

Female leadership and challenges in climate change communication in Cusco

Liderazgo femenino y desafíos en la comunicación del cambio climático en Cusco

Liliana Norca Florez Mayta

Escuela de Posgrado, Maestría en Antropología Social.
Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad de Cusco
(UNSAAC). Cusco, Perú.
190110@unsaac.edu.pe
<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3663-3002>

Jesús José Solis Mora

Escuela Profesional de Antropología de la Universidad
Nacional de San Antonio Abad de Cusco. Cusco, Perú.
jesus.solis@unsaac.edu.pe
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9796-2630>

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the leadership and narratives of women communicators on climate change in the Cusco region of Peru. Using a qualitative thematic analysis approach, in depth interviews, life histories, and a focus group with members of the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network were employed. The results reveal that women's leadership emerges as a resilient response to a male-dominated media environment, consolidating itself through specialized training and collective action. It was identified that these communicators prioritize narratives of climate adaptation and social commitment, giving voice to affected communities in contrast to fatalistic approaches. However, their work is limited by economic barriers, the burden of domestic work, and discrimination such as sexism, ageism, and racism, linked to Andean identity. The most relevant conclusion is that women's leadership within the network not only democratizes environmental information but also constitutes an act of resistance and activism that transforms the unpaid gender niche into a space of political and social influence fundamental to the resilience of the Andean region.

Keywords: climate communication, women's leadership, climate change, Cusco, gender, communication for development.



Corresponding Author

Liliana Florez
190110@unsaac.edu.pe

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Resumen

Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar el liderazgo y las narrativas de las mujeres comunicadoras sobre el cambio climático en la región de Cusco, Perú. Desde un enfoque metodológico cualitativo de análisis temático, se emplearon entrevistas en profundidad, historias de vida y un grupo focal con integrantes de la Red de Comunicadores Ambientalistas de Cusco. Los resultados revelan que el liderazgo femenino emerge como una respuesta resiliente ante un entorno mediático masculinizado, consolidándose mediante la capacitación especializada y la acción colectiva. Se identificó que las comunicadoras priorizan narrativas de adaptación climática y compromiso social, otorgando voz a las comunidades afectadas frente a los enfoques fatalistas. No obstante, la labor se ve limitada por barreras económicas, la sobrecarga del trabajo doméstico y discriminaciones como el sexismo, edadismo y racismo, vinculadas a la identidad andina. La conclusión más relevante es que el liderazgo femenino en la red no solo democratiza la información ambiental, sino que constituye un acto de resistencia y activismo que transforma el nicho de género no remunerado en un espacio de incidencia política y social fundamental para la resiliencia de la región andina.

Palabras clave: comunicación climática, liderazgo femenino, cambio climático, Cusco, género, comunicación para el desarrollo.

Introduction

Climate change is widely recognized as one of the most pressing challenges of our era, demanding not only strategic action from governments and organizations but also a profound transformation in public consciousness. In this regard, communication emerges as a fundamental and valuable tool for driving this change. However, research on the role played by local women communicators—particularly from a gender perspective—remains limited in regions highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, such as Cusco. In the Cusqueño context, media outlets face severe job insecurity and an organizational culture that frequently relegates environmental issues because they are perceived as non-lucrative. This combination of climate vulnerability and intersectional discrimination within the media raises a central question: how does vital information about climate change manage to break through? This study precisely addresses that gap by examining the role of female communicators who, despite these adversities, have taken on a leading role in this field,

reporting on climate change and environmental issues for over 15 years.

Journalism in Cusco has historically been dominated by political and economic agendas, creating an environment with sparse specialization in ecological matters. Nevertheless, a key milestone in this process was the founding of the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network in 2010. Through specialized training and the promotion of collaboration, this initiative served as a catalyst for awareness and action. Within this network, women communicators demonstrated a commitment and leadership that goes beyond simple information dissemination, manifesting as a tangible activism that seeks to translate the complexities of climate change into an accessible and relevant language for the local public. The work of these communicators, however, faces multiple hurdles. Although academic training and direct contact with reality through interviews have equipped them with the tools for specialized

communication, a lack of financial resources and time presents a recurring challenge that prevents them from traveling to the actual sites where environmental events occur. This limitation forces them to conduct their interviews within the city, creating a gap between the intent of field journalism and the operational reality of their work, which in turn hinders deep-dive reporting on environmental issues.

The objective of this research was to analyze the leadership of women in climate change communication within the Cusco region, exploring the structural barriers they face and the resistance strategies they implement to build participatory environmental narratives with a strong social commitment.

