Vulnerable or Poor? A Study of Ethnic and Gender Disadvantage Among Afro-Caribbeans in Limón, Costa Rica

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Drawing on recent debates on poverty which have stressed the non-economic and dynamic elements of disadvantage, this article explores the concept of vulnerability with reference to Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica. The argument focuses on how this group have made impressive inroads in overcoming socio-economic inequalities, yet remain racially disadvantaged in gender-differentiated ways. This relates primarily to labour vulnerability through their occupational entrenchment in ethnic and gender niches. While Afro-Caribbeans, and women in particular, are often employed in relatively privileged segments of the labour market, they are constrained by their lack of occupational mobility. At a broader level, this is compounded by their sense of powerlessness within the national polity. The article suggests that the concept of vulnerability may be useful in other contexts. First, in assessing more intangible elements of disadvantage; second, in examining the evolution of ethnic and gender relations over time, and finally, in contributing to debates on the effects of structural adjustment policies on ethnic groups.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, people of African descent have increasingly been recognised as central to the evolution of many Latin American societies [*Sarduy and Stubbs, 1995*]. While research on race and ethnicity in Latin America still tends to be dominated by studies of indigenous Indian groups, the profile of Afro-Latin Americans has been raised substantially. None the less, much work

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The European Journal of Development Research, Vol.9, No.2, December 1997, pp.35–61
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

has been historical in focus, and concentrated on countries with large Afro-Latin American populations. Much remains to be explored about the contemporary situation of these groups both in general [*Davis, 1995*], and within smaller nations, such as those in Central America. This article seeks to redress this neglect through an examination of the position of Afro-Caribbeans in the city of Limón, Costa Rica. Conceptually, it draws on recent debates on poverty which have seen a shift away from definitions based on income or consumption towards a recognition of more intangible, non-economic and dynamic elements. Central to this has been research on the concept of vulnerability, which allows analysis of certain segments of society who may not be defined as poor in income terms, but suffer other forms of disadvantage or exclusion [*Chambers, 1989; Moser, 1996*]. While this has included cognisance of gender differences in experiences of poverty and vulnerability [*Jackson, 1996; Kabeer, 1996*], there has been little discussion thus far in relation to ethnicity. The aim here, therefore, is to explore the concept of vulnerability with reference to primary case study material on one particular ethnic group in Costa Rica, addressing both racial and gender dimensions of disadvantage.[1]

More specifically, the article maintains that recent analyses of vulnerability, which encompass more subjective elements of well-being, such as self-respect, exposure to risks, and insecurity, provide considerable potential for a more accurate portrayal of the experiences of Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica. The underlying argument stresses how while Afro-Caribbeans have made impressive inroads in overcoming socio-economic inequalities, they have been racially disadvantaged over time in terms of their vulnerability, and in gender-differentiated ways. While the discussion considers the complexity of the term vulnerability, the focus is on labour vulnerability. This relates to how Afro-Caribbeans are often employed in relatively privileged segments of the labour market, which for women is particularly significant given the usual assumption that ethnic minority women are located in the lower echelons of the economy. However, this group remains vulnerable because their entrenchment within these niches prevents any occupational mobility. Having said this, Afro-Caribbeans have constantly negotiated and resisted disadvantage, being at once included and excluded from the national polity.

Throughout the article, I have chosen to refer to those of Caribbean origin in Limón as 'Afro-Caribbeans' rather than 'Afro-Latin Americans' or 'Afro-Creoles', although perhaps the most accurate terminology would be Afro-Costa Rican or Afro-Limonense [*Sawyers Royal and Perry, 1995*]. My chosen term is to stress the greater cultural empathy of this group with the Caribbean region, rather than with Africa. In addition, the term white/*mestizo* refers to those of direct Spanish descent, or of mixed Spanish and indigenous Indian heritage. These definitions are not unproblematic but are used for

heuristic purposes. Indeed, in Costa Rica, as elsewhere in Latin America, classification of ethnic groupings remains a minefield, partly because ethnicity has not been included in the census since 1950, and because racial boundaries are inherently fluid [*Monge Oviedo, 1992*].

URBAN POVERTY AND VULNERABILITY: CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

At the outset it is important to stress that the meaning of poverty is highly contested. Broadly speaking, it is often used interchangeably to denote the broad spectrum of deprivation, ill-being and disadvantage [*Baulch, 1996*]. While the term vulnerability is often conflated with poverty, the aim of the current section is to highlight how when deconstructed the two concepts are distinct, and to assess how vulnerability can be used in analyses of ethnicity. Emerging from criticisms of the technical definition of poverty as income or consumption, the concept of vulnerability has evolved in an attempt to encompass more subjective elements of deprivation. While poverty line methodologies have been improved (see, for example, the capability poverty measure developed by the UNDP [*1996*]), problems of setting value-laden and arbitrary standards continue to undermine their applicability [*Wratten, 1995*]. In turn, it has increasingly been realized that the relationship between income or consumption level and other forms of deprivation such as environmental risks, crime, violence, or social exclusion, is often weak [*UNCHS, 1996: 108–9*]. In other words, someone may be living above the poverty line, yet experience extreme forms of vulnerability through other means.

Underlying this more sophisticated understanding of the constitution of poverty is the issue of entitlements and capabilities, which draws upon research on food security and famines in rural areas [*Drèze and Sen, 1989; Sen, 1981*]. This has involved recognizing not only how the poor obtain resources, but also how they command them through the use of entitlements in order to withstand short-term shocks and longer-term trends. The key to this approach has been to emphasise the importance of access to a range of entitlements such as wage labour, food, social security claims, assets and so on. Those with recourse to entitlements during times of crisis are often more able to guard against deprivation [*Amis and Rakodi, 1994*]. Within this framework, the issue of 'trade-offs' between vulnerability and income also needs to be considered; while borrowing money or receiving credit may increase income and reduce poverty in the short term, it may increase vulnerability in terms of indebtedness in the longer-run [*Chambers, 1987*]. However, such coping mechanisms also depend on the types of resources available and their cultural meaning. In different contexts, for example, resources may not be equally valued by all people, which in the current case,

may be mediated by ethnicity. Overall, this research on rural areas has been increasingly incorporated within analyses of urban poverty, both in response to conceptual developments, as well as the realization that urban poverty is intensifying *vis-à-vis* rural [*Wratten, 1995*].

