ISSN: 2755-0214

Journal of Economics & Management Research

SCIENTIFIC Research and Community

Review Article

Open Access

Women's Empowerment and Entrepreneurship in the UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, Peru - 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the relationship between empowerment and female entrepreneurship within the Savings and Credit Unions (UNICAS) in Cajamarca in 2024. The research was basic, quantitative, non-experimental, correlational, and cross-sectional in nature. The population consisted of 536 UNICAS in the Cajamarca region; however, a sample of 15 UNICAS-comprising exclusively women and totalling 195 individuals-was selected. The study yielded a Spearman's Rho coefficient of 0.886, indicating a strong positive correlation. This suggests that higher levels of empowerment increase the likelihood of women starting a business. Therefore, it is essential to continue promoting economic empowerment programs and facilitating access to microfinance in order to foster economic and social development in the region.

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Received: June 10, 2026; **Accepted:** June 17, 2026; **Published:** June 25, 2026

Introduction

Women's economic empowerment and their participation in entrepreneurship have become topics of growing interest on the global agenda. According to the World Bank, significant disparities in progress are evident internationally [1]. While European and Asian countries have implemented public policies and specific programs to foster female entrepreneurship, the situation differs across many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Women's labor force participation in the region is not growing at the same rate as men's; one in three women does not earn her own income, compared to 11.7% of men.

Furthermore, 90% of unpaid domestic work is still performed by women; although progress has been made, gender gaps persist regarding access to resources, training, and business opportunities.

In the Peruvian context, women's empowerment and entrepreneurship have emerged as priority issues on the development agenda. However, Peruvian women continue to face challenges in accessing financing, support networks, and markets, despite the difficulties encountered in recent years. Research by Manco indicates that women's entrepreneurship has had a significant impact on the Peruvian economy, contributing 16% to the country's GDP. In 2019, women accounted for 45% of entrepreneurship in Peru, a figure that has risen to 51.5% so far in 2024 [2]. Yet, in this regard, rural regions such as Cajamarca present unique characteristics that require solutions tailored to their specific contexts.

Savings and Credit Unions (UNICAs) in Cajamarca are emerging as key players in fostering women's empowerment and entrepreneurship in the region. Data from Los Andes de Cajamarca indicates that there were 1,846 such unions nationwide, with 536 UNICAs established in the Cajamarca region-all of them sustainable [3]. These unions involved 4,995 participating families and had accumulated social capital exceeding S/. 13,407,287.00. Furthermore, women accounted for 3% of total participation and held 8% of leadership positions; consequently, Cajamarca serves as a benchmark for entrepreneurship, aiming to contribute to the understanding of how these unions impact women's economic empowerment and local development.

Similarly, Restrepo and Cuadra aimed to analyze female entrepreneurial empowerment through mentoring and networking in Chile [4]. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving interviews with female entrepreneurs participating in a mentoring program in Valparaíso. The study results demonstrated that mentoring and the creation of collaborative networks enable entrepreneurs to share experiences and foster an environment of trust, solidarity, empathy, and empowerment. It is concluded that these processes help narrow gender gaps for female entrepreneurs in the region.

Rojas-Rojas presents a study conducted in Ecuador that aimed to analyze entrepreneurial ventures through the lens of rural women's empowerment in the parish of Santa Ana, Cuenca [5]. Employing a mixed-methods approach (combining qualitative and quantitative research)-including semi-structured interviews and surveys with female leaders and members of women's associations-the study concludes that entrepreneurship offers an avenue for economic and personal development for rural women. It enables them to achieve autonomy and improve their living conditions, while highlighting their role in promoting gender equality and reducing poverty in rural areas.

Similarly, Ordóñez aimed to analyze female entrepreneurship within the context of local development in the province of

Cañar, Ecuador [6]. An empirical approach with a field research design was employed. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire featuring a Likert scale, and the results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study's findings indicated that gender-based entrepreneurship within the local development of Cañar province is characterized by instability, uncertainty, and complexity. It is concluded that female entrepreneurship has had to confront challenges imposed by the pandemic, which have exacerbated the complexities women face in achieving economic independence in the province, thereby hindering the advancement of local development.

In another study, Hernández aimed to determine the influence of entrepreneurship on women's empowerment in the Latacunga Canton, identifying differences in behavior between rural and urban areas [7]. A quantitative methodology was employed, involving the administration of a three-section structured instrument to a sample of 384 women. The study results demonstrated that entrepreneurial experience and profiles are significant factors in explaining empowerment for the sample as a whole and for the urban area, though this was not the case for the rural area. It is concluded that entrepreneurial initiatives in rural areas may serve as a source of household income without leading to significant improvements in women's decision-making, independence, or social and familial standing, owing to the cultural characteristics of the Ecuadorian Andes.

