



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon

Sarah Barrow, University of East Anglia (UEA)

Maria Eugenia Ulfe, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP)

Eylem Atakav, UEA

Roxana Vergara, PUCP

Victoria Chicmana, PUCP

Karoline Pelikan, UEA and Pelikan Pictures

With the young women of OMIAASEC¹

Abstract

The *Mujeres que influyen* (Women of Influence) project is a collaboration between researchers at University of East Anglia and PUCP, and young women from the Junín area of Peru who are members of the National Council of Indigenous Women of Peru. It takes its starting point from an acknowledgement that although women play a fundamental role in the preservation of biodiversity and ancestral knowledge, these contributions often go unrecognized and underdeveloped (Ketty Marcelo, 2018), to the detriment of the very culture and environment that should be preserved. Our women-led participatory project, uses film (production, screening, analysis) to

¹ All the women who directed films as part of the project work are specifically acknowledged in this article; the broader team is mentioned via the project website. We are indebted to each and every one of them for sharing their time, expertise and knowledge.

highlight the potential and importance for active and organised participation by these young women in their communities in order to protect and nurture their natural resources. Working alongside Asháninka and Yanesha young women, we seek to demonstrate the value of young female involvement in community decision-making, addressing the cultural and societal inequalities that may disrupt their path to leadership and influence. In this paper, we focus on the methods developed in the project, particularly the value of participatory video production as a form of activism, with the outputs serving as creative manifestos in themselves. The co-designed activities have led us to reframe fieldwork as auto-ethnographic digital collaborations that have sought to disrupt power hierarchies and facilitate the co-production of new knowledge. We reflect on how our Indigenous partners have helped us rethink issues of sustainability, resilience and alternative strategies to respond to gender dynamics, political ecologies and environmental challenges.

Introduction

'El agua es como los ojos: mientras los cuidamos, nos seguirán viendo; si no, se dormirá eternamente', states Abigail at the end of the short film she made as part of the Women of Influence project:² a collaboration between the University of East Anglia (UEA), the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), the National Organization of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous Women of Peru (ONAMIAP) and the Organization of Ashaninka and Amazonian Indigenous Women of the Central Rainforest in Peru (OMIAASEC), which explores the approaches to leadership adopted by the young women of these organisations in their work to protect their communities. Abigail is from the Ashaninka community of Bajo Aldea in Pichanaqui, in the Peruvian Amazon region of Junín. As an emerging young community leader, a member of OMIAASEC, and a participant of this project, she shared with us her concerns about the abuse of natural resources, and about the pollution and increasing scarcity of water since the springs (the *ojos de agua*) upon

² Loosely translated as 'Water is like our eyes: while we nurture it, it survives; if we don't, it will sleep forever.' This film (and the four others produced as part of this project) may be found and viewed on our project website here: <https://women-of-influence.co.uk/films>

which her community rely dried up as a result of misuse by the authorities. Through her film, she gently but very firmly challenges every viewer with the following key question: how can water possibly be so scarce in the central Amazon region? She has learnt through harsh experience that even in such an environment, water is a resource that may be lost if its use is mismanaged and its value is overlooked, and she uses her film to warn others of the very real risks of this loss to community life.

The Women of Influence project came about as a result of long-running conversations between the university members of the team based in the UK and Peru, during which we established common interests and shared values to do with women's rights, environmental injustice and interdisciplinary approaches to achieving deeper understandings of these issues within a specific geographical, sociocultural and historical context. We were keen that our work should take an activist approach as well as resulting in academic reflections such as this paper, so that all those who participated and especially our community partners would feel empowered and equipped to make a tangible difference, however small, in relation to and as a result of our work, and contribute to the positive development of their communities.³

Once funding was secured in late 2020, we immediately realised that as the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were unlikely to be lifted, we would have to reframe the intended in-person fieldwork to virtual work, at least for the opening stages.⁴ Thus we met online as a core academic project team almost every Saturday for about five months during 2021 to build trust and learn from each other's approaches.⁵ From May 2021 we were joined by our community partners/participant researchers (the small group of young indigenous women from OMIAASEC), and together we planned the

³ The concept of 'community' is vital to this project and this paper - it may be understood at several levels; for example, to do with family, organisation, project team.

⁴ Preliminary funding was granted by British Council Peru to support the development of institutional partnership and collaborative work between the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at UEA and the Centre for Social, Economic, Political and Anthropological Research (CISEPA) at PUCP. Project funding was then secured from the British Academy's Global Challenges scheme, and subsequent support from the Impact funds at UEA.

⁵ The core team comprised colleagues with expertise in anthropology, in law, in gender, development in cultural studies and in film production.

fieldwork that would eventually take place at the end of that year. Small interactive exercises such as choosing and discussing a significant object, taking photographs of certain elements of nature, recording audio features of their immediate surroundings, and video recording a short scene with women relatives (community elders), all helped us get to know each other across long distances in creative ways. These activities also inspired the idea of creating short documentary films that together form the creative manifestos at the heart of this collaborative project.

