

# Overview

The Inca Empire (Tawantinsuyu, c. 1400–1533) organized society so that men and women had distinct but complementary roles. Gender shaped daily work, ritual duties, political offices, and social status. Important to keep in mind: much of what we know comes from Spanish chroniclers and later colonial documents, so scholars compare these with archaeology and indigenous records to get a fuller picture.

## Basic principle: complementarity rather than strict separation

- The Inca ideal emphasized complementary spheres: men and women performed different tasks that together supported family, economy, and religion.
- Gender roles were not identical across classes, localities, or time — elites and commoners experienced gender differently.

## Household and family life

- Households were the basic economic unit. Women typically ran the household: food preparation, child care, and textiles.
- Men were usually responsible for fields and heavy labor away from the domestic space: plowing, herding larger livestock (llama), and construction.
- Marriage was central to organization of labor. Couples commonly cooperated in farming and crafts.

## Economic roles

- **Women**
  - Textile production: weaving and spinning were among the most highly valued skills. Textiles functioned as wealth, prestige goods, and official tribute.
  - Domestic processing of foods (maize, potatoes), brewing chicha (fermented maize beer) for household and ritual use.
  - Participated in agriculture, especially tending horticulture close to the home and planting/harvesting certain crops.
- **Men**
  - Major agricultural tasks: ploughing, irrigating, working higher-altitude fields.
  - Labor militia: building roads, terraces, and state projects through the mit'a labor draft (a labor tax used by the state).
  - Military service and state administration were predominantly male spheres.

## Work organized by the state: mit'a and acllas

- Mit'a: a rotational labor draft required of communities. Both men and women could be called for certain state tasks, but the most famous mit'a assignments (road-building, mining, military) were male-dominated.
- Acllas ("Chosen Women", often called mamakuna or "Virgins of the Sun" in Spanish texts): groups of young women selected from across the empire to serve the state/religion. Their duties included weaving elite textiles, preparing ritual food and drink, and in some cases being given as wives to important men or sacrificed in rituals. Acllas were an elite, state-run institution that elevated selected women's status while also restricting their freedom.

## Religious and political offices

- Sapa Inca (the ruler) and most high state offices were male, but women had visible ritual and political roles:
- Coya: the principal wife of the Sapa Inca. The Coya was formally recognized and had ceremonial duties — she could wield influence at court and in ritual life. In some places women served as local leaders (curacas) or had authority within their community.
- Priestly roles: many religious roles were gendered — some temples and cultic tasks were performed by men, others by women (especially those involving textiles, spinning, and water/household offerings).

## Social status and class differences

- Class (elite vs commoner) often mattered more than gender for access to power and wealth. Elite women had far greater resources, could own and control textile production, and could be members of the imperial household (panaka).
- Commoner women did essential economic work but had less political authority and limited access to luxury goods.
- Some social categories (yanakuna, mitmaquna) reflect service, resettlement, or status that cut across gender lines and changed one's life course dramatically.

## Rules, norms, and sanctions

- Inca society enforced moral and social rules (for example about marriage, sexual behavior, theft) with both community and state sanctions; enforcement could be public and severe.
- Polygyny existed among elites: the Sapa Inca and high nobles could take multiple wives. Among commoners monogamy or informal polygyny was more typical.

## Variations and exceptions

- Gender roles varied regionally — the empire incorporated many peoples with different customs, and the Inca often adapted local practices.
- Women could and did exercise power: female curacas (local chiefs), influential Coyas, and managerial women within palaces or temple complexes are recorded in the sources.

## Sources, bias, and modern interpretation

- Primary written sources are mostly Spanish chroniclers (Garcilaso de la Vega, Bernabé Cobo, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa) who recorded Inca practices but often through a colonial and Christian lens.
- Archaeology, ethnohistory, and comparative study of Andean communities fill gaps and correct biases — for example, showing the central importance of female textile labor and the political roles of some women.

## Summary

The Inca organized gender around complementary roles integrated into household, economic, religious, and political life. Women's work — especially textile production and household ritual — was vital to state and community, while men dominated large-scale construction, military service, and many administrative offices. Class, local customs, and the state's institutional choices (like the acllas and the

mit'a) created a complex, flexible system rather than a single rigid gender order.

### **Further reading (student starting points)**

- Gary Urton, *The Social Life of Textiles in the Andes* (overview of textile importance and female labor)
- Terence N. D'Altroy, *The Incas* (general synthesis with discussion of institutions like mit'a)
- Research on acllas and women in Andean religion and household economy in archaeological journals for more detail

If you want, I can: provide a short timeline of how gender roles changed after Spanish conquest; compare Inca gender roles with those of another Andean culture; or summarize primary chroniclers' accounts about specific women in the Inca court.