

Car Wash a Sexist Job in the Peruvian Andes

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Abstract

The objective of the research was to analyze how car wash work in the Peruvian Ande promotes sexist attitudes, especially through advertising featuring half-naked young women. The method used was ethnography, with participant observation and informal interviews, due to the social and informal nature of this type of work. The researchers' integration into the community of car washers, both as clients and as frequent passersby, was key to interacting with workers and clients on public roads, where labor practices are carried out illegally. The information collected was processed through field notes and reflection on the data obtained. It is concluded that informal car wash work in the Peruvian Ande perpetuates sexist attitudes, mainly through sexualized advertising of women. Despite the promotion of gender equity by the central government, local governments minimize these policies to preserve their popularity, which allows the continuity of sexist practices within this informal sector.

Keywords: Sexism, Andean Labor, Vehicles, Laundry, Andes.

Introduction

This research focuses on the Ayacucho region, located at an altitude of 2,761 meters above sea level, where the Quechua culture predominates and the Quechua language is used as the first official language. This Andean city, of colonial foundation, is characterized by its narrow streets. According to Diario Jornada (2023), Huamanga's historic center becomes chaotic during rush hour, with reckless drivers and daring pedestrians. Ayacucho's population has grown from 70,000 to almost 300,000, which has increased traffic and urban disorganization. Managing the city's growth is almost impossible due to the rugged geography. In addition, informal car-washing operations proliferate at the entrances and exits of three specific areas of Ayacucho: east, southeast, and west, critical points because they are exit routes to other cities.

The general panorama of the region, according to the report of the Centro Emergencia Mujer de Ayacucho (2024), reveals that Ayacucho faces serious problems of violence against women, with 1,894 cases of physical violence registered in 2023. In addition, women in the region earn lower salaries than men and have a high illiteracy rate, which shows significant gender gaps. This critical situation is aggravated by the presence of sexist advertising in the main streets of the city. This aspect, as Gordillo (2008) points out, is a worrying factor: ¿is it acceptable for an advertisement to suggest that getting a woman drunk guarantees her favors or to display a naked woman as a prize? The line between sex and sexism is blurred, and many cross it without facing consequences.

In the colonial streets of Ayacucho, as in other parts of the country, one can see images of half-naked women promoting services such as car washes, lubricant sales, hardware stores and fuel pumps, among other forms of commercial advertising. This phenomenon is recurrent and, despite this, the authorities have not been able to prohibit or regulate the display of these photographs, which often show young women with exuberant bodies. The placement of these images in full-color banners contradicts the struggle for gender equality. It is essential to consider the contribution of Espín et al. (2006), which highlights the importance of education for equal citizenship. Research on the representations of women

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in advertising seeks to explore the duality between the public and the private, encouraging the identification and elimination of sexism and stereotypes in the population, thus promoting a critical awareness.

In the streets of Huamanga, especially in the car wash areas, there is a proliferation of images of young women without identification, taken from some unauthorized internet page. It is common to see posters with pictures of half-naked women obstructing the sidewalks, making it difficult for pedestrians to pass. Simancas (2019) describes this situation as a clear example of the sexist and androcentric discourse present in advertising, which is based on sexist stereotypes and reflects the value system of society. This discourse reinforces the status quo and patriarchal identities, perpetuating unequal access to resources for women. Hortencia & Cabeza De Tarazon (2013) complement this observation by pointing out that the administrative authority cannot protect people from “sexist” trade advertising unless it generates illegal behavior. This type of advertising not only reinforces negative stereotypes, but also represents obstacles to equality, often masquerading as humor while perpetuating sexist and offensive messages towards women.

This research focuses on the entrances and exits of the city of Ayacucho, where there is a proliferation of illegal car washes without municipal authorization. Many of these establishments use clandestinely purified water. Most of the workers are Venezuelan, who offer their washing services from Monday to Sunday, from early in the morning until late at night. The sidewalks where pedestrians walk are practically inaccessible due to the high vehicular traffic, while the authorities responsible for the city's ornamentation seem to ignore this situation. The collective imaginary about Venezuelans in the region is negative. According to Najarro (2020), the arrival of Venezuelans is perceived as a problem, as they compete unfairly in the labor market, accepting low wages and generating distrust. This creates a sense of job insecurity among Ayacuchans, who feel that these workers receive benefits from the state unfairly.