In a recent study of vulnerability in the urban context, Caroline Moser [*1996*] explores the nature of the concept in the context of economic recession in Ecuador, the Philippines, Zambia and Hungary [cf. *Moser, 1997; Moser and Holland, 1997; Moser and McIlwaine, 1997a; 1997b*]. Moser [*1996: 23*] assesses the differences between poverty and vulnerability, highlighting how the former is usually conceived as a static concept, whereas the latter is more dynamic. It also encompasses matters such as survival, defencelessness, dignity, security and self-respect [*Chambers, 1989: 1*]. Despite relevant charges that it is extremely difficult to quantify or measure vulnerability [*Baulch, 1996*], Moser identifies some broad definitions of the term. Of most interest here are that, first, changes which undermine welfare may be social, economic, political or ecological in nature and occur in both the short- and long-run; second, that analysis of vulnerability requires not only identification of threats, but also the ability to withstand and recover from adverse changes; third, that resistance strategies through which vulnerability may be averted relate to the strength of asset ownership [*Moser, 1996: 24*]. In this instance, assets are defined as labour, human capital, productive assets (such as land and housing), household relations (focusing on income pooling and consumption sharing), and social capital (referring to the capacity to make claims at the inter-household level within communities based on social ties) [*ibid.*]. The dynamic of vulnerability rests, therefore, on the strategies adopted by the poor to withstand shocks through diversifying and mobilizing their asset base.

While certainly not all aspects of this framework are relevant for the analysis of ethnicity, a number of issues are pertinent. These include the ways in which disadvantage is influenced by various factors beyond income. In terms of asset ownership, for example, an ethnic minority group may be able to acquire certain economic assets through using their labour, yet lack access to others, such as social capital, which might help them guard against vulnerability in the longer run. For example, this may be through access to business networks which are denied them on grounds of their ethnic identity. This relates to issues of power and exclusion/ inclusion which extend beyond Moser's framework, and which are perhaps most relevant in discussions of ethnicity. In this sense, certain ethnic groups may not experience poverty in terms of inadequate income or access to basic needs, but may be viewed as vulnerable with respect to political and social legitimacy [*UNCHS, 1996: 116*]. Thus at a broader level, ethnic groups may be at once incorporated into society through national rhetoric, yet also excluded in reality through lack of access to political and social power.

While Latin America comprises a 'complexity of ethnicities', the examination of race relations in the continent is characterized by 'ambivalence and tension' [*Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996: 31*]. The much denigrated notion of 'racial democracy' has in the past, created the idea that ethnicity and race do not serve as barriers to mobility in society, suggesting that racism is virtually absent [*Wade, 1986*]. Reformulations of this, however, have illustrated how this democracy is based on 'whitening' or '*blanqueamiento*', which in turn devalorises blackness and incorporates racism. While these ideas have been associated with populations of African descent, particularly in Brazil and to a lesser extent Colombia, the process of '*mestizaje*' or mixing, has played a similar role among indigenous populations [*Whitten and Torres, 1992*].

The upshot of this is that ethnic groups are perceived to be incorporated into society through public discourses, yet in reality, they may suffer economic, social and cultural exclusion. This has led to highly contradictory situations among ethnic groups in their relation to wider society. Among black populations, for example, Wade [*1995: 7*] has noted for Colombia that 'the double dynamic of black adaptation and autonomy works in tandem with a double dynamic of nonblack conditional acceptance and racism', with tolerance and discrimination going hand-in-hand. Similarly, Agier [*1995: 252*] discusses how racism in Bahia, Brazil 'does not have a form of exclusion and segregation, but rather a diffused and unconfessed form of integration and domination'. In this sense, these groups may experience vulnerability derived from their equivocal inclusion/exclusion regardless of their socio-economic status. Finally, it is also essential to stress that these processes are heavily gendered, with ethnic disadvantage intersecting with gender inequalities in a myriad of ways [*McIlwaine, 1995*]. The remainder of the paper therefore discusses ethnic and gender dimensions of vulnerability among Afro-Caribbean men and women in Costa Rica.

ETHNICITY, POVERTY AND VULNERABILITY IN COSTA RICA

Turning to Costa Rica, the country as a whole is a largely *mestizo* society, with indigenous groups making-up only one per cent of the population, and Afro-Caribbeans constituting around two per cent [*Lara et al, 1995: xiv*].[2] However, while the latter constitute a small minority of the national population, they are overwhelmingly concentrated in the province and city of Limón, the latter being one of the country's largest cities and the major Atlantic port. Although this group constitutes one-third of the regional and urban population, Limón is consistently referred to as the province of '*los negros*' (the blacks). Furthermore, the significance of this population is heightened when viewed from the perspective of Central America as a whole.

The province of Limón forms part of a wider cultural belt which transcends six national borders from Guatemala to Panama. These areas share similar characteristics in that all have been, or still are, enclave economies based on the export of primary products, and all reflect an ethnic diversity not present in the rest of the national territory [*Duncan, 1989: 13*]. While the relationship between disadvantage and ethnicity in Costa Rica is rarely explicitly referred to, the continual identification of Limón as one of the most neglected provinces of the country tends to reinforce this association [*Smith and Murillo, 1989*].[3] Indeed, Limón's position as an economically 'lagging' province, coupled with the concentration of the Afro-Caribbean population in the area, has led to a 'regionalization' of race which reflects a stereotyped image of black backwardness and *mestizo* economic dynamism (see also Wade [*1995*] on Colombia).

This implicit recognition of disadvantage among Afro-Caribbeans has received attention recently as wider issues of poverty and vulnerability have become central concerns of the Costa Rican state. This concern has been linked with the realisation that economic recession since the 1980s, and the implementation of structural adjustment policies since 1985 (with subsequent packages again in 1989 and 1995), has led to increased levels of impoverishment and social polarisation [*Reuben Soto, 1995*]. While the government's commitment to social development between 1950 and 1980 resulted in widespread reduction in levels of poverty from 50 per cent in 1950 to 25 per cent in 1977 [*Lara et al., 1995: 63*], the 1980s saw an increase to between 31 per cent and 38 per cent of all households unable to meet their basic subsistence needs in 1994 [*Presidencia de la República, 1996: 15*]. In the context of cutbacks in state expenditure and the dramatic paring-down of the welfare state, the government has responded by directing funds to compensatory programmes aimed at those worst affected by recession. Since 1994, poverty reduction and social assistance strategies have been encompassed in the National Plan to Combat Poverty (*Plan Nacional de Combate a la Pobreza*) instituted in 1994 by the Figueres administration (1994–98). While ethnicity is not specifically mentioned, the problems of Limón are recognized through the plan's focus on 16 communities (nine rural and seven urban), which have been identified as those suffering from high levels of 'social vulnerability', one of which is in the city of Limón (Limoncito – a settlement included in the current research).

While the plan is significant in recognising the problems of Limón, it is also important from a conceptual point of view in recognizing notions of vulnerability and social exclusion [*Romero, 1996*]. Also of relevance to Limón, is a recent study under the auspices of the UNDP on social exclusion in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala [*Menjívar and Feliciani, 1995*]. In attempting to develop indices of social exclusion based on a range of direct and

indirect indicators, the Huetar Atlántica region of Costa Rica (comprising the province and city of Limón) fared badly, reflecting the second worst set of conditions out of the six regions in the country. Of particular interest here, was that in terms of income and consumption poverty measures, the Huetar Atlántica did well, with the second highest index after the Central region. However, when the more subjective elements, such as ethnic/linguistic discrimination and social abandonment were taken into account, levels of exclusion were among the highest in the country [*ibid.: 76–86*]. Taking the lead from such findings, the discussion now turns to explore in greater depth various dimensions of vulnerability in relation to ethnicity in Limón.

HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY AMONG AFRO-CARIBBEANS IN LIMÓN

The cultural milieu common to the entire 'black atlantic' region of Latin America whereby different cultures and identities 'jostle between asserting an absolutist sense of difference and recognizing an awareness of the double consciousness of trying to face [at least] two ways at once' [*Sarduy and Stubbs, 1995: 7*], has particular resonance in Limón. Only through historical analysis is it possible to assess the contemporary situation of Afro-Latin Americans in Limón (and elsewhere), in order to elucidate the reasons for their presence on the continent in the first place, as well as unravel the evolution of race and ethnic relations. Moreover, given the inherent fluidity of the concept of vulnerability itself, an historical perspective is also necessary to see how the relative position of Afro-Caribbeans has changed over time. However, as will become apparent, the specific nature of their incorporation into Costa Rican society has led to varying levels and types of vulnerability at different historical junctures.

Developing as the apex of an enclave economy largely dependent on banana cultivation, Limón was established and grew in response first, to the demands of railway construction from the centre of the country to the Atlantic coast as a transport route for coffee, and second, to the needs of the United Fruit Company, both occurring before the turn of the twentieth century. Although railway construction began in 1874, under direction of an Englishman, Minor C. Keith, it was not completed until 19 years later, hampered in the early stages by labour shortages. While initially, Keith recruited Italian, Irish and Central Americans to work on the railway, they were unable to withstand the harsh working conditions. Consequently, first Chinese and then Afro-Caribbean labour (mainly from Jamaica) was recruited [*Duncan and Powell, 1988*]. It was ultimately young, male Afro-Caribbeans who proved most adaptable to the quasi-slavery working conditions on the railway, notwithstanding that many also died in the process. This period

therefore saw the arrival of Afro-Caribbeans to the region, during which time they suffered extreme deprivation through physical and material hardship, with few having secure work contracts and all receiving low pay [*Echeverri-Gent, 1992*].

The introduction of banana cultivation into the region brought economic, social and demographic diversification. Initiated by Keith on land granted by the government, banana production through his company became so successful that it merged with the Boston Fruit Company in 1899 to form the United Fruit Company. However, this success was also dependent on the continued recruitment of Afro-Caribbean migrant labour, again comprising young, single males whose intentions were always to return to Jamaica. However, Afro-Caribbeans were soon to become a more permanent population in Limón, largely due to the arrival of women and the fact that few could afford to return to the Caribbean. In the case of the former, migration was mainly prompted by a desire to join family members, although some moved in response to employment opportunities largely in domestic service created by American managers of United Fruit. Although the advent of United Fruit brought improved material conditions *vis-à-vis* the days of railway construction, this soon gave way to other forms of deprivation.

Until the 1940s the province and city of Limón developed under complete control of United Fruit who effectively acted as a *de facto* state in the area. Not only did it control the banana plantations and the railway, but the company also provided housing, schools, and hospitals. On a positive note, Afro-Caribbeans enjoyed a relatively privileged position as employees of a paternalistic company who met all their basic material needs. At an ideological level, forming the majority group in the region at the time, and being geographically isolated from wider Costa Rican society, Afro-Caribbeans were shielded from blatantly racist discourses which prevailed in national attitudes and legislation [*McIlwaine, 1993: Ch. 3*]. In turn, this group nurtured their own cultural identity, feeling superior as a result. This identity was manifested through the maintenance of various traditions such as the British/Jamaican education system, architectural styles, food and sport such as cricket. Feelings of superiority were reinforced by their pride in their status as citizens of the British Empire, and their ability to colonize the area when Costa Ricans could not [*Purcell, 1987*]. During this period, therefore, the experience of vulnerability was equivocal. On the one hand, Afro-Caribbeans were protected through their cultural traditions, yet on the other, they were completely dependent on United Fruit for their livelihood.

With the increased migration of white/*mestizo* Costa Ricans to Limón in the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the precarious balance of Afro-Caribbean well-being was disturbed through ethnic conflict. The roots lay in what white/*mestizos* regarded as the preferential treatment of

Afro-Caribbeans within the Company who tended to be employed in higher status, middle-ranking positions as supervisors, timekeepers and clerks, while they were consigned to jobs as farm labourers. While this was based mainly on linguistic advantage, as well as Afro-Caribbeans' prior experience in plantation agriculture in Jamaica, white/*mestizos* regarded this as an affront to prevailing notions of white superiority propagated by the Costa Rican state. This era also marked a nascent awareness among Afro-Caribbeans of their situation partly through the influence of Marcus Garvey, who established a branch of his Universal Negro Improvement Association during his employment as a timekeeper with United Fruit in the 1920s. Although the company prohibited UNIA membership or activity, Afro-Caribbeans began to assert themselves in a clandestine manner, manifested in their refusal to participate in strikes organised by white/*mestizos* [*Purcell, 1985*]. While they actively resisted domination, the incorporation of Afro-Caribbeans into the national polity, brought increased vulnerability.

The period between 1936 and 1942, placed Afro-Caribbeans at their most vulnerable in response to a 'short-term shock'. Beset with labour problems, and the destruction of produce due to banana disease, United Fruit withdrew from Limón and transferred its operations to the Pacific coast leaving behind only a skeletal infrastructure. While the company had also intended to transfer its workforce, state policies explicitly prohibited the movement of Afro-Caribbeans outside the regional boundary of Limón on the grounds that this would 'upset the racial pattern of the country and possibly cause civil commotion' (May and Plaza, cited in Olien [*1977: 145*]). The responses to this were varied; those who could afford it, returned to Jamaica; some, mainly men, migrated to the Panama Canal and the United States; others remained in the area to eke out a living from subsistence agriculture, small-scale trading or whatever jobs remained in the port. While this period represented a return to a situation of poverty in income terms for many Afro-Caribbeans, as well as a sense of powerlessness in face of discriminatory state policies, it also heralded the ability of this group to resist vulnerability through international migration (see below).

From 1950 onwards, Afro-Caribbeans in general were able to recover to a certain extent. Not only was full citizenship granted in 1949, as recognition to those Afro-Caribbeans who fought in the 1948 Revolution on the side of the victorious liberals, but the government enacted a series of reforms in an attempt to re-activate banana cultivation in the region. Besides encouraging transnational companies to invest in banana plantations, the transport system was nationalized, an oil refinery was built and various de-centralised government institutions were created. While this renewed economic activity provided new sources of livelihood for Afro-Caribbeans (and white/*mestizos*), it also involved the wholesale reassertion of state control over the region. This

in turn, has arguably led to new forms of vulnerability among the black population who, by the middle of the century, had been transformed from a majority to a minority group. As Costa Rican citizens, Afro-Caribbeans had an assured status in the country, thus reducing their legal/institutional vulnerability through the security of citizenship. On the other hand, they now formed a small minority in wider society, which created other forms of vulnerability through social exclusion as they coped with their incorporation into a white/*mestizo* dominated nation.

