increase in labour force participation rates, unemployment rates among women would have decreased. For men, the calculations indicate that the increase in unemployment rates is explained by changes in labour demand and increases in the probability of unemployment given non-employment.[6] In summary, the increase in unemployment among members of poor households from 1996 to 2003 was caused, in part, by an increase in labour force participation rates for women.

III

Changes in household structure

In the last section, we identified the following explanations for stagnating poverty from 1996 to 2003 in Costa Rica despite economic growth: an increase both in the proportion of women from poor households working part-time as self-employed workers and in these same women's labour force participation rates which, in turn, caused unemployment rates among members of poor households to rise. In this section, we show that these labour market phenomena are related to changes in the structure of Costa Rican households. The most notable change in this respect is an increase in the proportion of female-headed households, from 18.0% of all households in 1990 to 25.5% in 2003, and the related decline in "traditional" two-parent male-headed households, from 61.6% of all households in 1990 to 49.6% in 2003 (see table 1). The most rapid increase in the proportion of female-headed households occurred during the period when poverty rates stood still despite economic growth (1996-2003): from 20.7% to 25.5% (as opposed to an increase of only 2.7 percentage points from 1990 to 1996). Further, in the 1990s it became increasingly likely that a poor household would be female-headed; the proportion of poor households headed by women rose from 20.4% in 1990 to 33.0% in 2003 (table 1) The proportion of female-headed households among the non-poor also increased in this period, although the jump was smaller (from 17.2% to 23.4%).

In an analysis of the relationship between household structure and poverty, it is important to distinguish female-headed households with children from those without. In the aggregate, female household heads are not necessarily poorer than male household heads. For example, ECLAC (2003) finds no systematic difference in poverty rates for male- and female-headed households in Latin America. Some female-headed households are less likely to be poor than the average household, such as those corresponding to the increasing number of economically independent young women in Latin America, which are reported as female-headed households (ECLAC 2004).[7] On the other hand, poverty rates for female-headed single-parent households are higher than for any other family type in almost all Latin American countries (ECLAC 2004). As we can see from table 1, this is also true in Costa Rica, where poverty rates are highest for this type of household.

The overwhelming majority of female-headed households in Costa Rica are also single-parent households (table 1). The typical female-headed household is a single-parent household (while the typical male-headed household is a two parent household). As

[6] For women, those employed as a percentage of the working-age female population increased from 29% in 1996 to 35% in 2003. The total change in the log of female unemployment rates between 1994 and 2003 was 0.35, of which the contribution of changes in non-employment rates was -0.08, while the contribution of changes related to changes in labour force participation was 0.43, i.e., the first and third of the components mentioned above. For men, the total change in the log of unemployment rates in the same period was 0.52, of which the contribution of changes in non-employment rates was 0.13, the contribution of changes in the probability of being unemployed given non-employment was 0.37, and the contribution of changes in labour force participation rates was 0.02.

[7] Slon and Zúniga (2006), using a panel data set of household heads constructed from the 2000-2002 Costa Rican Multi-purpose Household Survey, find that female-headed households have a lower probability of exiting poverty than male-headed households, and that female-headed non-poor households are more likely to become poor than male-headed ones (after controlling for other factors that affect transitions into and out of poverty).

TABLE 1

Costa Rica: household structure and poverty, 1990, 1996 and 2003
(Percentages)

	1990	1996	2003
Percentage of all households headed by			
Female household heads	*18.0*	*20.7*	*25.5*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	11.0	11.5	13.5
Spouse not present and no children	6.2	7.8	9.2
Spouse present and children up to age 18	0.6	0.9	1.9
Spouse present and no children	0.2	0.4	0.9
Male household heads	*82.0*	*79.3*	*74.5*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	1.7	1.7	1.7
Spouse not present and no children	5.1	5.7	6.8
Spouse present and children up to age 18	61.6	56.6	49.6
Spouse present and no children	13.6	15.3	16.3
Percentage of poor households headed by			
Female household heads	*20.4*	*26.5*	*33.0*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	13.4	16.8	22.5
Spouse not present and no children	6.5	8.1	7.9
Spouse present and children up to age 18	0.3	1.3	1.7
Spouse present and no children	0.1	0.3	0.9
Male household heads	*79.6*	*73.7*	*67.1*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	1.8	1.4	2.0
Spouse not present and no children	2.9	4.4	4.4
Spouse present and children up to age 18	65.2	57.0	50.7
Spouse present and no children	9.2	10.7	9.9
Percentage of poor (poverty rates) for the following households	***27.1***	***21.5***	***18.5***
Female household heads	*30.6*	*27.5*	*24.0*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	32.9	31.5	30.9
Spouse not present and no children	28.3	22.1	16.0
Spouse present and children up to age 18	14.3	29.6	16.1
Spouse present and no children	15.0	14.2	17.1
Male household heads	*26.3*	*20.0*	*16.7*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	28.0	17.9	22.6
Spouse not present and no children	15.6	16.5	11.9
Spouse present and children up to age 18	28.7	21.6	18.9
Spouse present and no children	18.5	15.0	11.2

