

'El trabajo dignifica' Twentieth Century Afro-Costa Rican Women and Informal Work in Port Limon, Costa Rica

"El trabajo dignifica". Mujeres afrocostarricenses y trabajo en Puerto Limón del siglo XX. Una mirada al trabajo informal de las mujeres de Puerto Limón, Costa Rica

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Abstract

The patriarchal system has convinced most that women's respectable place and function are exclusively within the private space of the home. When women 'transgress' and venture out into the public sphere by choice or by force, the reception is far from welcoming both by individuals and institutions. The analysis seeks to enquire, based on women of African descent history, how this ideology affects their participation in the public sphere. The main objective is to unearth and make visible some of the informal financial activities women were involved in during the 20th century in Port of Limon, Central America, Costa Rica. The information was gathered through interviews, some early 20th-century newspaper research, and other documentation. The analysis is conducted from a historical and gender perspective.

KeyWords: Costa Rica, Port of Limón; Afro-Costa Rican women; informal work; gender and work.

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Resumen

El sistema patriarcal ha convencido a la mayoría que el lugar y la función de las mujeres están exclusivamente en el espacio privado del hogar. Cuando las mujeres “transgreden” y se aventuran en la esfera pública por elección o forzadas, la recepción está lejos de ser bienvenida tanto en el ámbito individual como institucional. El análisis busca investigar, basado en la historia de las mujeres afrodescendientes, cómo esta ideología afecta su participación en la esfera pública. El principal objetivo es desenterrar y hacer visibles algunas de las actividades financieras informales en las que se involucraron las mujeres durante el siglo XX en Puerto Limón, Costa Rica. La información se recopiló mediante entrevistas, la investigación en periódicos del siglo XX y otra documentación. El análisis se realizó desde una perspectiva histórica y de género.

Palabras clave: Costa Rica; Puerto Limón; mujer afrodescendiente; trabajo informal; género y trabajo.

Introduction

Alison's popular song 'born with it'², speaks with pride of a general natural characteristic of women of African descent the world over. The big bottom. I use this song as a metaphor to indicate that women of African descent while not 'born with it' have a legacy and tradition of work out of the home that seems as if we were 'born with it'.

Three are the objectives that guide this investigation the main one is to make visible some of the informal financial activities Afro-Costa Rican women were involved in during 20th century Port of Limon, in Central America Costa Rica. A secondary objective is to shift the negative perception of informal work, and the third is to contribute to the UN International Decade for people of African descent (2015-2024) building scholarship that focus on women of African descent in Costa Rica³.

This oral history exploratory study focuses attention on ten women. The data collection was from interviews during the months of June and August 2017. The women were born between early and mid-twentieth century. Of the ten women, five are still alive. Four of the narratives came directly from the women. Of the five subjects who are still alive, only one story was told by her daughter, since she

2 Barbadian Soca Queen Alison Hinds. *Born with it*, 2013.

3 There is insufficient scholarship with a focus on Afro-Costa Rican women. See Putnam 2002. Her discussion includes working class women from the different ethnic groups represented during the period under study. However, the focus was not the Afro-Costa Rican women.





considered that the work she did was not worthy of an interview. The remaining five narratives came from the children of the deceased women.

Two main arguments guide the discussion of this research. One, 20th century Afro-Costa Rican women inherited the practice from their Afro-Caribbean ancestors to work out of the home. Second, the knowledge and skills of domestic chores developed by these within the private sphere conditioned through the patriarchal system afforded them the opportunity to offer, and create paid jobs for the benefit of themselves and their families despite the lack of legal protection and benefits due to the informality of their work.

Enslaved African women

Most Afro Costa Rican Women are descendants of Afro Caribbean immigrants who themselves are descendants of enslaved African women. Caribbean scholarship on enslaved African women including Lucille Maturin Mair (2006), Verene Shepherd (1999) and Hilary Beckles (1989) to mention a few deals with the hardship of Jamaican and Barbadian women during the slave period.

Scholarship on slavery in Costa Rica attest to the work and cruelty enslaved women underwent, and the kind of work they undertook during the XVIII century.⁴ This scholarship sheds light into the grueling work both in the private and public sphere that these women had to endure leaving after emancipation a heritage of work to their female descendants.

Informal Work

Samuel Freije (2002) gives a brief description of those considered informal workers. He states:

(...) la mayor parte de los investigadores se basan en una definición operativa de los trabajadores informales que incluye a los siguientes: trabajadores por cuenta propia (con lo excepción de las profesiones liberales), trabajadores familiares no remunerados, el servicio doméstico y empleadores y empleados de pequeñas empresas. (p. 4)

Based on the findings of this exploratory research the subjects of the study falls within more than one category listed above they were working on their own, and performing other informal financial activities including domestic work. Martha

4 See Acuña León 2005 and 2008.





Alter Chen (2001), in her discussion mentions that 'half or more of the female non-agricultural workforce is in the informal sector..., the informal sector is a larger source of employment for women than for men. I would argue that one of the reasons why the informal sector 'is a larger source of women's employment' is precisely due to the gendered fields of work.

The first part of the title of this paper 'el trabajo dignifica' a popular saying within the Costa Rican society suggests, notwithstanding the type of job (in this case informal) while legal, and decent, dignify the individual. Therefore, it is not the activity per-se that dignifies but the ability to work and take care of self and dependents. This is reinforced by the findings of Emilio Moyano Diaz et al (2008) stating that:

La mayor parte de los seres humanos trabaja porque necesita hacerlo incluso quienes no lo hacen por dinero. Necesidad y deseo se imbrican; hoy se necesita trabajar para poder obtener ingresos que permitan vivir (ayer para obtener alimento), pero el trabajo es una fuente no sólo de ingresos sino también de puesta en práctica de capacidades y habilidades personales, de enfrentar desafíos y así, ni más ni menos, de la propia realización personal. A quienes les gusta su trabajo no lo dejarían aun cuando no necesitaren el dinero que les procura. (Argyle, 1992 en Diaz, 2008, p. 695)

Diaz as well as Freije's previous intervention about one of the features of informal work being 'trabajadores por cuenta propia' accurately describe the subjects of my study. These 20th century Afro-Costa Rican women were 'trabajadores por cuenta propia', they worked not only out of the necessity to feed themselves, and their family but also for the pride and 'realizacion personal', and 'puesta en practica de capacidades y habilidades personales', stated by Diaz, as will be demonstrated.