Fast forward to August 2022 and the project team has come together in person again, sitting with the young women participant researchers in San Ramón (Junín), screening the films for the first time, after a long period of editing and post production work online. Together we talk about the content and messages conveyed by each of the films. One of the younger women, Anyeli, notes that in *Ojo de Agua*, Abigail shows great care for her community, for her relatives and for the new generations to come. One of the youngest women, Saraí, adds that sight and seeing are vital to inform better decision-making. Here, we noted that for these young women, the act of caring is integral to their approach and the act of seeing equates to 'having vision' in the broadest sense, both linked to a more hopeful future.

Indeed, scholars who have worked extensively on and with education in rural and indigenous communities have collected many different stories about the act of seeing associated with learning, opening their eyes and their minds to the world around them, and education as a means to become and remain conscious of their rights and struggles (Ansión 1995, Degregori 1986, Montoya 1990). Moreover, being able to see is further related in this context to being awake/awakened, to being/becoming conscious of the challenges and possibilities all around, and to the need to *care* more actively for their community's future. For these communities, care is not an individual matter: the politics of care locates the individual as part of a collective, a group of people or an indigenous community, as this small but significant example demonstrates. It connects people's basic needs and connections to fellow citizens, and the natural world: imagining a world that promotes the health and well-being of all: the politics of care points to a future, where 'no one is disposable' (Waxman, 2020: 86). However, as we will demonstrate in this paper, the constant tension between the individual and the collective is an important dimension in terms of the position of the



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

young women as emerging leaders, as 'women of influence' in and of their communities, and as part of an increasingly powerful collective for indigenous women's rights in Peru.

The concepts of seeing and caring are further understood here from a feminine and feminist perspective. Ours was a wholly female research and participant team, interdisciplinary at its heart, and feminist in its approach. We worked with a group of young female members of OMIAASEC, which is part of the largest indigenous women organisation in Peru, ONAMIAP. The project's starting point – drawn from a speech given by the current leader of ONAMIAP Ketty Marcelo – was an acknowledgement that women play a vital role in caring for their families, communities, and also nature in the Amazon basin: they are thus fundamental actors in the preservation of biodiversity and knowledge, and of water and forests (Marcelo, 2018). We set out to understand more deeply the concerns of the young women, as individuals and as part of their collective, and to get to know their motivations as emerging leaders.

Following a feminine and feminist approach means to us that knowledge is always relational, contextual, and partial. In Donna Haraway's words, 'feminist objectivity means quite simple situated knowledges' (1988: 581). As the author states, 'only partial perspective promises objective vision' (1988: 583). But, 'partiality only works as a connection' states Strathern (2005: xxix). We followed the paths of the young women to delve into their stories of intimacy and community, and in this paper we set out to connect those stories to larger motivations and interests in community leadership (including gender and generational tensions), as well as to appreciate their capacity for broader citizen participation in issues such as environmental injustice and threats to their own wellbeing. At the same time, we are conscious of the dangers of romanticising and appropriating the vision of the 'other', while also being wary of claiming to see from their positions. Situated knowledge-making and collective critical debate have taught us that the object/subject of knowledge should appear as an actor and an agent. Walking alongside these young women, along their paths, while also being mindful of the paths taken by research has resulted in commitment to an understanding of the different contexts within which this research was



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

conducted: a global pandemic, endemic diseases that affect the central Amazon, and the sense of never-ending violence, destruction, threat.

Through working with audiovisual tools we explored, with the young women, some of the many issues that worry them in their everyday lives, such as water scarcity amidst pollution, transmission and loss of ancestral knowledge, and threats to the protection of the rainforest. We noted that their sense of female identity has developed in relation to their collective identity as members of an organisation that represents indigenous women and also within a highly specific indigenous context. Questions we posed together and which are reflected upon in this paper include: What are the stories that young-indigenous-women leaders want to tell to the world about their lives and their communities? How do their identity and their political agendas emerge in those stories? What kind of participative methods are more effective for expressing those stories? The next section of this paper will first offer some greater detail on the aforementioned 'highly specific indigenous context', an understanding of which formed part of the ethical approach and trust building dimensions of this project, that's to say, taking seriously the context within which we were working as an academic team, constantly learning from each other and our community partners and reshaping our understandings and reflections accordingly. We then turn to reflections on the participatory methodological approach deployed by the project team, before discussing the films as manifestations of leadership-in-action and as articulations of their concerns.

Situating the knowledge-making

OMIAASEC includes members from different native communities along the Ené, Perené, Pichanaki y Rio Negro Rivers in Chanchamayo and Satipo provinces, in the Central Rainforest of Peru. These are mostly Ashaninka territories. The Ashaninka people form the largest indigenous group in the Peruvian Amazon, with more than 52,000 people from this group living in the Central Rainforest areas (the *Selva Central*). Its traditional territory occupies the furthest slopes of the Central Mountains: the valleys of the Bajo Apurímac, Ené, Tambo, Alto Ucayali, Bajo Urubamba, Perené and Pichis rivers; the provinces of Chanchamayo, Satipo and Oxapampa; and the Gran Pajonal plateau (Vigil, 2017). The colonisation, occupation and exploitation of these

territories and peoples, as well as the strategies of resistance and negotiation with foreigners and the government are increasingly, at long last, being recognised as being a constitutive part of the history of the Peruvian Republic

For almost a century before the beginning of the Republican period (1838-9), the Ashaninka people managed to prevent any further invasion of their ancestral territory and rejected any contact with the mestizo or white Western world, even when trade practices continued with other Amazonian and Andean indigenous people (Santos & Barclay, 1995). The most well-known rebellion of the Ashaninka with other indigenous people, conducted by the mythological figure of Juan Santos Atahualpa (1742 and 1756), expelled the Catholic missions, explorers and colonists from the Central Rainforest, that had established a relationship of economic control and subjugation over the indigenous peoples during the viceroyal period.