Similarly, Palacios aimed to determine the level of well-being among women and their families engaged in independent work in Mexico [8]. The study employed a quantitative methodology, focusing on the Heckman method and quantile regressions. Data were drawn from the National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure. The results indicated that female heads of households must work nearly three times harder than men to cover family expenses, allocating over 70% of household spending to food, housing, and transportation. The study concludes that female entrepreneurship-while driven by necessity-contributes significantly to family well-being, although gender disparities in well-being levels persist due to a lack of focus on leveraging education among women.

Similarly, García aimed to analyze differences in funding sources between male and female entrepreneurs across 69 countries [9]. The study employed an empirical methodology involving a comparative analysis. Data were collected through Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) surveys, and the results were analyzed using chi-square tests. The findings indicated that female entrepreneurs tend to prefer funding sources such as personal and family savings, whereas male entrepreneurs prefer turning to banks and other financial institutions. The study concludes that there is significant gender-based differences in funding preferences, which may influence women's entrepreneurial activity.

A study presented by Terrones-Sotomayor aimed to determine the effect of access to microcredit on the economic empowerment of female merchants in Huánuco. The research employed a quantitative approach and an explanatory level, using a quasi-experimental, post-test-only design with two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The results confirm that the differences between the group that benefited from microcredit and the group control group, which did not experience such benefits regarding the capacity to: generate income and financial savings ($Z = -5.506$); support the business and meet individual and family obligations ($Z = -5.548$); manage the business ($Z = -3.480$); and provide financial security for the household ($Z = -2.912$) with these differences being statistically significant ($p < 0.005$). There were no differences regarding entrepreneurial capacity ($Z = -1.608$; $p = 0.108$).

On the other hand, Silva set out to establish the relationship between entrepreneurship and female empowerment among young people in Lima. The methodology employed was quantitative, with a non-This study was experimental, basic in nature, and correlational in design, involving a sample of 132 young female entrepreneurs. The results demonstrated a significant relationship between entrepreneurship and female empowerment, evidenced by a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.732 and a p-value of 0.000 (< 0.05). It is concluded that an increase in the level of entrepreneurship leads to an increase in the level of female empowerment among young women in Lima.

Furthermore, Pando aimed to determine the influence of empowerment on the leadership of businesswomen in the Northern Cone in Peru [10]. The methodology used was quantitative, non-experimental in design, cross-sectional, and probabilistic sampling, working with 70 businesswomen. The results of the study showed that empowerment influences the female leadership of businesswomen in Lima Norte, highlighting autonomy and self-sufficiency as key factors. It was determined that there is a direct relationship between empowerment and female leadership, therefore the hypothesis that empowerment significantly influences the leadership of women entrepreneurs is accepted.

For their part, Arias and Espinoza aimed to determine the influence of gender equality and employability on female empowerment within the university academic sphere in Peru [11]. A quantitative methodology was employed, utilizing a field study with a sample of 100 female academics. The study results demonstrated that gender equality and employability significantly influence the empowerment of female academics in Peruvian universities, with a significance level of less than 0.05. It is concluded that promoting gender equality and enhancing employability are fundamental to female empowerment in the academic sphere.

Similarly, Saucedo aimed to analyze the relationship between entrepreneurship and women's empowerment in the Trujillo district [12]. The study employed a quantitative, correlational, and applied methodology, utilizing a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. The results based on Spearman's rho coefficient-revealed a direct relationship with a coefficient of 0.425**, indicating a moderate positive correlation; consequently, the hypothesis was accepted: Entrepreneurship is directly related to women's empowerment in the Trujillo district [12].

The study conducted by Valeria Mendoza in the city of Cajamarca aimed to determine the impact of microfinance on the assets of UNICA members in the Cajamarca region during the 2013–2021 period [13]. The research was descriptive in nature, employing a quantitative, non-experimental approach. The methodology involved non-probability convenience sampling, analyzing members from five UNICAs across the provinces of Cajamarca, San Miguel, and Santa Cruz. Document analysis was used as the technique, utilizing a data recording form validated by three experts. The results showed that microfinance had a positive impact on members' assets-evidenced by increases in savings, loans granted, and profitability-thereby confirming the proposed hypothesis.

