



Approaching the Scope of Higher Education for Women in Peru: A Systematic Review

Aproximación hacia los alcances de la educación superior de las mujeres en el Perú: revisión sistemática

  Irma Colquehuanca Usedo¹

¹ Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to systematize the most relevant information on higher education for Peruvian women based on the analysis of studies, highlighting those that describe the problems that women face during their higher education studies and the effects after their completion and access to the labor market, the opportunities for social mobility that higher education offers to young women who graduate and the development of the educational approach with gender equality applied at the higher education level. Key words: higher education, women's education, social mobility, gender equality approach. Key words: higher education, women's education, social mobility, gender equality approach. A systematic review was carried out in the Scopus, Scielo and ALICIA National Repository databases. The bibliography was classified based on exclusion and inclusion criteria that respond to the purpose of the study. The results show that several research studies confirm a series of problems in women's higher education in the Peruvian context, which are related to gender violence and the scarce mechanisms that exist to deal with it. They also report sexist dichotomies in the curricula of careers that are traditionally aimed at men, which highlights the importance of mainstreaming the educational approach with gender equality at the higher education level, an issue that has been evidenced from some experiences, but is still a pending problem in the Peruvian educational system. The conclusions are that the number of Peruvian women in higher education has increased, which has allowed them upward social mobility. However, this has not been a guarantee of access to better working conditions. Likewise, in order to achieve real progress towards inclusion, measures are needed that reflect in depth on the origins of these problems.

Keywords: Higher education, women's education, social mobility, gender equality approach.

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo sistematizar la información de mayor relevancia en relación a la Educación Superior de las mujeres peruanas a partir del análisis de estudios, destacando aquellos que describen los problemas que atraviesan las mujeres durante su trayectoria en la educación superior y los efectos tras su culminación y acceso laboral, las oportunidades de movilidad social que brinda la educación superior a las jóvenes que egresan y el desarrollo del enfoque educativo con igualdad de género aplicado en el nivel educativo superior. Se realizó una revisión sistemática en las bases de datos Scopus, Scielo y Repositorio Nacional ALICIA. La bibliografía se clasificó en base a criterios de exclusión e inclusión que respondan con el propósito del estudio. Los resultados muestran que diversas investigaciones confirman una serie de problemas en la educación superior de las mujeres dentro del contexto peruano, mismos que se encuentran relacionados con la violencia de género y los escasos mecanismos que existen para afrontarla, también dan cuenta de dicotomías sexistas en los planes de estudio de carreras que por tradición están dirigidas a varones, lo que marca la importancia de transversalizar el enfoque educativo con igualdad de género en el nivel superior, cuestión que se ha evidenciado a partir de algunas experiencias, pero sigue siendo un problema pendiente en el sistema educativo peruano. Como conclusiones se destacan que se ha acrecentado el número de mujeres peruanas en el nivel educativo superior, lo cual les ha permitido una movilidad social ascendente; no obstante, esto no ha sido garantía para acceder a mejores condiciones laborales. Asimismo, para el logro de un verdadero avance hacia la inclusión se necesita de medidas que reflexionen a profundidad sobre los orígenes de estas problemáticas.

Palabras clave: Educación superior, educación de la mujer, movilidad social, enfoque de igualdad de género.

INTRODUCTION

Peruvian higher education began with the opening and operation of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in 1551. By 1875, there were 6 public universities and by the last decade of the 20th century there were 22 public and private universities (UNESCO, 2003). At present, there are 51 public universities and 92 universities under private administration, which shows a remarkable growth since the year 2000 (UNESCO, 2003). In addition, there are 37 schools or institutes of university rank, all recognized by SUNEDU (Alburquenque, 2023), the national entity responsible for licensing institutions that provide higher education services.