After that time, during the nineteenth century, the Ashaninka people suffered increasing colonisation (Vigil, 2017): by the 1850s, new expeditions, began to enter the Central Rainforest (including to the Rivers Pichis and Perené), promoted and supported by the Peruvian government. The aim of these expeditions was to foster agriculture, to use the indigenous labour force and to 'civilise' the indigenous populations living there (Espinosa, 1997; Veber, 2009). Despite confronting the immigrants to leave their territory, the Ashaninka efforts were ultimately unsuccessful (Espinosa, 1997).

Colonial migration continued at the beginning of the twentieth century, with large companies such as the Peruvian Corporation Limited establishing themselves across the Central Rainforest, taking on indigenous families as part of their labour force (Veber, 2009). There was subsequent economically motivated migration of Andean peasants from nearby regions migrated to the Central Rainforest due to national transformations; these migrants developed new agricultural systems, established cattle raising, and used the indigenous labour force to do so (Rojas, 1994; Santos, 1995). During the 1950s, indigenous communities were integrated into formal education through the Summer Linguistics Institute, part of a religious organisation. This institute provided literacy education to indigenous children and trained bilingual teachers in the Amazon region (Green, 2009). In this way, a new generation of

indigenous people became better prepared than their predecessors to negotiate with governmental and non-governmental actors (Rojas, 1994).

Since 1969, the indigenous peoples of the Central Rainforest have used their traditional and modern education knowledge to establish, develop and secure funding for their representative organisations and protect their territory against constant threats. These organisations (now including ONAMIAP and OMIAASEC) have always been autonomous entities, gathering indigenous peoples together to represent themselves more effectively, to protect their territories and to reclaim their ethnic identities (Espinosa, 2009; Smith, 1996). In the Central Rainforest, one of the first indigenous organisations founded in 1978 was the Central de Comunidades Nativas de la Selva Central (CECONSEC), whose aims are to do with supporting sustainable development, protecting indigenous rights, self-governance and developing independent economic models that reduce their precarious reliance on the state.⁶

This and other representative organisations were shaped, perhaps ironically, by interventions at state level. For example, in 1974, during the military government of Juan Francisco Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975), the territories and communities of indigenous peoples across the Amazon region were formally recognized. The Law for Native Communities established in 1974 represented a fresh opportunity for indigenous peoples to have a legitimate mechanism to identify and protect their communities. However, despite this official recognition, indigenous ancestral territories were still not considered as fully legalised communities (Rojas, 1994), the Peruvian state did not recognize indigenous people as citizens, and their rights were not protected.

Moreover, periods of violence have also come in constant waves to the Central Rainforest: most latterly as a result of the internal armed conflict that affected the entire country between 1980 and 2000 with forced displacement, extrajudicial executions and murders, disappearances, kidnappings, sexual violence and other crimes (Espinosa 2021). Even today there remain remnants of the insurgency groups

⁶ CECONSEC is a non-profit organisation that represents the Ashaninka, Yanesha and Nomatsiguenga Indigenous communities of the Central Rainforest in Peru..

that were central to the internal armed conflict, now more associated with illegal economies, who transit the area causing anxiety and terror (Paredes and Pastor 2023).

Even after the ratification in 1994 of the International Labour Organisation's Convention 169 which recognizes indigenous peoples' right to self-determination within a nation-state, while setting standards for national governments regarding indigenous peoples' economic, socio-cultural and political rights, including the right to a land base; and the voting in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, the indigenous populations still face intense struggles to protect their communities. The most recent Law on the Right to Prior Consultation of Indigenous People in 2011 had not prevented Ashaninka people from facing on a daily basis the damaging effects on their territory of small and large scale extractive and agricultural activities, such as contamination and deforestation.⁷

Emergence of the women's agenda

'Indigenous women have a special bond with the territory and natural goods. Like nature, we are the ones who generate life and from there our special ancestral relationship of dialogue and harmony with Mother Nature... That is why we are the first to go out and defend (them)' (Ketty Marcelo, May 2017)⁸

When the indigenous organisations emerged, they did not have a specific women's agenda and their leaders were predominantly male (Espinosa, 2017). It was not until the 1990s that the indigenous movement became more inclusive from a gender

⁷ In January 2024, the Peruvian Congress approved the so-called 'Antiforest Law', that effectively dismantled the country's legal constraints on deforestation. It is estimated that 150,000 to 200,000 hectares of forests are lost each year in Peru, with deforestation accounting for as much as 60% of Peru's greenhouse emissions. Local communities, grassroots organisations, international NGOs and institutions have voiced concerns about the new law, fearing that its implementation will threaten the survival of the rainforest, legitimise illegal logging and land invasions, further endanger the lives of environmental rights defenders, and violate numerous international commitments made by the Peruvian State.