According to research conducted by Arshad, financial inclusion impacts women's empowerment in developing countries by facilitating access to microcredit and other forms of financing that promote female entrepreneurship [14].

This research draws upon the following theoretical foundations: empowerment-the first variable-is defined by Gutiérrez as the way in which an increase in a group's power can enhance the functioning of its individual members [15]. Additionally, drawing on Brizas, empowerment is understood as the process through which women develop their skills, confidence, and perspectives by participating in a social group that fosters positive changes in their circumstances [16]. This variable is broken down into three main dimensions: the individual, close relationships, and the collective.

For Balibar, individuality is the unique and irreducible essence of each person [17]. It can be assessed through indicators such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and personal autonomy. Self-confidence refers to the belief in one's own abilities to face challenges and achieve goals. Self-esteem entails a positive valuation of oneself, while autonomy refers to the capacity to make decisions and act independently.

Resilience the capacity to recover and adapt in the face of adversity and the ability to defend one's rights-which entails the capacity of women to advocate for themselves and their interests in various social and economic contexts serve as key indicators in this regard.

Participation in management and decision-making serve as indicators for measuring an individual's collective agency. Participation in management refers to the involvement of women in leadership and managerial roles within organizations and communities. Decision-making, meanwhile, entails the ability to influence decisions that have an impact at both the personal and community levels.

The second variable, entrepreneurship, is understood in the research by Uribe & Reinoso as a set of competencies rooted in an individual's attitude toward seizing opportunities within their environment. According to Marulanda, Geovanny, and Mejía, it is also defined as the process by which a person becomes the primary agent of change and the driver of development in new economic sectors [18]. This variable is broken down into three main dimensions: entrepreneurial individuality, processes, and the entrepreneurial environment.

Entrepreneurial individuality can be assessed through motivational factors and business strengthening. Motivational factors include the reasons and desires that drive a person to start a business, such as the pursuit of financial independence, personal fulfilment, and the identification of business opportunities. Business strengthening refers to entrepreneurs' capacity to consolidate and grow their businesses by developing key skills and competencies.

Administrative processes relate to access to the financial system, which encompasses the availability and ease with which entrepreneurs can secure funding to start and expand their businesses. Training in business plan preparation refers to the instruction and support entrepreneurs receive to develop sound, viable business strategies.

The environment is assessed based on the relationship between the company and its surroundings. This indicator considers how businesses interact with their economic, social, and cultural environments, encompassing aspects such as competition, government policies, support networks, and market opportunities. Research by Vargas & Uttermann indicates that the national and regional context significantly impacts the willingness to start a business; furthermore, cultural and social norms play a crucial role in the creation of new ventures, as they influence individuals' inclination toward entrepreneurship. A favourable environment can facilitate the growth and sustainability of new ventures, whereas an adverse environment can present significant challenges.

Consequently, the following general research question has been posed for this study: What is the relationship between women's empowerment and entrepreneurship within Savings and Credit Unions (UNICAS) in Cajamarca in 2024?

General Objective

To determine the relationship between empowerment and female entrepreneurship within the Savings and Credit Unions (UNICAS) in Cajamarca – 2024.

The Specific Objectives are

To determine the relationship between women's empowerment and their entrepreneurial individuality within the UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, Cajamarca – 2024.

To determine the relationship between women's empowerment and the entrepreneurial process within the UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, Cajamarca – 2024.

To determine the relationship between women's empowerment and their entrepreneurial environment within the UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, Cajamarca – 2024.

Following this Line of Reasoning, The General Hypothesis is Proposed:

There is a positive relationship between empowerment and women's entrepreneurship within the UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, Cajamarca – 2024.

Hypothesis

There is a direct and significant relationship between empowerment and women's entrepreneurship within the UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, Cajamarca – 2024.

Null Hypothesis

There is no direct and significant relationship between women's empowerment and entrepreneurship within the Savings and Credit Unions (UNICAS) in Cajamarca (2024).

In this regard, the research is theoretically grounded in the concepts of women's empowerment and entrepreneurship. Women's empowerment is understood as the process by which women develop their skills, confidence, and perspective through participation in a social group that fosters positive changes in their circumstances. Entrepreneurship is viewed as a key driver of economic and social development, wherein individuals become agents of change by creating and managing new businesses. From a practical standpoint, this research is crucial for identifying and analyzing the mechanisms through which UNICAS contribute to women's economic empowerment in Cajamarca, evaluating indicators such as self-confidence, resilience, access to the financial system, and business training.