It is clear that higher education and specifically university education is a crucial issue that has a direct and indirect impact on social, economic and cultural aspects. Among its various purposes, in addition to training professionals, are the promotion and cultural and intellectual generation, as well as artistic expression; but above all the promotion and development of scientific research (León, 2024). In this sense, during the last few years, it has become evident that the demand for university and non-university higher education has increased, an issue that, in turn, has been reinforced by the growing academic offer of private institutions.

It has also been shown that the participation of women in the higher education sector has increased, since around 1960, the percentage of female applicants was 28%, a figure that rose to 47% by 2004 (Díaz, 2008). However, in Peru, women were late to gain access to this level of studies, unlike other Latin American countries, since it was not until 1908 that the Peruvian State legally authorized women's access to university classrooms (Chávez, 2023). Currently, according to SUNEDU data, the number of female university students is higher than that of their male counterparts. However, even their opportunities (access, salary and working conditions) are 27% less than those of men (El Peruano, 2024).

According to Carbonell-Yáñez (2019), in a study on gender and education, currently the number of women who have early access to higher education is higher than their male counterparts, and under the same trend, evidence indicates

that the percentage of women who graduate is also higher. However, this study has confirmed that there is a sexist segregation by areas of knowledge with educational fields where a high differentiation between masculine and feminine persists, which results in an exclusionary work culture. Likewise, in the higher education field, problems that directly attack women have been recognized, such as horizontal and vertical segregation, which results in labor discrimination (Buquet *et al.*, 2013), among other problems related to gender inequality that are not alien to university contexts and that have gained visibility in recent years.

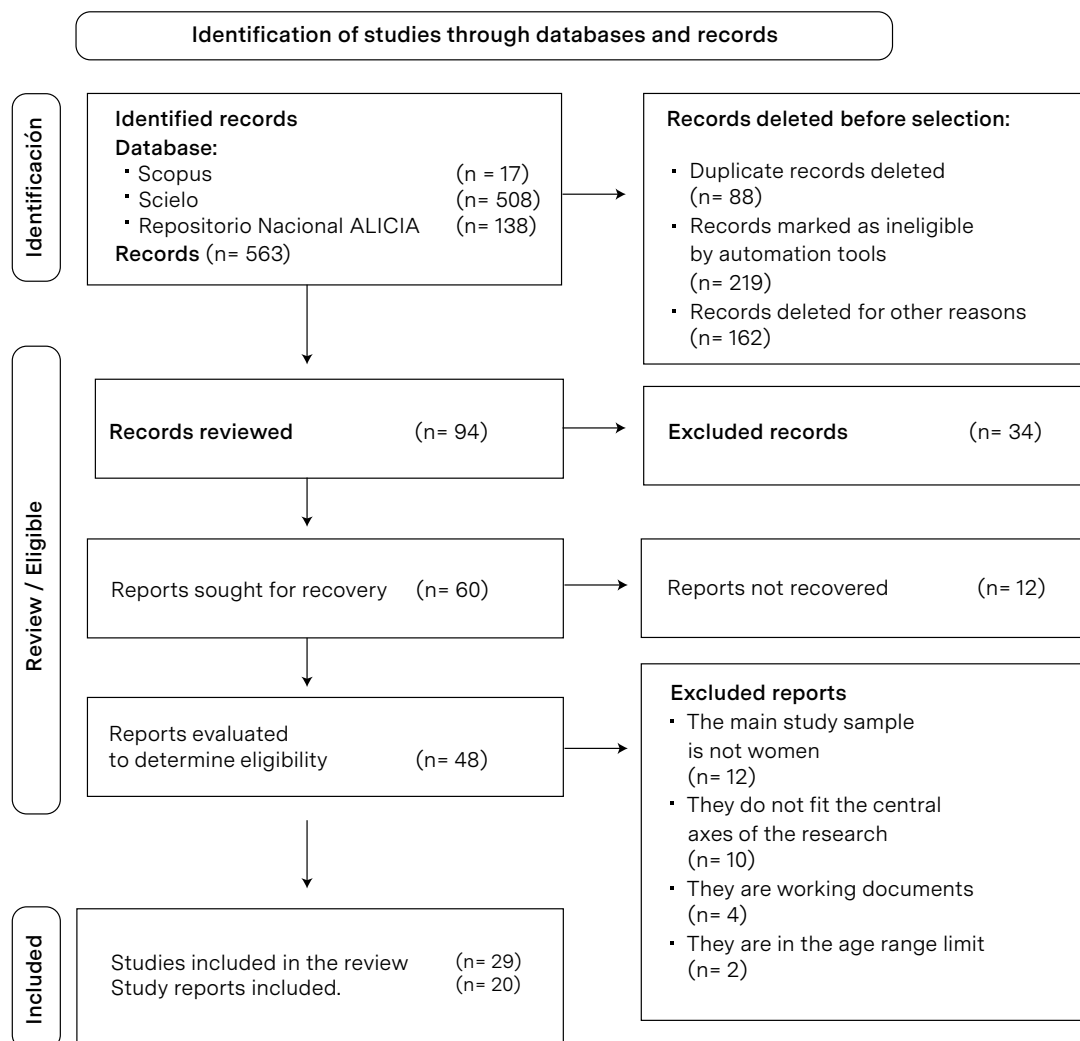
The main objective of this review article is to systematize the most relevant information on higher education for Peruvian women based on the analysis of studies on the subject, highlighting those that describe the problems of women in higher education and their effects on completion and access to employment, the opportunities for social mobility that higher education offers to young women graduates, as well as the development of the educational approach with gender equality at the higher education level.

