

ORIGINAL

## Women Leaders in the Peruvian Public Sector: Communicative Barriers, Opportunities, and Meanings from a Phenomenological Approach

### Líderes mujeres en el sector público peruano: barreras comunicativas, oportunidades y significados desde un enfoque fenomenológico

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**Cite as:** Romero-Carazas R, Dionisio-Flores HO, Santillán De la Vega R, Janampa-Acuña N, Cáceres-Gálvez F. Women Leaders in the Peruvian Public Sector: Communicative Barriers, Opportunities, and Meanings from a Phenomenological Approach. Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología - Serie de Conferencias. 2025; 4:1752. <https://doi.org/10.56294/sctconf20251752>

**Submitted:** 19-07-2025

**Revised:** 27-09-2025

**Accepted:** 30-11-2025

**Published:** 01-12-2025

**Editor:** Dr. William Castillo-González 

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#### ABSTRACT

Female leadership in public administration is key to gender equity and institutional strengthening. From the point of view of labor law, it is linked to equal opportunities in access, permanence and promotion in employment, guaranteed by national and international regulations. This study, with a qualitative phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, explored the experiences of female leadership in the Peruvian public administration through semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes each, applied to 28 female public servants selected through intentional sampling by criteria, minimum seniority of 5 years in the position, representation of different hierarchical levels and regions. The interviews continued until information saturation was reached, iterations 25-28, verified when no new thematic codes emerged. Data analysis was performed with Atlas.ti v9 software, applying open, axial and selective coding, ensuring reliability through triangulation of researchers and validation of participants. Written informed consents were collected, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The findings show normative and sociocultural barriers that hinder the development of female leadership and opportunities. Representative textual quotations are included to illustrate each category. It is concluded that in order to consolidate strong and equitable female leadership, a normative and cultural commitment is required, along with concrete strategies for inclusion such as inter-institutional mentoring programs, gender equality committees, implicit bias training and professional development.

**Keywords:** Women's Leadership; Public Administration; Phenomenology; Gender Equity; Experiences; Barriers; Opportunities.

#### RESUMEN

El liderazgo femenino en la administración pública es fundamental para la equidad de género y el fortalecimiento institucional. Desde la perspectiva del derecho laboral, está vinculado a la igualdad de oportunidades en el acceso, la permanencia y la promoción en el empleo, garantizada por normativas nacionales e internacionales. Este estudio, con un enfoque cualitativo fenomenológico-hermenéutico, exploró las experiencias de liderazgo femenino en la administración pública peruana mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas de aproximadamente 45 minutos cada una, aplicadas a 28 servidoras públicas seleccionadas

mediante muestreo intencional por criterios: antigüedad mínima de 5 años en el cargo, representación de distintos niveles jerárquicos y regiones. Las entrevistas continuaron hasta alcanzar la saturación de información, entre las iteraciones 25 y 28, verificada cuando no emergieron nuevos códigos temáticos. El análisis de datos se realizó con el software Atlas.ti v9, aplicando codificación abierta, axial y selectiva, y garantizando la confiabilidad mediante triangulación de investigadores y validación de participantes. Se recopilaron consentimientos informados por escrito, asegurando anonimato y confidencialidad. Los hallazgos evidencian barreras normativas y socioculturales que dificultan el desarrollo del liderazgo femenino, así como diversas oportunidades. Se incluyen citas textuales representativas para ilustrar cada categoría. Se concluye que, para consolidar un liderazgo femenino sólido y equitativo, se requiere un compromiso normativo y cultural, junto con estrategias concretas de inclusión como programas interinstitucionales de mentoría, comités de igualdad de género, capacitación en sesgos implícitos y desarrollo profesional.

**Palabras clave:** Liderazgo Femenino; Administración Pública; Fenomenología; Equidad de Género; Experiencias; Barreras; Oportunidades.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership in public administration is a fundamental element for the consolidation of gender equity in the workplace and the strengthening of inclusive and efficient institutions. From a legal and socio-labor perspective, this concept is linked to the right to equal opportunities in access, permanence and promotion in employment, enshrined in various national and international standards. In Peru, Article 2.2 of the 1993 Political Constitution establishes equality before the law and the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex. Likewise, the Law on Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (Law No. 28983) and the Civil Service Law (Law No. 30057) seek to guarantee equal conditions in the access to and exercise of public functions. However, there are still structural challenges that limit the effective participation of women in leadership roles within State institutions.