Literature Review

This research is grounded in the principles of Communication for Development (C4D), an approach that promotes dialogue and participation to generate sustainable social changes (Servaes, 2012)—a theoretical framework that moves away from the unidirectional model of information dissemination. C4D, in its variant of popular communication, postulates that social change must be a participatory dialogue that empowers communities; for Kaplún (1998), true communication is not that which “dictates” a message, but that which helps people think for themselves and act upon their environment.

Furthermore, as Beltrán (1981) affirms, it is fundamental to conceive communication as a two-way interactive dynamic where feedback and dialogue transform information into a process of mutual construction. Communication for development takes into account both parties involved in the communicative process and aims for social and political advocacy by facilitating access to information and knowledge, promoting participation, empowering and giving a voice to excluded individuals, and influencing public policies (Asociación de Comunicadores Sociales & Swiss Cooperation COSUDE, 2021). By giving a voice to those affected, the women communicators in this study

aligned themselves with this approach, even though their capacity to generate dialogue was conditioned by economic challenges.

On the other hand, the need for specialized journalism in environmental matters is evident. All participants stated that specialization is fundamental to gaining authority and credibility with the audience. This finding directly aligns with the position of Shanahan (2007), who argues that the complexity of climate change demands specialized knowledge that goes beyond general journalism. However, a fundamental contradiction arises: despite the importance of this specialization, the communicators perceive that it does not offer financial remuneration comparable to other fields, such as political or daily news journalism.

Given that women are the ones who report most heavily on climate change, they face the added challenge of domestic labor. Findings from UN Women (2018) highlight the limitations that domestic work imposes on women’s professional development, a statement that coincides with the findings of this research, where women communicators are responsible for housework and family care—even going so far as to leave their jobs to dedicate themselves entirely to childcare, a fact that restricts their professional performance.

Finally, the study found that male communicators, especially younger ones, avoid environmental journalism because it is not lucrative. This is a critical point, as they relegate this field to female communicators, creating a sort of unpaid gender niche where women are pushed toward environmental, social, or entertainment topics, while men reserve for themselves political topics, which are profitable.

Methodology

Approach and Design

This research was developed using a qualitative approach centered on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This design allowed for a deductive exploration of the phenomenon, applying prede-

defined theoretical categories to examine the empirical data. Additionally, the study is descriptive and explanatory, oriented toward characterizing the work of women communicators and untangling the sociopolitical dynamics that define their practice.

Participants and Sampling

The unit of analysis consisted of the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network. A non-probability, purposive sampling method was employed to select a sample of nine informants: six women and three men. These members of the network were chosen to compare their routines and experiences within the communicative labor field. This sample was specifically selected because while the network comprises both men and women, women constitute the predominant population. The inclusion criteria centered on their demonstrated leadership in environmental matters.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure the validity of the findings, a triangulation of techniques was applied:

- In-Depth Interviews: Conducted in 2023 using an interview guide to explore subjectivities and professional trajectories.
- Life Histories: Conducted in 2023 using a life history guide to understand the construction of professional and gender identities.
- Focus Group: Administered in 2023 via a moderation guide to analyze collective narratives and consensus within the network.
- Participant Observation: Carried out in the advocacy spaces of the communicators, utilizing a field diary throughout 2023.

Processing and Analysis

The information analysis was governed by the systematic steps of thematic analysis. The processing of empirical data and the subsequent

construction of categories were executed using ATLAS.ti software. This analytical procedure was transversally articulated with the theoretical frameworks of Communication for Development (C4D) and the Gender Perspective.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to the principles of beneficence and autonomy. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of all sensitive information.

Resultados

El estudio cualitativo, mediante el análisis temático, permitió estructurar un modelo conceptual que explica la dinámica del liderazgo femenino en la comunicación climática de Cusco. Este fenómeno no se presenta de forma aislada, sino como un proceso resiliente que surge de la intersección entre un entorno mediático adverso y la capacidad de agencia colectiva de las comunicadoras.

As illustrated in the conceptual model, the leadership of women communicators is heavily conditioned by structural barriers such as job insecurity, gender discrimination, and the burden of unpaid domestic labor. These factors act as constraints that hinder professional development within conventional media. However, in the face of this outlook, an institutional resilience emerges—strengthened by training and public presence—which is reflected in the testimony of Mariana, a communicator who states:

"When there was talk of forming this group of press men and women [...] we didn't need anything, it was in our hands; we just needed to train ourselves a bit because environmental language is different." (Mariana, personal interview, February 16, 2023).

