

**Exploring the Disparity of Minority Women in Senior Leadership Positions in Higher  
Education in the United States and Peru**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this essay, the author compares and contrasts accessibility to higher education senior leadership for women in the United States and Peru. This paper addresses the disparity and challenges of women in higher education senior leadership focusing on minority women such as indigenous and Afro-Peruvian women in Peru and women of color in the United States. The author further calls for empirical research on the character traits, career path, motivations, definitions of success, and challenges of women who serve in executive higher education leadership positions. This paper further contributes to the field of comparative and international higher education, both domestically and abroad, while addressing demographic challenges such as sex and race for women in and seeking higher education administrative leadership career goals.

*Keywords:* gender disparity, higher education administration, higher education leadership,

indigenous women, leadership, minority women, Peru, United States, women leaders

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## **WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT ROLES**

In recent decades women have become an increasingly important part of the labor force as women make up 38.74% of the labor force globally (World Bank, 2020 a). In the United States and Peru, the percentage of women in the workforce was 46% and 45.7%, respectively, in 2020. Further, a growing number of women now have access to higher education and, in turn, are assuming more substantial leading roles in the educational, social, and economic activities of their respective countries. According to the Grant Thornton International Business Report [IBR] (2020), globally, women hold 29% of senior management roles in various industries. In 2015, approximately 35% of management positions in Peru were held by women (International Labour Office [ILO], 2017). In the United States, the rates were slightly lower, as only 26.5% of executive management positions are held by women (Catalyst, 2020). Three percent of registered businesses have a woman as the president of a board of directors, and only 4% have a female CEO in Peru (Jáuregui & Olivos, 2018). As of December 2020, women only held 6% of the CEO positions in the S&P 500 companies in the United States (Catalyst, 2020). Although women are breaking gender barriers, the "glass ceiling" still exists in several countries, economies, industries, and organizations.

### **Breaking Glass Ceilings: Limitations of Minority Women in Leadership**

In Peru and the United States, women are gender minorities; however, ethnic minority status would vary based on geographic location. In Peru, ethnic minorities are identified as the indigenous, native people of the rural Andean and Amazonian regions (Del Aguila, 2016) and the Afro-Peruvian people, the brown-skinned descendants of slaves brought to Peru by the Europeans

that are concentrated in the coastal cities (Benavides et al., 2006). Although the percentage of women in Peru's workforce is steadily climbing, few women are in executive leadership positions (Jáuregui & Olivos, 2018), yet even fewer minority women in those roles (Del Aguila, 2016). Alas, tracking women in various leadership positions has proven challenging over the years as Peru does not have a systematic method of gathering racial or ethnic identities (Matute, 2020).

Afro-Peruvian and indigenous Peruvians have been severely limited in their ability to serve in leadership positions in government, business, education, and the military (Minority Rights Group International, 2018). According to the Center for Development of Black Peruvian Women [CEDEMUNEP], Maria Zavala Valladares was identified as the first Afro-Peruvian woman appointed to a presidential cabinet as minister of Justice and Human Rights (Matute, 2020), as well as having served as President of the Superior Courts of Lima and Loreto. There have been five Afro-Peruvian women elected to congress since the year 2000 (Matute, 2020), of which three of those were elected in 2014 (Htun, 2016). Regarding employment and economic activity, 41.95% of indigenous women are employed in the agriculture, livestock, hunting, and forest industry, with 21.73% following in the retail industry (Del Aguila, 2016), not leaving much room for executive leadership advancement.

In the United States, ethnic minorities are all of those encompassed as non-white. Much like in Peru, based on one's position in history, discrimination-based privilege has allowed for easier access to leadership and career success for specific groups. In 2019, 32.3% of management positions were held by White women, whereas only 4%, 4.3%, and 2.5% were held by Black women, Latina women, and Asian women, respectively (Catalyst, 2020). To date, there have only been two Black women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and as it stands, there are only two other women of color currently on the list. Minority women, when given the opportunity, are excelling

in their various leadership roles. For instance, Marcelite J. Harris was the first Black woman to become a Major General officer in the United States Military in 1995 (Najarro, 2018). That was no small feat, as even today, women are not openly welcomed into the military. Dr. Ellen Ochoa's brilliance and resilience radiated as she was the first Hispanic woman to go into space as a National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA] astronaut. She currently serves as the first Hispanic female Director of the Johnson Space Center (NASA, 2012).