⁸ Ketty Marcelo's intervention in the VIII Pan-Amazon Social Forum (FOSPA), held from April 28 to May 1, 2017 in Tarapoto, Peru, which had as its strategic axes the care of the territory and natural assets.

perspective, both through the incorporation of women's issues into the work of mixed Indigenous organisations and through the emergence of specifically women's organisations (Rousseau, 2018). As a result of decades-long efforts to train and bring together indigenous women, the National Organization of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous Women of Peru (ONAMIAP) was finally established in 2009.

Indeed, between 1995 and 2009, the Center of Indigenous Cultures of Peru CHIRAPAQ, an indigenous association, organised the Permanent Workshop for Indigenous Women in Peru.⁹ The initial purpose of this activity was to provide training and share knowledge among indigenous women, and to gather their views in preparation for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). The workshop continued for a further fifteen years and impacted the indigenous women participants by strengthening their ethnic identity, developing their leadership skills, and providing networking opportunities with other indigenous women across Latin America and the world. The experience of this so-called Permanent Workshop inspired and motivated indigenous women across the Andes and the Amazon to create their own independent organisation of and for women. In 2009, they established their own first congress to share their organisational experiences, where they also elaborated a political agenda and created a national women's indigenous organisation: ONAMIAP. Today, ONAMIAP represents indigenous women at the national level in Peru and contributes to their civic participation through dialogue and advocacy with the State and civil society organisations.

The formation and work of ONAMIAP has led to the formation of more local indigenous women's organisations. In the Central Rainforest, the Women's Council within CECONSEC was founded in 2012 to represent women and promote their participation in decision-making. Two years later, in 2014, the Council and ONAMIAP promoted the creation of the Organisation of Ashaninka Indigenous Women of the Central Amazon (OMIAASEC). Currently, OMIAASEC works towards the reclamation and preservation of Ashaninka knowledge, the strengthening of women's leadership, the prevention of gender violence and the protection of water sources and

⁹ Chirapaq was founded in 1986 to promote the strengthening of indigenous identity and rights.

[Chirapaq English | chirapaq.org.pe](http://chirapaq.org.pe)



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

reforestation. And, as a base organisation of ONAMIAP, that local agenda is articulated within the rubric of the national agenda for protecting and defending the indigenous territories and natural goods, and for caring for Mother Nature. This overarching mission is supported by the continuous creation of an indigenous and female community of 'hermanas' (sisters), as they refer to each other.

Making collaboration work: creating sisterhood across boundaries

'In the context of Indigenous knowledge, the political language of sisterhood and the cultural linguistics of relations intersect, resulting in definitions of roles, responsibilities, and obligations of indigenous relations that are complex and gendered.' (Lindberg 2004: 342)

After several encounters of the project team with our community partners through online meetings and conversations throughout the Covid-19 pandemic period, followed by fieldwork and creative production visits to their communities, the young indigenous women of OMIAASEC started to use that term 'hermanas' (sisters) to refer to us. At that moment, we sensed that a more fundamental kind of relationship was being created. 'Sisterhood' is a well-known concept in feminist discussions. But what did it mean in the context of our collaborative creative work as we explore concepts of leadership and participation in relation to the motivations and activities of these young women (as individuals and as members of a broader organisation)?

The term 'sisterhood' has long been used in various ways to describe relationships among and between groups of women. At the same time, many feminists have questioned its relevance in practice, mainly when relationships between women of different demographics, whether to do with intersections of race and/or class, are marked by inequalities and hierarchies of oppression. In her article, the Canadian indigenous researcher Tracey Lindberg (2004) states that while indigenous women may share some terminology with feminism, 'they do not always share its definition, understanding and context' (2004: 342). For her, the term has not recognized the role of indigenous women in the realms of child-rearing, care for elders and community education. She asks what role feminism might play in understanding equality when equality itself is not defined in the same ways; and she further asks how feminism can be understood in the context of constant subjugation against all indigenous people.



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

Moreover, then, the term 'sisterhood' in English (so often part of non-indigenous feminist language) seems not to fully encompass the web of relations across and within indigenous families linked to kinship and extended complex family situations. But also, perhaps most importantly, indigenous sisterhood, from a political perspective, is built through very specific shared knowledge, values and life experiences. We learned and increasingly appreciated this perspective through the practical experiences of working collaboratively with our community partners on this project even more than through our academic readings in preparation for the fieldwork.

We noted that the young indigenous women used the word 'hermana' between them repeatedly and with other Asháninka (and Yanasha) women in their organisation. They used 'hermana Ketty' or 'hermana Maria' with 'las mayores' ('those older than us'), the former president and current (at time of writing) president of ONAMIAP and OMIAASEC respectively, as signs of respect and of kinship. And then, they used it with us, but in a different way. For there are different kinds of sisters. The understanding of these diverse and complex relations around the term 'sisterhood' exceeded our initial purpose and knowledge bases, but became fundamental to the effectiveness of the project. That's to say, to the ongoing and indeed continuing commitment by all to coming together (online and in person) despite many obstacles (technological and pandemic-related), finding common cause and shared values, and to completing the tasks we co-devised. And, following Lindberg, we came to understand that 'assumptive relationship[s], the assumption of the authority to name the relationship and define the relationship is as much a part of the colonial legacy as falsely asserting presumed jurisdiction over [indigenous] lands' (2004: 350). That's to say, we appreciated that the use of the term 'hermanas' to indicate our relationship with our community partners had to come from them first.