From a social perspective, the research addresses gender inequalities and promotes women's economic inclusion, demonstrating how UNICAS can serve as an effective tool for overcoming barriers and contributing to poverty reduction and improved living conditions for women and their families. Methodologically, this research is expected to serve as a valuable reference for the scientific community by providing a conceptual framework on female empowerment and entrepreneurship, offering empirical data on how UNICAS can enhance women's self-confidence, resilience, and access to finance. Furthermore, it will aid in the design of more effective policies and programs to reduce poverty and foster women's economic inclusion.

Methodology

This research employs a quantitative approach, as numerical data will be used for the analysis. It is basic research, given that its purpose is to expand theoretical knowledge on the subject. It features a non-experimental design, as no variables will be manipulated. Its scope is correlational, seeking to measure the relationship between empowerment and female entrepreneurship. Finally, it is cross-sectional, because the data were collected at a single point in time [19].

Variables and Operationalization

Table 1: Operationalization of the Variable: Women's Empowerment

Variable	Conceptual definition	Operational definition	Dimensions	Indicators	Measurement scale
Women's empowerment	Female empowerment is a dynamic process that provides women with the capabilities and skills necessary to transform and promote positive changes in their reality and that of their community. (Briñón, 2010)	To measure the variable of women's empowerment, a questionnaire will be administered to the study population.	Individual	Self-confidence Self-esteem Autonomy	Ordinal
			Close relationships	Resilience skill Skill to defend one's rights	

Data taken from Saucedo [12].

Table 2: Operationalization of the Variable: Female Entrepreneurship

Variable	Conceptual definition	Operational definition	Dimensions	Indicators	Measurement scale
Female Entrepreneurship.	Through entrepreneurship, human beings are the primary agents of change and the development of new economic sectors. (Marulanda, Geovanny, & Mejía)	To measure the Entrepreneurship variable, a questionnaire will be administered to the studied population.	Entrepreneurial individuality.	Motivational factors Business strengthening	Ordinal
			Entrepreneurial process.	Access to the financial system Training on business plan development	
			Entrepreneurial environment.	Company–environment relationship Communication with other organizations	

Data taken from Saucedo [12].

Population

It consists of 536 Credit and Savings Unions (UNICAS) registered in the Cajamarca region.

Sample

The sample consisted of 15 UNICAS Credit and Savings Unions, using convenience sampling since these unions were made up of ongoing businesses managed solely by women, totalling 195 located in the districts of.

Technique and Instrument

The technique that was used was the survey since it allows collecting data on the opinions of the population to be studied.

The instrument used to measure the variables was a questionnaire validated by experts; it yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.896 for the entrepreneurship variable and 0.78 for empowerment. Empowerment was measured using a Likert scale with the following ranges: 1 = Never, 2 = Almost never, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Almost always, 5 = Always. This instrument was previously validated by Saucedo [12].

Procedures

Data collection involved contacting the UNICAS through visits to rural settlements such as Porcón Bajo while in other instances, contact was made by telephone to administer the survey, thereby facilitating the research process. The participation of female entrepreneurs was also sought for the study, and the collected information was organized into tables in alignment with the established objectives.

Results

Taking into account the stated objectives, and following the administration of the questionnaire to 15 UNICAS groups comprising a total of 195 women, the following results were obtained:

Table 3: Correlation between Empowerment and Female Entrepreneurship

Correlation			Female empowerment	Entrepreneurship
Spearman's rho	Women's empowerment	Correlation coefficient	1,000	,886
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	195	195
	Entrepreneurship	Correlation coefficient	,886	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	195	195

Table 3 presents a Spearman's rho coefficient of 0.886, suggesting a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between the variables. Furthermore, given the obtained significance level of 0.00, the researcher's hypothesis is accepted—namely, that women with higher levels of empowerment are more likely to start a business.

Table 4: Correlation between Empowerment and Entrepreneurial Individuality

Correlation			Female Empowerment	Entrepreneurial Individuality
Spearman's rho	Female empowerment	Correlation coefficient	1,000	,845
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	195	195
	Entrepreneurial individuality	Correlation coefficient	,845	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	195	195

Table 4 presents a Spearman's rho coefficient of 0.845, suggesting a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between the variables; that is, women with higher levels of empowerment are also more likely to engage in individual entrepreneurship.

Table 5: Correlation between Empowerment and the Entrepreneurial Process

Correlation			Female Empowerment	Entrepreneurial Process
Spearman's rho	Women's empowerment	Correlation coefficient	1,000	,832
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	195	195
	Entrepreneurial process	Correlation coefficient	,832	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	195	195

Table 5 shows a Spearman's Rho coefficient of 0.832, which suggests a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between the variables, that is, when women have greater empowerment, their entrepreneurial process is also faster.

