

# Conducting Arts-Based Research with Rural Women in Columbia, South America: A Tool for Community Empowerment and Gender Justice

Lady Johanna Peñaloza-Farfán<sup>1</sup>; Irma A. Flores-Hinojos<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidad de Ibagué, Ibagué, Colombia, South America

<sup>2</sup> Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá D.C., Colombia, South America

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## Abstract

Women's social movements in Colombia are known for being visible in the streets, on social networks, in the courts, and neighborhoods (Zulver, 2022). In Colombia, women have mobilized to seek gender justice. Many of them have to face violence not only daily, but also in a structural way such as the legal impossibility of owning land. Sometimes, mobilizing means exposing themselves to the dynamics of power and violence to which they are subjected (Rojas, 2000). Many women, however, seek to form associations to protect themselves from these dynamics. Associating and organizing as a collective allows women to start transcending the patriarchal structures that keep them in a situation where they are held as immobilized victims, and in turn, become the new protagonists of a struggle that allows them to be the builders of a different destiny for themselves and future generations (Llevadot, 2022). This new scenario demands that women recognize the importance of building a collective identity that can lead them to establish common objectives that are broader compared to the individual goals that lead them to satisfy their immediate and daily needs. Building this identity implies establishing actions that commit them, through participation, to change how they interact with their closest people and the social and political environment in their territories (Zulver, 2022). Some of these actions are expressed in the production of handicrafts, food, embroidery, theatrical performances, and other community activities that strengthen the community's organization.

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**Keywords:** Art; autonomy; Colombia; community empowerment; critical reflection; forgiveness; governance. justice; self-management; social action; violence.

## Introduction

This article presents an organizational experience that uses handicrafts to express women's imagination and creativity. Art is used to highlighting reflections on the territory's history, including environmental care and complex community issues. In this case study, 8 women from the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima- AMEECC (Association of Empowered and Enterprising Women of the Combeima Canyon - AEEWCC), participated in an art-based research process to explore the concepts of women, sustainability, forgiveness, peace, and harvest and how these concepts affect their role as members of a rural community.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) demonstrates that art is a powerful tool for engaging community members in research and allows them to express their perspectives in a creative and meaningful way (Clover, 2011). Art can foster critical reflection and social action, which can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to previously identified problems. In addition, it can trigger critical self-reflection by “learning from diverse cultural perspectives through art, knowing self through art, accessing or uncovering hidden knowledge, image making as a way to deepen understanding, learning through the arts, art in the curriculum, and art as a means for social change” (Blackburn Miller, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, this methodology ensures that the results are relevant and useful for the community and that the proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable.

## Literature review

Historically, women in Colombia have been subordinated and often ignored in both public and private life. Many of them are subjected to inequitable power dynamics in which violence and abuse prevail. As Rodriguez (2022) argues patriarchal ways of relationships, interactions, and behaviors persist in Colombia. These are immersed in the social, political, cultural, and economic systems in the 21st century. Consequently, some of the women's associations have emerged in the framework of struggles that demand primarily women's civil rights, economic justice, and gender justice (Zulver, 2022; Sánchez-Jimenez, et al 2021) and are expressed through protests in the streets, on social networks, and in the courts. Sometimes, the fact that women engage in this type of mobilization is a sign that the dynamics of power and violence to which they are exposed are exacerbated (Rojas, 2000), so to protect themselves from such dynamics of violence and injustice (Zulver, 2022), they seek to organize themselves collectively in associations, strengthening their demands.

By associating and organizing as a collective, women can begin to transcend the patriarchal structures that keep them in a situation where they are held as immobilized victims, and in turn, become the new protagonists of a struggle that allows them to be the builders of a different destiny for themselves and future generations (Llevadot, 2022). This new scenario demands that women recognize the importance of building a collective identity that can lead them to establish common objectives that are broader compared to the individual goals that lead them to satisfy their immediate and daily needs (Zulver, 2022). Building this collective identity implies the development of actions that commit them through participation to make changes in how they relate and interact with themselves, with those closest to them, and with the social and political environment in their territories (Zulver, 2022). For instance, these collective actions are crystallized in handicrafts, food, embroidery, theatrical performances, and other community activities, strengthening their identity by making them feel useful, productive, and capable of generating income. By participating in these organizational activities, women from the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima (AMEECC) have begun to transform their mindsets and ways of acting. They have discovered new skills and potential within themselves, enabling them to be more productive and involved in local, regional, and even national events. This increased participation provides them with economic opportunities, expands their social networks, and grants them greater recognition in the community. Thus, working collaboratively with the organization offers them an alternative source of income and drives a positive change in their lives, empowering them to reach their personal goals and aspirations.