Gender Considerations

Feminist scholarship has unmask the patriarchal system demonstrating its perversity in maintaining women ideologically fixed and marginalized through androcentric discourses within the private sphere.⁵ The same is true for Costa Rica. When late 19th century immigrant female and male landed in the Port of Limon to work on the construction of the railroad, they did not enter a gender-neutral geographical space.⁶

5 Feminist and other scholars have dealt with this extensively. See Tong 1994, Bryson 2003, Mohammed 2002, Saltzman Chafetz 1999.

6 See Rodriguez 2005, Vega R. 1994, Santana, 2011, Rodriguez 1999.





When the Afro-Caribbean immigrant labor arrived in Costa Rica, they also brought their constructions of gender that was similar to the host country.⁷ This Caribbean gender construction clashed with the everyday reality of women, and men, to perform other duties that the androcentric ideology had not designed for each sex, including women working outside of the home,⁸ and men performing domestic shores like washing and cooking as Putman (2002) demonstrated early into the migration to Costa Rica.

After settling in the host country, Afro-Caribbean immigrant were unable to escape the systematic re-enforcement of gender inequalities since it was strengthen also through the media. The work of Eugenia Rodríguez (1999) demonstrates how magazines designed for, and consumed by women support discourses about the family and gender relations during the 19th and early 20th century Costa Rica. Rodríguez notes,

En el caso de las revistas las mujeres eran sus principales consumidoras, lo cual se vio reflejado en el hecho de que las ofertas de subscripciones a precios cómodos estaban dirigidas en su mayoría hacia dicho sector. (Rodríguez, 1999, p. 6)

Rodríguez continues to list some of the magazines catered to 20th century Costa Rican women⁹ which includes, *'Bohemia, Cordelia, El Hogar Católico, La Mujer Cristiana y el Repertorio Americano'* (Rodríguez, 1999, p. 7).

The author indicated that one of the objectives was to, also analyze newspapers of the period but the study was unable to do so. I will make my contribution in this regard by strengthening the discussion demonstrating some of the images found in some 20th century newspaper reinforcing the idea of 'women's right place in society'. An ad found in the newspaper *El Comercio* April 11, 1915 is a clear example of gender representation in the media. The advert is about a toothpaste but the imagery portrays a woman with young children in the bathroom suggesting the role of caretaker.

7 See Wilson 1969.

8 See Hutchinson Miller 2006.

9 Note that the women she refers to are mestizo women from the Meseta Central in Costa Rica.





Picture 1. There is another advertisement 46 years later in *La Republica* on May 25, 1961: 9¹⁰



Picture 2. *WeeklyNews*, 1903

This advertisement is about Maggi soup. It is telling consumers that ‘this one is made out of chicken’ and that it is at a reasonable price. Note the woman how she looks happy, and how well made up with hair in place. There are numerous examples of the media for the period, which plays a very important role in re-enforcing the stereotypes around women’s place and responsibilities within the Costa Rican society.¹¹ Another portrayal of women in these advertisement were as pathological human beings since they are constantly prescribing some type of medicine for their ailment, or convincing them of the appliances, and products that would be useful in heeding their domestic shores.¹²

The examples above systematically portrayed the image of the mestizo woman. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the media was not effective also in its job of conditioning Afro-Costa Rican women. During the 20th century, the Afro-Limonense community had newspapers that catered to them in their English language,¹³ and while the imagery is not noticeable, the discourse is deafening!

In *Limon Weekly News*. May 21, 1904: 3 under the heading “Nice Mrs. Nagg: Her Husband takes a day off and stays home to fault find and grumble”. There is

10 A testament to the resilience of the patriarchal system.

11 See newspaper, *Republica* 1961, *WeeklyNews*, 1903.

12 See *El Pueblo Limonense* Sabado 1ro de Mayo de 1915, last page., *Limon Weekly News* Saturday May 21, 1904: 4-5, *El Atlantico* 22 de Abril, 1950: 2.

13 Some of these are mention in the work of Hutchinson Miller 2015, and Rosario 2015.





a very long report coming out of New York. In essence, the article speaks to the frustration of a woman when her husband stays home.

The article speaks to the ideology of domesticity¹⁴ where the man enjoys the privilege of being the 'king of castle' where he just sits around not helping his wife with the domestic chores, instead creating more work for her. It speaks to the private and public sphere where men feel better to be out of the domestic realm to enjoy with friends. It also underscores the frustration of women within the private sphere. While ideologically conditioned, it highlights a reality of physical and emotional exhaustion by the part of women. It is very interesting to note that 51 years after publication of this article in 1955 *Good Housewife Guide*, reinforces the attitude the woman was complaining about.

On May 28, 1904: 3 the *Limon Weekly News*, under the title *Woman's realm: Girls should be dignified*, continues to show evidence of the patriarchal system favoring men. The last two examples for this discussion are found in *The Searchlight* January Saturday 11, 1930: 1 under the title "To whom it may Concern" speaks to women being the property of men.

Twenty years later in *El Atlántico* April 27, 1950: 2 under the title "William Brown Pinnock Avis." The same patriarchal ideology is perpetuated demonstrating the childlike notion of married women who are dependent and need to be "protected and taken cared of" financially within marriage, clarifying that this would cease after she 'voluntarily' left the marital space and in so doing freeing him of any financial responsibility or otherwise.

This is the country Afro-Caribbean women found, and the society of un-equal gender relations in which their daughters were born. Women of African descent are accustomed to work in the public sphere one of the reasons being the unfortunate circumstance of their enslaved female ancestors as briefly mentioned above on the discussion on enslaved African women.

Finding

The historiography has indicated that most 20th century Afro-Costa Ricans are descendants of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Late 19th century Afro-Caribbean female immigrants to Costa Rica came armed with the tradition of work. It is not

14 There is sufficient scholarship dealing with the 'Cult of Domesticity' and the public and private sphere. See Bowden and Offer 1994, Karusseit 2007, Rothman 2006, Baron 1981, Gorham 1985, Ferree 1990, Habermas 1974.





surprising that their Afro-Costa Rican descendants step up to the plate when the circumstance requires them to do so within the informal sector of the economy.