Despite the existence of a regulatory framework that promotes gender equity in public employment, in practice, women continue to face significant barriers in their access to management and decision-making positions within government entities. According to reports from the National Civil Service Authority (SERVIR) and the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP), women represent a minority in the highest hierarchical levels of the public sector, despite their increasing participation in the labor market and in public service. Among the main limitations are vertical segregation in public employment, the persistence of gender bias in the selection and promotion processes, the overload of unpaid family responsibilities and the scarce implementation of effective work-family reconciliation policies.

To contextualize the phenomenon in a comparative context, Zhao et al.<sup>(1)</sup> analyzed female leadership in public administration, addressing experiences, barriers and opportunities in the framework of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Based on a bibliometric analysis of 1 820 publications, they examine gender dynamics and female underrepresentation in leadership positions. Women in senior positions face challenges such as work-family reconciliation and social expectations. Among the barriers identified are gender stereotypes, implicit biases in selection and promotion processes, and an exclusionary organizational culture. However, opportunities arise, such as the implementation of leadership programs for women and inclusion policies. The study concludes that transformational and relational leadership is key in public management and that institutional commitment to equity can improve female representation. EDI not only boosts women's advancement, but also strengthens organizational culture and institutional efficiency.

Pham et al.<sup>(2)</sup> examined female leadership in public administration, highlighting experiences, barriers, and opportunities in the public sector context in Vietnam. In this environment, gender dynamics influence how women exercise leadership and face challenges in their professional development. Women in managerial positions often adopt collaborative and empathetic leadership, promoting innovation and participation within their teams. However, they face structural barriers, such as gender stereotypes, lack of support networks and disproportionate workload due to work-family reconciliation. Despite these obstacles, key opportunities exist, such as training programs and inclusion policies that can improve women's access to leadership positions. The study concludes that fostering gender equity in public administration strengthens innovation, institutional performance and the construction of a more inclusive and efficient environment.

In European contexts Liden et al.<sup>(3)</sup> examined female leadership in public administration, addressing the experiences, barriers and opportunities faced by women in this field. Although the study does not focus exclusively on public administration, it analyzes how women perceive and exercise leadership in traditionally male-dominated environments. Women leaders often face additional challenges, such as the need to demonstrate their competence more rigorously than their male colleagues. Among the most relevant barriers are gender stereotypes and an organizational culture that does not always promote diversity, which limits their

access to leadership opportunities. Despite these obstacles, the study points out that gender equity policies and the growing importance of diversity may open more spaces for women in management positions. The findings highlight the need for an institutional approach that removes barriers and encourages more inclusive leadership, thus strengthening public administration and the quality of management in general.

Zhang et al.<sup>(4)</sup> analyzed female leadership in public administration, addressing the experiences, barriers and opportunities for women aspiring to managerial positions. They highlight how their career advancement is often conditioned by micromanagement, discrimination and intersectionality of gender, race and class, which generates additional challenges. Among the most relevant barriers, cultural and structural biases, the lack of female role models in leadership and the burden of family expectations that limit their professional development are identified. However, there are opportunities, such as public inclusion policies and the strengthening of support networks that facilitate access to leadership positions. The study concludes that while there has been progress, it is critical to reform organizational structures and adopt an intersectional approach to better understand the barriers women face. Fostering more inclusive leadership will contribute to a more equitable and effective public administration.

Ghundol et al.<sup>(5)</sup> explored the experiences and barriers faced by women academics in Yemen in accessing and remaining in leadership roles in higher education. In a context marked by instability and restrictive cultural norms, the study uses a case study approach with interviews with 15 female academics to understand their challenges. The main barriers include socio-cultural norms, which perpetuate the idea that leadership is male, the difficulty of reconciling work and family life, and the presence of a glass dome that limits their advancement. In addition, they face a lack of institutional support and restrictions in their work interactions. Despite these obstacles, the study highlights the need to strengthen leadership competencies and promote gender equity policies in academia. It concludes that there is an urgent need to remove structural barriers and foster an inclusive environment that values women's participation, promoting social justice in higher education.