Handicrafts can be used as an expression of women's imagination and creativity. Art is used as a tool to highlight reflections about the territory's history, including environmental care and the community's complex problems. In this case study, eight women from the (AMEECC) Canyon participated in an art-based research process to explore the concepts of women, sustainability, forgiveness, peace, and harvest, and how these same concepts affect their role as members of a rural community.

## Methodology

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) demonstrates that art is a powerful tool for engaging community members in research and allows them to express their perspectives in an evident creative and meaningful way as Clover (2011) mentioned in a case “The growing sense of community was also noticeable to the audience at the exhibitions” p. 20. Art can foster critical reflection and social action, which can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to previously identified problems, contributing to Sustainable Development Goals.” Therefore, now is the moment to widen the scope of knowledge in society and move beyond creating fragmented solutions, to a true knowledge-based society through engagement with the citizenry as a whole, at all scales of activity, to deal with the problematic issues and global challenges of the day” (Tandon, Singh, Clover, and Hall, 2016; p. 22). In addition, the methodology ensures that the results are relevant and useful for the community and that the proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable, as Tandon, et al (2016, p.

3,4) remark “they will gain access to the methods, tools, and values of CBR to promote the use of research by community members and encourage the collaborative creation of knowledge democracy.”

In this Community Based Participatory Research, a focus group consisting of 8 women from the association, which comprises 36 members, was conducted. This approach also enabled the triangulation of information gathered from fieldwork practice with feminist theory. Such integration facilitated the analysis of how art-based research methodologies influenced gender justice and contributed to nurturing critical and creative consciousness. In addition, as Butterwick and Lipson Lawrence (2023, p 349) posit: “One of the most important aspects of this type of learning is meaning-making, which the arts help to process in a unique way. When adults experience a transformation and suddenly their lifeworld has new meaning and purpose, it can be a powerful experience that has many ripple effects in their lives”. In this sense, we recognize that arts and various forms of creative expression introduce us to new forms and creative expressions that allow us to think and feel how things should be and can be different to reframing the problem and subverting sexism. Finally, the relationship between women artisans and environmental care is linked to the role they play in the territory as caretakers and entrepreneurs. In this sense, we can say that imagination to transform its reality makes sense in this new identity that is configured through arts. In conclusion, this case study demonstrates how communities can use imagination and creativity (Butterwick and Lipson Lawrence , 2023) linking with different university actors to generate efficient processes of local transformation (Tandon, Singh, Clover, and Hall, 2016).

## **Community based participatory research**

This case study was conducted from the perspective of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), considering that this is an approach that seeks the active participation of community members in all phases of the research. This implies that throughout the research process, there is collaborative work between researchers from the academy and the community, where each participant contributes to the identification of problems, research planning, data collection, and analysis, as well as decision-making to carry out the necessary and relevant changes (Tandon, Lepore, Singh et. al., 2006). In this sense, community-based participatory research fosters greater equity and justice in research by ensuring that those directly affected by a situation collaborate in transforming it and that the proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable.

In the narrative of this experience, three aspects stand out. Firstly, the co-construction of trusting relationships to understand the context, listen, and dialogue. Secondly, a process adapted specifically to the territorial context was developed. Finally, as part of the solution to the problems encountered, individual work dynamics were generated, while respecting each participant's personality traits, which resulted in collective constructions of a new empowered identity. Ethical issues were considered and developed with several important aspects in mind by participants. First, agreements related to mutual respect were generated between the women of the participating organization and the two Higher Educational Institutions. The agreements considered aspects such as caring for others and attentive listening. We also ensured that all participants were informed of the different decisions that were made during the process, recognizing the differences that arose during the development of the project (Banks, 2016) Moreover, we decided to use arts-based methods that allow for broad participation and free expression of all involved within the project (Kuri, 2020).