Methodology

The ethnographic research, based on participant observation, was conducted in car washes located in the three entrances or exits of the Ayacucho region, province of Huamanga, in their respective districts with municipal governments. The researchers interviewed the workers, women, men and children, who are engaged in informal work. In this context, it was observed that advertising images are sexist, showing women in tiny clothes bathed in shampoo and soap, used as strategies to attract male clients. In addition, informal interviews were conducted to obtain perspectives on car washing work, since it was not possible to conduct formal interviews due to the social nature of the “jaladores” and washers, who present criminal behaviors in front of unknown users without vehicles to wash.

The researchers collect data with direct interaction in the daily life of work in the car wash in the three selected sectors of study; this allowed collecting direct data. Participant observation ethnography that “conceives as a methodology that encompasses more than a series of data collection techniques that can be easily described or used” (Cotán, 2020, p. 86). The essence of the research work lies in interpreting the meanings and symbols associated with the work of the car wash. The researchers, as participating actors, took the vehicles to be washed, which allowed them to integrate into the community and learn first-hand about their stories, work dynamics, social relations and cultural structures, fundamental to their daily communication. This immersion facilitated a deeper understanding of the practices and values that guide their work, as well as the interactions that define their daily lives in the context of car washing.

The most accessible way to collect data was through immersion, acting as clients and looking for workers in the car washes who met the characteristics displayed in the full-color advertisements. On other occasions, investigators acted as passersby who strolled daily through areas filled with informal car wash stalls, an activity that lacks control by municipal authorities. On occasion, investigators witnessed sporadic raids in which advertising banners were confiscated, but shortly thereafter or the next day the situation was repeated. Once the information was collected, it was processed in a desk study, using bibliographic sources, field notes and reflections on the data obtained through participant observation, in order to develop a comprehensive analysis. This study seeks to understand how informal car washes in the Peruvian Ande reflect and reinforce sexist attitudes, especially through advertising and interactions with customers, most of whom are men.

The culture of the Peruvian highlands has machista characteristics, influenced by the geographic and social conditions of the region. Physical labor in the fields, which requires considerable strength, has relegated women to domestic roles and limited their social participation. According to Quispe-Martínez (2024), fear stands as a main barrier for women in politics, generating what can be called a “socio-psychological death” as they are unable to challenge machismo. This situation normalizes fear of criticism, which often leads to frustration and a sense of defeat for many of them. During the visits to the high Andean communities, this reality became evident. The rainy season, which allows planting once a year from November to March, contrasts with the dry months. In this context, men tend to migrate to the inter-Andean valleys in search of agricultural work that requires irrigation, while women remain at home, shepherding and caring for the household.

In the data collection in the Ayacucho region, a persistent machista culture is evident. According to the women interviewed, this situation is due to a lack of education, since in the past, grandparents taught obedience to their husbands. This reality demands a gradual change through state policies that implement laws to protect women. Studies by Gutiérrez-Gómez & Munaris-Parco (2023) and González (2023) reveal that governments in various parts of the world are promoting gender equality and women's rights, driven by a history marked by paternalistic machismo. Women have faced numerous obstacles in their struggle for recognition and acceptance in society. Feminism, as a social movement promoted worldwide, has been slow to reach the highlands of Peruvian territory.

The general conditions of machismo in the Peruvian highlands are fueled by the sexism present in commercial advertising, especially in the context of informal work related to car washing. In these unhealthy environments, sexist photographs of voluptuous, half-naked women are displayed, reinforcing Andean machismo, where education is scarce and Quechua is the predominant language. In this regard, Boix (2022) mentions that some organizations and women have analyzed the distortion of the female image in the media and advertising from a gender perspective. However, communication issues and information strategies are often left out of feminist agendas.

In the Peruvian Andes, there are family rituals with marked macho characteristics, such as the proposal of marriage, which involves betrothing a woman from her home through special ceremonies. In this context, it is not contemplated that a woman asks for a man's hand; the right to fall in love falls exclusively on the man. These types of situations are justified as customs, as indicated by the research of Salas (2022). The proposals of hand must be carried out with the intervention of recognized persons, such as the tertuleros. Before proceeding, the father of the male consults his son about his desire to live with the young woman, in addition to making sure he knows the customs of his family. A complementary study by Moral (2000) points out that advertisers cannot be expected to support the claims of a specific group. If feminism were to have a significant impact on the majority, this would be reflected in commercial advertising, which would adopt a discourse aligned with social reality.