Evidence found in the English newspapers of 20th century Province of Limon, and through interviews attest to the fact that there were a significant number of businesses owned by male Afros,¹⁵ which included drug stores, grocery stores, dental offices, tailor shops, stores, hotel, baker shops, mini marts, sale of home-made ice cream, radio service among others. Mr. Rudolf Robert Lewis Lewis better known as 'Pollo' in the province of Limon remembers some of the men who had their businesses in Limon. He recalls,

Mr. Flemings had a grocery shop right at the corner, enfrente de soda el patty, he used to do baking too, him was a big comerciante. Botica Mc Ray was where the Banco Nacional is now beside a china man name Gollo. Next one was John Babb him used to mix medicine, him work with British pharmacy. Tailors, Bulla Gibbs, him was right at the corner of Danny Hailing bomba, tailor James was 50 yards south soda el patty, Sony boy round Mas x Menos. Bakers, you have the sterling brothers, then you had Malcolm, Booth¹⁶ and Flemings...Mr. Clark used to sell ice cream, Randall Laurence, Mr. George and Caballero, them raise their family. (Mr. Rudolf Lewis Lewis August 18, 2017)

Based on this report many of these men were involved in informal work. For the period under study, there is the need of more research to determine if all men activities fell under the category of informal work. While the newspaper evidence is scarcer for women advertising their businesses, interviews provide more information which attest to the fact that they were sufficient female entrepreneurs in the province of Limon. Mr. Lewis, Lewis also mention that 'Ms. Malcolm and Ms. McFarlane were bakers, and nurse Darkins was a midwife as well as a baker' (Mr. Rudolf Lewis, Lewis August, 18, 2017).

15 There were ads for shoes stores, hotels, coffee shops, drug stores, tailors, and cinemas among others. See Ads *The Atlantic*, Oct. 22, 1949 for assorted ads, "Jack Orane Suc." in *Central American Express*, Jan. 10, 1949: 6, and *The Atlantic* "The People's House: Jack Orane Sucs" Oct. 22, 1949: 6, *El Atlantico* "Hotel Guapiles", owner Leon Weinstock. Oct. 22, 1949: 2, *The Searchlight*. "Sasteria Grant". Saturday 11, January 1930: 3, *The Limon Searchlight*, Nov., 23, 1929: 2 for assorted ads which included one female business., *El Atlantico* 24 Diciembre 1949: 3, "Hotel Hispanoamerica" de Ernest Cecil Lewis y Senora, *El Atlantico* 22 Octubre 1949: 6, "Wear Clifford Steel's Tailor Made Suits", *The Atlantic* Nov. 19, 1949: 6 "The Hollywood Store" Solomon Berenzon Sra. e hijos, *The Atlantic*, Nov. 5, 1949: 6 "Hotel Guapiles" propietario Leon Weinstock, *The Atlantic*, Dec., 24, 1949: 11, "The Blue Bar". Johnny and Franklyn.

16 There is an ad in *The Atlantic* Dec., 24, 1949: 12 "The People's Bakery" Philip Booth and Family.





Mrs. Lucetta Miller Blake provides more information of the women who were teachers, seamstress, bakers, restaurant, and cook shop owners. She shares,

You had happy landing, Ms. Birdy them used to call it. You had a lady that used to sew Ms. Manahan and Ms. Jackson them was seamstresses, you had plenty seamstresses. Them was in the center of Limon, one in the market. Plenty of them had cook shops Ms. Andrina, right next to the Bomba where Caribeños is, to the corner. Another one that used to sell was Edith Lewis, Ms. Clementina mother in Law. She too did have a cook shop ah remembah right out by the Saint Marks Church. Ms. Blanch she is who start the bochinche casado. You had a lady that had a little refresquería chop, Ms. celeste, en el centro de Limon ovah by where is Mega Super . Era en el centro de Limón como 100 metros este de estadio Juan Gobán. The people who used to bake bread Ms. Reid, that coming from her mother, you had a lot ah don't remember. Ms McRay, highy, highy people, not sure if it was her business or her husband, they had a drug store. This lady that used to teach Ms Jessy, right where the Methodist church is. All the old people used to go to her. You had round Jamaica Town Ms. Ruby, you had Ms. Gainor. Right beside Ms. Blanch you had Ms. Carnegie she used to teach. (Lucetta Miller Blacke August 18, 2017)

Mr. Rudolf Lewis, Lewis also mentioned that Ms. Blanch McLean known as 'Blanchy, tenia dos hijos Hubert, and Leroy. Restaurant Blanchy estaba en el building de Mr. Fleming en frente de donde está ahora Soda el Patty' (Mr. Rudolf Lewis August 14, 2017). Lic. Delroy Barton also mentioned Ms. Blanch along with Ms. Brown who used to sell soup, Ms. Splatt¹⁷ who owned Happy Landing, Mary Brice and Mrs. Cayasso who used to wash and iron clothes. He also mentioned English teacher Ms. Jessy and made reference that there were piano teachers and seamstresses (Lic. Delroy Barton August 18, 2017).

The study found newspaper advertising businesses owned by three women in the Port of Limon. I am suggesting that probably these were receiving revenues that allowed them to run ads on a regular basis. In *The Searchlight* November 23, 1929: 2 and January, 4th, 1930 there is an ad advertising a store called 'The Little Paris' owned by Mrs. Jack De-Pass.

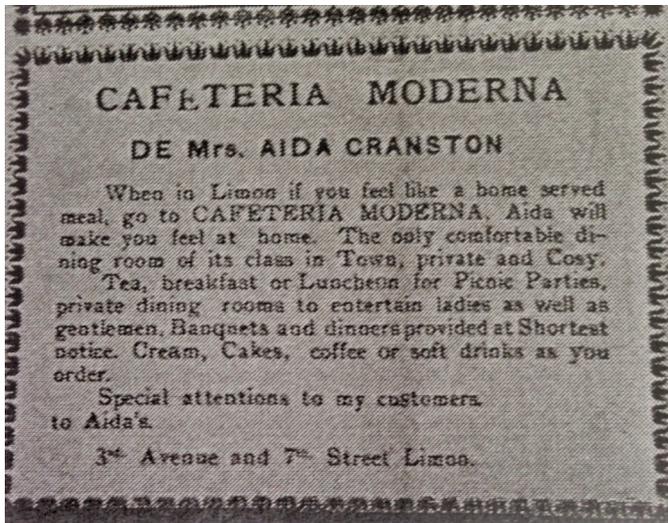
17 There is an ad in *The Atlantic* Dec., 24, 1949: Splatt's Bakery.





