

In Bolivia's Marketplaces, Women Rule

By Deanne Estrada

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When Bolivian farm families bring their produce to the sprawling market in Tiraque, husbands help their wives carry in the huge sacks of potatoes that are the main commodity, and the women take over from there.

"Men rule the fields, but women rule the markets," said Nadezda Amaya, a master's degree student in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech. Her analysis of male and female roles in the farming communities of the Andes is part of the SANREM CRSP's research on gendered access to markets in seven countries.

In Tiraque, a province in the central Bolivian highlands, eight of the market's 10 wholesalers are women. Through a social network that increasingly depends on cell phones to gather information, they set the prices based on supply, demand, and quality. Men do not know how to bargain with the majority female wholesalers, they say: "Between women there is more understanding."

Amaya's findings contradict the conventional wisdom that Andean societies are strongly male-dominated, with women relegated to reproductive responsibilities in the home. It is true, she said, that in mixed company women tend to be shy and not to speak up. In the marketplace, however, they are in charge, managing the money and making the decisions. Their clout is significant. Wholesale merchants can sell more than \$60,000 worth of potatoes a week.

Amaya is one of eight students participating in the SANREM gender project, which pays for part of their field research. She was initially recruited to complete her master's degree at Virginia Tech by Jeffrey Alwang, principal investigator for SANREM's Long-term Research Award Activity 3: Watershed-based Natural Resource Management for Small-scale Agriculture in the Andes. In 2007, she joined the gender cross-cutting initiative.

She presented some of her findings Nov. 20, 2008, as part of Virginia Tech's Women in Development (WID) Discussion Series. Led by Maria Elisa Christie, WID program director, SANREM researchers are studying the role of gendered networks in market access and enhanced livelihoods in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Zambia.

Among questions guiding the research are: Which products are sold by women and which by men? Do men and women get different prices for the same products? If so, why? How do coalitions and networks arise? How are they sustained? How do they benefit people?

[Click here](#) to learn more about SANREM's gender work.

[Click here](#) to see Nadezda Amaya's Nov. 20 presentation.