This also included aspects such as privacy and confidentiality preservation, promotion of equitable inclusion of all community members, as well as adequate representation of the participants' perspectives. During the research process, it was also identified that all women, including university professors, should be involved in the research and knowledge production processes through artistic expression from a perspective of social responsibility “as active moral agents in a political context of challengeable framings, norms, rules and policies about social justice, social responsibility, and societal compassion” (Banks. 2013. p. 46). To address these ethical issues, clear and transparent practices were followed involving explicit communication with participants about their rights and the use of information, promotion of inclusion, and equity in the research process (Akenson, 2014).

Careful consideration was given to how the results would be presented and communicated. In addition, we complied with formal protocols, and all participants provided their consent through their signature. (Guilemin & Guilian, 2004)

## Cooperating partners

The cooperating partners for this case study included the organizations and individuals who contributed to the achievement of the study's objectives in a variety of ways. This includes three faculty members from the "Universidad de los Andes" and the "Universidad de Ibagué", a student from the "Semestre Paz y Región" at the same university, the "Museo del Arte del Tolima" (MAT) and the "Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima" (Association of Empowered and Enterprising Women of the Combeima Canyon) (AMEECC). Although not all AMEECC members participated throughout the research, they all provided logistical support during the meetings and in the dissemination of events such as the Craft Fair.



## Art, self-management, autonomy, and governance

Art becomes a powerful tool in Community Based Participatory Research to engage the community in the research process and to help them express their experiences and perspectives creatively and meaningfully. Art possesses the ability to be a universal means of communication that overcomes language and cultural barriers, allowing for more active and effective community participation in research and decision-making. Furthermore, art can stimulate critical reflection and social action within the community, potentially leading to more effective and sustainable solutions to identified issues. As Blackburn Miller (2020) asserts, "The arts can be accessible for everyone, and they hold much potential for creating transformative learning experiences" (p. 350). In summary, art plays a critical role in CBPR by strengthening community participation and empowerment in research and by promoting social change.

In this case study, there were no pre-defined roles. Each participant contributed to the definition of research criteria and processes, fostering autonomy and governance. Even though we played a coordinating role in guiding the process, we always promoted each group member's sovereignty and self-management. Decisions were made through agreements and voting, to guarantee equal conditions within favorable conditions for horizontal dialogue and the valuation of different perspectives. This made it possible to consider all the participants' ideas and coordinate actions with the association and the cooperating partners, achieving a positive impact on the territory.

## Mapping, reflecting and connecting

By using tools such as mapping, we were able to identify and address local problems encountered throughout our territory. We used Social Cartography (Herrera and Flores, 2021) to position ourselves in our context, identifying problems related to social and geographic dynamics, and identifying possible actions to tackle them. This exercise allowed the community to become actively involved in the design and discussion of maps that reflected their realities and experiences. The location of problems was highlighted in orange circles and possible solutions in green triangles in the corresponding images.

Throughout the reflection process, questions arose related to the concern for the environmental care of the Combeima River canyon. Questions focused on the impact that the lack of environment care has on the area, the importance of the Canyon for the city of Ibagué, as well as the interest of artisan women. These questions also focused on the relation between handicrafts and natural environment and how women artisans contribute to the sustainability of the area.

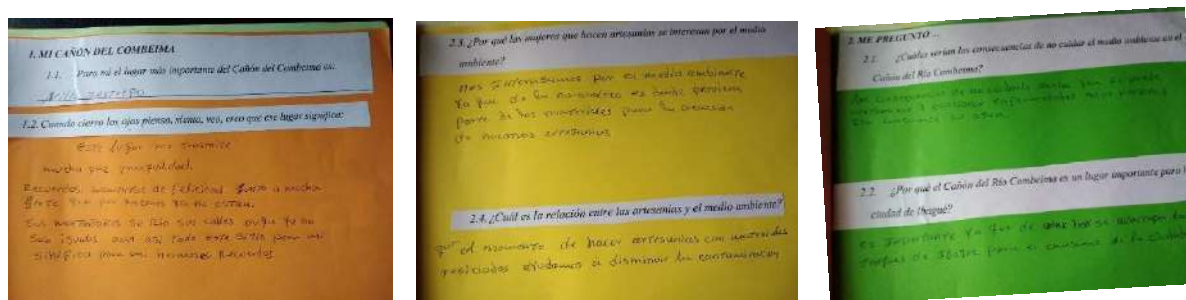


In this phase of the case study and after analyzing the data, it is concluded that water contamination caused by waste and litter is a serious problem with significant implications for the health, biodiversity, economy, and well-being of the communities in Ibagué. The river is essential to the city of Ibagué in the Tolima region of Colombia, both as a source of safe drinking water and, as a recreationally beautiful and peaceful place. Therefore, and according to (Budd et al. 2019) it is critical to take care and protect this natural resource while passing on its importance to future generations.