From an historical perspective, vulnerability was experienced in a number of forms; through harsh working conditions and low wages in the early days of railway construction, through economic insecurity due to dependence on one source of employment in the form of United Fruit, and through racism on the part of the Costa Rican state linked with their legal and social exclusion as a disenfranchized people after the withdrawal of the company.

CONTEMPORARY DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY AMONG AFRO-CARIBBEANS IN LIMÓN

Bearing in mind the highly dynamic and often contradictory nature of vulnerability among Afro-Caribbeans over time, the discussion of contemporary patterns focuses primarily on the experiences of this group in the labour market. Besides examination of employment divisions and occupational mobility, this section considers international migration patterns and household arrangements which are also fundamental in understanding vulnerability in the area. In establishing that Afro-Caribbeans have managed to accumulate a relatively high degree of assets or claims, particularly in financial terms, the discussion considers how vulnerability remains through other less tangible constraints, and also how these have been challenged.

The Contemporary Regional and Urban Economy

As one of the main banana producing areas in Costa Rica which is the second highest exporter of bananas in the world [*Lara et al., 1995*], the regional economy of Limón has remained an enclave, agro-export banana economy centring around the city itself which has continued to act as a service centre and port. While the primary functions of the city have remained unchanged over time, ownership has shifted from United Fruit to the Costa Rican state. Despite the rhetoric to promote integrated development in Limón, it has been argued that the state has merely 'invaded' the region to meet its own ends. Indeed, Carvajal [*1989: 72*] has suggested that government initiatives have effectively replaced the dependent relationship initiated by United Fruit. This dependence on the state, however, has been a double-edged sword in the context of structural adjustment policies. Although the government has

continued to invest in banana cultivation in the region as part of the pursuit of export-led growth strategies, attempts to pare down the state through reductions in public sector employment, as well as privatisation of state-owned enterprises, has had particularly adverse effects on the urban labour market where the state is one of the largest employers (see below).

Puerto Limón itself has developed as the nexus of public sector employment in the region, vanguarded by the nationalisation of the port and railway in the 1960s and the creation of JAPDEVA, the port administration authority. The state consolidated its influence over the local economy in the 1970s through the establishment of RECOPE, the national oil refinery, ICE, the Institute of Electricity, and the CCSS, the Ministry of Social Security. By 1990, these public sector enterprises dominated the labour market, with JAPDEVA being the largest employer in the city (see Table 1).[4] Alongside these, the private sector also figured strongly, with cargo handling firms, contracted by JAPDEVA, being the most important. However, the manufacturing sector has also burgeoned revolving around the production of cardboard boxes for banana shipment, with other important enterprises involved in food and drink processing, and furniture and wood manufacture (Table 1). As the regional capital, Limón also has a large tertiary sector comprising shops, restaurants, and hotels. While this refers to the formal labour market, there is also an extensive informal economy involving home-based commercial enterprises, such as *pulperías* (grocery shops), as well childminding, laundry work and street vending [*McIlwaine, 1993: Chs. 4 and 5*].

Another pertinent point in relation to Limon's labour market is the maintenance of higher than average wage levels than the rest of Costa Rica outside the central metropolitan region [*MIDEPLAN, 1990*]. This is partly related to the precedent set by United Fruit who paid salaries first in US dollars, and then in *colones* at a higher rate than elsewhere in the country. These standards were maintained over time as other multinational enterprises in the region replaced United Fruit. Perhaps most importantly, however, has been the role of strong trade union activity in ensuring high wages through collective bargaining agreements negotiated by the powerful Union of Port and Railway Workers (*Sindicato de Trabajadores Portuarios y Ferrocarrileros de Limón* – STPFL). In particular, average wages in cargo handling enterprises have remained high, where in 1990, *estibadores* (stevedores) could earn more than doctors and lawyers [*McIlwaine, 1993: 96*]. At the same time, however, this situation should be qualified as employment in the cargo sector is highly unstable, and based on a large temporary workforce (see Table 1).

Furthermore, rates of un- and underemployment in the labour market as a whole are higher than the national average [*Carvajal, 1989: 76*]. More recent changes have exacerbated this further, through the closure of the railway (INCOFER) with a view to re-establish it as a private company, and the

opening-up of the port cargo handling system to competition in 1995. The latter has involved the rupture of a monopoly of three stevedore firms with prices for handling cargo fixed by the port authority, being replaced by a total of 15 enterprises employing fewer stevedores at much lower wages. As a result, unemployment has soared in the city, and real wages have declined. In turn, the power of the unions has been significantly undermined, a pattern prevalent throughout Costa Rica [*Valverde et al, 1994*]. This has particularly affected the Afro-Caribbean population, who have traditionally been employed in the railway and port (see below).

TABLE 1
EMPLOYMENT STRUCTURE OF LIMÓN

Type of firm	Total no. of employees		Percentage of women employed	Percentage of Afro- Caribbeans employed
	Permanent	Temporary		
PUBLIC SECTOR				
Port and transport				
JAPDEVA	1,325	150	15.1% (220)	40%
INCOFER	680		2.4% (16)	43%
Industry				
RECOPE	350	220	9.1% (32)	23%
Services				
CCSS/hospital	502	70	70.0% (352)	50%
Institute of Electricity	230	3	4.3% (10)	30%
PRIVATE SECTOR				
Port and transport				
ESTIBA	475	325	0.8% (4)	50%
CADESA	285	95	1.4% (4)	50%
COOPEUTBA	250	400	2.8% (7)	50%
BANDECO	112	20	5.4% (6)	30%
COOPELIMON	45		26.6% (12)	15%
Industry				
Cardboard box factory	230		3.0% (3)	12%
Cardboard box factory	150		1.3% (2)	40%
Drinks processing	90		4.4% (4)	12%
Plywood factory	105		2.9% (3)	50%
Commerce				
Supermarket	110		37.2% (41)	15%
Book/stationary shop	8		62.3% (5)	0%
Restaurant	11		81.8% (9)	0%
Total	4,957	1,283	14.8% (733)	30%

Notes: The definition of Afro-Caribbean origin is based on the perceptions of the personnel managers interviewed.
Source: Employer survey, Limón, 1990.

Socio-economic Circumstances of Afro-Caribbeans

Before looking at labour vulnerability, it is important to outline the socio-economic situation of Afro-Caribbeans compared with white/*mestizos* in order to assess levels of well-being defined in terms of income and education levels. The analysis is based on 80 Afro-Caribbean and 170 white/*mestizo* households, drawn from a household survey in low-income communities in 1990.[5] Of these households, 74.8 per cent were headed by men, compared with 24.8 per cent by women. Ethnic differences were marked, with more than one-third of Afro-Caribbean households headed by women (36.9 per cent), compared with less than one-fifth of white/*mestizo* families (19.4 per cent). Broadly assessing patterns of earnings, household income and educational levels, it appears that Afro-Caribbeans are more privileged than white/*mestizos* in a narrow sense of material advantage.