In Peru, there is abundant literature on machismo, especially in the Andean region. This research presents an overview that introduces the issue of machismo in the trade related to car washes in Ayacucho. Informal car washing work in this region reveals a marked presence of machismo, without effective control by the authorities. This situation has been well documented by Moral (2000). Advertising plays a fundamental role in society, acting as a powerful vehicle of persuasion that encourages consumption and the dissemination of different lifestyles. However, there are no complaints or judicial control mechanisms over the exposure of outdoor images that do not align with the representation of the Andean woman's body. It is relevant to consider the work of Quirós (2020), who points out that the limitations in the active legitimization and the high judicial costs explain the scarcity of sentences in this area. So far, only two standards have been consolidated in jurisprudence: gender role discrimination and exploitation of the female body.

Women in the Peruvian Andes face significant vulnerability to divorce, especially when they have children. Society often labels them as single mothers, and the saying “the more you hit me, the more I love you” becomes popular. When they are abandoned or decide to divorce, they face the reality that physical labor in the field traditionally requires the presence of a man. Job opportunities for women in agriculture are scarce and, in addition, salaries are significantly lower compared to men. In the Ayacucho region, the subject of this research, women are found working in car washes. However, their situation is far from the idealized image shown in advertising banners, where young, thin, semi-naked women predominate. It is crucial to consider the approach of Moral (2000), who concludes that advertising seeks to reflect changes in the social role of women. To combat sexism in advertising,

it is necessary to address and eradicate the sexism present in society.

Car Washers and Sexist Stereotypes

It has been noted that car washes in the Ayacucho region operate completely illegally and informally, without authorization from any municipality near the three entry and exit points. This situation reflects sexist and stereotyped work, prone to front situations, as evidenced in the complaints reported by Times (2016). In one of them, it is reported that the Attorney General's Office (FGR) arrested three women and one man for forcing female employees of a car wash under its administration to engage in prostitution. On the other hand, there are also examples of women who defy these gender stereotypes. Frida Ames, for example, learned to drive at the age of seven and became the first woman in Peru to drive an Enatrú bus, transporting up to 300 passengers, as reported in Redacciónperu21 (2015).

Political, municipal and other authorities that protect against sexism do not consider stopping and prohibiting the display of banner images along the streets of Ayacucho, which cover about ten blocks at the three exits and entrances of the area. The work of (Hortencia and Cabeza De Tarazona 2013) indicates on “Article 59 of the Political Constitution of Peru adds that, although the State guarantees freedom of enterprise the exercise of the same must not be harmful to morality, health, or public safety” (p. 19). It is a violation of free enterprise that disrespects the morals and good customs of Ayacucho society with colorful sexist images of half-naked young women. It is important to point out that Ayacucho women “have achieved a leading role as citizens and as agents of change in Huamanga. The twentieth century is also the century in which women, more and more women, take the floor and control of their identities” (Gutiérrez, 2018, p. 210).

In participant observation and interviews with workers in these illegal businesses, they mentioned that the images that appear on the banners are only a façade, used as a hook to attract clients. Given that, in the Andean region of Peru, most drivers are men, this dynamic becomes an advantage that fosters sexism, as they point out (Aguilera et al. 2022) that “most of the subjects expressed that they had a traditional, strict and stereotyped upbringing with religious influence” (p. 62). The determining factor in sexist behavior in the Andes is education, as expressed by most of the interviewees. This is related to what is expressed by (Rottenbacher, Espinosa, and Magallanes 2011) on “benevolent sexism as a political and social response to expressions of human sexuality and male-female relations, which are politically considered transgressive of the status quo” (p. 240). The Peruvian State makes strenuous efforts to achieve tolerance, but in practice it is not achieved.

In the car washes that are installed informally in unsanitary conditions without prior authorization, the workers are women, men and children of humble condition, which is far from the advertising images found on the sidewalk. According to the work of (Alarcón and Torres 2016) “the spaces in which stereotypes are housed are undoubtedly the media. Advertising sits, most of the time, on the stereotype, to motivate consumption” (p. 4). Advertising in Peru is uncontrollably stereotyped and sexist with the sole objective of obtaining economic benefits. It is so “those advertisements that had the impact of ‘favoring’ or ‘stimulating’ any kind of offense or racial, sexual, social, political or religious discrimination; a prohibition that in turn is present in the Constitution itself” (Hortencia & Cabeza De Tarazona, 2013, p. 47). Andean women have other physical and dress characteristics due to the geographic nature of their location.