Recycling emerges as a multifaceted solution to address pollution, offering economic benefits and serving as a cornerstone of sustainability efforts. Beyond its immediate advantages of waste reduction and resource conservation, recycling plays a pivotal role in minimizing the extraction of raw materials, thus mitigating the environmental impact of resource depletion. By diverting materials from landfills and incinerators, recycling helps mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduces the need for energy-intensive manufacturing processes, thereby lowering the carbon footprint associated with producing new goods. Moreover, recycling fosters a circular economy model where materials are repurposed and reused, promoting efficiency and resilience within the supply chain while alleviating

pressure on natural ecosystems. Importantly, this paradigm shift recognizes waste recyclers women as community political actors (Batthyány, K. 2022), empowering them to actively participate in decision-making processes regarding waste management and environmental policies. Embracing recycling initiatives not only yields economic rewards but also aligns with long-term sustainability objectives, making it a crucial component of global environmental stewardship efforts.

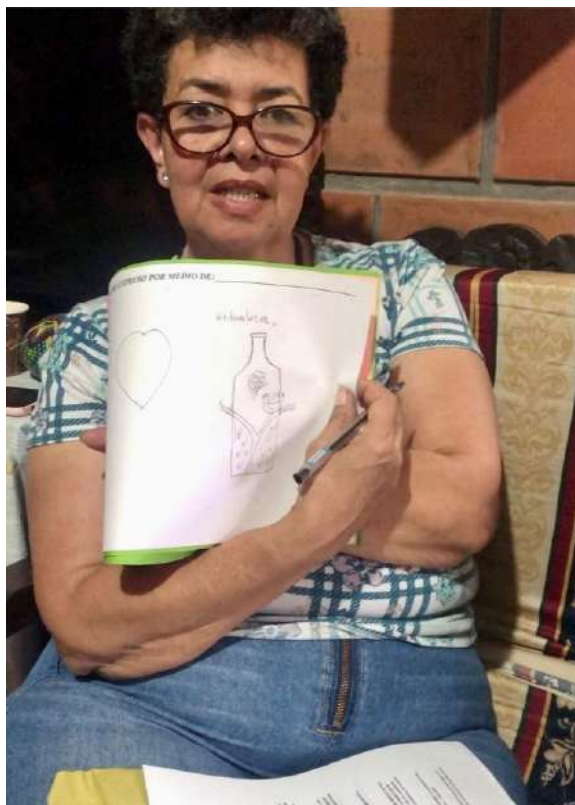
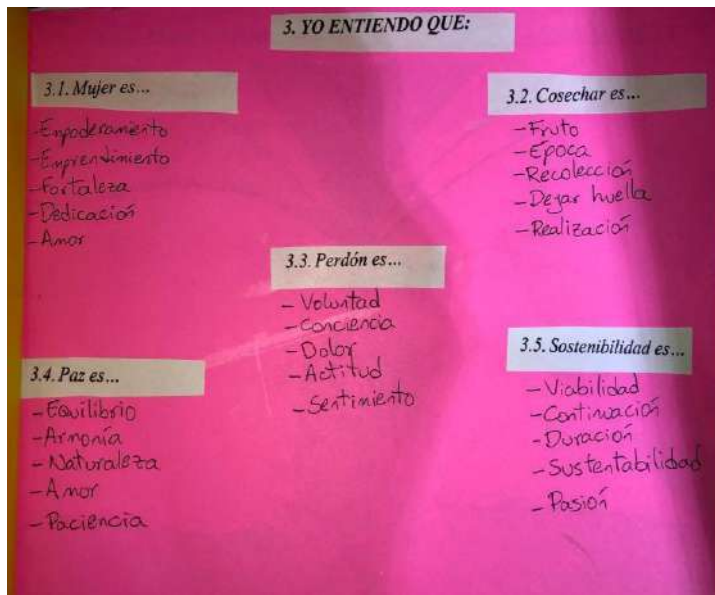
The collaborative process and collective reflections led to the co-construction of a fundamental question: How can the handicrafts crafted by the women of Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC contribute to a strategy that promotes sustainability in the region of the Combeima River Canyon? This question arises from a deeper understanding of the intertwined relationship between the local environment and the activities of the community, particularly the women artisans. By recognizing the value of their craftsmanship beyond mere artistic expression, the community begins to explore the potential of these creations as catalysts for sustainable development by articulating academic, community, and political scenarios (Batthyány, K. 2022). This question reflects a shift towards holistic thinking, considering not only the economic benefits of handicraft production but also its broader implications for environmental conservation, community empowerment, and cultural preservation in the region. Through this inquiry, stakeholders can envision innovative approaches that leverage the unique skills and perspectives of the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC women to address environmental challenges and promote resilience in the Combeima River Canyon area.