Picture 3. *The Searchlight* January, 4th, 1930: 3.

In *The Searchlight*. January 11, 1930: 3 another ad is advertising “Cafeteria Moderna” of Mrs. Aida Cranston.

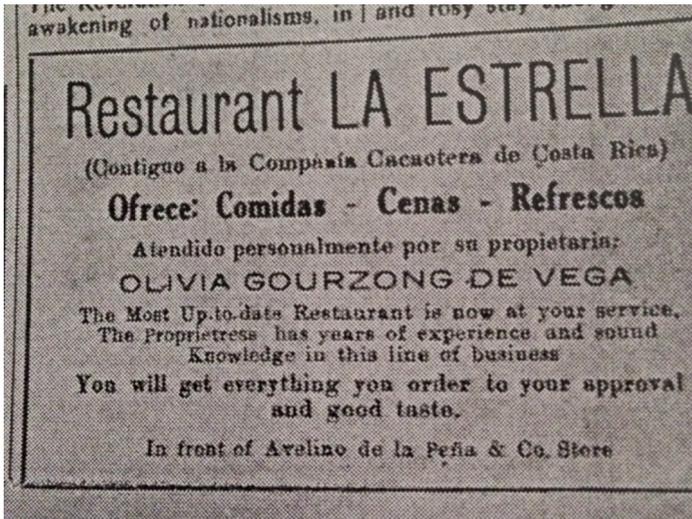


Picture 4. *The Searchlight*. January 11, 1930: 3.





In *The Atlantic*. November 5, 1949: 2, 19 years later we can appreciate an ad advertising 'Restaurant la Estrella' owned by Mrs. Olivia Gourzong de Vega.¹⁸



Picture 5. *The Atlantic*. November 5, 1949: 2.

It is important to highlight that the three female owners are married women.¹⁹ This goes in opposition of a patriarchal system that dictates through its code of domesticity that women's space is in the private sphere, I was unable to locate any family member for Mrs. Cranston and Mrs. De Pass, in order to enquire about the effects of their business on their marriages. It would have been interesting to find out if it was a family or individual business, if they had full support from their spouses, and how long the business lasted among other questioning.²⁰

Women Interviewed and Informal Work

The previous discussion about relations of gender and the working practices of Afro-Caribbean women sets the stage for understanding the lives of the ten women

18 In the case of Mrs. Olivia Gourzong de Vega the newspaper evidence shows that she advertised her restaurant regularly in various newspapers at least for the year 1949. I was delighted when I contacted Mrs. Olivia Gourzong de Vega's son Guillermo Vega Gourzong who provided me with some very interesting information.

19 Two of the ads had the preface Mrs., Olivia has the possessive Spanish article de before Vega which is indicative that she is the wife of Vega. I also interviewed Olivia's son who confirmed that she was married.

20 Further research will enquire into the lives of these and other women mentioned in this exploratory research.



of the study. As the historiography on Afro-Caribbean migration has shown, the second wave of the present Afro-Costa Rican population are descendants of late 19th century immigrants for the construction of the railroad. The numbers of women slowly increased as the project developed. These women played a very important role within late 19th and 20th century Limon society, performing both in the public and private spheres contributing to their family, and the development of the province of Limon.

The stories collected about the ten women of this research who were born between 1912 and 1944 open for us a window into the lives of 20th century Afro-Costa Rican working class women. The narratives give us a glimpse into their everyday lives, including their dreams, struggles and aspirations. It took great effort for the study to focus on their informal work due to the richness of the information gathered which told much more about their lives.

All the women interviewed were/are mothers, births averaging between one and eight children. One had two abortions. Having children made it imperative for them to work out of the home since some were single mothers, while the others although married, their husband's income was limited since they were all within the category of working class people.

Internal Migration

Some of the women interviewed were part of internal migration in the province of Limón and others immigrants from Panama and Nicaragua. Some migrated because of their spouses, others in search for better condition for their children, and others looking for their personal development. The personal stories are diverse, the only similarity that they were all women working in the informal sector. Dorothy Smith Wilson shares how her mother Margarita Wilson Connor came to Costa Rica,

Mi mama nació en Bluefields Nicaragua en el año 1912, se casó con mi papa un costarricense capitán de barco de Costa Rica de Cahuita. Mi mamá vino a Costa Rica conmigo a la edad de nueve años y desde esa vez no hemos vuelto a Nicaragua. (Dorothy Smith Wilson July 4th, 2017)

Retired teacher Ms. Beverly Francis, daughter of Ms. Kermith Rowe Henry explains when her mother migrated from Panama as a single woman with her five children. Beberly comments that her mother,





Emigró a Costa Rica con todos los hijos en 1960, los hijos estaban entre las edades de 20 y 9 años, yo tenía nueve años y vivíamos todos en barrio Roosevelt. Tuvo cinco hijos: Leston Rowe Dennis, Neora Rowe Rowe, Jaime Rowe Rowe, Beverly Francis Henry, and Antonio Smith Rowe. (Beverly Francis July 3rd, 2017)

Mrs. Barzilla Gale, Gale also known by the Limonenses as Ms. Zilla, was born in Estrada on February 28, 1924 and moved to Limon during her teenage years. She is proud to say that she is a country girl. Mrs. Barzilla different to the previous women migrated to the province of Limon in first instance for self-development. It was after she got married to Mr. Stanford Barton that she moved along with him. There is also Mrs. Amy Hall Jackson who was born in Cairo. Migrated to Limon after being married with Louis Furtado, and with children.