Scholars and business professionals agree that more needs to be done to advance women to senior leadership positions in all sectors and industries, specifically, underrepresented women of color. Therefore, this comparison piece explores the disparity of minority women in leadership positions in four-year public universities in the United States and Peru to stimulate the pipeline of leadership development for women of color both domestically and abroad.

### **Women are Catalysts for Change**

There has been a great deal of emphasis placed on the need to increase the number of women in higher education administration positions in colleges and universities based on the equity of civil rights (Eddy & Kirby, 2020). Advancing diversity and inclusion initiatives in higher education is paramount and starts with ethnic and gender minorities accessing leadership pipelines and being granted their earned seats at tables of power. This is the case in the United States (Ford, 2016) and Peru (Guerrero & Rojas, 2019). In developing countries such as Peru, however, women's rights are still in their infancy stages, such as being granted basic citizenship and the right to vote, joining the workforce, and obtaining an education. These factors have impacted the career options and leadership accessibility in all industries and occupations for the women of Peru and the United States. Women have fought tirelessly for decades for equity and equality, and so on the battle rages.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN PERU AND THE UNITED STATES**

Peruvian women were not granted the right to vote in national elections until 1955. Peruvian women's citizenship was based significantly around their domestic roles as wives and mothers leaving them the second-longest disenfranchised female population in Latin America (García-Ponce, 2017). There was no evidence that minority women in Peru were further disenfranchised and limited in their voting rights based explicitly on their ethnicity. However, socioeconomic status [SES], occupation, and literacy criteria in place were just as foretelling and intersected with race (Cozart, 2017).

With the passing of the 19th amendment, White women in the United States were granted the right to vote in 1920 (U.S. Const. amend. XIX); however, much like the legislative reform of the early 20th century, it discriminated against people of color. Black and brown Americans were harassed, beaten, and killed as they fought for citizenship and their right to vote for many years. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the start of U.S. legislation to ban racially discriminatory practices preventing minorities from voting in the United States; however, words put on paper take several years to put into practice.

Peru is a historically patriarchal country, yet the 1990s introduced legislative reforms that dismantled outdated, customary laws granting Peruvian women more rights to the workforce, access to banks and financial institutions, and the ability to own and inherit assets. Approximately 43% of women participated in the labor force in 1990 compared to 70.58% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020 b). Though women are now participating in Peru's economy via the production of goods and services, they are paid considerably less than their male counterparts. It is of further discouragement that women's participation is limited due to work/life imbalance and the "unequal burden of domestic responsibilities" (Nathan Associates Inc., 2016, p. 5).

World War II ushered in a new era for American women in the workforce as their involvement grew exponentially. Between 1940 and 1945, women's participation in the workforce increased by 50% (Goldin, 1991). In 1980, 53.1% of Black women, 47.4% of Hispanic women, and 51.2% of White women were active in the U.S. labor force compared to the 59.4% of Black women, 55.8% of Hispanic women, and 56.3% of White women in 2016 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Although participation has increased, women's gender pay gap is far more disparaging for women of color. Whereas White women earn 79 cents to every dollar earned by a White man, Black women earn 63 cents, and Hispanic women earn 55 cents of the same dollar (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Recent years have yielded a reverse in the gender gap in Peruvian higher education for women as they have been enrolling at higher rates than their male counterparts since the mid-2000s. The increase has been significant as men's enrollment compared to women was 12.793% vs. 6.818% in 1970 and 17.112% vs. 8.275% in 1975. The early 2000s indicated some leveling out, yet women started to inch past as enrollment rates were approximately 30% for each group. By the mid-2010s, women's enrollment rates had surpassed men's; 73.6% vs. 68.7% in 2016 and 72.7% vs. 68.7% in 2017 (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2020c, 2020d). Benavides et al. (2018) discussed the increased challenge that darker-skinned Afro-Peruvians faced in their attempts to access higher education than their fairer-skinned brethren due to the ongoing discrimination of colorism and social stratification in Peru.