Themes and Co-creating concepts: Peace, Sustainability, Forgiveness, Women, and Harvest

During this stage of the process, an analysis of the information that emerged from the previous reflections was carried out. In this space, Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC women identified important themes and sought to establish connections to express their feelings, thoughts, and actions. They defined key concepts related to their identity and values, such as:

1. **Being a woman** is described as an individual that has a mixture of attributes. Some of these attributes include: empowerment, intelligence, creativity, strength, entrepreneurial spirit, dedication, love, responsibility, commitment, humility, beauty, kindness, organization, concern for the environment, self-confidence, courage, and passion. A woman is characterized as a courageous warrior and fighter as well as an entrepreneur.
2. **Harvesting** implies undertaking, sowing, cultivating, and reaping fruits at the right time, leaving a footprint, and experiencing a sense of fulfillment. It is also related to sowing with love to reap positive results and to take care of what has been sown.
3. **Forgiveness** is seen as a way of liberating negative feelings such as bitterness, resentment, anger, and pain. It involves loving others, being conscious and willing to change attitudes and feelings, seeking reconciliation, and freeing oneself from resentment to achieve tolerance and peace.
4. **Peace** is understood as a state of tranquility that is achieved through balance, harmony, nature, love, and patience. It is also related to awareness, cleanliness, and dialogue while seeking agreements and accepting differences.
5. **Sustainability** implies dedication, perseverance, and effort to achieve viability, continuity, and durability. It also relates to passion and love for what one does, as well as managing resources responsibly and creating opportunities for all, including the use of renewable energy sources and recycling.



In brief, a thorough analysis was conducted to ensure that the essence and significance of the concepts identified by the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC women were faithfully preserved. These concepts, rooted in their experiences and reflections, encapsulate profound aspects of their identity and values. For instance, the notion of “being a woman” embodies a multifaceted blend of qualities encompassing empowerment, resilience, and compassion. “Harvesting” symbolizes not just the act of reaping rewards, but also the journey of nurturing and growth, leaving a meaningful legacy. “Forgiveness” emerges as a powerful tool for personal liberation and fostering reconciliation. “Peace” is depicted as a state of serenity derived from balance, love, and dialogue. Lastly, “sustainability” encompasses dedication, responsible resource management, and a commitment to creating equitable opportunities. Each concept reflects the genuine sentiments and aspirations of the women, ensuring that their voices are authentically represented in the narrative.

## Expressions of territory through handicrafts

As a result of the information analysis and the development of their concepts, women identified the passion that would motivate their creativity. They also managed to recognize that handicrafts are the main area where the association works, so it was decided that this would be the best way to express the co-constructed concepts of Forgiveness, Peace, Sustainability, Women, and Harvest, through artistic expression. By doing so, they were able to show who they were and how they related and identified with their territory. Initially, sketches were created as drafts of the artistic ideas and each expression was given a name that would reflect what they wanted to convey. Finally, through the development of a booklet, the memories of the reflection and creation process were recorded.

Below, we present the names of the artistic expressions, which emerged from a reflection where participants defined the composition of their essence as rural women in three aspects: their mind, their heart, and their body, these three aspects were finally captured on the handicrafts.