Table 6: Correlation of Empowerment and Entrepreneurial Environment

Correlation			Female Empowerment	Entrepreneurial Environment
Spearman's rho	Female empowerment	Correlation coefficient	1,000	,867
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	195	195
	Entrepreneurial environment	Correlation coefficient	,867	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	195	195

Table 4 presents a Spearman's Rho coefficient of 0.867, suggesting a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between the variables; that is, as women experience greater empowerment, their environment changes, and they become connected with more entrepreneurs.

Discussion and Conclusions

The objective of this research was to determine the relationship between empowerment and female entrepreneurship within Savings and Credit Unions (UNICAS) in Cajamarca in 2024. The results obtained show a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between female empowerment and entrepreneurship, with a Spearman's Rho coefficient of 0.886.

Women's Empowerment and Entrepreneurship

Existing research, such as the study by Manco, Pacheco, and Quispe (2024), indicates that women's entrepreneurship has had a significant impact on the Peruvian economy, contributing 16% to the country's GDP. This study also highlights that women's participation in entrepreneurship has risen from 45% in 2019 to 51.5% in 2024. Our results confirm this trend, showing that the economic empowerment of women in the UNICAS of Cajamarca is strongly linked to their capacity for entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial Individuality

Saucedo's study found a moderate positive correlation between empowerment and entrepreneurial individuality in Trujillo, with a coefficient of 0.425 [12]. In contrast, our findings show a stronger correlation (Spearman's Rho of 0.845), suggesting that, in the context of Cajamarca, empowerment has an even greater impact on women's individual capacity for entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial Process

Terrones-Sotomayor (2019) demonstrated that access to microcredit significantly improves women's ability to generate income and sustain their businesses. Our study reinforces this conclusion, showing a strong positive correlation (Spearman's rho of 0.832) between empowerment and the entrepreneurial process, indicating that empowered women not only start businesses but also improve their administrative processes and access to financing.

Entrepreneurial Environment

Finally, Valeria Mendoza's research in Cajamarca highlighted the positive impact of microfinance on the assets of UNICAS members [13]. Our results also show a strong positive correlation (Spearman's Rho of 0.867) between empowerment and the entrepreneurial environment, suggesting that empowered women are more capable of interacting with and benefiting from their economic and social environment.

This research has multiple implications, ranging from the social and economic empowerment of women-thereby fostering gender equity-to inclusive business practices. The study aims to drive significant change in both cultural perspectives regarding women's roles in the economy and the development of more effective strategies to support women entrepreneurs in Cajamarca, where the support of organizations like ALAC is crucial [20-23].

Conclusions

The results of this research confirm and expand the findings of previous studies, showing that female empowerment in the UNICAS of Cajamarca is strongly related to entrepreneurship, having obtained a Spearman's Rho coefficient of 0.886. These findings underscore the importance of continuing to support women through economic empowerment programs and access to microfinance, to foster economic and social development in the region. Furthermore, this finding highlights the value of autonomy, self-confidence and decision-making capacity as essential elements for entrepreneurial development.

Entrepreneurial Individuality

Personal empowerment reinforces aspects such as motivation and entrepreneurial skills, showing a Spearman correlation of 0.845. This suggests that women who feel confident and autonomous not only possess a greater willingness to start a business but also demonstrate greater resilience in the face of challenges. The training and access to credit provided by UNICAS have been instrumental in strengthening these individual qualities, a fact that underscores the importance of programs focused on the personal and professional development of female entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial Process

A Spearman correlation of 0.832 indicates that empowered women manage their projects more successfully and make strategic decisions for the growth of their businesses. This suggests that the training in finance and administrative planning provided by the UNICAS facilitates the development of more structured and sustainable businesses. This finding demonstrates the importance of offering not only financial support but also training in specific competencies, enabling women entrepreneurs to effectively manage their initiatives.

Entrepreneurial Environment

The Spearman correlation of 0.867 between empowerment and women's ability to integrate into support networks highlights another key benefit of empowerment: the opportunity to connect with other entrepreneurs and access new avenues for growth. Empowered women tend to build stronger, more productive relationships, thereby expanding their access to the resources and knowledge needed to solidify their businesses in a competitive landscape. This suggests that UNICAS beyond providing financial services serve as platforms for exchange and collaboration.

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