Education

Education played a very important role in their lives. Some were unable to complete formal education in Spanish but they did in English. Therefore, they were literate women. Dorothy Smith Wilson shares about her mother's education,

Educación formal, pues, allá en Nicaragua era English School, ella fue como los negritos de antes no les gustaba el español...ella fue a la escuela pero no sé cuántos años, realmente no sé, pero ella lee y escribe muy bien el español, escribía bien, bien. (Dorothy Smith Wilson July 4th, 2017)

Meteorologist Mr. Guillermo Vega Gourzong shares about the education of his mother Olivia Gourzong de Vega. He states that,

My mom did a lot of reading even though I think she got until sixth grade. But she had a library there with all the books she used to buy and read, so that helped her quite a bit. She is the one who taught me how to sell in a way that I could not lose a dime, because I would have to pay, you can imagine. (Guillermo Vega Gourzong July 27, 2017)

As previously stated all the women are/were literate but some had a hard time to complete their basic education for a number of reasons. Nurse, Grace Cope Gordon shares that her mother Ms. Nora Gordon Williams could not continue her formal education after the death of her mother at an early age. This circumstance forced her to live with a relative who was more preoccupied with her doing domestic chores than going to school. This goal became even more difficult to attain when she became a single mother of two children. Not giving





up on her dream, she managed to complete her primary school later in life. Her daughter Grace shares,

Ella siempre quiso estudiar, ella tenía planes y aunque ella estaba mayor ya y estaba enferma tenía sus metas, nunca cedió en eso. Ella llegó a 6to grado pero ya adulta porque de chiquita no los dejaban ir a la escuela de español porque en esa época no creían en eso, iban a la escuela de inglés pero no los dejaban ir a la escuela de español, entonces ya adulta cuando yo estaba en el colegio ella iba a colegio para adultos en la escuela Rafael Iglesias Castro, la escuela de niñas y sacó el 6to grado por lo menos, y se sintió muy bien. (Grace Cope Gordon June 17, 2017)

It was Ms. Nora Gordon Williams' mother death when she was a child that injured her chances of completing her primary education. For Ms. Jean Beverly Henry Wilson the sickness of her mother, forced her at an early age to enter night school to complete her primary education. Jean comments,

My mother took sick when I was 12 years old so I had to go to night, Tomas Guardia. I had to take care of my mother. We had a neighbor who love us very much, so I gone to school and leave her wid she, run go and when school finish run come back. (Jean Beverly Henry Wilson July 21, 2017)

Jean took care of her mother for fourteen years that was how long her illness lasted, when she said with a bit of resignation 'I grow up in that'. It is my contention that the women's realities of financial and emotional struggle were the fuel for making them made their best effort to ensure that their children got a better deal in life than they did.

Types of Informal work

The roles within the private sphere were very clear for Afro-Costa Rican women. They had to take care of all the household shores including washing cooking, baking, and cleaning among many other. The knowledge and skills developed in this sphere were the same ones used as informal workers in the public sphere. Many of them were involved in different types of informal work throughout their lives.

Based on the information gathered from the interviews, some of the work done by the women include washing, and ironing clothes for individuals especially men, and for hotels. Others include baking and decorating cakes, baking bon, and patty, cooking and selling food, ironing hair, teaching English and music, selling chance, domestic workers, raising and selling chickens, sewing, nannies, owning business, and selling rubber among others.





Picture 6. Mrs. Margarita Wilson Conner Born 1912, died 2004 at age 83. Photo courtesy of her daughter Dorothy Smith July 27, 2017

Dorothy Smith Wilson tries to summarize some the informal work of 20th century Afro-Costa Rican women.

Los tipos de trabajo que los de antes hacían era igual, lavar; aplanchar; había digamos en los baños había una lavandería para que la gente que lavaba iban a los baños lavaban la ropa se lo llevaban a la casa, después aquí en bella vista había otro que era público con agua que la gente llevaba, pero la mayor parte de la gente de antes lavaba y aplanchaba y otros se dedicaban a la venta de comida bofe con yuca y cosas así. (Dorothy Smith Wilson July 4th 2017)

Ms. Dorothy Smith Wilson shares snippets about her mother including her informal work,

Mi mamá nació en Bluefields Nicaragua en el año 1912, se casó con mi papá un costarricense capitán de barco de Costa Rica de Cahuita. Mi mamá vino a Costa Rica conmigo a la edad de nueve años y desde esa vez no hemos vuelto a Nicaragua, mi mamá era ama de casa trabajaba lavando ropa, haciendo pan, cocinando, después que tuve a mis hijos pues me ayudo a cuidar a mis hijos en la casa mientras que yo trabajaba afuera. Mi mamá solo me tuvo a mí. (Dorothy Smith Wilson July 4th, 2017)

Ms. Dorothy gives more detail on her parent's household. She notes,

Digamos, mi papá en ese entonces cuando el ganaba, en ese entonces, ganaba 100 por mes trabajando en barco, mi mamá, pues, depende de la cantidad de ropa que lavaba, todo dependía, tal vez por tanda, tal vez unos 15 ó 20 colones en esos tiempos. (Dorothy Smith Wilson July 4th, 2017)





Picture 7. Mrs. Lucilda McLean Lindo. Born Dec. 17, 1917, died July 19th, 1976 at age 59. Photos courtesy of daughter Melva Johnson July 4, 2017.

Retired teacher Mrs. Melva Johnson, daughter of Mrs. Lucilda McLean Lindo shares the different types of work her mother did. Melva comments,

She worked at the saw-mill preparing food for the workers: such as porridge (chicheme) fry cake, codfish fritters. Second informal work: wash clothes at her home, for outsiders (women and men) who lived at a hotel, the hotel was a burdel called Hotel Banton, tenia salon abajo y los cuartos arriba. Los inquilinos del hotel le llevaban ropa para lavar y aplanchar y mami cobraba por pieza, es decir un vestido 300 colones, una blusa etc. Todas las piezas tenían un precio diferente. Third informal work: selling clandestine Panama chance. All this to help at house with expenses to raise her children, sending them to school. (Melva Johnson July 4th 2017)

Retired teacher Beverly Francis daughter of Ms Kermith Rowe Henry shares that,

‘Su primer trabajo fue en la zona Americana lavando y planchando, realizando oficios domésticos. El salario recibido en panamá fue entre \$3 y \$5 por cada bulto de ropa que lavaba y planchaba²¹. Beverly also shares that after settling in Port Limon along with the washing her mother used work doing, she also used to travel to Panama to buy ornaments, and other house appliances to sell in Port Limon.