Gender Inequality in Carwashing

Gender inequality is a widely recognized phenomenon both in Peru and globally, and particularly in the Andean region, where work continues to be gendered. In many car wash centers, the work is performed by women from rural areas who migrated to the region's capital in search of informal jobs, which are characterized by extremely low wages. According to Torns & Recio (2021), this situation reflects that gender inequalities in the labor market have a structural character; they not only persist, but are transformed, like any type of energy. In the participant observation, it became evident that the work performed by foreign women has nothing in common with the advertising images on the posters that adorn some premises. Most of these workers are found in the middle of the street, in areas with high vehicle and pedestrian traffic.

The work done in the car washes, with images of half-naked young women in various advertising photographs

placed at the three main exits of Huamanga, is unhealthy and criminal in nature. The car washes compete for customers by offering the best photos of women in their advertisements. The verbal and social behavior of the workers is problematic, as they accuse each other of hoarding clients. According to Mingo (2020), the pathologization of women's anger, especially feminists, seeks to delegitimize their struggle, using epithets such as “hysterical” or “feminazis” and negative comments in social networks and digital media, especially in response to protests by the collectives interviewed.

In the unhealthy work environments of the car washes, their workers are mixed, and none of them are related or equivalent to the advertisement offered as a hook for their illegal business. This research emphasizes women's participation in the images and in the work they perform as indicated by (Barba, Martos, and Fonseca 1997) on “the entry of women workers in the factories established a new modality of relationship, that is, a system of hierarchies according to the capitalist business objective to extract the maximum profit from the female labor force” (p. 27). Women's working conditions in Peru are strongly influenced by historical and social factors, as well as by race and gender. The condition of a patriarchal society generates subordination to the economic structure.

Regardless of the images on full-color panels of half-naked young women with perfect bodies, inside the premises, some of which have a makeshift shack, the car wash is usually done on the street, where passersby have to dodge the water spray to walk on the sidewalks occupied by the car wash and the posters promoting the best car wash. Even in the historical conditions of women such as “education, work and organization were masculinized spaces. While the private, the home and its care were feminine spaces. Disrupting these patterns that governed the existence of human beings produced wide debates” (Goicochea, 2020, p. 61). This situation can be overcome in the Peruvian Andes, where machismo is deeply rooted as indicated by (Boix 2022) “this has been one of the debates that have occupied the most space in the times of reflection on feminism and communication, tinged perhaps by the historical clashes between the feminism of equality and the feminism of difference” (p. 2).

The Inaction of the Municipal Authorities in the Face of Sexism

The political authorities, directly in charge of the ornamentation of the city and the protection of women's image, do not adequately supervise the public display of semi-nude images that serve as a hook for illegal businesses. Thus, the historical struggle of women in Peru is relegated as “the right to vote for women was only granted in 1955 with the enactment of Law No. 12391, under the fulfillment of certain requirements” (Caballero & Choquehuanca, 2024, p. 193). The right won by women in politics continues to be overshadowed by illegal activities that involve public exposure of images that do not reflect the physical characteristics of working women, such as those involved in car washing. It is essential to take into account the incomplete aspects of gender equity, as pointed out by (Andrade, Arboleda, and Chalarca 2021) “is enunciated in Peru in Law 27387 of 2000 for its Upper Houses; that is, they have a gender parity of less than half of the 100 % of political positions and candidacies present in their State” (p. 149). The advances made in women's history are undervalued in the workplace.

During visits to the municipalities under its jurisdiction, the office in charge of granting operating licenses to commercial establishments has indicated that it is prohibited to grant licenses to car washes. This restriction is due to the fact that these establishments use potable water, and the requirement for the authorization of a car wash is that they use a technified water reuse system. However, the owners of these businesses do not dare to implement this type of system because of the high investment costs involved. In addition, scientific reports on water scarcity are worrisome “in the Apacheta micro-watershed, as it will not have the capacity to meet such demand, making it necessary to build water storage dams or strengthen water planting and harvesting programs” (Moncada & Willems, 2020, p. 93). Despite growing concern about water scarcity in the Andean region of Ayacucho, regional and municipal authorities have not taken measures to restrict the indiscriminate use of potable water. In addition, informal labor that exploits the image of half-naked women in its billboard advertising persists without effective regulations.