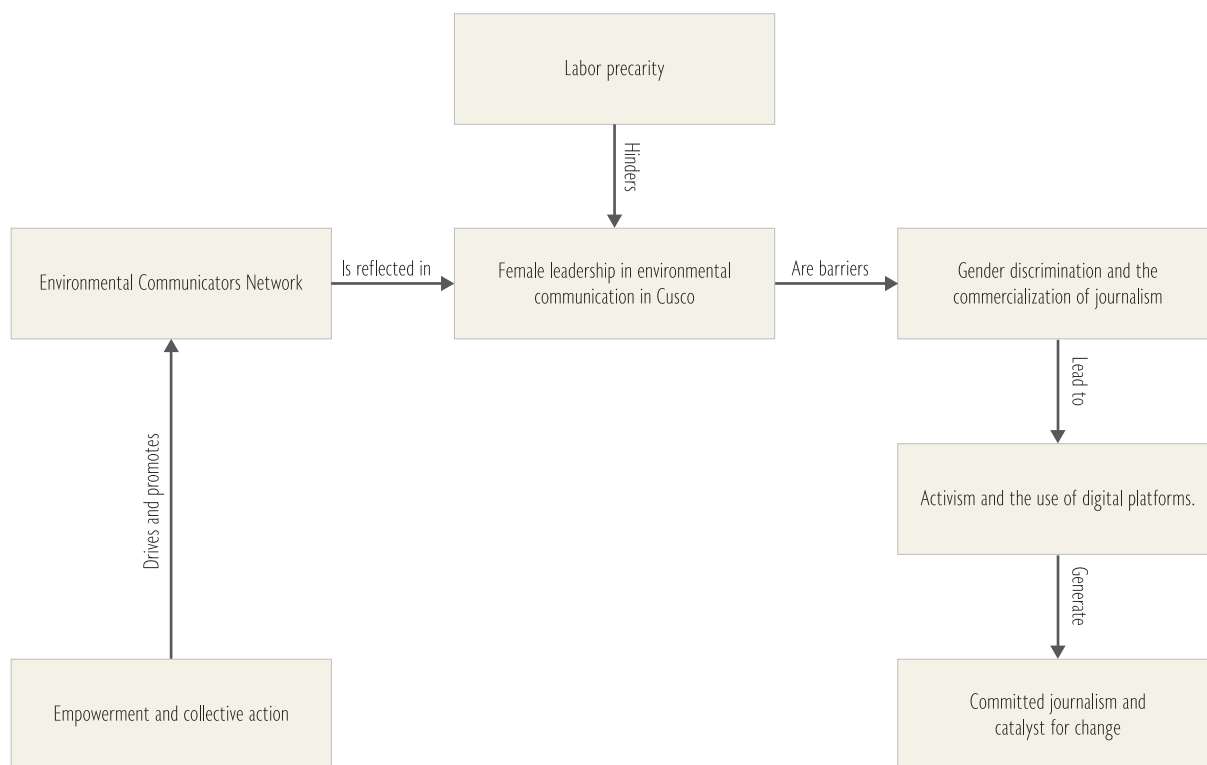


Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of Female Leadership in Environmental and Climate Communication in Cusco

The model identifies the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network as the primary driving factor. The network functions as a space for support and empowerment, where collective solidarity allows for the development of resistance strategies—such as digital activism and the creation of independent content—to guarantee the sustainability of their work.

The identified leadership actions transform the practice of journalism, moving it away from sensationalism to prioritize the voices of affected communities. This ethical commitment positions women communicators as agents of social change, where prestige and public trust become an alternative form of power against the commercialization of local journalism:

“Journalism is a tool that reaches the population; it also gives you power because leaders, authorities, and people look for you [...] you cannot betray or disappoint the expectations they have of you.” (Mariana, personal interview, February 16, 2023).

In synthesis, the emerging theory explains how female agency and networking successfully transform a precarious labor niche into a space of fundamental political advocacy for climate resilience in the Andean region.

To understand in depth how this female leadership emerged, the research findings are divided into the following seven themes:

1. Climate and Environmental Awareness and Action Among Women Communicators

The results demonstrate that the environmental awareness of these women communicators is not an innate trait, but rather a process constructed through specialized training and cultural identity. The Environmental Communicators Network acted as the primary catalyst for this commitment, allowing initial unfamiliarity to transform into media advocacy work:

“Before, we didn’t know about these issues... with that training, we started to invite guests,

to talk, and to try to make environmental issues known in the media, especially adaptation.” (Sayri, personal interview, April 18, 2023).

This transition toward specialized journalism was further reinforced by postgraduate academic training. The fact that five of the participants completed a master’s degree in climate change evidences that professionalization is a major driver of communicative agency. As one participant relates:

“...my master’s degree is what helped me a lot [...] it’s like you choose and embrace a cause.” (Micaela, personal interview, February 15, 2023).

