

# ***Examining the Intersectionality of Gender and Race in Leadership Experiences Within U.S. Higher Education: Towards Equitable Representation and Social Justice***

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**Abstract:** In the ever-evolving landscape of U.S. higher education, representation in leadership roles remains a prominent concern, particularly when viewing through the lenses of gender and race. This study critically examines the intersectionality of gender and race in leadership roles, delving deep into these two critical social identities and their implications on leadership positions in higher education in the United States. The study adopts a literature review and rigorous content analysis despite some researchers tiptoeing around the topic and looking at racial or gender disparities in isolation. The research uncovers systemic barriers perpetuating disparities in leadership roles. The findings not only reveal the unique challenges individuals face at this intersection but also shed light on potential strategies to champion equitable representation. By bridging the existing knowledge gap, this study underscores the importance of a holistic understanding of educational equity and diversity, further advocating for progressive reforms in leadership within U.S. higher education.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Higher Education, Gender, Race, Educational leadership

## **1. Introduction**

In the dynamic tapestry of American higher education, leadership roles or superintendents have historically been occupied by a homogenous group, often not reflective of the diverse student populations and broader minority and marginalized communities they serve [1]. While significant strides have been made in recent decades to promote diversity and inclusivity in many areas of higher education, leadership roles remain an area with noticeable disparities, particularly at the intersection of gender and race [2]. As researchers delve deeper into the intersectionality of gender and race in leadership roles within higher education, especially in the U.S. higher education environment concerning organizational studies on ethnicity and diversity, the connection to educational equity becomes evident [1]. This implies that leadership roles, if equitably represented and kept diverse, may need more capacity to genuinely represent and understand the unique social identity experiences of individuals within the academic community. In the realm of literature addressing diversity and leadership in U.S. higher education, there exists a conspicuous void; incredibly, there remains a scant exploration of the cumulative experiences of leaders who belong to multiple minority and marginalized communities [1].

Therefore, to delve into the matter comprehensively, this paper is structured around three core segments. Firstly, the intricate overlap of gender and race is explored within leadership contexts. Secondly, the overt and covert barriers inhibiting diversity are dissected. Lastly, the paper culminates in proposing strategies for fostering equitable representation and initiating systemic change in the landscape. This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of diversity in higher education, emphasizing the significance of equitable representation and diversification in educational leadership roles. It calls for a top-down approach to educational equity and champions the principles of social justice.

## **2. Intersectionality of Gender and Race in Leadership Dynamics**

### **2.1. An Intersectional Approach and Its Significance**

Intersectionality is a multifaceted concept that centers on understanding the inherent complexities within societal structures, individuals, and their experiences. As posited by Crenshaw and echoed in Kingsberry and Jean-Marie, intersectionality underscores the simultaneity of multiple identities and the ways these identities converge to shape experiences of discrimination or advantage [3,4]. For instance, it brings to the fore how being both black and a woman can compound experiences of discrimination, as these dual identities intersect in the sociocultural landscape [4]. This overlap of identities is not limited to race and gender alone. However, it extends to various social categorizations, such as class, nationality, and sexual orientation, collectively shaping individuals' experiences [5].

In this paper, the significance of intersectionality in studying educational leadership and equity is underscored by its potential to delve deeper into the multifaceted experiences of minority and marginalized individuals within higher educational settings. Since a one-dimensional approach risks oversimplifying these experiences and failing to recognize the nuanced challenges and opportunities they present [4]. Specifically, within U.S. higher education, an intersectional approach offers an invaluable lens for understanding the intricate interplay of power dynamics, institutional barriers, and personal experiences. In particular, it exposes the limitations of viewing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion through a monolithic lens, emphasizing instead the imperative to recognize the multifaceted nature of individual and collective experiences [5]. In addressing challenges such as racial violence, gender discrimination, and gender politics in higher education environments, it is essential to recognize that the affected individuals come from diverse racial backgrounds and experiences. An intersectional critical analysis is crucial to ensure the comprehensiveness of the proposed potential solutions.