With respect to earnings among heads and spouses, there was little difference between the ethnic groups in broad terms. However, examination of occupational and gender divisions revealed that Afro-Caribbeans had the edge over white/*mestizos*. Most notable was that Afro-Caribbean women earned substantially more than their white/*mestizo* counterparts (4,788 *colones* – US$56.3 per week compared with 3,810 or US$44.8).[6] This is largely related to occupational differences among women from different ethnic groups, with the former more likely to be employed in professional jobs such as nursing and teaching (see below). Furthermore, Afro-Caribbean men, who were concentrated in transport sectors, received 6,181 *colones* (US$72.7) per month compared with 5,557 (US$65.3) among their white/*mestizo* co-workers who predominated in factory work. Similar patterns prevailed with regards to total household incomes, although the variations were even more marked in favour of Afro-Caribbeans. For example, incomes within Afro-Caribbean households averaged 8,012 *colones* (US$94.3), compared with only 6,860 (US$80.7) in white/*mestizo* units. In general, these variations can be accounted for by higher levels of labour force participation among Afro-Caribbean women, compounded by their higher earnings. Also important was the receipt of non-earned income which was considerably more extensive than among white/*mestizos* (57.1 per cent of the former received additional income compared with 35.6 per cent of the latter). Moreover, the bulk of the non-earned income received by Afro-Caribbeans was in the form of remittances from abroad (70 per cent), mainly from relatives/partners working in the United States (see below).

The most prominent ethnic differences were in education levels, with significantly higher attainment among Afro-Caribbeans. Although this obtains for both men and women, it is Afro-Caribbean women in particular who stand out as especially well-educated. This is reflected in the fact that almost

one-fifth of female heads and spouses from this group had some form of higher education compared with only 3.3 per cent of white/*mestizo* women. Similar differentials are evidenced at secondary levels with over one-third of black women having attended and/or completed high school, compared with only 19.6 per cent of the white population (see Ellis [*1986*]; McKenzie [*1986*] on the Caribbean). Indeed, while the value of education was espoused by both groups, Afro-Caribbeans put much greater weight on educating their children, often sending them both to state schools, as well as private tutors where teaching is conducted in English (see Higginbottom and Weber [*1992*] on the United States). Overall, Afro-Caribbeans have considerably more resources or assets in terms of income and human capital than white/*mestizos*. This does not, however, mean that they are less vulnerable.

Ethnicity and Occupational Segmentation and Segregation

The vulnerability of Afro-Caribbeans is intricately bound up with their position in the labour market. While the assets of this group has ensured their incorporation into the labour market at relatively high levels, analysis of labour market patterns demonstrates disadvantage in more subtle ways. Most important is the inability of this group to transcend the traditional occupational segmentation and segregation which have been entrenched since the days of United Fruit. Furthermore, the case of Limón illustrates how ethnicity cannot be isolated as a single axis of differentiation in the labour market, but that gender is also critical in mediating employment patterns.

Based on analysis of the employer and household surveys, the distribution of the labour force in the city through segregation, as well as the nature of labour market segments in terms of segmentation, reflects both the dominance of the public sector and the importance of the port and transport sectors to the local economy. Indeed, the largest employers in the city were JAPDEVA, together with the railway (INCOFER) and the various cargo handling companies. Occupational patterns within the local labour market reflect distinct ethnic and gender divisions (see Table 1).

Very broadly speaking, the male labour force in Limón tends to be segregated into the primary productive sectors such as port work and manufacturing, with Afro-Caribbeans employed mainly in the former, working as *estibadores*, and white/*mestizos* working as factory operatives. Within this, Afro-Caribbeans tend to predominate in public sector enterprises, in occupations which are largely manual as in the case of cargo handling, while white/*mestizos* are more likely to work in semi-skilled or skilled jobs, such as machine-operators. Women, on the other hand, are concentrated in service occupations, with Afro-Caribbeans most likely to work in government services, mainly in nursing and teaching (accepting that some are also self-employed in informal commercial enterprises), and white/*mestizos* in

commerce or informal activities. Again, among the female labour force, Afro-Caribbeans tend to be disproportionately employed in public sector enterprises in professional jobs, while white/*mestizos* predominate in privately-owned firms or on their own account [*McIlwaine, 1994a*].

Considering the labour market from a more conceptual perspective highlights the somewhat paradoxical position of Afro-Caribbeans. Looking at occupational structure in Limón, by which I am referring to the pattern which is created by the distribution of the labour force across the range of existing types of work or occupation [*Watson, 1995*], it is possible to identify segregation of ethnic and/or gender groups within particular occupations or niches. These niches correspond with patterns of segmentation of productive activities into ethnic and gender segments, such as port work, manufacturing and professional services such as teaching and nursing.

While accepting that such generalisation glosses over a number of exceptions, the labour market can be viewed as a series of broad heterogeneous layers within which particular niches dominated by gender and ethnic groups are placed according to wage level, educational and skill level, as well as the prestige attached to occupational groupings. While conventional approaches to the labour market often assume a labour market hierarchy whereby men from the dominant ethnic group will normally be located at the top, with members of the minority ethnic group at the bottom [*Breugel, 1989*], this was not the case in Limón. Instead, Afro-Caribbean women were concentrated in a relatively high status intermediate segment mainly on grounds of educational level and prestige through their employment as teachers and nurses. Afro-Caribbean men were also employed in this broad layer, yet at a lower level, on grounds of the manual nature of their work, yet also recognising that wage levels were high. While a minority of Afro-Caribbean men occupied upper-level managerial positions, these were dominated by white/*mestizo* men. Finally, white/*mestizo* women were employed in the most subordinate sectors of all in low status, poorly paid jobs in commerce and the informal sector. These findings therefore question so-called 'additive' or 'parallelist' models of assessing the interrelations between gender and ethnicity where potential 'layers' of oppression are thought to 'accumulate' [*Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1990; Maynard, 1994*]. Indeed, in Limón, various layers of stratification exist and overlap according to both gender and ethnicity, which contribute to variations in levels of vulnerability among women and men from different ethnic groups.

Ethnicity and Labour Market Mobility

At first glance, the situation of Afro-Caribbeans suggests considerable labour market advantage, particularly among women. However, further investigation reveals that labour market mobility influences employment vulnerability rather

than the position of different gender and ethnic groups *per se*. Following Scott's [*1994*] research on Lima, labour market mobility involves the occupational movement of workers either horizontally to other segments with similar wage levels, skill requirements and prestige, or vertically to occupations with improvements in these levels. While mobility may be intra-generational over the space of one person's lifetime, the patterns referred to here mainly denote intergenerational mobility. On one hand, Afro-Caribbeans have managed to achieve a certain degree of vertical movement over time due to their relatively privileged position in the intermediate segments of the labour market. Yet on the other hand, they have remained virtually excluded from key decision-making positions in the upper levels of the employment structure which is dominated by white/*mestizo* men (see also Lovell [*1993*] on similar patterns among Afro-Brazilians).