Picture 8. Ms. Kermith Rowe Henry Born July 19th, 1919, died April 29, 1991. Photo courtesy of daughter Beverly Francis July 7th, 2017.

²¹ The daughter comments that due to this she does not like to iron.





Picture 9. Mrs. Olivia Gourzon de Vega Born Sept. 19, 1919. Died Sept. 23rd, 1965. Photo courtesy of her son Guillermo Vega Gourzong July 27, 2017.

Based on 20th century newspaper records Mrs. Vega Gourzong²² was the owner of a

Restaurant called la 'Estrella' fact that her son was unaware of until I contacted a relative of hers his cousin Natasha Chipembere, who is a researcher to verify if this person mentioned in the clipping was a relative of hers. After that confirmation, I contacted Mrs. Vega Gourzong son Meteorologist Mr. Guillermo Vega Gourzong who commented that,

When my mother had the restaurant I haven't born because that was in 1949, and I was born in 1953. She took care of the family business which was selling cold cuts, cheeses, eggs, and avocados all these products in an informal way. The business with the cold cuts was my father's and mah mother was the one who coordinated and managed that. (Guillermo Vega Gourzong July 27, 2017)

22 Is the daughter of Ruth and William Gourzong from Jamaica and New Orleans. Natasha Gordon-Chipembere who is her niece wrote a piece on her grandparents, parents of Olivia in *Tico Times*, online newspaper "A Look back at the 1930s Limon and the real legacy of Caribbean immigrants. December 7, 2015.





Picture 10. Mrs. Amy Hall Jackson. Born 1925. Photo by Carmen Hutchinson Miller. June 15, 2017.

Mrs. Amy Hall Jackson started to work very early in her life. The informal work she did was the selling of chance, raising chicken and selling rubber.

She relates her story that covers her childhood until her life as a wife and mother. She shares,

My mother die from 1936 when I was just 11 years, so we had to work to take care of ourself then I start to sell chance I get up 5 o'clock every Saturday morning and go to Bataan and sell chance and come back on the train and go down the airport and sell chance. Sunday morning I get up again and ah have to sell chance in the morning, sell chance in the evening, so I did not have no life at all. I remember, you know rubber? Chuckled, well I used to climb rubber tree to pick rubber to sell. I used to climb tree because I used to climb very much, when anybody came at me we used to

have a lot of ackee, and when them come to buy ackee I used to climb but when them come we had so much I don't sell them, I just give them. And when I was in Bataan I used to raise chickens, every Saturday I bake bread and cake and I buy a ice cream bucket to make cream for the children them and Sunday morning they have a big breakfast, they loved that.

I am from Cairo there is where I get my husband and start to have my children, then I move to Siquirres. I was living there but at that time I wasn't working, or anything until I move to Bataan where my husband was working, he was working in the plant, you know the plant?²³ Well, ha, ha! He was working there and they have a gang where some men were and my husband was in that gang and I used to wash for all those men. Sometimes I start to iron 4 o'clock in the evening and don't finish 'till 4 o'clock in the morning, then when a get up again I have to start looking to take care of my children to go to school and everything. (Amy Hall Jackson June 15, 2017)

23 She is referring to the Abaca plant during the 1940s. See newspaper *The Central American Express*. Sunday January 17, 1942: 1 "There're Good Days Coming: Abaca Project To Commence Shortly!!"





Picture 11. Mrs. Barsilla Gale, Gale also known as Mrs. Barton or Ms. Zilla. Born Feb. 28, 1924 in Estrada de Limon. Photo by Carmen Hutchinson Miller July 20th, 2017. Port Limon, Costa Rica.

Children especially around Barrio Roosevelt know Ms Zilla for her teaching of the English language.

She began teaching English in 1950 'I used to teach from 1950 but up that side in Manila. I came back in Limon in 1960'. Ms. Zella shares that she really wanted to be a nurse and had a formal work as a nurse's assistant in Port Limon.

This hospital, Limon hospital that time, it was bananero. Ah work there from 44 to 49, auxiliar de enfermero them call it, nurse helper. Nevah get to go ahm my real fadah was too pinche you know that one! Chuckled. Meh step fadah was a very good person a

Christian man, but you know the finance wasn't so, but thank the Lord you know I decide when I get old woman I decide I must go to college, and I go through fifth year. (Barzilla Gale Gale July 21st, 2017)

She commented that she dedicated her life to teaching it 'was not for lucro, 150 colones for the week, nothing of luxury, was poor people. I used to enjoy teaching because I love children, the money did not matter'.



Picture 12. Mrs. Barzilla's house since 1961. Place she taught the English language. Photo by Carmen Hutchinson Miller



Picture 13. Mrs. Barzilla teaching. Circa 1970s. Photo Courtesy of the Library in Limon





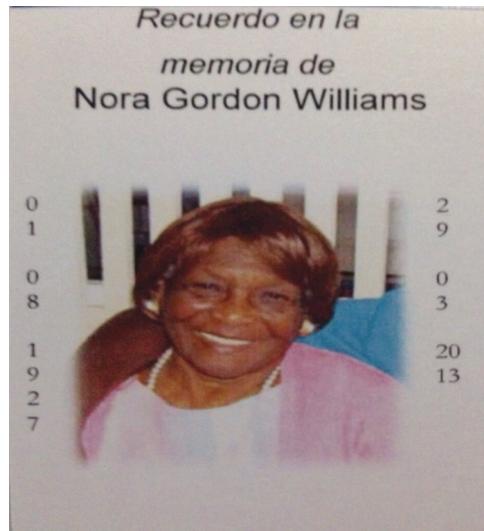
Picture 14. Mrs. Lena Watson Carr Born in Limon in 1926. Photo courtesy of granddaughter Tawana Linton Watson

Ms. Lena Watson Carr did all her informal work from her house being one of the examples of how women created jobs using the knowledge imposed by the patriarchal system within the private sphere as cooks and bakers. She used these acquired skills to help raise her children and take care of herself. Nurse Sharon Watson Carr commented about her mother Mrs. Lena Watson Carr.