In this context, and bearing in mind the importance of the term to our partners, we do believe that exploring the significance of this term with the young indigenous women has helped us to understand more fully our relationship with them, our position in this collaborative filmmaking work and our appreciation of their leadership positions. During our fieldwork trip of August 2022 to her community Waypancuni, Karen Pamela, former Secretary of Youth and Childhood at ONAMIAP,

explained to us that even if we (the researcher team from PUCP and UEA) are not part of/do not belong to their people, community, and organisation, **'We can be sisters because we are allies. You support us with *our fights*. And we can have a *shared fight to protect mother nature*'**. This points directly to the shared values and interests between the project research team and the community partners along thematic lines that transcend many borders and indeed echo the types of allyship between women indigenous organisations and western ecofeminists that scholars such as Andrea Sempértegui (2019) have traced in the Amazon. Understood as partially connected, these allyships also always involve asymmetrical relationships of power; however, she argues (and we align with this) that in their collective effort to resist extractivism, Amazonian women have increasingly drawn from elements of ecofeminist discourse and, in the process, situated their own claims within the broader indigenous territorial struggle. In turn, Sempértegui contends that ecofeminism has also itself been transformed through these forms of allyship, becoming more inclusive of indigenous women's perspectives.

Indeed, through the experience of this project, we discovered the immense power of allyship, of seeking out shared values, of listening to the concerns of those with lived experiences in very specific contexts, and of challenging certain preconceived ideas of feminist concepts such as sisterhood. As educators, activists and artists, we worked together to find new paths to connect with each other, through and despite our differences, some of which are cultural and historical, others to do with hierarchies of privilege.

Storytelling: everyday experiences with political impact

As the project progressed, and the pandemic showed little sign of abating, we evolved our methodological approach in dialogue with the OMIAASEC 'hermanas' to embrace creative audiovisual methods: after various short exercises undertaken during our online meetings that involved capturing and sharing of images, sounds and short clips using mobile phone technology, we embarked upon a more ambitious pathway towards facilitating the creation of short documentary films by our community partners, over a period of eighteen months (2021-2022). We never intended for our partners to become expert filmmakers as such, and producing high quality films was

not our primary objective. Rather, we agreed to use filmmaking as a means of supporting the articulation of ideas, ambitions and concerns that were important to our partners, to their communities and organisations, so that at the same time new skills were developed (from teamwork and confidence-building to practical video production) and accessible outputs were created that could be shared across a variety of platforms to a range of different audiences, from their own communities to festival and conference events around the world. As the dissemination work then developed, we began to realise that these films were in effect forms of political manifesto, powerfully elucidating the everyday concerns of the young women of OMIAASEC.

As a team, we reflected on and debated repeatedly the value, relevance and practicality of filmmaking as research method. We note that the use of digital storytelling to access 'everyday' insights and experiences is well established in disciplines including Gender Studies (Martin, et al., 2019; May & Macnab, 2018), Education Studies (Siriwatchana, et al., 2019), and Health Sciences (Botfield, et al., 2018). This approach is often seen to offer an opportunity to challenge power imbalances between (feminist) researchers and the researched, potentially promoting social justice. Indeed, participatory visual methodologies have become a crucial tool for feminist researchers to conduct work that begins with the experiences of women and provides women with the ability to decide how they choose to represent their lived experiences. Scholars such as Sophie Harman (2019), whose work is grounded in feminist and decolonial approaches, acknowledge that images are highly effective in provoking emotion and affect; she argues that filmmaking must be taken seriously as a way of making visible the normally invisible, including women's worlds, their everyday lives and concerns.

What is more, digital storytelling, as one form of participatory visual methodology, is often used to support alternative ways of learning. The low-tech (mobile phone and camcorder) approach we adopted suited the context and objectives of our project, and allowed both the project team and the community partners to understand themselves and each other more deeply. It also underpinned and prioritised the work to identify and legitimise the stories the young women wanted to tell about their lives, and facilitated the sharing of those 'stories' more widely, that's to say the filmmaking was a tool of engagement, not an end in itself. As an increasingly prevalent method in



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

social research, digital storytelling aims to understand the everyday life experiences of ordinary people by adding the visual to narrative inquiry.