In the United States, higher education enrollment rates have changed drastically over the years for women, and more specifically for women of color. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2019) shows that in 1980 White males reported the highest enrollment rates in higher education institutions, followed by White women at 26.3%; Black

women ranked third at 20.9%, and Hispanic women were fifth at 16.2%. By 2018, the top three enrolled groups were White women at 45.4%, Black women at 40.9%, and Hispanic women at 40.4%. There is much to be said about the *American Dream*, migration, and educational reform in the United States; however, that is a different topic for a different paper.

As women's rights began to emerge, so did their opportunities for a better life. For women in the United States and Peru to vote, own land, handle financial matters, join the workforce, and obtain a formal post-secondary education, leadership opportunities were now becoming attainable.

### **College and University Educational System Structures in Peru and the United States**

The education structure in Peru is similar to the structure of the United States education system. Peruvian higher education institutions offer bachelors, masters, doctorate degrees, and professional certificates for those pursuing professional specialties (Levy, 1986; Paulston, 2014). Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are also fundamental principles among U.S. and Peruvian colleges and universities. On the other hand, differences lie in governance. In Peru, the National Superintendence of Higher University Education [SUNEDU] is the technical body under the Ministry of Education responsible for licensing, quality assurance, and supervision of university higher education services. The National Assembly of Rectors [ANR] was the previous the governing body that was responsible for the promotion of scientific, educational, cultural, and economic cooperation between universities and fostering dialogue within and between national and international organizations (Anicama & Livia, 2015; Butters, Quiroga, & Dammert, 2005). Thus, the move to SUNEDU will promote consistency in the quality of education across institutions of higher learning in Peru (del Carmen Arrieta & Avolio, 2020). In the United States, the state has more governing authority in which authority is delegated to boards and councils. However, universities' authority generally lies within an individual, such as a president or

chancellor in the United States or a *rector* in Peru and other Latin American countries. The term *rector* that translates into the word "ruler" refers to the highest university administrator or leader in Latin America and a few other countries (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). There can also be vice-rectors along with deans that serve as higher education administrators and leaders. These positions mirror those of vice-presidents, provosts, chancellors, and deans in American colleges and universities.

### **CAREER ATTAINMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES AND PERU**

The following sections briefly explore women's higher education senior leadership career attainment in the United States and Peru. The author discusses women's transition into the roles and the disparity and challenges minority women have faced in seeking these leadership roles.

#### **American Women in Higher Education Senior Leadership**

In the United States, even with the increased statistics on enrollment, women are still underrepresented in the academy and higher education leadership in general. A partial explanation of the disparity comes from the clear challenges and experiences that women have faced. With that said, women of color are still far less represented and have less access and opportunity in the world of higher education leadership (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Women's access to serve in higher education senior leadership has been delayed; however, progress has been far more expeditious than in other countries (Featherman, 1993; Lapovsky, 2014). The first woman appointed to a college senior leadership position was Frances Willard of Evanston College in 1871 (Tisinger, 1992), far before minority women were permitted to attend college. Women of color were only represented at minority serving institutions [MSIs] such as all women's schools or specific ethnic serving schools such as Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College in the early 1900s. Black women truly began taking their place at the



table of higher education senior leadership after Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson became the first Black woman to serve as a president of a national research university in 1999 and Dr. Ruth J. Simmons became the first Black woman appointed president of the Ivy League, Brown University in 2000 (Chance, 2020).

Although there is still a disproportional number of male vs. female senior leaders of colleges and universities, the emerging changes in this field are allowing women to make strides. Older White men have historically and traditionally dominated higher education's senior-most administrative positions of chancellor or president (Chance, 2020). According to the American Council on Education (ACE, 2017), women accounted for 30% of all presidential positions in 2016. However, of this 30%, only 9% represent Black women, and 4% Hispanic women than the 83% who are White women. Native American women have had an even slower ascent into higher education senior leadership. Dr. Cassandra Manuelito-Kerkvliet was the first Native American woman appointed to serve as the president of an accredited college outside of the tribal system in 2007 (Minthorn & Chavez, 2014). Minority women as senior leaders have been limited to serve almost exclusively at community colleges, MSIs, and lower-ranked, less prestigious schools that are not financially endowed, athletically ranked, or valued for research development (ACE, 2017; Featherman, 1993).

Thus, the barriers and obstacles minority women in the U.S. higher education administration face are personal and systemic. Furthermore, having limited role models can deter younger minority women from seeking careers in an area where they anticipate feeling marginalized and oppressed. As such, advancements can be made for women of color in higher education senior leadership.