Presently she lives in Colina de Limon in her own house build by her eldest daughter with 'empleada'. She lived in union libre, and had 8 children two of which are deceased. Had 5 boys and three girls. Her informal work included baking and selling bon, patty and cakes from her house. (Sharon phone interview July 9th, 2017)

Nurse, Grace Cope Gordon shares about her mother,

Nació y vivió en Limón hasta los 60 años que fue a vivir conmigo a San José. Desde que la conocí ella fue trabajadora. Ella trabajaba vendiendo chances y con eso me crió a mi hermano y a mí. Después de un tiempo, siempre vendiendo chances trabajaba como cocinera en un restaurant, pero nunca dejó la parte de los chances, con eso es con lo que pudo criarnos, hizo todo lo que ella pudo, ella siempre fue emprendedora siempre trato de darnos lo mejor. (Grace Cope Gordon June 17, 2017)



Picture 15. Ms. Nora Gordon Williams. Photo courtesy of her daughter Grace Cope Gordon June 17, 2017





Picture 16. Jean Beverly Henry Wilson born in Port Limon on Jan 15, 1941. Photo Courtesy of Jean Beverly Henry Wilson Port Limon July 20th, 2017.

Jean's informal work consisted mainly of straightening hair but included baking, and decorating wedding cakes and sewing for the dead. She worked pressing hair from 1953 until 1987 (34 years) when the doctor stopped her due to health issues. Jean started pressing hair at the age of 14 forced by the circumstances of the sickness of her mother²⁴ she shares,

No one is going to accept a young girl to straighten their hair so you had a young one like me, Mayra Lipman, I said to Mayra, Mayra wash you hair, and come mek a straighten it, she seh what!/? Ah she yes man! And when you

look Mayra wash ar hair, she seh mind you know! A she no doh worry about it. She wash the hair fast dried it u, fan it wid newspaper because no dryer in those days and so I press ar hair. And when Mayra, who, because in those days you draw me out, I draw you out until Carmen²⁵ come, and everybody can't go to her because is too much people so there is where my clientele started from, because when people started, Mayra who do you hair? So ah end up wid Ms. Chita and all the neighbor around. (Jean Beverly Henry Wilson July 21st, 2017)

24 Her mother's name was Sara Marie Henry Accleston. She was a housewife she used to bake and sell. Was the first person in Limon who started selling plantain chips for 25 cents a bag. Her aunt Mrs. Eufemia Laurence Accleston who used to work as a domestic over the zone. The name of Gaddy was Alfreda Morisson Griffith.

25 Carmen Nelson Nelson, was the person to go to for hair pressing. She was her god-sister who used to live with her and her mother. Carmen's mother was living in Panama to whom she returned after she got a little older. While with her mother, she learned about hair dressing later returning to Limon. She used to live three houses from Springfield. She also taught the hair pressing to other young women, using Abaca.





Picture 17. Dorothy Smith Wilson. Born September 1st, 1944 in Nicaragua. Photo by Carmen Hutchinson Miller Port Limon Costa Rica July 4th, 2017.

Dorothy Smith Wilson is the only daughter of Margarita Wilson Conner, but had to work informally. Based on her accounts she straddle both the formal and informal sector. She shares,

Yo nací en Nicaragua el 1 de setiembre de 1944, 73 años. Vine a Costa Rica a los 9 años con mi mamá realicé mis primeros estudios en la escuela de niñas, mi secundaria entre el colegio diurno y nocturno me dediqué a dar clases informal en la casa, de inglés y francés, después al tiempo comencé a apoyar a los jóvenes en estudios sociales, matemáticas como tutora.

Trabajé con la familia Garrón fui nana de los Garrón, los Velázquez y los del Barco, fui nana de ellos que me consideran como su nana hasta la fecha. Trabajé con el señor del banco como ama de casa, banco de costa rica, trabajé por muchos años y después de ese ya me retiré de esos trabajos, apoyé a mi mama lavando ropa. (Dorothy Smith Wilson July 4th, 2017)

It was very interesting to find that the women interviewed who are alive could not see the contribution made through their hard work. While sad, it is not surprising that women's work for their children is not recognized and celebrated considered 'natural'. On the contrary, the children had no problem spelling out with pride what their mother did for them. In the previous discussion, I intentionally mentioned the profession of the children who narrated about their mothers in order to start demonstrating their contribution in human capital through the profession of their children.

Despite their meager income, and in most of the cases lots of children, sometimes raising these by themselves they produced for the province of Limon and the country at large teachers, nurses, meteorologist, mechanics, football players among others with their grandchildren soaring even higher. Their achievements included material gains like the purchasing of land and building their dreamed houses.

Retired teacher Beverly Francis shares how hard and lengthy it was for her mother to buy her piece of land. 'En 1961 ella compró un lote por la suma de 2500 colones en pueblo Nuevo de Limón a tipo polaco' (Beverly Francis Port Limón July 3rd, 2017). Beverly continues sharing that it took her mother 20 years to pay





for the land and that she would get very upset when people ask her to sell it after her hard work. The house was finally build and the one who is really enjoying it is Beverly along with her daughter and granddaughter.

Retired teacher Patricia Furtado interjecting in her mother's, speaks about the different works her mother did to be able to buy her house in Pueblo Nuevo.