METHODOLOGY

Systematic review is defined as a type of research that selects information linked to a certain topic of study with a pre-established design (Aguilera, 2014). Its purpose is to review the existing literature in order to situate it through analysis towards a certain perspective. In this study, the descriptive type of systematic review was used, which is beneficial in the educational or teaching area (Icart and Canela, 1994).

This review began with the exploration and identification of relevant and verified documentary data on women's higher education in the Peruvian context, for which a systematic review was applied in accordance with the PRISMA methodology, which allows the systematization and analysis of data. The databases used were Scopus, Scielo and the ALICIA National Repository. The process applied for the identification and selection of reports included in this research is shown below.

Figure 1.
PRISMA flow diagram



For the process of registration, review, eligibility, and final selection of articles, research studies and documents related to the study category, Boolean criteria such as AND, OR and NOT were used to allow the inclusion and exclusion of documents. Initially, 563 records were identified in the database shown in Figure 1, of which 469 were eliminated before selection. Therefore, 94 records were screened. After evaluation of these records, the eligibility of 48 reports was determined, of which 28 were excluded. The exclusion criteria applied to these reports were: studies in which the main sample was not composed exclusively of women; studies that do not fit the central axes of the research such as social mobility, gender equality approach in higher education or problems experienced by women during the higher education process; research whose age range is older than 2019. For these reasons, 20 study reports were finally included.

Following the application of both criteria, the results are presented below.

RESULTS

Women's problems at the higher education level, graduation and access to the labor market

The problems surrounding women's higher education have been studied from different perspectives. In this way, Nahuel di Napoli and Pogliaghi (2022) analyze a series of complaints made by students at a higher education center about gender-based violence, highlighting the types of aggression to which students are subjected: harassment, sexual abuse, psychological violence and sexing. These authors point out that despite the existence of protocols

and channels of attention in the institutions, the students -main victims- do not use them and prefer to use other types of media such as “complaint clotheslines” or digital networks. The complaints are mostly from students to teachers and not so much among students. They point out that the complaints are not always taken with the seriousness of the case, which finally pushes many victims to remain silent when they suffer this type of situation. According to these authors, it is urgent to reflect on why, if there is recognition of the presence of gender violence and that institutional mechanisms are limited, complaints continue to be rejected, distrusted and minimized.