1. **Coffee tree:** "In the head, it carries the leaves and flowers that show the result of the sowing. The heart is a basket full of coffee that is the result of my harvest. In the body are its roots and the earth that is where I can continue sowing and harvesting, in that earth and that basket, all my dreams with love (Sandra)."
2. **To be Reborn:** "It is when a woman allows herself to bloom as a second chance so that the beauty of the heart also blooms and the colorful nature is recovered, helping sustainability. To be reborn has a head of love and second chances, a heart of recovery and sustainability, and a body of nature and colors" (Yaneth).
3. **Pacifica:** "Its body is made of stems that signify strength. Its head is made of flowers that mean conservation and its heart has leaves that stand for tranquility" (Blanca).
4. **Colors of love:** "It has a snowy head, a multicolored heart, and a river body. In my earrings I describe the color of nature, beauty, and tranquility" (Yohanna).
5. **Cultivate yourself:** "It has the head of a rainbow, the heart of a hummingbird, and the body of flowers. We are from nature and we will return to it. Therefore, "Cultivate" shows the relationship you have as a human being with Mother Nature; the same one that provides us with the resources and raw materials to shape the designs of artistic and cultural expressions that beautify and bloom with the most beautiful colors; the same ones that adorn the thousands of landscapes with their flora and fauna, filling with light and harmony each of the physical and spiritual spaces that surround us" (Milena).
6. **Christmas:** "The head of my bottle has light to illuminate tranquility. The heart of my bottle is life, flowers, and seeds. And the body holds everything that contains it, with pebbles it holds" (Sara).
7. **Nature:** "The dove has a head of flowers, a heart of birds, and a body of a tree. The dove means peace in Colombia, the rose represents the woman in the head and nature means forgiveness and sustainability" (Olga).
8. **Chapolera:** "It has a coffee bean head, a coffee flower heart, and a coffee plant body. It signifies everything I do: my cooking, my handicrafts, the cultivation of coffee. It is quite simple but when I try to express myself through art, I succeed. I manage to show who I am and who we are, the women who harvest coffee" (Mirian).

In this way, the women described their creative work identifying what it represented from their minds, hearts, and bodies, conveying the meaning of each artistic expression, its name, and components.

Consequently, and as part of the community action, they considered that the best way to make the artistic expressions known would be through a handicraft exhibition called "Territorio de Paz" (Territory of Peace). To carry out this exhibition, the most appropriate place for the exhibition was selected. We also had to identify the public to whom the handicraft exhibition would be shown. In collaboration with professors from the "Universidad de Ibagué" and the "Universidad de Los Andes",



arrangements were made to exhibit these artistic creations at the "Museo del Arte del Tolima" (Art Museum of Tolima). As a result, the Craft Fair was held on February 16, 2023.



The following is a photographic record of the Craft Fair.



### United to transform: Resilience and sorority

Transformative actions play a key role in building capacity to bring about positive and sustainable change in the community. These actions focus not only on understanding community problems but also on addressing their underlying causes and collaborating with

community members to develop effective and sustainable solutions. For that reason, the art is considering The Soft Power (Waddock, S. 2022). It is described as the capacity to sway others through the appeal of culture, values, and policies. As an example of the above, we can mention that because some of the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC members also work in the tourism and pastry sector, they helped to market the handicraft products of all the members of the organization in the "Cañón del Combeima" (Combeima Canyon). This place is very popular on weekends with occasional national and international tourists that visit the area because of its natural attraction. This was done with the idea of building relationships to improve the perception and experiences of visitors in the area. As part of this exercise, a collective decision was made to carry out a campaign to raise awareness and develop ways to take care of the surrounding areas.



## Conclusions and future directions

There are several important insights that our study provides:

- Community Based Participatory Research highlights the importance of art as a powerful tool for engaging the community in research processes. Art stands out as a universal means of communication that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers. This creative approach promotes active community participation in research and decision-making. In addition, art can stimulate critical reflection and social action, fostering more effective and sustainable solutions to previously identified problems. Therefore, art is an engine of community change.
- The study highlights the absence of defined roles and the promotion of autonomy in the research process. All participants worked together on the definition of criteria and processes where governance and autonomy were fostered. Equality of conditions was valued, facilitating spaces for horizontal dialogue, and encouraging respect for all perspectives. This structure favored the inclusion of all the participants' ideas and coordinated joint actions, which generated a positive impact on the territory. In this sense, the CBPR is a generator of autonomy and empowerment. In other words, we perceive her approach as primarily focused on transformative learning, wherein she assists individuals in scrutinizing the underlying causes of environmental degradation and encourages them to participate in devising strategies to tackle these issues. Consequently, individuals swiftly assume responsibility and feel empowered to actively contribute towards effecting change (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023).
- Water pollution poses significant threats to various aspects of life in Ibagué, including public health, biodiversity, the economy, and overall well-being. Given its profound impact, it is crucial to find effective ways to address this issue. Here, art emerges as a powerful tool for raising awareness and fostering environmental stewardship. Through artistic expressions such as visual arts and handicrafts, communities can engage with and understand the gravity of water pollution. Art has the unique ability to evoke emotions, spark conversations, and inspire action. By incorporating environmental themes into artistic endeavors, individuals are encouraged to reflect

on the importance of preserving water resources and taking proactive measures to safeguard the environment. In this way, art transcends its traditional boundaries and becomes a catalyst for environmental advocacy and positive change in Ibagué.

- Recycling serves as a multifaceted solution to combat contamination, offering not only economic advantages but also serving as a cornerstone of sustainability efforts. Beyond its immediate benefits of reducing waste and conserving resources, recycling contributes to the broader goal of sustainability by minimizing the extraction of raw materials, which in turn lessens the environmental impact of resource depletion. By diverting materials from landfills and incinerators, recycling helps mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduces the need for energy-intensive manufacturing processes, thus lowering the carbon footprint associated with producing new goods. Moreover, recycling fosters a circular economy model where materials are reused and repurposed, promoting efficiency and resilience within the supply chain while reducing pressure on natural ecosystems. Therefore, embracing recycling initiatives not only reaps economic rewards but also aligns with long-term sustainability objectives, making it a crucial component of environmental stewardship efforts worldwide.

By becoming aware of ourselves as questioners, as makers of meaning, and as individuals engaged in constructing and reconstructing realities with those around us, we may be able to communicate different points of view about reality, emphasizing that its construction is never complete and that there is always more to explore (Greene, M. 1995). Hence, the relationship between women artisans and environmental care underscores the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into educational curricula. Moreover, by recognizing the roles of women as caregivers and entrepreneurs in environmental stewardship, educators can foster a more practical, inclusive, and integral approach to teaching sustainability. This involves promoting critical thinking skills and encouraging students to explore the intersectionality of gender, entrepreneurship, and environmentalism. Additionally, this case study highlights the value of collaborative learning experiences that bridge academic knowledge with community expertise.

In conclusion, this case study suggests that future research could delve deeper into the specific mechanisms through which women artisans contribute to environmental care within their communities. Exploring the cultural, social, and economic factors that shape women's roles in sustainability initiatives can provide valuable insights for designing targeted interventions and policy measures. Additionally, investigating the replicability of the collaborative model presented in this case study, with Community-Based Participatory Research methodology could inform efforts to empower communities and promote sustainable development on a broader scale. Overall, future studies in this area have the potential to advance our understanding of the intersection between gender, entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability, ultimately guiding more inclusive and effective approaches to environmental education and community development.

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## About the Authors

**Dr. Irma Alicia Flores** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education of the University of Los Andes, Colombia. Irma’s research and teaching focus on teacher training in qualitative and participatory research, ethno-education, popular and rural education inclusion, diversity, and curricular transformation. Dr. Flores completed her PhD in Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth. She also has a Master’s degree in Educational and Social Development, and a Specialization degree in Community Development; her undergraduate degree is in Psychology. Dr. Flores is also a mentor in the Community Based Research of the UNESCO Chair Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. She is the coordinator of the Hub Colombia from the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium.

**e-Mail:** ia.flores24@uniandes.edu.co

**Lady Johanna Peñaloza-Farfán** is an Agro-industrial Engineer. She is a specialist in Environmental Management. Ms. Penaloza-Farfán has a master’s degree in education and is a full time lecturer in the Department of Logistics and Computer Science at the University of Ibagué, Colombia. Her research interests are in Regional Development, Sustainability, Community Development, Peace Building, and Systems Thinking.

**e-Mail:** lady.penaloza@uninague.edu.co