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

may also be seen in table 1, the proportion of poor households headed by women with children in Costa Rica increased from 13.4% in 1990 to 16.8% in 1996 and 22.5% in 2003. During the period when incomes were growing but poverty was stagnant (1996-2003) female-headed single-parent households were the only type to increase as a proportion of total poverty. The increase in the number of single-mother households in poverty was not due to an increase in poverty rates among such households, which remained steady (and even fell slightly), but rather to an increase in the proportion of such households in the population in general. The proportion of households headed by single mothers increased from 11.5% in 1996 to 13.5% in 2003 (after remaining relatively steady from 1990 to 1996).

The increase in the number of female-headed single-parent households contributed directly to keeping poverty rates stagnant during this period because such households are more likely to be poor than other types of households. This is partly because these female heads of household are more likely than others to earn low wages. Table 2 sets out the characteristics of poor and non-poor female-headed single-parent households. A comparison of female heads of single-parent

TABLE 2

Costa Rica: characteristics of female-headed household with children up to age 18 and spouse not present, by poverty status, 1990, 1996 and 2003
(Percentages)

	Poor households			Non-poor households		
	1990	1996	2003	1990	1996	2003
Age distribution (% of household heads)						
12-29 years old	10.3	8.0	11.2	8.5	8.3	10.1
30-39 years old	29.3	31.2	31.7	29.3	28.5	24.0
40-49 years old	23.7	26.5	30.6	26.8	33.3	39.2
50-64 years old	24.5	21.3	14.2	26.1	20.0	20.6
65 years or older	12.2	13.0	12.3	9.3	9.8	6.0
Percentage living in urban areas	*56.9*	*46.4*	*62.0*	*55.3*	*52.1*	*66.4*
For household heads						
Average years of education	4.3	5.0	5.3	6.7	7.6	8.5
Incomplete secondary school education	94.8	92.7	90.2	76.9	70.5	63.7
Labour force participation rate	41.8	41.8	52.8	57.4	68.3	72.4
Unemployment rate	9.0	12.5	17.0	2.5	3.9	2.9
Percentage unemployed	3.8	5.2	9.0	1.4	2.7	2.1
Percentage employed	38.1	36.6	43.9	56.0	65.6	70.3
Employed household heads working						
Part-time	71.1	58.1	66.9	34.6	36.8	45.7
Full-time (40-48 hours per week)	15.4	14.8	20.4	39.2	36.3	27.1
Over-time	13.6	27.0	12.7	26.1	26.8	27.2
Employed Household Heads Working in						
Self-employment	31.4	49.6	51.8	21.9	19.2	25.4
Wage employment	68.0	50.4	49.2	77.8	80.8	74.4

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

TABLE 3

Costa Rica: characteristics of male household heads, with children up to age 18 and spouse present, by poverty status, 1990, 1996 and 2003
(Percentages)