According to municipal workers, definitive control of informal establishments is impossible. Although they carry out unexpected raids and confiscate posters displayed on public roads, they do not have sufficient personnel to carry out constant surveillance, due to the proliferation of car washes at several interprovincial exits. In addition, the employees of these establishments display criminal attitudes, threatening municipal workers. These establishments show no regard for the indiscriminate use of drinking water in an area facing a scarcity of this

resource. Most of them operate clandestinely, which contrasts with the situation of the farmers, who, unlike these businesses, do comply with their obligations to pay a “flat rate of S/60/ha approved by the Junta de Usuarios del Distrito de Riego de Ayacucho, a rate that does not cover the costs of operation and maintenance of the minor infrastructure of the Cuchoquesera Dam in the Cachi river basin” (Ccasani et al., 2023, p. 253). Water flow from higher elevations is in a process of irreversible scarcity.

In participant observation and interviews with owners and workers of the car wash establishments, they state that they are authorized to operate. However, the responses to investigators and passersby passing through the area are hostile, which affects the entry of vehicles into their businesses. As for the display of photos of half-naked women covered in shampoo and soap, the owners claim that these images attract drivers, mostly men, who seek to stimulate morbidity. In none of the laundry premises were female workers found to match the images on display. In some premises liquor is even sold for consumption while vehicles are being washed. This situation has no formal or informal complaints, despite the fact that, as Sosa (2017) points out, responsibility for regulating indecent, sexist or antisocial advertising has been constantly questioned. Demands for action against advertisements in bad taste or that reinforce negative stereotypes, such as machismo, have intensified with the rise of social networks.

Conclusion

The research reveals that the informal car wash sector reflects and perpetuates sexist attitudes, especially through full-color billboard or banner advertising, which depicts young, statuesque women in minimal clothing, drenched in shampoo and soap. This visual representation reinforces gender stereotypes and contributes to the objectification of women. In the Andes, this sexist situation facilitates the normalization of machismo by presenting women as mere objects of attraction, which perpetuates gender inequality and discrimination at work and in society. In this regard (Espín, Marín, and Rodríguez 2004) analyze that “traditional stereotypes appear, such as the use of the perfect female body, the image of women as an aesthetic and/or sexual value, that is, as an ornament or advertising claim, and the image of the ‘superwoman’ (p. 224). The female image in car wash advertisements, represented in a sexualized way, usually in subordinate roles, contributes to gender inequality, fostering machismo.

The primary role of the municipalities with jurisdiction in the region, such as the Municipality of Jesús Nazareno, the Municipality of San Juan Bautista and the Municipality of Huamanga, should be to control and supervise the display of posters with images of half-naked women on public streets, promoting car washing services. However, these entities do not exercise any type of regulation in this regard, nor do they have any direct or indirect relationship with the informal work associated with car washing in the Ayacucho region. Although the central government promotes gender equity, as indicated by (Gutiérrez-Gómez et al. 2024) that “the Peruvian state seeks to reach the most remote places where a marked machismo, accepted by the entire community, continues to exist” (p. 5). This initiative has not been effective at the municipal level, as car washes continue to reinforce gender stereotypes, promoting a division of labor between men and women. It is crucial to address sexism through effective control that encourages the formalization of work and regulates the authorized use of images, many of which come from Internet sites and are used without any oversight.

The limitations of this research are due to the nature of informal vehicle washing work. In the entire Ayacucho region, there are no authorized premises for the use of potable water in this sector. In addition, workers show serious reluctance to express their opinions, especially those involved in criminal practices, who avoid interacting with people outside their potential clients. The fieldwork was concentrated in the city of Ayacucho, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other regions of Peru, with diverse social and cultural contexts. In addition, there are no previous studies on sexism in car washing in the Andean highlands of Peru. Another important factor is the limited participation of local authorities in the control and eradication of informal and unhealthy environments. Neighbors argue that these car washes contribute to the electoral campaigns of authorities who do not take measures to regulate these practices.

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