As mentioned earlier, there is a high degree of occupational entrenchment in specific niches which are both 'gendered' and 'racialized' [*Brah, 1994; Phizacklea, 1988*]. Effectively barricaded into heavily 'racialized' occupations and segments of the employment structure, which are also strongly gendered, Afro-Caribbeans have little room for manoeuvre, which, in turn, contributes significantly to their vulnerability. Similar to the concept of the 'glass ceiling' [*McGuire and Reskin, 1993*], so often referred to in relation to gender in terms of women's inability to reach the upper levels of the labour market, when race mediates the picture in the context of Limón, Afro-Caribbeans appear to be positioned within 'glass boxes' [*McIlwaine, 1994b*]. In other words, their movement is restricted both laterally and vertically within 'bounded niches', yet for little ostensible reason (see below for the processes underlying this pattern).

Considering first, the position of Afro-Caribbean men, labour market vulnerability among this group rests not on remuneration levels, but on the barriers to their movement within and between different employment segments. With the exception of those employed in high level positions in JAPDEVA (where there is a policy to employ Afro-Caribbeans), this group is rarely able to attain positions beyond manual employment, usually working as cargo handlers in the port (and until 1995, in the railway). Not only is movement sideways into the manufacturing sector difficult, but even on an intra-niche basis, upward mobility is constrained due to lack of promotional structures within cargo enterprises. While earnings in port employment are relatively high, restricted mobility within the local labour market has often contributed to the international migration of Afro-Caribbean men to work mainly on cruise liners in the United States (see below).

In contrast, white/*mestizo* men generally have much greater freedom of movement, both horizontally and vertically. While these men are employed in all segments, they are found disproportionately in the manufacturing sector,

especially in cardboard box making factories, which not only involves skilled and semi-skilled occupations, but is also one of the most dynamic areas of the labour market. Furthermore, career ladders within this segment are extensive allowing workers to move with relative ease from manual jobs, through to skilled machine operators, to supervisory positions. Beyond manufacturing, white/*mestizo* men are also employed in the main decision-making posts of traditionally Afro-Caribbean dominated segments, both in cargo companies, and even in health and education. Therefore, while accepting that only a minority of men from this ethnic group rise to the upper levels of their firms, the fact that they face few barriers to their mobility releases them from the types of labour vulnerability experienced by Afro-Caribbeans.

Among the female labour force, Afro-Caribbeans have fared considerably better than white/*mestizos*. Again, accepting that some women work in the informal sector of the economy and in domestic service, this group has generally achieved a significant degree of intergenerational mobility through their employment in nursing and teaching. They hold relatively privileged positions with respect to wages, earning substantially more than in any other form of female employment in the city. Moreover, in terms of status, they are concentrated in mainly professional and technical occupations at a higher level than all other 'feminized' and most 'masculinized' sectors. However, they too are located within an ethnic 'bounded niche' or 'glass box' from which it is difficult to ascend upwards or sideways, making them vulnerable in the process. White/*mestizo* women, on the other hand, are generally concentrated in the lowest status segments of the labour market, both in the informal sector, and within the commercial sector in shops and restaurants. While this partly reflects the 'masculinization' of the key economic sectors in Limón, it is significant that white/*mestizo* women are ostensibly able to move upwards in the labour market into 'female' segments such as health and education, if they have the requisite educational qualifications, and/or the motivation to do so (see below).

Ethnic and Gender Stereotyping

Underlying the lack of occupational mobility among Afro-Caribbeans, and specifically, the ways in which they have remained 'boxed' into bounded niches, is ethnic and gender stereotyping, which, in turn, serves to exacerbate their vulnerability. Not only has stereotyping contributed to the insertion of Afro-Caribbeans (and white/*mestizos*) into certain segments of the labour market, but is also an important mechanism by which employment divisions have been maintained over time.

The racialisation and gendering of Limón's labour market have their roots in the historical evolution of the labour market. Ethnic stereotyping among Afro-Caribbean men and women relates to apparently fixed notions and assumptions about the 'attributes' of these groups through recruitment

practices. While not the only reason influencing the construction of stereotypes, the historical legacy plays an important role. While managers interviewed in the employer survey made overt references to gender-typing with respect to male physical strength and female 'weakness', and men's greater facility for handling technology, comments on racial characterisations were more indirect. While many employers admitted that discrimination against women existed, all denied the existence of racial prejudice. None the less, many discussed, for example, how Afro-Caribbean men had an affinity with manual labour, justified on the grounds that they had always worked in port and transport sectors where physical strength was the only prerequisite for employment. These notions, coupled with employer's perceptions that Afro-Caribbean men have less 'ability' to operate machinery due to their lack of experience, have therefore led to the entrenchment of this group in manual port and transport employment. The important counter-effect of this process has thus been that white/*mestizo* men have been able to take advantage of new opportunities in the dynamic manufacturing sector which still remains virtually closed to Afro-Caribbeans who are thought by employers to be less 'suitable' for skilled and semi-skilled jobs involving new technologies (see also Miles [*1989: 126–7*] on similar ethnic stereotyping in the UK).

Afro-Caribbean women have also become entrenched in health and education sectors through both gender and ethnic stereotyping. While gender-typing partly accounts for their concentration in nursing and teaching jobs with a 'nurturing' or 'caring' element, the ethnic dimension is also important. Indeed, since their initial employment as domestic servants in the homes of United Fruit officials, Afro-Caribbean women's work in Limón has long been associated with their domestic and 'nurturing' roles. Over time, however, domestic service employment has largely been replaced by other forms of public reproductive work through their move into the health and education sectors, facilitated by high levels of educational attainment. Thus, while the status of their employment has improved, the nature of the occupations has remained closely linked with their reproductive roles, reinforced by historical memory (see also Patai [*1988*] on Afro-Brazilian women's association with domestic service).

One further aspect of ethnic and gender stereotyping which underpins lack of mobility, is that Afro-Caribbeans are confined to a small number of occupational segments in the labour market. This contributes to their labour vulnerability in a number of ways. First, there is a high degree of competition for a relatively small number of racialised and gendered jobs, which undermines Afro-Caribbean's ability to demand wage increases and improved working conditions. Second, when these specific sectors face crisis and cut-backs as has occurred since 1995, Afro-Caribbeans are more at risk than those working elsewhere in the labour market (see below).