### **2.2. A Narrative of Leadership & The Junction of Gender and Race in U.S. Higher Education**

There has been a notable emphasis on the need for equitable representation and justice in leadership roles, particularly within the framework of American academia. Central to this discourse is understanding the intricate interplay of gender and race in determining the experiences and trajectories of leaders in this sphere.

Although women have made significant strides in the U.S. workforce, their representation in executive leadership remains disproportionately low. Women constitute more than half of the labour force and dominate mid to lower-level managerial roles; however, their presence in the executive echelon remains marginal [2]. This leadership disparity becomes even more pronounced for women of colour, especially black women; they continue to occupy the lower strata of organizational hierarchies, illustrating a significant leadership divide [2].

In the United States, women represent approximately 75 percent of the educational workforce. Still, their representation in senior leadership roles is staggeringly low at less than 20 percent [2].

Such disparities are further amplified when analyzed racially. According to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, in the fall of 2021, of the 1.5 million faculty in higher education institutions, the racial/ethnic and sex distribution of full-time instructional faculty varied by academic rank at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, as shown in Figure 1. Considering full-time faculty only, 73 percent of the faculty and staff were White, including 35 percent white women and 38 percent white men. In stark contrast, 6 percent of faculty were Black, specifically 4 percent of black females and 3 percent of black males [6]. Black educators, both male and female, account for only a small percentage of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the associated consequence is that the opportunities for Black or other minority communities to hold senior leadership positions in U.S. higher education would significantly decline, especially when compared to the mainstream white community.

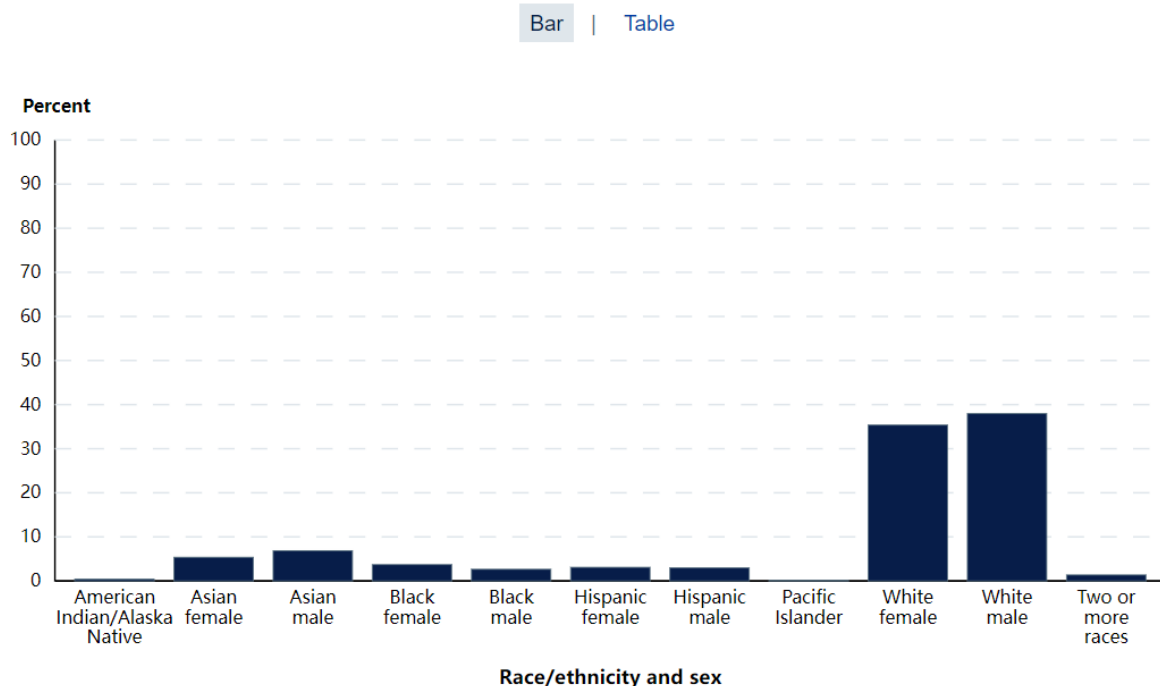


Figure 1: Percentage distribution of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex: Fall 2021 (Numbers in figure titles reflect original numeration from source Condition of Education indicators) [6].