This level of specialization, shared alongside biologists and other scientists, allowed the communicators to grasp the severity of the water and climate crisis from a solid technical foundation.

However, the commitment is not only intellectual but also deeply emotional and territorial. The testimonies highlight that cultural heritage and rural roots are key factors in their identity as defenders of the environment:

“I grew up with my parents; they passed down the language to me, the customs, the love for animals, the love for plants.” (María, personal interview, February 13, 2023).

For these communicators, this “love for Mother Earth” represents an inherited ethical mandate that links them to the defense of the “common home.” Thus, their leadership is sustained by a balance between acquired scientific knowledge and an Andean worldview (cosmovisión andina) that infuses their reporting with a sense of urgency and profound purpose.

2. Framing of Climate Change and Environmental Coverage

The research reveals a narrative approach that prioritizes the humanization of the climate crisis.

While women communicators utilize official sources, their work is distinguished by placing “everyday citizens” and the scientific community at the center of the story. This methodological choice aims to foster audience identification, intentionally breaking away from rigid, institutional jargon.

However, a critical gap persists between professional intent and operational reality. Although the Communication for Development (C4D) framework demands direct, on-the-ground dialogue within the territory, economic precarity imposes severe physical limits:

“I try to focus [...] on the residents, on everyday people [...] to generate audience identification [...] but it comes down to time and budget; you have to hire transport, and it is not easy to afford that with what you earn as a journalist.” (Tomas, personal interview, July 23, 2023).

This lack of resources prevents travel to high-impact zones, forcing communicators to centralize their interviews within the city of Cusco. This financial constraint does not merely impact logistics; it directly restricts the depth of field journalism, which is deemed essential for both professional learning and public awareness:

“My colleagues will only learn by going out into the field and seeing it [...] to truly understand why disasters happen.” (Basilía, personal interview, April 25, 2023).

Consequently, the reporting of climate change in the region exists in a state of constant tension: on one hand, an ethical commitment to amplify the voices of rural communities, and on the other, a precarious media structure that confines journalistic labor to urban spaces, curtailing the transformative potential of their narratives.

3. Media Platforms and Professional Challenges

The findings reveal a clear preference among women communicators for radio broadcasting due to its widespread accessibility and low cost, con-

firming its role as the most democratic medium in the Andean region. For the participants, radio is not merely an information channel but a space of “enchantment” and emotional connection that allows global challenges to be translated into local realities (Santillan, 2015).

This ongoing relevance of radio aligns with the theories of Alfaro (1993), who argues that radio in Peru has historically functioned as a platform for public recognition among working-class and marginalized sectors. As one participant states:

“Radio is the most popular medium because it reaches furthest, it provides company, and it sparks the imagination.” (Micaela, personal interview, February 15, 2023).

The radio work produced by members of the network is characterized by a flexible structure that allows for live dialogue—an element that Kaplún (1998) defines as “transformative communication,” where the listener stops being a passive recipient and becomes a central protagonist in the environmental discourse.

However, the study identifies a structural contradiction: even though specialization is vital to gaining authority and credibility, environmental journalism in Cusco lacks fair financial remuneration. As one of the communicators explains:

“You have to secure advertising yourself, and that advertising is what pays for your work [...]. Public and private institutions do not easily give advertising slots to specialized programs [...] because they look for programs with commercial ratings.” (Mariana, personal interview, February 16, 2023).

The lack of institutional advertising revenue for environmental programming exposes a “commodification of public attention,” where educational content is consistently displaced by profitable entertainment. Confronted with this, women communicators have turned to self-management (autogestión) as a means of professional survival. They increasingly attempt to leverage digital

tools to maintain the editorial independence that conventional media limits; however, fully mastering and exploiting digital platforms remains an ongoing hurdle for them.

4. Knowledge of Environmental Policies and Solution-Oriented Framing

The results reveal that these women communicators possess specialized knowledge regarding the regional regulatory framework. A key finding is their command of information concerning the Regional Climate Change Strategy (Giusti, 2017) and the operations of the Regional Climate Change Council (CORECC), of which they are active members. However, a critical gap persists between policy formulation and its actual implementation across local territories:

“We have the regional strategy [...] they are updating it, but municipal governments are simply not following up or monitoring it.” (Mariana, focus group, July 12, 2023).

Faced with this regulatory non-compliance, the communicators assume a citizen oversight and watchdog role. Their journalistic practice deliberately steers away from fatalistic or purely descriptive narratives, focusing instead on adaptation and resilience while actively pressuring authorities to enforce environmental laws. This approach directly aligns with the perspective of Shanahan (2007), who argues that climate journalism must offer actionable tools for engagement rather than inducing paralysis through fear.