Film as artefact and manifesto

Importantly, the short films created through this research method (mainly during the first field trip of December 2021) became artefacts that were shared with the communities of participants during the field trip of August 2022, and for use by them within their organisations and beyond for education, promotion, communication purposes.¹⁰ They shed light on the young women's approach to the concepts of community, environmental concerns, intergenerational conflict, and the subsequent concerns around the loss of different textures of cultural history. As already mentioned at the start of this article, the shortest film *Water Spring* focuses on the unequal access to water, intergenerational responsibility and the misconceptions visitors to the area may have about life there. Emphasising the politics of care, the director says:

It may seem like we live in paradise, but in my community the water supply has been deprioritized. We have to provide many neighbouring villages with water purely because they pay to use our spring. And while we often have no water, the neighbouring villages, who we provide water to, have so many car washes. Seeing how badly they are misusing and wasting our water without being aware of the problems we are going through, I began to wonder how things might be two or three years from now. Sometimes I worry that younger

¹⁰ The production process took place over many months, partly online and partly via fieldwork. The first trip was led by research team members Karoline Peikan and Roxana Vergara along with project production associates Iñakapalla Chávez and Belissa García, and took place in December 2021 at which point some of the most severe Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. There followed several months of post-production work, carried out collaboratively via online meetings with each film group. The full research team then travelled to Junin in August 2022 to work with the young women to support and attend the screenings of each film in each of their communities. Since then, further dissemination has included screenings at COP28, various conferences, civic and activist events and festivals across the world.

generations will question us for our actions, because we are not looking out for their futures (Abigail Hoyes López, 2022).¹¹



Figure 1: The Making of Ojo de Agua

Meanwhile, *The Intergenerational Struggle for Collective Territories*, co-directed by Karen Pamela Huere Cristobal and Anyely Martínez and with participation by one of the older female community leaders, used their film to emphasize the need for their rights as indigenous women to be recognised, and through images, sound and voiceover, invoke the importance of plant and animal life in doing so within a highly specific cultural and geopolitical context. In her director's note, Karen Pamela states:

¹¹ [El Ojo de Agua — Women of Influence | Mujeres Que Influyen \(women-of-influence.co.uk\)](https://www.women-of-influence.co.uk/)

Just like the Congona tree that stands firm and provides food for the Chihuaco bird with its ripe fruit, so our mission will grow tall and will nourish others who might normally follow our parents and authorities. We want to be heard so that communities and organisations are informed about our rights and issues, so that they might give us space and help us strengthen our resolve; heard so that the state recognises and acknowledges our agenda and our proposals as young people, as women who are part of a community and a people (2022).¹²



Figure 2: The co-directors of Intergenerational struggle work together to design their film

¹² [La Lucha Intergeneracional de los Territorios Colectivos — Women of Influence | Mujeres Que Influyen \(women-of-influence.co.uk\)](http://women-of-influence.co.uk)



Figure 3: Karen Pamela prepares her mother – community leader – for her piece to camera



Figure 4: Luna – youngest member of the group – prepares for her scene

My Wise Grandmother, co-directed by actual sisters Kely Quicha Martínez and Estefhani Poma Martínez, focuses on the figure of their own grandmother, Rosa, who explains through their film how she came to acquire her ancestral knowledge and has coped with various painful life experiences as a woman in a harsh environment. She talks directly to the camera (and her granddaughters the directors), in her Ashaninka language, about having learnt from her own grandmother about the dangers and benefits of different foods that can be found in the forest, and about how to administer various healing therapies. In their directors' note, they describe their grandmother as a 'living book of medicinal plants,' details of which she is willing to share with any family member who is willing to listen. The issues highlighted in their film include an absence of a younger generation who wants to take serious notice of her and hence the threat of loss of this powerful ancestral knowledge. This sense of loss is further compounded by a concern for important plantlife; Rosa herself notes: 'these plants are more and more difficult to find due to indiscriminate felling of the trees, due to fires, and due to ignorance of those who live in the city who refuse to believe in their healing powers.'¹³ There is a poignant sadness about this film, picked up through the words, the tone of voice, the pauses and silences, and through Rosa's expressive face that veers from playful to angry and to intense regret for only having one of her ten children interested in learning from her.

As one of the other young women (Yanelia) noted when we watched the films together, there is also a sense of isolation that is accentuated by the close framing to focus only on Rosa: 'The grandmother is sad that no-one appreciates her weaving and textile skills; they just don't seem to notice her generally.' When discussing their work, Kely and Estefhani recall how the medicinal plants are often used by Rosa to alleviate female-related pain such as that experienced during menstruation and childbirth. While the film ends with Rosa angrily (and, perhaps, regretfully) looking away from the camera, frustrated at the younger generation's greater interest in the medicinal properties of alcohol, in their own discussions, Kely and Estefhani spoke with a greater sense of hope for the future in terms of reclaiming the ancestral knowledge base. For them, the value of learning and sharing, including in more formal and organised

¹³ [Mi Abuela Sabia — Women of Influence | Mujeres Que Influyen \(women-of-influence.co.uk\)](https://www.women-of-influence.co.uk/)

education settings, has become paramount, remarking: 'now schools are starting to give space for us to learn about and express our cultures, so we don't lose our sense of [Ashaninka] identity.'¹⁴



Figure 5: The skills of weaving and spinning are being reclaimed and revalued by the work of organisations such as OMIAASEC

By comparison, *Las Fiestas de mi Comunidad*, directed by Yanelia Quinchuvia Yompiri, is replete with images of groups of people, of food and of occasions when that food is being shared amongst the community (in this case in Churingaveni). Yanelia's film specifically references the effect of the pandemic on preventing these festive occasions taking place, and her joy at their return. She remarks on the value of these events as being:

... to bring people together across generations, within and across communities. During the pandemic, these events couldn't take place and we all suffered – individually and collectively – from the separation and isolation. Now these

¹⁴ The young women also worry about the loss of their indigenous identity through discrimination, asserting that if others see them wearing their *kushma* (traditional dress) and face paint, they tend to insult them, resulting in some young women being too scared to dress traditionally and instead to try to fit in by wearing the same clothes as those in town.