She buy land in pueblo Nuevo. Well a sell chance, well my husband work but I work all the time. She used to work as a cook with Mariano Zuniga, Gourzong and a Spanish lady por el parquecito. During the time that she was building the house she worked in house as a domestic worker that included everything. I remember as she get her pay she used to go and pay, she go around Northern by Garrido to pay him, yes, and she used to go around seeking resources to buy, to trust board, to trust the zink and if she hear them pull down any house she gone, and she get any second hand board and things like those. Basically was her domestic work and sell chance. (Patricia Furtado June 15, 2017)

These narratives serve to show us how these women were determined to help themselves and their families through different types of informal work despite having a spouse, or companion in many cases. Despite the hardship, these women really enjoyed having financial independence. Based on the interviews all the women and their children spoke about how they felt to be working and earning an income. Mrs. Amy Hall Jackson shares how she really loved to work, and how she would even seek out work opportunities regionally and internationally. She shares,

(...) but you know like it didn't bother me because I was feeling strong and I really love to work , I love to cook I love to do everything so it really never bother me. And then from Bataan we move to limon, I come to limon and I start to work again, cook and I work, work wid chiney, I work with Spaniards but I didn't work wid no black, well I work wid Dr. Gourzong, the uncle I work wid him too and I work wid the father but they love it so much every time I go to leave they don't want me to leave when I come home they bring the car and bring me back. But the last time don Gourzong come he come fah me I told him ah not working anymore because I was going to the states but I did not stay long in the states because I really didn't like there and when I consider I leave my children with their father alone, and every time she write me I start to cry, so I have to come home because I didn't feel happy to leave them alone u know, so, I have to come home, so when I come home now it didn't bother me because I start to work. (Mrs. Amy Hall Jackson June 15, 2017)





Nurse Sharon Caar Watson says of her mother,

She stops baking a los 70s ella lo hacia por hobbie, to feel good that she doing something. Le gustaba ser independiente, she want to have her own. (Ms Sharon Carr Watson, July 9th, 2017)

Nurse Grace Cope Gordon comments that after her mother moved to live with her to help with her children she still found ways to earn some money by taking care of other children around the neighborhood. She shares,

(...) y pudo estar conmigo y me ayudó a cuidar a mis hijos y aun así cuando ella estaba, cuando después de los 60 años está muy sana y muy vigorosa, ella tenía esa pensión y aun así ella buscó qué hacer, no sólo cuidar a mis hijos y no sólo estar allí porque ella no podía estar sentada entonces ella empezó a cuidar a los hijos de varias de las vecinas y así ganaba plata de más. De hecho que por varios años casi como 17 años ella hizo eso cuando yo dije ya! De hecho ella murió a los 86, yo creo que dejo de cuidar chiquitos a los 78 por allí. (Grace Cope Gordon June 17, 2017)

Mrs. Barzilla comments that she does not like to depend on anybody, 'I don't have no pension, but a la mano de Dios'. She shares that she gets her income from renting two rooms she added on the house.

The women who are still alive are enjoying another achievement of their hard work. Today their children are there for them, including a steady income. The only one that speaks with a bit of regret is Mrs. Barsilla who comments that she was ignorant about how to go about to enjoy her late husband's pension. Today she lives off the rent of two of the rooms she added to her home that she lives in since 1961.

Ms. Amy is enjoying her former's husband pension and the loving care of her children. Today she lives with her daughter in San Jose due to old age and not being able to take care of herself in her house in Pueblo Nuevo in Port Limon. She shares with a bit of emotion,

It was so hard with me that I use to take flower sack to make underclothes, with a rubber slippers on my foot! It was hard but thank God today I am living, I don't falta nothing because my daughter take care for me. When the children get bigger it become a little easier, because I had to work to send them to school, because when them get big them could help themselves, until this child (hija) she married, she was going school in San José





afterwards she get married and I was so happy because she take care of me, take the best care of me. (Amy June 15, 2017)

Nurse Grace Cope Gordon says of her mother Nora, 'No tuvo seguro social, cuando llegó a cierta edad pudo obtener una pensión del gobierno de régimen contributivo, que se llama'. After she turned 60 years of age, she went to live with her daughter in San Jose until she died. She enjoyed her three grandchildren and other niceties of life. Sadly, Dorothy enjoys a pension due to the death of one of daughters who was a journalist. Ms. Jean also reports the good treatment from her daughter who works as an accountant at Japdeva who blessed her with four grandchildren that she adores.

Retired teacher Ms. Beverly Francis says of her mother Ms Kermith, 'disfruté en cuanto a seguro médico, se benefició del trabajo formal de su hijo para disfrutar del seguro social hasta el día de su muerte'. Beverly in a reflective mode concluded by saying 'hard work kill these women' (Beverly Francis July 4th, 2017).

Conclusion

The women of the study have demonstrated, different to the women referred to in Alison's song 'born with it', that they 'followed it', the tradition of work of their African and Caribbean female ancestors. Their lives were an interesting paradox navigating both the private and the public sphere due to their social and economic condition. This paradox affected them in having the double burden that resulted in exhaustion, frustration even for those having a married partner. I am arguing that probably not having much time for leisure.

The women took advantage of the knowledge and skills acquired within the patriarchal private sphere and capitalized on this to work, and to create work for themselves in the public sphere. They were involved in more than one type of informal work.

Based on the information gathered, 20th century Afro-Costa Rican women were involved in at least twelve categories of informal work that are divided in two main groups, the ones who offered their services and straddled their work between their home and the people who hired them. The ones who using their knowledge of health, teaching, cooking, sewing, baking, administration, and others could work at home, on their own, or open a business. It is in the latter group where we find more women represented.





Despite their grueling work, they loved having their own income because besides this helping to provide for their family especially their children, it gave them also a sense of independence, autonomy, and pride shown in the professional development and material wealth of their children and grandchildren.

Their meager wages help them to make an important contribution through their children to the human development of the province of 21st century Port Limon and by extension the Costa Rican society. Today the labour of these women have produced professionals in many fields and created respectable Limonenses, like the Gourzongs and Ms. Amy Hall's son football player of the 1970s, Reinaldo Furtado known as Reinaldo Mullins who was one of the first three²⁶ Afro-Limonenses according to his sister Patricia Furtado who played in the Heredia National team.

Having a husband did not hinder their zeal for working in the informal sector since in most of the cases both were categorized as working class individuals and needed the welcomed income. The women who are alive are reaping the sweets of their hard labor. They are enjoying not only a pension which was obtained by some through the death of their husbands, and for others obtained through the formal work of their children, along with good treatment and a quality of life they could only dream of while busy working and raising these who are giving them positive returns.

This finding helps not only to highlight the importance of the informal work within our society but more importantly to make visible the type of work working class women of African descent of the 20th century were involved in, their presence, courage, and determination to ensure a better life for themselves and especially their children. I would had to the popular phrase 'El trabajo dignifica', *el trabajo honesto dignifica*.

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26 The other two are Raymond Nelson and Wanchop.





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