While Afro-Caribbean women and men in Limón have made significant strides in securing stable, well-paid jobs in a highly constricted labour market, they have been unable to forge roles which break with conventional gender and ethnic moulds. Indeed, stereotyping and confinement to specific labour market segments serve as important debilitating factors in their occupational mobility either laterally or vertically and *ipso facto*, their vulnerability. Historically, it would be reasonable to expect upward occupational mobility of Afro-Caribbeans due to their long-established presence in the city, ensuring them greater knowledge and skills within the labour market, and compounded by their privileged occupational position in the United Fruit Company. However, the fact that this position was not translated into occupational diversification or mobility after the departure of United Fruit can perhaps be explained by the transfer of control of the economy to the Costa Rican state who were eager to propagate national (white/*mestizo*) ideals. On the surface, Afro-Caribbeans have made some progress, yet implicit constraints mediated largely through white/*mestizo* interests as well as ethnic and gender stereotyping has set limits on their labour market experiences.

Ethnic Variations in Female Labour Force Participation

While the discussion so far has concentrated on racialised gendered constraints dealing with structural factors, it is also important to highlight ethnic differences in gender identities and ideologies. This highlights first, variations in the meaning of employment, and second, how the nature of vulnerability changes according to ethnicity. Most significant is that Afro-Caribbean women have much higher rates of labour force participation than white/*mestizo* women. In the household survey, for example, more than half of all Afro-Caribbean heads and spouses of households were employed, compared with less than one-third of white/*mestizo* women. This illustrates the centrality of paid employment for Afro-Caribbean women, and vice-versa, how labour force participation is often less important for white/*mestizo* women. Underlying this is how Afro-Caribbean women are not vulnerable in terms of their entry into the labour force, yet experience disadvantage in terms of their lack of occupational mobility once employed. White/*mestizo* women, on the other hand, are vulnerable both in terms of their access to employment, and in their concentration in low status jobs when they do engage in paid work.

Differential rates of labour force participation rest on a number of factors related to the household. Accepting that household level factors play a more crucial role in influencing women's employment patterns compared with men's [*Chant, 1991*], ethnicity also mediates these. In Limón, the marked differences in household composition between Afro-Caribbean and white/*mestizo* households with respect to headship, broadly influenced labour force participation rates. For example, Afro-Caribbean female heads were

considerably more likely to work than those residing in male-headed units (42.2 per cent among the former and 35.7 per cent among the latter), although there was little discernible pattern among white/*mestizo* women, whose rates of employment were low regardless of household type (30.5 per cent of female heads were working compared with 30.8 per cent of spouses) (see also Trotz [*1996*] on similar patterns in Guyana). Furthermore, it was intra-household factors relating to ethnically differentiated gender ideologies and traditions which emerged as most important, linked, in turn, to the meaning of employment for women of different ethnic groups.[7]

White/*mestizo* women, for example, identified themselves primarily with the domestic domain, being more likely to seek social legitimacy through this sphere than through entering the labour market. This was exacerbated by relatively strict gender divisions of labour within the home, and widespread restrictions on their paid employment by male partners. Work was perceived mainly as an economic necessity, only undertaken as a last resort, and even then, with most partners preferring their spouses to work from home. Coupled with low educational attainment which restricted their labour force participation, white/*mestizo* women therefore validated their status by remaining in the domestic sphere, with social mobility being primarily dependent on the efforts of their male partners. Thus, this group experience extensive labour vulnerability through their difficulties in labour market entry and low status employment. Furthermore, they are also vulnerable in the household arena through constraints placed on them by male partners, and inequalities in gender divisions of labour within the home.

In contrast, paid employment has been at the core of Afro-Caribbean women's identity since the days of United Fruit (as is the case elsewhere in the Caribbean [*Massiah, 1986*]). In response to widespread economic vulnerability following the collapse of United Fruit, Afro-Caribbean women migrated to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly to work in domestic service (see below). This not only ensured the survival of their households, but also funded the education of their children, especially daughters, through vocational courses which would guarantee stable work in an otherwise highly constricted labour market.

The historically high incidence of women-headed households, as well as the nature of gender ideologies have also contributed to the prevalence of paid employment among this group. Over time, Afro-Caribbean women have been unable to depend on male partners to ensure survival for themselves or their families. The history and current reality of the structural instability of male residence and economic support has led these women to seek financial independence regardless of the type of household to which they belong. This has created and reinforced Afro-Caribbean gender ideologies which are not only flexible, but also reflect female economic autonomy as a central part of

women's status. Within Afro-Caribbean households, for example, there are few restrictions placed on women working by male partners, and there are fairly complementary gender divisions of labour and decision-making patterns. Afro-Caribbean women have essentially manipulated their social position as a means of overcoming constraints and inequalities at the household level, even though this strategy has only been partially successful given the racialised and gendered restrictions they face within the labour market itself.

International Migration Strategies Among Afro-Caribbeans

Expanding on the ways in which Afro-Caribbean women have challenged constraints they face in the labour market, it is important to emphasise that Afro-Caribbeans as a group have not been passive in the face of changes. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this has been international migration. Not only did this lead to their presence in the region in the first place, but it has acted as an important safety valve throughout the region's history. Indeed, current estimates suggest that around 30 per cent of the population of Limón has emigrated [*Municipalidad de Limón, 1992: 130*]. As mentioned earlier, the first stage of international migration followed the withdrawal of United Fruit in the 1940s, comprising mainly men, with the second wave occurring in the 1950s and 1960s, consisting of women. Such was the extent of this latter movement, that this wave has been termed the '*emigración de los vientres*' (migration of the wombs) [*ibid., 1992: 131*]. Not only did this allow Afro-Caribbean families to survive during a period of low labour demand in the economy, but it was also important in terms of 'storing-up assets' for the future in the form of funding education, mainly for daughters. Migration has thus served as a safety net for women in the past, as well as a means to ensure their own individual social and economic mobility.

By the 1980s, the gender composition of international migration from Limón had reverted to men. Facilitated by long-established contacts in the United States, coupled with their ability to speak English, this group have considerable advantages over their white/*mestizo* counterparts. Indeed, English itself is an important asset for Afro-Caribbeans without which it would be difficult to migrate. Involving temporary labour migration for eight to ten months at a time, primarily to Miami to work on cruise liners, Afro-Caribbean men have been actively resisting their lack of occupational mobility through circumventing the local labour market altogether. While migration has brought economic benefits for Afro-Caribbean men and their families, it has also allowed them to improve their status in the eyes of their white/*mestizo* counterparts. Indeed, the symbols of migration to the United States in the form of domestic appliances, North American fashions and jewellery among Afro-Caribbeans are often a source of envy among the rest of the population. In a more pragmatic sense, Afro-Caribbeans were also able to build substantial

homes and to set-up their own businesses on their return, funded by their savings from overseas work.

Other outcomes have been less positive. With the majority of Afro-Caribbean families having at least one member working abroad, the migration of male partners has increased levels of vulnerability in other ways. This is reflected in the high proportion of women-headed households. Although, as mentioned earlier, female headship among the Afro-Caribbean population does not reflect disadvantage in economic or in ideological terms, and indeed, often signals benefits in terms of more egalitarian decision-making, these sentiments were more common among those permanently living without a partner.