It is essential to note that the experiences of these black women leaders are rooted in broader societal dynamics. As the study suggests, the leadership narratives of women, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, were often confined to the experiences of middle- to upper-class white women, with limited focus on women of colour [7]. They often grapple with challenges originating from both their gender and racial identities, suggesting an experience of "multiple marginality" [8]. This means that each form of identity, whether gender or racial, can present its barriers, and their combination often amplifies these challenges. For instance, Dr. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero share contrasting academic experiences. While both hold the esteemed rank of full professor, their journeys to this achievement have been marked by differences informed mainly by race and gender. Dr. Johnson-Bailey, a black female professor, often found herself battling hostility, isolation, and disrespect, suggesting a second-class existence in higher education. Contrastingly, Dr. Cervero, a white male professor, experienced the privileges often ascribed to his gender and racial identity [9]. Despite making significant strides in enrollments and graduations, African American women remain

underrepresented in senior leadership roles in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). While their competencies and contributions to policy and curriculum development are evident, and their progression into high-ranking leadership remains stymied [10]. The intersectionality of gender and race within the U.S. higher education environment is intricate and layered. While the journey to senior leadership is complex for all, women of colour and ethnic minorities face compounded challenges or barriers that are emblematic of broader visible and invisible societal issues.

### **3. Overt and Implicit Obstacles Stifling Diversity**

#### **3.1. Explicit Long Systemic Barriers**

Historically, the very architecture of higher education has been inherently designed to privilege certain groups over others. The institutional arrangements in academia have perpetuated limited leadership prospects for women [11]. The underrepresentation of women, especially women of colour, at the zenith of academic leadership is not only a product of explicit gender stereotypes and biases; it is a consequence of a historical context that continues to be deeply embedded within academic structures. Paradoxically, this underrepresentation feeds into a vicious cycle: the absence of diverse women in educational senior leadership roles perpetuates a barrier for more women to ascend these ranks [11].

Moreover, the ladder to academic leadership roles is inherently biasing. The higher echelons of academia often see a decreasing proportion of females, which implicitly supports the notion of a leadership glass ceiling [11]. For example, women often find themselves funnelled into roles centred around teaching, learning, or community engagement rather than those emphasizing leadership. This systematic channelling not only limits the leadership trajectory for women but also subtly reinforces patriarchal norms [11]. Leadership disparity is not a mere gender inequality issue; it intensifies when gender intersects with race, culture, or religion. Drawing upon Bernal's insights, critical raced-gendered epistemologies emphasize the wealth of knowledge that emerges from the intertwined experiences of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression [12]. This underscores the need for academia to broaden its epistemological horizons and recognize that individuals, especially women of colour, are not merely passive subjects but can play active leadership roles in education.

#### **3.2. Implicit Obstacles that are Hard to Detected**

Race has created "a fundamental fault line" in the U.S., shaping how individuals and collectives define themselves [13]. One key factor inhibiting diversity in leadership is the prevalence of implicit racial associations. The associations are deep-seated and relatively unconscious biases based on race. They are pivotal in influencing behaviours within educational institutions [14]. A significant proportion of individuals harbor pro-White/anti-Black implicit associations [14]. These implicit biases, often unknown to individuals themselves, potentially lead to actions that perpetuate racial inequality, even in scenarios where intentions lean towards racial equity.