For the participants, environmental communication is an exercise in ethical responsibility:

“...there is a lack of responsibility, education, public policies, and an urgent need for each of us to truly step up and play our part.” (María, focus group, July 12, 2023).

Consequently, the network’s efforts transcend the daily news cycle to become a platform for political pedagogy, translating the technical complexities of environmental legislation into concrete

social demands to optimize the resilience of the Cusco population against climate emergencies.

5. Communication, Gender, and the Challenges of the Professional Woman

The research unveils deep structural barriers where sexism, ageism, and systemic racism intersect against Andean-identified women communicators. The findings show that the local media environment is not only heavily masculinized but also exerts symbolic violence regarding the physical appearance, age, and ethnic background of female professionals.

A critical finding is the persistence of racial prejudice within official media spaces, such as press conferences, where the use of the Quechua language or traditional clothing remains a trigger for marginalization. The derogatory term “Hualaychu”—historically used to disqualify and demean indigenous Quechua communicators—surges in the testimonies as a prominent marker of exclusion. Nevertheless, faced with this systemic hostility, the communicators exercise a fierce cultural resistance:

“Someone approached me and said: ‘How can you show up like that [...] with your braids? You need to fit in.’ [...] I looked right at them and said: ‘My vicuña shawl costs 500 dollars, enjoy looking at it. I will come to this conference however I please and I will wear my cultural identity symbols.’” (Mariana, personal communication, life history, March 13, 2023).

This act of reclamation demonstrates that traditional attire is not a mere accessory, but a deliberate political tool used to claim authority in spaces that actively attempt to erase or minimize their presence.

Furthermore, the study confirms the severe impact of the “double burden” of labor, which strictly caps their professional growth. Echoing the findings of UN Women (2018), participants report that the unequal distribution of domestic care

work routinely forces them to stall their careers or limit their journalistic output:

“No matter if a man is a journalist, he isn’t going to cook, he isn’t going to wash [...] that is the main difficulty for a woman in journalism.” (Mariana, personal interview, February 16, 2023).

Finally, widespread economic precarity generates a stark gender paradox: while male journalists benefit from professional camaraderie facilitated by exclusive male social spaces, economic survival forces independent female journalists into fierce competition for scarce advertising slots. Despite this, female leadership within the network successfully subverts parts of this dynamic, transforming a historically “unpaid gender niche” into a unified front for political advocacy and collective solidarity.

6. Commercialization of Journalism and Gender Challenges

The research identifies that the absolute commercialization (mercantilización) of journalism in Cusco represents one of the most prominent ethical and professional barriers for reporters. A complete institutional dependence on advertising revenue has shifted the social mission of communication toward a profit-driven business logic, where environmental topics are systematically sidelined because they are perceived as non-lucrative. This dynamic has triggered an invasive encroachment of corporate interests into editorial pipelines:

“The majority are just doing business; they have commercialized it [...]. This is a noble profession meant to achieve justice and channel social issues; it is not meant for getting rich.” (Micaela, focus group, July 12, 2023).

This commercial landscape generates a stark gender paradox: male communicators, particularly those with longer career trajectories, deliberately avoid environmental journalism due to its low profitability. Consequently, a structural

“unpaid gender niche” has formed. Within this niche, women willingly assume the heavy lifting of environmental activism and climate reporting driven by ethical conviction, while men reserve for themselves the well-funded, lucrative spaces of political and economic journalism.

This constant tension between professional ethics and basic economic survival is vividly captured in the words of a male colleague cited by one of the participants:

“If I’m going to spend my time thinking about ethics, I’m going to starve to death.” (Máxima, personal interview, February 14, 2023).

As a result, women communicators face a compounding precarity: they endure a lack of income for covering ecological issues while simultaneously bearing the pressure of a media system that actively penalizes editorial independence in favor of commercial ratings.

7. The Network as a Catalyst for Empowerment and Collective Action

Faced with this systemic exclusion and commercialization, the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network emerges as the definitive factor securing the sustainability of female leadership. Officially founded on July 7, 2010, with support from the National Service of Natural Areas Protected by the State (SERNANP), this organization has served as a critical “safe space” where specialized technical training and mutual support have empowered women to spearhead the regional environmental agenda for over 15 years.

The research demonstrates that the network operates under a clear framework of volunteerism and autonomy, which, paradoxically, constitutes its greatest political strength:

“Now there are networks everywhere, but ours was first... there were far more women involved, and that gave it an incredible push. And that is exactly how it was built.” (Basilia, personal interview, April 25, 2023).

