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# The Impact of Improved Rural Roads on Gender Relations in Peru

Ana Bravo

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*The Andean region of Peru covers over one third of the country's territory and contains about 30% of its total population. Development is constrained by both natural and non-natural barriers, especially in rural areas. Geographic isolation, difficult mountainous terrain, high costs associated with improving transport infrastructure, deficient services, and intermediate means of transport limit the mobility of the rural poor as well as their access to basic services and utilities. Illiteracy rates are high in rural areas; the rate for women (28.2%) is 3 times that of men*

*(9.1%). Responsible de facto for family life activities (education, health, food, recreation, child-care, family relations, etc) and increasingly sharing productive and management roles with men, rural women carry a significant workload. The impact of improved rural roads on gender relations in the Peruvian Andes is highlighted in the present paper, with a focus on the example of the Rural Roads Program. Recommendations are made for more gender-sensitive policy programs in the transport sector.*



## The importance of mobility for women

Experience has shown that roads alone do not have a great impact on poverty alleviation. Transport infrastructure programs now pay greater attention to affordable transport services and intermediate means of transportation, components that are considered important in providing mobility for the poor, especially in rural areas (Figure 1). But there are additional lessons to be learned in the transport sector. An efficient and equitable strategy of poverty reduction must be based on a full understanding of the gendered nature of poverty. The transport burden faced by women contributes to poverty in terms of time. Lack of time is a key constraint on the ability of women to build their assets and reduce their vulnerability. By reducing the burden of transport, development projects can increase women's productivity and income and also enhance their assets. This would also give women more time to rest, enjoy social life, and participate in community activities. Fernando and Porter (2002) found that facilitating mobility can empower women to gain greater control over their own lives by increasing their access to markets and their exposure to education, training, and information and by offering them more opportunities for political participation.

**FIGURE 1** Access to markets and mobility are made possible for isolated communities in rural areas by infrastructure such as this railway line in Izcuchaca, Peru. (Photo by author)





**FIGURE 2** A local woman uses a rehabilitated rural road to do household work in Huancavelica. (Photo by author)

### The Rural Roads Program in Peru

After an initial 4-year phase of the Rural Roads Program, a study was carried out to assess the role that rehabilitated rural roads and paths have played in providing women with the resources to meet their practical needs. Three Andean communities were chosen for the study: Súcota (Cutervo Province, Cajamarca), Hampatura (Yanaoca Province, Cuzco), and Huallhua (Tayacaja Province, Huancavelica). The study took account of women's multiple economic and social roles and responsibilities including production, reproduction, household management, community management, and maintenance of social infrastructure.

Women and men have different roles in Andean culture. Although family life activities are shared by both sexes, the burden is unbalanced. Women are responsible for taking care of children and household management, whereas men have responsibility for protecting the family. Women make decisions related to their assigned roles. But having different roles does not constitute inequity in itself. Inequity results when some tasks are held in lower esteem than others. Women's household tasks have a low status in many parts of the Andean region, although this is not true everywhere.

Even where men and women work together in productive activities, men make the decisions. Women's decision-

making capacities depend on land ownership, their level of education, and the extent of their participation in community organizations. According to the Farming National Census (1999), in 1994 79.7% of landowners were men and only 20.3% women.

### Did the Rural Roads Program change gender relations?

#### Household management

Improved roads have reduced traveling time related to marketing tasks (Figure 2). But except in Huancavelica, where men have started to assume some family responsibilities such as taking their children to health services or attending family planning programs, rehabilitated roads have had no influence in persuading men to share additional tasks with their female partners.

#### Health services

Improved roads have reduced the traveling time involved in accessing health services. But the unaffordable prices of medicine discourage women from using these services. The present study showed that men had a higher rate of access to health services (17%) than did women (10%). Men often have control over cash resources, and women's health needs are not considered a high priority in Andean households. This could be because of the

**FIGURE 3** Woman working on the road as a member of a rural road maintenance microenterprise in Cuzco. (Photo by author)

inequity that results from the low status of women's roles. Nonetheless, the number of men attending family planning programs in Huancavelica has increased.

### Education

The gap between young men and women in enrolment in secondary education has been reduced (although not strikingly), especially in rural areas. Improved roads have made it easier and faster to reach school. In terms of access to technical and undergraduate education, however, there was no change in the gap between males and females after the Rural Roads Program. In the highlands, where economic resources are scarce, only men have an opportunity to continue education.