Additionally, critical race theory (CRT) postulates that racism is a typical, ingrained feature in American society, impacting legal systems, policies, and institutions [15]. It is possible that American higher education, despite its inclusive facade, contains implicit systems that support racial hierarchies, impacting leadership equitable representation and diversity. Furthermore, gendered racial theory, which emphasizes the intersectionality of race and gender, suggests that women of colour may face compounded biases—both implicit and explicit [16]. Women of colour, especially black women, face substantial hurdles in higher education institutions, predominantly when these institutions uphold white supremacy ideologies [10]. Suppose teachers and faculty, a significant subset of academic leadership, have such biases. In that case, it can indirectly influence their judgments, expectations, and interactions, potentially reducing leadership opportunities for Black individuals. According to

Turner's experiences further illuminate the challenges faced by women of colour. Encounters with prejudiced admissions officers and the experience of being "defined out" rather than "defined in" underscore the barriers. Individuals are perceived first through the lens of their racial and gender social identities rather than their competencies [8]. Such interactions and decisions, though seemingly small, can accumulate over time, leading to a noticeable lack of diversity in leadership roles in postsecondary education.

#### **4. Proposals for Equitable Representation & Educational Equity**

In American higher education, the intersectionality of gender and race in senior leadership roles is not merely a matter of representation. However, it is tightly intertwined with the overarching goals of educational equity and social justice. If leadership paradigms in U.S. higher education settings do not consider equitable representation and diversity, the ripple effects extend far beyond administrative levels; educational equity is difficult to achieve in the minority or marginalized student communities they serve [2]. The pursuit of equitable leadership thus becomes an imperative, not only for symbolic representation but as a lynchpin to a top-down approach to achieving educational equity.

From the individual level, the role of self-reflection stands out. Furman suggests that leadership should be viewed as a praxis – a deliberate and reflective action underpinned by social justice considerations [17]. Therefore, higher education senior leaders will continuously self-reflect, evaluating their biases, assumptions, and any implicit barriers they might perpetuate. On the Institutional Level, reimagining leadership and curriculum will be considered. As Lopez illustrates, a genuine pursuit of social justice demands a reconceptualization of leadership, one that is informed by curriculum inquiry [18]. U.S. higher education institutions need to evaluate and adjust their curriculum to emphasize themes of equity, inclusivity, and intersectionality. Nevertheless, beyond the curriculum, the structures and processes of leadership selection, development, and promotion should be interrogated and redefined to prioritize diversity [18]. Historically black colleges and universities offer a template in how leadership can be reimagined. Since those institutions have long provided platforms for African-American female leaders, emphasizing the significance of creating spaces that welcome the traditionally marginalized [19]. Extension to social justice level requires a paradigm shift in leadership. Educational leadership needs to transcend traditional hierarchies and bureaucratic structures. It is crucial to understand and integrate the interconnectedness of multiple social identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status [7]. Leadership training and development programs will then be embedded with these principles, focusing on the lived realities of diverse communities and understanding the challenges faced by those at the intersections of various identities [7]. By adopting such top-down and inclusive approaches, U.S. postsecondary institutions can ensure that leadership at all levels reflects the educational equity and diversity of students' broader communities.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The intricate landscape of U.S. higher education, underscored by the interplay of race, gender, and leadership, demands rigorous introspection to discern the intertwined dynamics at its core [1]. By addressing the intersections of gender and race, individuals and the public can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the biases and systemic obstacles that can stifle diversity in leadership within higher education in the United States. Through this research, the author endeavoured to illuminate the multifaceted terrains of gender and race in leadership experiences, bringing to the fore the stark disparities on higher educational leadership. These imbalances do not merely hint at representational challenges; they indeed raise deeper concerns about genuine



inclusivity and equity within academic settings, especially when leaders hold the reins of educational policy and strategy that profoundly affect diverse student cohorts.

However, while the study is intended to be comprehensive, it presents certain limitations. Delving into the nexus of race and gender within leadership, the scope remained restricted by the available literature and data. The intricate experiences of leaders navigating multiple intersectional social identities could be different based on other factors such as socio-economic contexts, age, or regional nuances, which might not have been adequately covered in this research. Additionally, the focus was on highlighting the intersectionality in educational leadership; a more in-depth autoethnography exploration or direct narrative accounts might provide richer insights into these leaders' authentic experiences. In championing the principles of social justice, the pursuit of equitable representation in higher education leadership cannot be a transient wave but rather a sustained movement [2]. The journey towards diversity and inclusivity in leadership roles beckons rigorous introspection, continuous research, and actionable initiatives.

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