Empowerment within this network is not merely an individual milestone; it represents a collective agency that manifests as active resistance against a lack of funding. By remaining entirely independent of commercial sponsorships that would otherwise restrict or compromise their output, these communicators preserve the editorial freedom required to exercise their oversight and watchdog roles.

Backed by a dedicated core of 20 to 30 active members, the network’s deep vocation for public service transforms traditional communication into a tangible act of political activism. Ultimately, the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network stands as a landmark model of institutional resilience. It has successfully subverted an underfunded gender niche into a powerful platform for political advocacy, intertwining Andean identity and ethical commitment to democratize climate information across southern Peru.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that women communicators in Cusco do not merely report on events; they apply what Puleo (2011) terms an ethics of care, wherein the protection of nature functions as a direct extension of safeguarding life and family. This leadership is built upon a foundation of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988); that is, these professionals do not speak from abstract theory, but from their own Andean identity and lived experiences within the territory. By occupying a professional space that male journalists abandon due to its lack of profitability, these women validate systems of knowledge that the dominant media ecosystem ignores—a phenomenon that Santos and Meneses (2014) define as Epistemologies of the South. Through this process, they transform environmental journalism into a vital tool for resistance and social justice across the region.

Besides, the results reveal a definitive preference among both female and male communicators for radio broadcasting as the primary vehicle for disseminating information on climate change and environmental issues. This preference is dri-

ven by its high accessibility, which serves as a critical asset in a resource-limited context. As noted by Santillan (2015), radio possesses an immense potential to bridge massive global challenges, like climate change, with immediate local realities. Its low operational cost and capacity to penetrate remote rural areas make it an indispensable tool for environmental communication in Cusco. Conversely, television presents significantly higher financial and human resource barriers, strictly limiting the ability of independent communicators to maintain regular programming.

Regarding the role of specialized training in fostering climate awareness and action, the findings strongly align with Shanahan (2007), who emphasizes the urgent need for journalists to receive targeted education to effectively navigate the complexities of the climate crisis. Similarly, institutional efforts by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB, 2022 and 2024) reinforce this necessity through their published guidelines designed to assist journalists in framing climate change topics accurately.

Once this heightened awareness is achieved, the communicators' commitment manifests dynamically through volunteerism and climate activism, translating directly into the production of radio spots and the persistent grassroots diffusion of environmental issues.

Finally, in analyzing the communicators' knowledge of climate change policies and their perceptions of policy effectiveness, the study yields a significant baseline: the vast majority—comprising six women and two men—are fully familiar with the Regional Climate Change Strategy of Cusco. However, they unanimously agree that this regulatory framework is entirely unfulfilled in practice. In contrast, only one male communicator lacked deep, specialized knowledge of this regional strategy.

Furthermore, the results highlight that these women communicators focus their messaging directly on adaptation, mitigation, and policies that promote concrete actions. This finding is parti-

cularly relevant when considering the necessity, emphasized by Shanahan (2007), for climate communication to distance itself from fatalistic discourses and center heavily on solutions. They explicitly understand that their professional and ethical responsibility is to keep the climate crisis on the public agenda to exert pressure on local authorities. The empowerment of these women is vividly evidenced by this deep, operational knowledge of climate change.

This perspective directly interfaces with a study by Alegre (2022), which concludes that regional environmental policies often exist “on paper, but are not applied in practice.” This chronic gap between legal frameworks and operational reality demands a strategic communication approach. Here, the work of Weibel (2021), which highlights the importance of communication adapted to the localized context of Cusco, takes on special meaning. Knowing this disconnection between policy design and local execution firsthand puts these women communicators in a unique position to construct narratives that do not merely inform, but actively catalyze local mobilization. Despite systemic escepticism regarding compliance, the officialization of the Regional Strategy Against Climate Change (ERFCC) to 2050, presented in Cusco, provides an official, long-term regulatory framework that these communicators can utilize to audit and hold public authorities accountable. In this sense, the work of these professionals becomes essential to guarantee that public policies do not remain dead letters, but are instead widely disseminated and translated into effective, real-world measures to confront the climate crisis across the region.

On the other hand, despite their demonstrated leadership in environmental journalism, these women must constantly navigate a professional ecosystem deeply marred by sexism and structural discrimination. This sexism manifests both subtly and overtly. A notable finding is the presence of economic competition among women for scarce advertising slots, a phenomenon that stands in stark contrast to the casual camaraderie observed among male communicators, who,

as one participant noted, “play soccer or meet up, have drinks, and are all friends” (Tomasá, personal interview, July 23, 2023). Rather than an inherent gender division, this dynamic is driven by extreme labor precarity, which forces independent female journalists to operate as isolated micro-entrepreneurs competing for highly limited survival resources.