### Access to markets

Road rehabilitation has led to an increasing number of women visiting markets, either to sell their produce or buy other products. It has also increased productive roles among women because the number of women stockpiling their produce is now comparable to that of men. Women's ability to reach distant markets is limited by the scarcity of services, the perishable nature of their produce, the quantity of goods, and the fact that they have to take their children along. Time is another constraint because they cannot afford to be away from home for too long.

### Seasonal jobs

Improved roads have also facilitated transport services and, as a consequence, seasonal migration among young people. During the months when agricultural labor is at a minimum (June to August) and during school holidays (January to March), both adults and young men and women migrate in search of harvesting jobs, to labor in the mines, or to work as domestic servants. The migrants have traditionally been men, but this is slowly changing. In the study areas, 21% of the families interviewed stated that more young men now migrate on their own, whereas 15% cited more migrants among adults and young men, and 15% among young women, often single. Economic activity by young women is being recog-



nized as bringing social status, although to a lesser extent than for young men.

### Microenterprises for road maintenance

The project aimed to generate income opportunities for the rural poor by creating microenterprises and committees for rural road maintenance. But it lacked a clear policy for including women. In Cajamarca, young women were excluded because they were considered "too weak" to do the job. In Cuzco, older women who participated said there was nothing new in road maintenance work, which they had done in the past in the form of *faenas comunales* (1- or 2-day community jobs). In no case did women participate in microenterprises, with the exception of 1 committee in Cuzco (Figure 3). All other microenterprises and committees were

made up of men only, simply reflecting the cultural pattern of male leadership in the communal system of authority.

The traditional role of women was also evident in roadwork. They cooked and took food to their husbands, which required up to 2 hours a day.

### Safety

Women tend to place a high value on safety following the rehabilitation of roads and paths. They believe that they and their children can travel safely using the roads as pedestrians and occasionally as passengers and invest less effort walking up and down the mountains. For men, the rehabilitation of roads and paths means improved security and easier preservation of family honor because it allows them to travel with their wives, eliminating fears of unfaithfulness.

### Access to information and technology

Increased travel by women also means improved access to information. Access to markets brings contact with people from other regions, along with a chance to learn about and from them. Women can now travel to the nearest town and communicate by telephone with their children who may be working far from their village or with other relatives. They also have greater access to government institutions, which facilitates legal paperwork in government offices.

### Participation in community organizations

Improved roads can also have an effect on women's participation in community organizations. In Cajamarca, the level of participation in women's organizations has remained unchanged, whereas in Huanacavelica people claim that women's organizations are now more articulate, thanks to rehabilitated paths. But greater participation by women in general community meetings is still far from noticeable in all the study areas. Reduced participation has prevented women from letting their voices be heard, and planning meetings have failed to take account of women's needs.

### The need for further study

Although the rehabilitation of roads and paths has improved mobility and access to

services, livelihood improvement was not uniform for all groups in this study. In fact, improvement was even greater for men than for women. Social customs, unavoidable household burdens, lack of control over cash resources, and minimal transport services limit travel by women.

For women, household work and the support they provide to their husbands in their economic activities are a major time constraint. This leaves little spare time, restricting women's access to literacy programs and education as well as other services. Men's control over household cash income restrains women's access to health and education services.

This study did not deal with access to transport services and intermediate means of transport. Despite the fact that camelids (llamas and alpacas) and equines (mules, horses, and donkeys) play an important role in transportation of goods in the Andes, the study provided no information about the ownership and use of these animals at household level. It would be interesting to know, for example, whether the improvement of roads and paths encouraged their use by women or, on the contrary, it encouraged the use of other means of transport such as bicycles, tricycles, or motorized transport.

### Recommendations

- Transport intervention programs need to pursue a more clearly defined gender strategy to ensure participation by women in transport resource management and decision making. Road users, especially women and children, should be among those consulted during the planning stage before any decisions are taken about transport improvement.
- Women's productive and family life tasks should be considered if they are to be included in maintenance work on paths, so as not to add to their existing workload. Brigades of youngsters (male and female) could be used to do this work.
- Finally, affordable transport services and appropriate intermediate means of transport should be considered and encouraged in transport intervention programs.

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