

**Title:** Investigating the Role of Traditional Weaving Workshops in Reducing Gender Inequality and Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment

### **Introduction and background:**

In the Andean highlands of Peru, textile weaving has long been more than a craft. It is a language of heritage, resilience, and identity. The Quispicanchi province, located southeast of Cusco, is home to generations of artisans who preserve intricate weaving techniques rooted in pre-Columbian traditions. These skills, once primarily passed down through women within households, have evolved into a key source of income and empowerment for many families in rural areas.

My research took place in Andahuaylillas and surrounding communities, where the Quispicanchi Project supports local women through workshops that combine traditional weaving practices with modern economic opportunities. The project provided an avenue to explore a central question: *How do traditional weaving workshops reduce gender inequality and enhance women's economic empowerment in rural Peru?*

This study situates traditional weaving as both a cultural and economic practice that reshapes gender dynamics in local households. Understanding these relationships is essential for designing future community-based programs that value indigenous knowledge while supporting financial independence and education.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted using ethnographic fieldwork, which allowed for direct engagement with community members. I lived and worked in Andahuaylillas for several months, conducting interviews and participatory observations with women artisans who work in small, cooperative-style weaving workshops.

These workshops are community-run spaces where women gather to dye yarn, weave, and exchange knowledge. Conversations centered around each woman's personal motivations, family structure, and financial decision-making. Observations were complemented with photo documentation and informal discussions during daily activities, which provided insight into how weaving is integrated into everyday life.

This qualitative approach prioritized listening and collaboration rather than measurement. The research aimed not to quantify productivity but to understand the deeper social and emotional value of weaving, finding out what it means for women's roles, family aspirations, and generational continuity.

### **Findings and Discussion**

**A. Women as Primary Income Earners:** One of the most consistent findings across interviews was that weaving has transformed women into primary earners within their households. While their husbands often work in agriculture or construction, women's weaving income frequently covers essential family expenses such as food, school supplies, and healthcare. The men's earnings are typically directed toward long-term savings. This redistribution of financial responsibility has quietly reshaped gender roles. Women expressed pride in being able to contribute meaningfully to their families' well-being, describing weaving as

a source of stability. Economic empowerment, in this context, emerged not from external employment but from valuing women's traditional knowledge as a marketable skill.

*B. Education and Intergenerational Aspirations:* A recurring theme among participants was the desire to break the cycle of dependency and limited opportunity through education. Many women stated that their primary motivation for weaving was to secure funds for their children's university education. Although their children often help with small weaving tasks at home, most mothers do not wish for them to pursue weaving as a career. This duality of preserving tradition while aspiring to new futures illustrates a nuanced form of empowerment. Rather than rejecting heritage, these women are using it as a bridge toward academic and economic advancement for the next generation. It also raises questions about the sustainability of cultural transmission as economic priorities shift.

*C. The Social Fabric of Weaving Workshops:* Beyond economic benefit, weaving workshops fostered collective resilience and solidarity among women. Participants described their spaces as sources of emotional support and collaboration, where they share stories, teach younger artisans, and exchange advice on family matters. The workshops serve as informal networks that provide both income and community care. These findings highlight the interdependence between economic empowerment and social cohesion. The act of weaving sustains not only livelihoods but also relationships, traditions, and self-worth, which are elements that are often overlooked in policy-driven development initiatives.

### **Broader Implications:**

This project demonstrates that traditional crafts can serve as powerful tools for advancing gender equality and community resilience. In Quispicanchi, weaving is both an income-generating activity and a carrier of ancestral knowledge. Recognizing craft as a form of expertise challenges conventional definitions of innovation, often dominated by Western models of progress.

For development organizations and policymakers, these findings underscore the importance of investing in local skills and self-sustaining enterprises that prioritize women's leadership. Empowerment programs should not merely introduce external technologies or training but amplify the strengths already embedded within cultural systems.

From a broader academic lens, this project contributes to the growing intersection between engineering, design, and humanitarian studies. As a mechanical engineering student, this experience redefined how I view design, not only as a technical process but as a human-centered practice rooted in empathy, sustainability, and cultural respect.

### **Conclusion**

Through months of immersive research in Quispicanchi, I witnessed how weaving empowers women to reshape their families' futures and their communities' identities. While many hope their children will pursue academic paths, the act of weaving continues to symbolize strength, perseverance, and connection to heritage.

Ultimately, this project revealed that empowerment does not always stem from innovation alone, but instead it can emerge from recognizing the enduring value of traditional knowledge. The lessons I learned in Peru continue to inform my academic and professional

journey, guiding how I approach engineering and community engagement with humility and purpose.

## References

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