Gender-based discrimination within Cusco’s media landscape is also heavily weaponized through the sexualization of female communicators, whose professional value is routinely reduced to physical appearance, reinforcing beauty stereotypes as documented by Eyzaguirre (2022). The participants emphasize that the intellectual capacity of women is systematically disregarded, leading to a pervasive lack of respect within their own workplaces. This environment is further compounded by overlapping vectors of oppression: ethnic-racial discrimination, classist lookism (*aparentismo*), ageism, and severe prejudice against traditional attire. This is starkly illustrated in the painful testimony of María, who was publicly humiliated with the derogatory term “Walaychu” by an institutional authority figure:

“I have endured plenty of mockery from colleagues, many humiliations and insults. Like the time an authority figure from the College of Journalists saw me at a press conference in the Wanchaq district and said: ‘What is this Walaychu doing here?’ He asked, ‘What, are there Indians or peasants in Wanchaq? What is she doing here interviewing people? There are no peasants here, what is this Walaychu doing here?’” (María, personal interview, February 13, 2023).

María’s experience demonstrates that discrimination in Cusco’s journalism sector is intersectional, occurring where racism, machismo, and lookism converge. This structural hostility severely restricts Andean women from fully exercising their right to occupy public and professional spaces. As Marisol de la Cadena (1991) observes, women in Andean society bear a disproportionate burden of ethnic discrimination because their bodies, clothing, and cultural identities are policed with greater severity.

María’s story highlights the oppressive dynamics faced by Andean women in the media; challenging these discriminatory narratives is an urgent step toward ensuring the participation and leadership of Andean women.

Furthermore, the study exposes the barrier of unpaid domestic labor. The communicators navigate internalized gender roles that saddle them with exclusive responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and family care. This aligns with findings from UN Women (2018) highlighting how the unequal distribution of domestic work restricts women’s professional advancement. The communicator Mariana serves as a clear example: she stepped away from her career for eight full years to dedicate herself to childcare, directly altering her professional trajectory. This systemic entrapment is a cornerstone of feminist critique, echoing authors like Beauvoir (1949) and Pastizzi et al. (1990), who emphasize that entry into the labor market does not liberate women from the domestic sphere; rather, it superimposes a double workday.

Despite navigating this minefield of gender bias, financial scarcity, and domestic burdens, their role in environmental journalism remains vital. The voices of these women are powerful precisely because their lived experiences allow them to give a human face to climate change. Their work transcends simple news reporting; it is an act of resistance and a pathway toward collective empowerment, establishing an unassailable professional credibility that defies the structural limitations of the traditional media system.

Finally, the hyper-commercialization of journalism stands as a central crisis for these professionals. Independent programming relies entirely on advertising revenue, transforming a civic service into a pure business model. This reality subjugates editorial integrity to the interests of corporate and political funders—a finding that mirrors the research of Nieto (2022). The communicator Micaela expressed this systemic decay with deep regret: “The majority are just doing business; they have commercialized it [...] that is not journalism [...] this is a noble profession [...] it is not meant for

profit, it is not meant for selling out your editorial line.” This perpetual tension between professional ethics and basic economic survival defines the daily reality of journalism in Cusco.

The material working conditions of these women solidify their vulnerability. With monthly salaries fluctuating between a meager 1,000 and 2,500 Peruvian soles, and workdays routinely stretching up to 14 hours, their labor precarity is undeniable. While earning a wage is a fundamental pillar of female autonomy, Fraser (2015) critically warns that labor market integration under contemporary capitalism is insufficient if it is not accompanied by a structural reorganization of social support systems. In this regard, data from UN Women (2018) back this premise, pointing out that women not only face greater barriers to entering the formal labor market, but when they do succeed, they often do so under conditions of high precarity and without the necessary guarantees to achieve real economic independence.

In this context, the selection of journalistic beats is also directly affected. The study found that male communicators, particularly younger ones, deliberately avoid environmental journalism because it is not lucrative. This is a critical point, as they relegate this field to female communicators, creating a sort of unpaid gender niche.

This dynamic is highly consistent with what the literature terms horizontal gender segregation in the media, a global phenomenon documented by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2021). The GMMP evidences that men tend to concentrate in the politics, economy, and sports sections—areas structurally associated with higher status and profitability—while women are frequently displaced toward social, cultural, or environmental coverage, which typically suffers from greater precarity and fewer allocated resources.

This reality underscores the double burden that female communicators face: on one hand, their deep commitment to a vital cause like climate change; on the other, the pressure of a market that does not financially value this labor. The re-

search also revealed that the lack of profitability in environmental journalism directly impacts professional ethics.