Ludvig et al.<sup>(6)</sup> explored the experiences and barriers faced by women academics in Yemen in accessing and remaining in leadership roles in higher education. In a context marked by instability and restrictive cultural norms, the study uses a case study approach with interviews with 15 female academics to understand their challenges. The main barriers include socio-cultural norms, which perpetuate the idea that leadership is male, the difficulty of reconciling work and family life, and the presence of a glass dome that limits their advancement. In addition, they face a lack of institutional support and restrictions in their work interactions. Despite these obstacles, the study highlights the need to strengthen leadership competencies and promote gender equity policies in academia. It concludes that there is an urgent need to remove structural barriers and foster an inclusive environment that values women's participation, promoting social justice in higher education.

Frick et al.<sup>(7)</sup> studied leadership in special education, their findings allow inferring some relevant aspects for the analysis of women in leadership positions. The experiences and challenges mentioned include one administrator's struggle to balance the needs of all students, reflecting the burden of responsibility many women face in inclusive management. Among the barriers, she highlights the lack of resources, such as funding and staffing, which resonates with the challenges of female leadership in other sectors. Although it does not explicitly address opportunities for women, the article suggests that an inclusive approach to education can provide them with greater roles in policymaking. It concludes that leadership requires a combination of art, science and philosophy, emphasizing the importance of ethics and inclusion, key principles for strengthening women's participation in public administration.

At the regional level, Torres et al.<sup>(8)</sup> explored female leadership in public administration, highlighting advances, barriers and opportunities in various institutions. The experiences in the Education District 03D01 and the Homero Castanier Crespo Hospital show a growing access of women to managerial roles, while in the Governor's Office of Cañar and the provincial prosecutor's office their representation is still low. Among the barriers identified, there is a predominance of rigid organizational structures and discriminatory practices that maintain male leadership, evidencing a glass ceiling that hinders women's promotion. Opportunities highlight the need for inclusive public policies, affirmative measures and transparent promotion systems that guarantee real leadership opportunities. In the context of the study, five institutions in the province of Cañar were analyzed, where female labor inclusion varies significantly. The conclusions underline that, in spite of normative advances, inequalities persist and require more effective policies adapted to each institution to guarantee an equitable and efficient public administration.

Bernedo<sup>(9)</sup> examines female leadership in public administration, focusing on its impact on the job performance of women in managerial positions in the municipal governments of Metropolitan Lima in 2022. Despite advances in gender equity, female representation remains limited, affecting inclusion in decision-making. Experiences and opportunities show that women leaders tend to adopt a transformational and participatory approach, fostering trust and collaboration in their teams. However, they face barriers such as gender stereotypes, which restrict their access to high-level positions and perpetuate exclusionary work structures. The study concludes that female leadership improves organizational performance, with a positive correlation ( $r=0,903$ ), and highlights the need for gender equality policies that facilitate their inclusion in public management. This

analysis reinforces the urgency of strategies that promote a more equitable and efficient work environment.

The research question that drove this study was: How do women public servants in Peru experience their leadership experiences, and what are the barriers and opportunities they face? The main limitation of this work was the lack of phenomenological studies in the Peruvian context, with a predominance of quantitative and bibliometric research that does not address the perceptions and social constructs from the perspective of the women leaders themselves.

The objective of the study was to explore the experiences of female leadership in the Peruvian public administration from the perspective of labor law, identifying the normative and sociocultural barriers that hinder their development, as well as the opportunities that have allowed their access and permanence in high positions. This article sought to contribute to academic and practical knowledge, providing elements for the formulation of public policies and the implementation of mentoring, training and awareness programs on implicit biases. Methodologically, the originality of the application of hermeneutic phenomenology is emphasized in order to understand the direct experiences of female leaders and to evidence non-quantifiable aspects that operate in organizational dynamics.