### **Peruvian Women in Higher Education Senior Leadership**

Unlike the United States, women's access to higher education administration as a career has been restricted to a few isolated cases in Peru. Although few and far between, these cases are positively viewed as "the first results of a lengthy maturing process which got off to a late start" (Zamora, 1993). Even today, only 18% of public universities in Latin American regions have women in senior leadership as rectors (UNESCO IESALC, 2020).

Few studies that discuss the roles, characteristics, and leadership styles of Peruvian women administrators of higher education have been found while reviewing the existing literature. This disparity is due to the small number of women in these positions and relative newness to the Peruvian culture (Zamora, 1993). Recent inquiry via internet search revealed that of the more than 100 universities in Peru, there are only three female rectors currently in place. Although Peru's university system has significantly expanded over the past 50 years, expansion does not apply to all leadership levels. Peruvian women were not taken into account in the reformation, modernization, and expansion of Peruvian universities. Women were not even admitted access to Peruvian universities until 1908 (Stromquist, 1992). It would appear that progress is a very slow process for Peruvian female leadership, such as the first woman elected to rector's position was Dr. Ilse Wisowsky in the late 1980s at the University of Lima (Zamora, 1993).

Traditionally, positions of leadership and higher education administration in Peru have been delegated to men. Stromquist (1992) described Peruvian universities as "bastions of male power" and shared the thoughts of a fellow feminist that "universities are male institutions with women in them" (p. 78). Women have made significant gains in access to higher education administration; however, they are a long way from having equal representation at the highest levels of university leadership (House, 2001). Furthermore, based on the persistent challenges of

indigenous and Afro-Peruvian female visibility in leadership ranks within and outside of higher education, no minority women reported having served in university senior leadership roles. Undoubtedly, stereotype based discrimination still drives people's thoughts and behaviors in the workplace and leadership positions. Kogan (2017) shared that hiring professionals indicated preferences for hiring lighter-skinned people based on assumptions that Afro-Peruvians lacked basic professional inclination, cultural, and social competency for compliance in the workplace. These thought and behavior patterns present at all hiring and employment levels, specifically when there are intersections of sex and race (Rattan et al., 2019).

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Peruvian and American women in higher education administration have been subject to similar obstacles in advancing leadership, as evidenced by their gradual development of rights. Obstacles associated with racial and gender biases (Featherman, 1993; Zamora, 1993), gender-pay gap (Hill, 2014; Rossini & Jauregui, 2012), work-life imbalance (Rossini & Jauregui, 2012; Zamora, 1993) and lack of role models and leadership requirements (House, 2001; Lapovsky, 2014; Rossini & Jauregui, 2012; McIntosh, 2011) have been examined given their relationship to leadership development. However, as the numbers of women at this level of leadership in Peru are scarce, there is little to no research in this area.

To further examine the disparity of minority women in higher education senior leadership in the United States and Peru, advanced research is needed to investigate the character traits, career paths, motivations, definitions of success, and challenges of women who serve in senior leadership positions. As a potential starting place, appendix A presents a concept map comparing minority women in higher education senior leadership in the United States and Peru. With encouragement and support, increased numbers of role models, early leadership experiences, and development,

women in Peru and the United States can advance higher education administration (Lapovsky, 2014). There is still much to learn of these women's various roles and leadership characteristics and use that to help increase women in leadership globally. With the minimal amount of empirical research on this culture and population, there is a need for further inquiry and investigation. This paper opens the doors to a potential cross-cultural study investigating higher education, both domestically and abroad.

### **AUTHOR NOTE**

Dr. Nuchelle L. Chance is a social activist, educator, academic, scholar, mentor, advocate, and leader. Her research interests are Social Cognition, Sex and Gender Differences, Women's Studies, Race, Learning, Memory & Recall, Perceptions & Attitudes, Consciousness & Awareness, and Leadership. Dr. Chance is increasingly motivated to inspire young minority girls and women to strive for leadership development while promoting an advanced education. She continues to fight, support, and advocate for all underrepresented, marginalized, and oppressed groups using her platform, being unapologetically and unabashedly vocal and visible on social justice matters.

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**APPENDIX A: CONCEPT MAP**