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

events are returning and we can connect again through sharing food, games, songs, customs and knowledge.¹⁵

The importance of sharing (especially food) came up time and time again in our discussions and in response to the film screenings within the communities, speaking to the power of the collective in terms of generating a sense of distinct identity, shared values and a platform for purposeful action. As one elder audience member (in a neighbouring community) exclaimed:

Food is important because it brings people together. If the people aren't united, there are no activities of any sort. Each villager has to bring their stew made with whatever they have. It's not like there's just one meal. We share them. And when it's time to share we put them all in a circle ... with no chairs, just a mat. And everyone brings their plate, grabs some food and we talk (Señor Segundo, 23 August 2022).¹⁶

¹⁵ [Las Fiestas de mi Comunidad — Women of Influence | Mujeres Que Influyen \(women-of-influence.co.uk\)](#)

¹⁶ Ibid.



Figure 6: Close-ups of foodstuff being prepared and shared

The fifth film in this collection, *We Live Amongst so Much Rubbish*, co-directed by Wendy Delia Cruz and Edith Karol Chávez, returns to a more lamenting and angry

tone with its focus on the loss of the natural resources that have been vital to sustain their communities over many generations, emphasised through multiple images of contaminated river water. As Wenddy explains:

The river is no longer the same. Fish are in short supply. [In our film we show] the Perené river that passes through the Impitato Cascada community; we watch it flow. That river goes on to reach [the town of] Atalaya. The message we want to convey is that we must think about future generations. In Atalaya, they drink water from the river, but it is contaminated.

Co-director Edith is likewise mournful about the water pollution caused by deforestation and discarding of harmful plastic products, and spoke about the importance of the river (when clean) for providing water and fish. But she also points to a solution that has emerged in several communities - the creation of large ponds for the farming of fish in regulated environments, away from the pollution, so that these communities can continue to sustain themselves healthily. Throughout this six-minute film, images and interviews about the contamination are interspersed with those of fish farming, suggesting hope for a more sustainable future, one achieved through collective community effort.





Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

Figure 7: Senor Victor Chavez reflects on the polluted river beneath him

Concluding thoughts: Community and leadership

Although they have different styles and tones, taken together these films facilitate a raising awareness of the priorities and concerns of the young indigenous women in relation to their cultural and political identities. The acts of creating and sharing these films has helped us (the research team) understand more fully the act of leadership in the context of the daily lives of the young women with whom we worked. Moreover, the development of a sense of sisterhood and broader community was crucial not just as concept but as practice throughout this project: from the first online workshops when we got to know each other in multiple ways, through the group chats using mobile phones that enabled us to keep in touch and continue to build trust, to the in-person field trips when relationships were deepened across the wider team through showing up and making an effort to be present. When we speak of 'community', in fact we must acknowledge that we created and experienced various 'communities', that's to say, spaces of shared values and belonging in different intensity and scope: from our research team to the broader partnership, as well, of course, as the all-important organisations and communities that we visited and worked with.

As the films themselves and the process of making them demonstrate, the act of narrating is also a powerful practice. It allows us to understand what happens in times and places of environmental, social and political crisis. It also enables us to represent different worlds and worldviews, especially those that have been fractured by multiple forms of violence and discrimination. The discussions at each screening event provided evidence of the impact of the narrations on those who watched, from family members familiar with the content who were keen to debate the issues of concern to them collectively, to audiences in Lima and the UK who were motivated to attend by a general interest in the broader issues of environmental injustice, discrimination and indigeneity, largely unfamiliar with the specific contexts and histories of the Ashaninka people, but keen to learn. Thus, the films produced by these young indigenous women leaders of OMIAASEC demonstrate and provide access to *their* personal and collective stories, *their* lives. While we must note that the project has not



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

given the young women a voice, nor aimed to speak *for* them (they were and are already more than capable of expressing themselves powerfully), but rather it has offered an alternative platform for them to exercise their agency, to frame their own narratives, to share their own experiences, and to offer their own perspectives that defy the touristic gaze of the 'other'.

As such we have been inspired by the work of Sarah Marie Wiebe, who refers to Susan Sontag's thinking on ethics and the photographic image when stating that:

Collaborative filmmaking unsettles, challenges, and ultimately seeks to change universal perspectives. It does so by refusing to gaze at an 'Other's' lived reality with curiosity, detachment, professionalism, and neutrality; instead, it aims to interrupt a monolithic gaze with the views of the participants themselves. In doing so, it moves beyond a voyeuristic, distanced, touristic, objective mode of looking at research subjects and instead looks *alongside* participants of a community (Wiebe 2015: 249).

It remains important to us to learn continuously from our partners, creating spaces for dialogue. For, as Wiebe further contends, '[E]thical relationship-building that is respectful of indigenous ways of knowing can challenge... extractive knowledge production, which clearly delineates between "the researcher" and "researched."' (Wiebe 2015: 247). Like her, we recognised the necessity to respect the agency, the independence and the specific protocols of the native communities, the organisation and the young women *alongside* whom we worked, rather than treating them as objects of research from whom knowledge might have been 'extracted'.