From a theoretical point of view, this study contributes to the analysis of female leadership in the public sphere through legal and socio-labor approaches that allow understanding the barriers and opportunities faced by women in the exercise of leadership functions. It is based on theories such as the glass ceiling theory, which explains the structural and invisible limitations that hinder women's promotion to senior management positions, and the social capital theory, which examines how power networks influence professional development. It also draws on the national and international regulatory framework that supports gender equity in public employment, including the Political Constitution of Peru, the Law on Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (Law No. 28983), the Civil Service Law (Law No. 30057) and treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Through this approach, we seek to identify the gap between the regulations in force and their application in practice, allowing us to understand the reasons why women still face difficulties in accessing and consolidating leadership positions within the public administration.

From a practical perspective, this research is fundamental for the design and implementation of public policies and human talent management strategies in state institutions. By analyzing the experiences of women in leadership positions, it will be possible to generate relevant information to strengthen gender equity programs, leadership training and effective mechanisms for the elimination of labor discrimination. This study may also be useful for entities such as the National Civil Service Authority (SERVIR), the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP) and the Ombudsman's Office, as well as for unions and associations of public servants. The identification of barriers and opportunities will allow these institutions to implement concrete measures to facilitate the insertion and promotion of women in decision-making positions within the public sector.

From a social approach, this study is relevant because it addresses a problem that directly affects gender equality in the workplace and the representation of women in public management. The promotion of women's leadership in public administration not only responds to a principle of justice and equal rights, but also contributes to the strengthening of institutions, since greater participation of women in decision-making generates more inclusive and representative public policies. In addition, making the experiences and challenges of women in the public sector visible will raise society's awareness of the need for structural and regulatory changes that favor greater equity in the access and professional development of women public servants.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative phenomenological-hermeneutic approach was used to deepen the understanding of female leadership experiences. According to Hernández-Sampieri et al.<sup>(10)</sup> and Espinoza et al.<sup>(11)</sup> this design allows capturing the essence of the phenomena experienced by the participants.

The study population consisted of female public servants and civil servants from Metropolitan Lima and other regions (Arequipa, Cusco, Trujillo), with at least 5 years of service in the public administration and occupying intermediate and higher-level positions. We used purposive sampling by criterion, selecting participants from different areas (finance, human resources, health, education), in order to achieve heterogeneity in the experiences.

Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, with an average duration of 45 minutes each, applied in face-to-face mode during the period from January to March 2025. The interview script, validated by experts in gender and public administration, included questions on labor trajectories, barriers faced, coping strategies and future prospects.

Data analysis followed the stages of hermeneutic phenomenology: comprehensive reading, open coding, axial coding and selective coding, using the software Atlas.ti v9. To ensure reliability and validity, researcher triangulation was applied, where two independent coders reviewed the first 10 transcripts, codes were compared and discrepancies were resolved through reflective discussion. Member checking was performed with a subset of 10 participants to corroborate the fidelity of the interpretation of their testimonies.

All participants signed informed consent, understanding the purpose of the research, their right to

confidentiality, and the possibility of withdrawal at any time. The data were anonymized using pseudonyms.

The use of semi-structured interviews may have introduced social desirability biases, and the geographic restriction to Metropolitan Lima may limit the generalizability of the results. A comparison group with male leaders was not included, which could delve into gender differences in future studies.

## RESULTS

The analysis of the interviews generated 12 main categories, grouped into two dimensions: Barriers and Opportunities. The findings are presented below with sample quotes to illustrate each category.

### Barriers

1. Double standard and underestimation: P1 stated, "Sometimes I feel that I have to demonstrate twice as much competence as a man in order for my proposals to be taken seriously." This double standard is reflected in the perception of less legitimacy of female leaders in senior management rooms.

Lack of mentoring and support networks: P7 shared, "I did not have a female reference to guide me when I entered the position; I learned as I went along." The absence of formal mentoring programs hinders the development of leadership skills.

3. Organizational resistance: P12 indicated, "Decisions end up falling to the same old men; we women are invited to have a say, but rarely to decide." The patriarchal organizational culture prevents effective assumption of leadership roles.