	Poor households			Non-poor households		
	1990	1996	2003	1990	1996	2003
Age distribution (% of household heads)						
12-29 years old	19.1	11.5	13.2	19.4	18.4	14.0
30-39 years old	37.6	39.5	36.6	38.3	35.3	33.8
40-49 years old	21.4	25.5	27.1	23.6	26.7	32.0
50-64 years old	14.8	15.7	15.3	15.1	15.8	16.9
65 years or older	7.1	7.7	7.8	3.6	3.8	3.3
Percentage living in urban areas	*37.2*	*30.3*	*42.2*	*45.3*	*44.0*	*57.0*
For household heads						
Average years of education	4.9	5.2	5.4	7.7	7.9	8.4
Incomplete secondary school education	93.7	93.1	90.8	69.9	70.8	66.8
Labour force participation rate	89.6	89.4	89.8	94.5	94.7	95.8
Unemployment rate	1.5	3.7	5.6	0.5	1.3	0.6
Percentage unemployed	1.4	3.3	5.1	0.5	1.3	0.6
Percentage employed	88.3	86.2	84.7	94.1	93.4	95.2
Percentage of employed household heads working						
Part-time	36.8	38.2	35.8	20.0	21.3	18.6
Full-time (40-48 hours per week)	32.5	28.7	27.8	40.3	33.5	33.4
Over-time	30.7	33.1	36.4	39.7	45.2	48.0
Percentage employed household heads working in						
Self-employment	36.0	38.2	42.7	26.4	30.6	30.9
Waged employment	63.6	61.8	57.2	73.5	69.3	69.0

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

households with male heads of "traditional" two-parent households (table 3) shows that female household heads are more likely to be unemployed, work part-time or be self-employed: labour market phenomena that we have identified as causes of the increase in inequality and standstill in poverty in the 1996-2003 period. Compared to non-poor female household heads, poor women heading households are more likely to participate in the labour force, have higher levels of unemployment, work part-time or be self-employed (table 2).

Further, between 1996 and 2003 (when poverty rates stagnated despite economic growth) labour force participation, unemployment, part-time work and self-employment become more prevalent in poor female-headed households. For example, table 4 shows that, among the poor, almost all new female labour force participants came from female-headed single-parent households; the proportion of poor female workers living in this type of household increased from 36.4% in 1990 to 48.3% in 2003 (while the proportion of poor female workers living in male-headed households and in female-headed households without children decreased). In addition, from 1996 to 2003 the proportion of poor single female household heads with children who worked part time increased from 58.1% to 66.9%, the proportion working as self-employed increased from 49.6% to 51.8%, those unemployed increased from 5.2% to 9.0%, and their labour force participation increased from 41.8% to 52.8% (table 2). Conversely, during the same period, among male-headed two-parent households labour force participation rates and the proportion working part-time fell. While rates of unemployment and self-employment rose among male household heads of two parent families, the increase was not as great as among female-headed single-parent households, as seen when comparing tables 2 and 3. The proportion of female heads of non-poor households working part-time also increased between 1996 and 2003 (from 36.8% to 45.7%), as did the proportion working as self-employed (from 19.2% to over 25.4%), while unemployment rates for this group decreased from 2.7% to 2.1% (table 2).[8]

In summary, the evidence suggests that the increase in the proportion of female-headed single-parent households can help explain the phenomena observed in the labour market (higher rates of labour force participation, higher unemployment rates and larger numbers of self-employed workers) which, in turn, contributed to stagnating poverty rates and higher earnings inequality in Costa Rica. Unfortunately, the Multi-purpose Household Surveys do not allow the researcher to identify the underlying sociological causes of the increase in female-headed single-parent households. For example, we cannot tell whether these are women who have never been married, were married but have been divorced or widowed, or who have lived in consensual unions but no longer have another adult living in the household. This is an important focus for future research.

[8] The proportion of female-headed households without children also increased from 1987 to 2004 (although at a slower rate than the increase in female-headed single-parent households). These women are usually older and less likely to be labour market participants than female household heads with children and male household heads of "traditional" two-parent families; more than 65% are aged 65 years or older, while less than 10% are labour force participants. This suggests that these are older women who do not have access to the pensions of a spouse. Unfortunately, the household surveys do not allow us to identify whether these are women who were never married, who have divorced, or whose husbands have died. From 1996 to 2003 there was also an increase in the proportion of married women in male-headed households who entered the labour force. In this same period an increasing percentage of married women from poor households with children also entered the labour force (the proportion increased from 11.5% to 13.5%). For married women from poor households, both employment rates and unemployment rates (as a percentage of the population) increased. Among employed married women from poor households, there was an increase in those working part-time or self-employed. The increase in the proportion of households with working married women can help explain the increase in part-time and self-employed workers, but not the stagnating poverty rate, because a household with two earners generally has a lower probability of being poor. Indeed, there is some evidence that the increase in the labour force participation rates of married women in two-parent households translated into a decrease in poverty, since the proportion of households with two working spouses in Costa Rica increased more among non-poor households than among poor ones (the proportion of poor male-headed households with an employed spouse increased from 6.7% in 1996 to 12.8% in 2003, while that of non-poor male-headed households with an employed spouse increased from 24.4% in 1996 to 32.2% in 2003).