From conceptualisation, location scouting, production, editing and dissemination, the participatory methods involved in collaborative filmmaking thus brought all members into the process, and ensured they were co-producers. That process turned out to be a powerful and accessible way to acquire knowledge and develop leadership skills, resulting in tangible articulations of the everyday concerns of the young women of OMIAASEC that connect their lives with broader political issues. Through depicting individual community members, mostly women of different generations, and offering them space on screen to speak about their circumstances (sometimes from a personal

perspective such as grandmother Rosa, sometimes on behalf of a community as their leader), a range of situations are brought to life that serve to connect the different groups. Moreover, each screening became a collective community effort involving men and women of all generations, and was usually accompanied by the sharing of food, drink, recipes, conversation, singing and debate.¹⁷



Figure 8: Pop-up cinema – in the Churingaveni community, quickly created, in collaboration with hermana Yanelia's wider family.

In conclusion then, we learnt above all that what connects these women above all else, as demonstrated throughout their participation in this project and by the range of purposeful artefacts they were supported to produce, is their determination to play a significant role in securing recognition and respect for the Ashaninka people. Every action coalesced around the shared objective to be identified as citizens with rights that deserve protection, and as [Ashaninka] women – as keepers of knowledge – who deserve to be heard and allowed to lead.

¹⁷ As we travelled along and across the river Perené in August 2022, we created pop-up cinemas on each occasion, using both equipment we had brought with us from the UK and Lima, and drawing on resources found in the community itself such as black tarpaulin sheets to create the desired blackout effect for optimal viewing.



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

References

- Ansi3n, J. (1995). Del mito de la educaci3n al proyecto educativo. In: Portocarrero, G. & M. Valc3rcel (editors), *El Per3 frente al siglo XXI*. Lima: Fondo editorial PUCP, pp. 507- 525.
- Degregori, C.I. (1986) 'Del mito de Inkarr3 al mito del progreso'. *EIn: Socialismo y participaci3n* 36: 49-56.
- Espinosa, O. (1993). Los ash3ninka : guerreros en una historia de violencia. 53 (4), 45-60.
- Espinosa, O. A. (2021). Las memorias ash3ninkas del conflicto armado interno y el recuerdo de Sendero Luminoso como experiencia maligna. En *Historias, violencias y memorias en la Amazon3a*. (pp. 95 - 115). Lima: PUCP.
- Greene, S. (2009) *Customizing indigeneity: Paths to a visionary politics in Peru*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Gunella, C. (2022). Collaborative Filmmaking as a Tool for Decolonising Cinema. The Faire-Part Case Study. *Avanca Cinema*. 14, 367-372.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), 575–599.
- Harman, Sophie (2019). *Seeing Politics: film, visual method, and International Relations*. McGill Queens University Press.
- Informe final. Comisi3n de la Verdad y Reconciliaci3n. 2023. www.cverdad.org
- Lindberg, T. (2004). Not my sister: what feminists can learn about sisterhood from Indigenous women. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 16: 342–352.
- Lins Ribeiro, G. (2023). From decolonizing knowledge to post-imperialism. A Latin American perspective. *American Ethnologist* 50(3): 375-386.
- Montoya, R. (1990). *Por una educaci3n biling3e en el Per3*. Reflexiones sobre cultura y socialismo. Lima: CEPES - MOSCA AZUL editores.



Sarah Barrow, et al., 'Women of Influence: interdisciplinary participatory approaches to understanding female leadership in the Peruvian Amazon', *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

- Paredes, M. & A. Pastor. (2023). Illicit crops in the frontier margins. Amazonian indigenous livelihoods and the expansion of coca in Peru. *Journal of Peasant Studies*.
- Rojas, E. (1994). *Los asháninka un pueblo tras el bosque: contribución a la etnología de los campos de la Selva central peruana*. Lima : Fondo Editorial PUCP , 1994.
- Santos Granero, F., & Barclay, F. (1995). *Órdenes y desórdenes en la selva central : historia y economía de un espacio regional*. Lima: IFEA, IEP, 1995.
- Sempértegui, A. (2019). Indigenous women's activism, ecofeminism, and extractivism: partial connections in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Politics & Gender* 17: 197-224.
- Strathern, M. (2005). *Partial Connections*. Oxford: Altamira Press.
- Veber, H. (2009). *Historias para nuestro futuro. Narraciones autobiográficas de líderes Asháninka y Ashéninka de la Selva Central del Perú*. Grupo Internacional de Trabajo sobre Asuntos Indígenas
- Vigil, N. (2018). Poblamiento y ocupación de la Selva Central del Perú. La conquista del territorio asháninka. *Anales de Antropología* 52(2): 157-176.
- Waxman, S. (2020). The Politics of the Future. *The Politics of Care*. Cambridge, MA: Boston Review and Verso Books, 82-88.
- Wiebe, S.M. (2015). Decolonizing engagement? Creating a sense of community through collaborative filmmaking. *Studies in Social Justice*, 9 (2), 244-257.
-