The work of these communicators, when addressing systemic issues such as those highlighted by Pongo (2019) regarding the necessity of green taxes, is absolutely crucial for society. However, their capacity to advocate and generate tangible change is strictly bottlenecked by the hyper-commercialization of journalism and the rigid gender roles that persist within the media industry. The lack of a sustainable business model for environmental reporting in traditional media forces these professionals to seek alternative avenues, confirming that the struggle for sustainability is not merely environmental, but deeply professional and economic.

The Cusco Environmental Communicators Network has been fundamental to the empowerment of its members, especially women, who have led the organization since its inception just over 15 years ago. The Network is not merely a group of professionals; it is a space for personal and collective growth that has directly influenced the work of its members.

As the communicator Micaela stated, participation in the Network has required them to push far beyond their individual work:

“I necessarily had to conduct workshops, participate in major events as a Network, and establish an institutional presence.”

This proactivity has strengthened their capabilities, enabling them to become key speakers at prominent regional climate forums, such as the Interclimas.

The collective effort within the Network has generated a tangible environmental commitment among these women communicators. Through continuous training and constant meetings, they have successfully consolidated a shared group vision that translates into a coherent media agenda focused squarely on climate change.

This alignment mirrors the research of Santillan (2015), which underscores the vital importance of organizing and fostering dialogue among local communication networks to effectively bring environmental issues to the public eye.

In essence, the network serves as a clear example of how coordinated group work is key to keeping climate and environmental issues on the media agenda and achieving a real impact on society. The deep commitment of its members has been essential for over 15 years, proving that shared enthusiasm and ethical conviction can drive meaningful change. To confront the sheer complexity of climate change, collective coordination (*articulación grupal*) is no longer just an option; it is an absolute necessity for achieving effective and sustained public awareness.

Conclusion

This study yields several critical conclusions regarding the intersection of gender, environmental journalism, and structural precarity in the southern Peruvian Andes:

First, female leadership in environmental communication across Cusco is not an innate or spontaneous individual trait; rather, it is a process of collective construction spearheaded and sustained by the Cusco Environmental Communicators Network. The Network has functioned effectively as an incubator for “climate literacy” and collective empowerment, enabling these women to successfully transition from empirical, general news reporting to highly specialized journalism. This leadership is robustly demonstrated by the communicators’ ability to maintain a consistent regional climate agenda for over 15 years, completely independent of institutional financial incentives.

Second, the research demonstrates that women communicators have deliberately shifted away from fatalistic climate narratives, pivoting instead toward humanized, solution-oriented frameworks centered on adaptation. By consciously prioritizing the voices of everyday citizens and personal life histories over rigid, top-down official jargon, their prac-

tice aligns seamlessly with the core principles of Communication for Development (C4D). This methodological choice does not merely democratize technical scientific data; it translates a global ecological crisis into the localized vernacular of the Andean worldview (*cosmovisión andina*), embedding respect for *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) as a core ethical pillar of their journalistic practice.

Third, a structural revelation of this study is the identification of an “unpaid gender niche” within Cusco’s media ecosystem. While male communicators systematically prioritize political and economic beats due to their commercial profitability and higher social status, environmental journalism has been largely abandoned and effectively delegated to women. Driven by an ethics of conviction, these female professionals have filled the void. This feminization of the environmental beat exposes a deeply flawed media architecture that systematically undervalues sustainability issues, segregating them into the realm of unpaid social care and volunteer activism—roles historically and unfairly associated with the feminine sphere.

Fourth, the study reveals that the professional practice of Andean women in the media is marked by a triple burden of discrimination: gender-based (sexism), social (job insecurity), and ethnic-racial (racism and ageism). The accounts regarding traditional dress and the use of Quechua demonstrate that female leadership in Cusco is, in itself, an act of cultural resistance. The persistence of the burden of domestic work remains the primary structural constraint preventing women from fully realizing their professional careers in field journalism. However, this finding raises limitations that open avenues for future research. As this study focuses on the Cusco region and is primarily qualitative in nature, it is suggested that future studies adopt mixed-methods or comparative approaches at the macro-regional level to quantify the economic impact of this triple discrimination.

Furthermore, future research should explore how public gender parity policies and internal protocols within regional media outlets are address-

sing—or ignoring—the ethnic and care-related intersectionality that affects Andean women journalists.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used (Google version, May 2026) to verify the availability, currency,

and web links of the cited bibliographic references. Following this process, the author manually reviewed, corrected, and edited the content, assuming full responsibility for the scientific rigor and accuracy of the data presented in the article.

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