### Opportunities

4. Growing internal policies: P15 commented, "Our institution implemented an equity committee, and that brought changes in selection processes." Although incipient, the creation of equity committees has generated spaces for dialogue and proposals.

5. Training and empowerment programs: P21 said, "I attended leadership workshops and noticed that many of us share the same concerns; these networks allowed me to feel accompanied." Specialized training and networking foster the exchange of strategies for self-improvement.

6. Work-family balance: P28 mentioned, "The flexibility in my schedule allowed me to balance my role as a mother with the responsibilities of the position, and that gave me the confidence to aspire for more." Policies to raise awareness of the importance of work-life balance are key to retaining female talent.

To visualize the relationships between categories, code networks were generated (figure 1), where it is observed how the codes of 'double standards', 'lack of mentoring' and 'organizational resistance' interconnect in the Barriers dimension, while 'internal policies', 'training programs' and 'work-life balance' emerge in Opportunities.

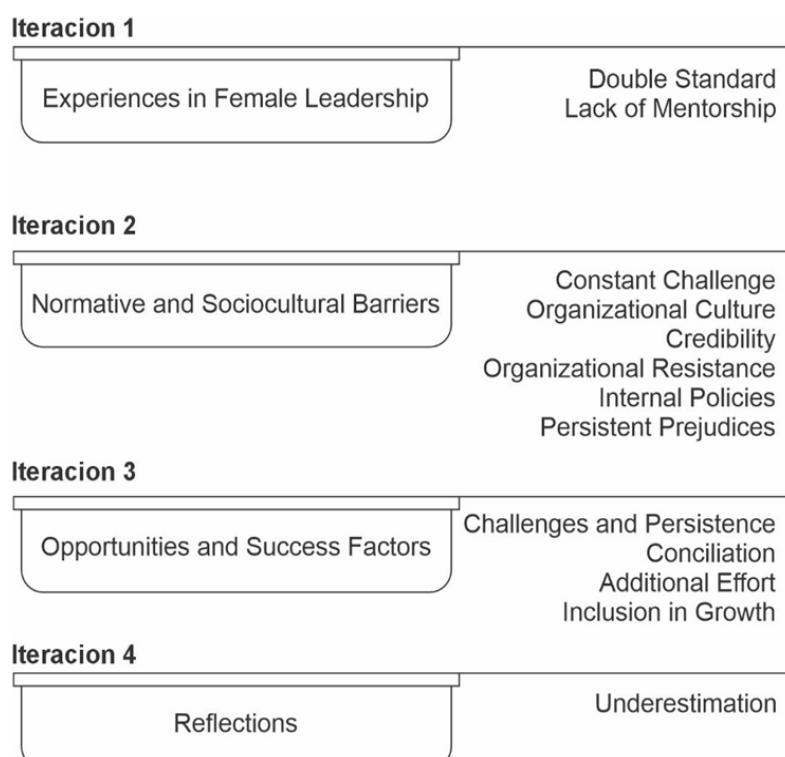


Figure 1. Iterations

Iteration 1 presented in figure 1 reflects the initial experiences of female leadership in public administration, identifying two main codes: 'Double standards' and 'Lack of mentoring'. These codes emerge from the interviews conducted and represent the main challenges faced by women in senior positions within the public sector.

Iteration 2 of figure 1 represents the emerging network of codes focused on the normative and sociocultural barriers faced by women in leadership within public administration. Six key codes are identified that reveal the main structural and cultural obstacles that limit their access to and permanence in senior positions.

Iteration 3 shown in figure 1 represents the network of codes focused on opportunities and success factors for female leadership in public administration. Four main codes are identified that reflect both the advances and challenges overcome by women in leadership positions.

Iteration 4 shown in figure 1 represents the network of codes focused on reflections of women leaders in public administration. In this case, the only emerging code is “Underestimation,” indicating that this perception is a constant in the experiences shared by the interviewee.