In contrast, *de facto* female-heads often reported difficulties in maintaining relationships on such an intermittent basis in terms of emotional and sexual insecurity. In part this may be linked with fears of men setting-up liaisons while abroad, and/or deciding to remain in the United States on a more permanent basis [*Chant, 1997*]. Accepting this, the resilience of Afro-Caribbeans to this type of adversity has been ameliorated by their dependence on close-knit kin networks which have been in place since the early days of labour migration. These networks, which comprise grandmothers in particular, as well as other female relatives, provide both emotional support and assistance with childcare, which is especially important given the high rates of female labour force participation among Afro-Caribbean women. In this sense, family and community networks, or in other words, the social capital base, is well-established and serves to protect against vulnerability both in terms of daily functioning, and when a partner migrates abroad.

On a final note, it is important to stress that recent changes in the local labour market in response to wider patterns of economic restructuring throughout Costa Rica, appear to be affecting the Afro-Caribbean population to a greater extent than white/*mestizos*. As mentioned earlier, as part of a wider national drive to reduce public expenditure, government sector employment has been cut back, or in the case of the railway, been abolished altogether. Given that Afro-Caribbeans are disproportionately employed in public sector occupations, it is this group which have experienced the effects most acutely, through redundancies, compulsory retirements, and so on. Similarly, the concentration of Afro-Caribbeans in port employment has meant that the recent re-organisation of cargo-handing in the port has hit this group most strongly. At the same time, however, there has been resistance to these changes, manifested in a strike in August/September 1996, organized by a civic group called *Limón en Lucha* (Limón in Struggle), which resulted in the meeting of most of their demands by the government [*McIlwaine, 1997*].[5] These changes in the labour market are signalling a return to economic disadvantage for Afro-Caribbeans. Long-term vulnerability through the

maintenance of ethnic and gender niches is being translated into job loss and inadequate incomes among Afro-Caribbeans. The advances which this group have made over time are therefore in danger of being wiped-out, indicating how precarious their relative advantage in economic terms has been.

CONCLUSION

In this discussion of Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica, I have attempted to explore various elements of ethnic and gender disadvantage. The key theme has been the recognition that disadvantage, defined in a strict economic sense, is not the most appropriate way to assess the well-being of this particular ethnic group. Instead, drawing on recent research interrogating the complexities of poverty, the situation of Afro-Caribbeans may be more accurately assessed by examining their vulnerability. While this group have historically been able to guard against economic vulnerability in terms of income, they have experienced labour vulnerability through occupational entrenchment in ways which have been both racialised and gendered. More broadly speaking, Afro-Caribbean vulnerability has also related to powerlessness and social exclusion within the national polity. Despite adversities, however, this group have also challenged their vulnerability through the development of an ideology and reality of economically independent female heads of households employed in relatively prestigious occupations, as well as through male international labour migration. Nonetheless, more recent changes in relation to structural adjustment policies illustrate the fragility of their position and how easily labour vulnerability can become economic vulnerability.

Accepting first, that the situation of Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica in terms of their socio-economic status is probably more the exception than the rule among Afro-Latin Americans, and second, that the concept of vulnerability is difficult to quantify, there is some potential for employing this framework in other contexts in relation to ethnicity. As I outlined at the beginning of the paper, for example, the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Afro-Latin Americans into wider society, has been noted elsewhere. As Dzidzienyo [*1995: 346*] points out 'Afro-Latin Americans have consistently developed cultural initiatives in response to their predicament [which] is testimony to their unwillingness to embrace victimhood. Yet those institutions in no way address issues of political and economic power and representation, nor do they resolve the tension between actual power and symbolic power'. While the concept of vulnerability is not without its problems, it is useful first, in assessing the non-economic dimensions of disadvantage, particularly those encompassed in social exclusion and powerlessness among ethnic groups. Second, vulnerability assists us in exploring the dynamic nature of well-being,

which is essential when examining the evolution of ethnic relations and the construction of ethnic (and gender) identities over time. Finally, vulnerability may be helpful in contributing to debates on the consequences of adjustment policies in relation to ethnicity, from where initial research on the term itself originated.

NOTES

1. Primary data are based on doctoral research carried out in Costa Rica in 1990, and funded by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland and the Central Research Fund, University of London. Follow-up research was also conducted in 1992 and 1996, the latter funded by the Social Science Research Fund, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London.
2. These figures are broad estimates and have been contested elsewhere. McKinney [*1996: 18*] for example, citing the 1989 British Yearbook, suggests that the white population comprises 86 per cent of the total, with 12 per cent black, one per cent *mestizo* and 0.5 per cent indigenous. In turn, Hopkins cited in Davis [*1995: xxii*] claims that the white population make-up 6 per cent, *mestizos* 90 per cent, blacks two per cent, indigenous people less than 1 per cent, and others one per cent.
3. Gilbert Brown Young (*La Nación*, 27 Aug., 1996, p.13B), who notes: 'Para ninguno costarricense es un secreto que Limón padece una gravísima situación social y económica, producto del abandono en que lo tienen los gobiernos de turno y los sectores dominantes' (It is no secret to any Costa Rican that Limón is suffering an extremely grave social and economic situation, which is the product of abandonment of governments in their turn and of the dominant sectors of society.)
4. Information on the employment market is derived from a survey of 17 firms in the city conducted by the author in 1990. This included all the largest public and private sector companies in the city, as well as interviews with a number of smaller enterprises.
5. Interviews were conducted in two peripheral urban settlements characterized by high levels of white/*mestizo* households, and in one inner-city area dominated by Afro-Caribbean families. Afro-Caribbeans were defined in this context as those whose grandparents or great-grandparents were born in the Caribbean, as well as those who spoke English in the home. White/*mestizos* were those whose family originated in Costa Rica or a neighbouring country, and who spoke Spanish in the home. While ten per cent of the households interviewed comprised racially mixed partnerships, they are allocated here by the ethnicity of the head of the household.
6. The exchange rate in 1990 was US$1 = 85 *colones*, and the minimum weekly wage was 4,200 *colones* (US$49).
7. Information on intra-household divisions of labour, decision-making, attitudes to work and so on, are derived from a series of 45 in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of women and men interviewed through the household questionnaire survey.
8. Comprising 57 different sectors, *Limón en Lucha* is a civic group established in April 1996 and led by a former trade union leader, Danilo Powell. In calling for a strike, *Limón en Lucha* petitioned the government with over 200 demands for change in the region and city. Among the most important, were the reduction in the number of stevedore firms, the setting of a minimum wage for cargo handlers, redundancy payments for workers, and a range of infrastructural and social welfare improvements. After much negotiation, an agreement was met, although it remains to be seen whether the promises will be implemented (*La Nación*, 3 Sept. 1996, p.8A).

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