TABLE 4

Costa Rica: household structure and labour force participation of women living in poor households, 1990, 1996 and 2003

(Percentage of the female labour force living in each type of household)

	Poor households		
	1990	1996	2003
Female household heads	*42.6*	*50.3*	*54.4*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	36.4	40.8	48.3
Spouse not present and no children	5.3	5.1	2.9
Spouse present and children up to age 18	0.7	3.9	2.6
Spouse present and no children	0.2	0.5	0.6
Male household heads	*57.4*	*49.7*	*45.6*
Spouse not present and children up to age 18	1.7	1.1	1.5
Spouse not present and no children	0.1	0.0	0.4
Spouse present and children up to age 18	52.0	46.6	39.9
Spouse present and no children	3.6	2.1	3.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Multi-purpose Household Survey, 1990-2003.

V

Conclusions and policy implications

The period when poverty rates stagnated in Costa Rica despite growing average real earnings and incomes coincided with a large increase in the proportion of households headed by women, and an even larger increase in the proportion of poor female-headed single-parent households. Because single-parent households headed by women are more likely to be poor than any other type, the increase in the proportion of that type of household alone was enough to push up poverty rates. The evidence also supports the supposition that these women, as new entrants to the labour force, were unable to find or unwilling to accept full-time work in the higher-paying formal sector, and ended up unemployed or working part-time as self-employed workers. These labour market phenomena, in turn, contributed to increased inequality, higher unemployment and low incomes for households vulnerable to poverty.

The findings here suggest that many poor mothers in Costa Rica have sole responsibility for childcare, which may make it difficult to work standard working hours in the formal sector. Policies that would help those women to obtain and keep full-time work in the higher-paying formal sector could contribute to reducing poverty rates in Costa Rica. Expanding access to childcare for poor families during normal working hours would make it easier for poor single mothers to obtain well-paid full-time work. Public policies to expand access to childcare might include: increasing subsidies to poor families for childcare, providing after- and before-school childcare programmes in schools, and subsidies to private firms for the provision of day care facilities at the workplace.

Trejos (2006) describes existing programmes in this area in Costa Rica, such as the Ministry of Health's *Centros Infantiles* ("Child Centres") scheme and the programme run by the Joint Institute for Social Aid (IMAS) known as *Oportunidades de Atención a la Niñez* ("Childcare opportunities"). He makes the point, however, that the existing programmes cover a very small proportion of the poor families who need childcare services and that the already small amount of spending on these programmes has actually been falling since 2000. Also, these programmes are only for preschool-aged children. For school-aged children, the Ministry of Education runs programmes that help families to keep children in school, such as free lunches and financial aid for transport, uniforms, supplies, and so on. However, there are no before- and after-school

childcare programmes for children above preschool age. This limits mothers' work options, because many public schools in Costa Rica have two sessions per day and a child may thus be in school only in the morning or only in the afternoon, and will require childcare for the other half of the working day.

Our results suggest that Costa Rica should reduce the legal barriers faced by women who would like to work non-standard work hours. For example, current Costa Rican legislation limits employers' ability to employ women at night, which may force women interested in part-time or night work into the lower paying informal sector.

Lastly, our findings suggest that the Costa Rican government should enact policies to provide single mothers with the training and other resources they need to find and keep well-paid employment. Poor female heads of single-parent households have very low levels of skills compared to other Costa Rican workers; thus, programmes designed to address that lack could help to reduce poverty in the country. One such set of policies would make it easier for women (particularly younger women with children) to complete more years of formal education. Another set of policies would provide training for adult single mothers. The Costa Rican government currently has non-targeted training programmes that include those run through the National Apprenticeship Institute (INA), the Agricultural Development Institute (IDA) and the National Production Council (CNP). In addition, the Joint Institute for Social Aid administers training programmes directed towards the poor (especially female heads of household). Our results suggest the government should expand this type of programme aimed at providing training for poor women.

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