## Word cloud



**Figure 2.** Word cloud of iterations

The word cloud presented in figure 2 reflects the most recurrent concepts in the interactions with women in public administration, making it possible to identify the main axes of discussion around female leadership. The most prominent term is “leadership”, which confirms that the main focus of the study is on the way in which women exercise managerial roles in the public sector. This concept appears closely linked to “female,” which highlights the specificity of the analysis and reinforces the need to examine how gender influences the leadership experience. One of the most prominent terms is “barriers,” suggesting that women’s access to and tenure in senior positions continues to face multiple obstacles. Among these, the word cloud highlights terms such as “credibility,” “double standards,” and “bias,” which indicate that women in leadership are subjected to more rigorous evaluations compared to their male counterparts. In addition, the word “organizational” appears frequently, suggesting that many of these barriers are rooted in the internal structure of public institutions.

However, alongside these challenges, opportunities also emerge. The word “opportunities” occupies a relevant place, indicating that, despite the difficulties, women identify spaces for their professional growth. In this sense, terms such as “policies”, “inclusion” and “support” appear, which suggest that certain institutional initiatives have favored gender equity in public administration. The term “experiences” also has a strong presence, which reinforces the phenomenological character of the research. Its association with words such as “challenge” and “credibility” indicates that women in leadership not only face structural obstacles, but also experience a constant struggle to be recognized and valued within their institutions.

The word cloud reveals that female leadership in Peruvian public administration continues to face significant barriers, mainly related to gender bias, credibility issues and exclusionary organizational structures. However, progress is also visible, with opportunities driven by equity policies and the gradual recognition of the importance of diversity in decision making. These findings suggest that, although the road to a more equitable public administration is challenging, there are factors that can contribute to the transformation and strengthening of female leadership.

## DISCUSSION

The findings are consistent with previous studies that point to the persistence of structural barriers to female leadership.<sup>(1,2)</sup> In line with Liden et al.<sup>(3)</sup>, this study confirms that internal support networks are critical to strengthen the perceived legitimacy of women in managerial positions. However, in the Peruvian context, the lack of real implementation of equality policies limits the impact of these advances, as Bernedo<sup>(9)</sup> warned in Metropolitan Lima.

The connection with the ‘glass ceiling’ theory is evident in the rigidity of promotion processes: although regulations exist, implicit criteria that block female promotion persist. Likewise, the ‘social capital’ perspective becomes relevant by showing how mentoring and support networks among women can counteract the lack of formal opportunities.<sup>(12,13)</sup>

Practical implications: It is suggested to design formal inter-institutional mentoring programs, where consolidated female leaders guide new applicants; to establish equality committees with the power to supervise selection processes; and to train human resources managers in identifying and correcting implicit biases. In addition, it is recommended that indicators be created to monitor the advancement of women in hierarchical positions and that annual gender audits be implemented.

Reflexivity of the researcher: The main author, a woman and professional in public administration, recognizes her position in the field and possible interpretation biases. To mitigate this, researcher triangulation and member checking were employed, allowing participants to validate interpretations.

Limitations: The geographic restriction to Lima and purposive selection limit the transferability of the results to rural or distant provincial contexts. In addition, a comparative group of male leaders was not included, which could enrich future studies by contrasting gender experiences.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the experiences of female leadership in Peruvian public administration, revealing that, beyond normative barriers, the construction of support networks and specific training are determining factors for the resilience of women leaders. Based on the phenomenological analysis, it is concluded that sociocultural barriers (double standards, underestimation, organizational resistance) need to be addressed through concrete mentoring strategies and equality committees that transcend normative formality.

The originality of this study lies in the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to reveal subjective and contextual aspects that do not usually emerge in quantitative research. Thus, it broadens knowledge about the intersection between gender, organizational culture and public policies in Peru.

## CONCRETE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement formal mentoring programs at the inter-institutional level to accompany women in their professional careers.
- Consolidate equality committees with powers to supervise selection and promotion processes.
- Train human resources teams in the detection and correction of implicit biases.
- Establish annual indicators to monitor the proportion of women in management positions and conduct gender audits.
- Promote work-family reconciliation policies that allow women to remain in the company and develop their careers.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors express their gratitude to all the people and institutions that contributed to the development of this research.

## FUNDING

The authors did not receive funding for the development of this research.

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