Likewise, Cazares-Palacios *et al.* (2022) analyze the gender violence constantly experienced by female university students, an issue that is aggravated in migrant women or those who have assumed motherhood without family support. Sexual harassment and bullying may be part of the behavior of their academic and teaching peers. Although they recognize the existence of regulatory mechanisms, these have not been able to solve the root of the problem. The testimonies collected by these researchers show a greater presence of men in university spaces, where psychological and even physical acts of aggression towards female students occur and are normalized. Likewise, sexual harassment is revealed in scenarios where the vertical hierarchy or power relations are manifested verbally or through physical or sexual conduct against the assaulted persons. This includes comments about private life, invitations, gestures or proposals with a strong sexual charge.

According to Peña *et al.* (2023), despite the progress made with respect to equal treatment by gender, the use of public spaces continues to be predominantly male; a characteristic that has been replicated in university spaces. This could be explained by the fact that universities were initially conceived for men. According to the authors, this is evidence of a masculinization that is also linked to the institutional aspect, where it has been observed that within its management and cultural praxis it reinforces exclusion and inequality between men and women.

Rodríguez *et al.* (2023) note in their study that harassment and sexual harassment practices are part of university life and is a problem that has been demonstrated by the protests of various movements in higher education institutions. The

results of this research allow us to observe that these acts affect women’s emotions, causing them to have negative reactions and rejection. The normalization of violence is related to an insufficient number of institutional mechanisms that help to reduce aggression and violence against university women.

Likewise, Sandoval and Jiménez (2022) expose in their study, from a feminist theory, the consequences of the spaces of fear, which are forged within the centers of higher education, on emotions. In such spaces, violence and little empathy are normalized. They also raise the differences between public spaces for women and men. In their study, they emphasize the existence of cases of gender violence within university entities and that its expression is varied. They emphasize that protocols to prevent and punish this type of violence are not enough, but that it is necessary to introduce changes in the way of dealing with this problem, which has effects on the personal development of women, as well as on the ways in which they relate institutionally. In relation to the above, Trujillo and Contreras (2020) argue that higher education is not a barrier against gender violence, nor a tool that helps to dismantle the imaginaries linked to this problem. In their research at the university level, they observed a high presence of myths and sexist constructions, which shows that in order to destabilize unequal power relations, more than formal education is needed, it is necessary to include specific programs for this purpose.

On the other hand, Herrero-Villarreal *et al.* (2023) in their study highlight another problem linked to the effect of gender roles and stereotypes in the choice of professional careers; as well as sexist dichotomies and prejudices about what is feminine and masculine, the latter being considered relevant and more suitable for science. They also evidenced sexist ideas in scientific theories. For their part, Salinas *et al.* (2023) observed in their study on stereotypes of teachers in engineering and STEM-mining careers, that a system of gender beliefs predominates in which certain characteristics of power are demanded of female students because this is the only way to be productive, which brings to light a series of contradictions that are not always conscious, especially among female teachers. On the other hand, the teachers agree that university women weigh the consequences of an environment where machismo prevails, with brusque attitudes that culminate in a self-

demanding attitude as a result of this pressure. This study also reveals that female students are uncomfortable openly accepting that they have different abilities compared to their male peers, even though they try to imitate them.

In the same way, Martínez-González *et al.* (2023) in their study of four bachelor's degrees in health sciences conclude that the curriculum and gender have an impact on the academic trajectory through professional training. They also indicate that women presented high graduation rates and a lower probability of dropping out and falling behind in their studies compared to men. However, this study did not take into account socioeconomic and family factors that may be determinants in the academic trajectories of female students in higher education. Also, Espinoza and Albornoz (2023) observed manifestations of gender inequity, such as stereotypes and sexist pedagogical practices in higher education that undermine learning and development. The analyses carried out show gender stereotypes in both teachers and students, especially in men, linked to academic and social skills.

Likewise, Garrido and Tapia (2022) related the percentages of entry, graduation and graduate professionals at the higher education level in various areas of knowledge, contrasting it with the labor market and economic activities; a relationship that has made it possible to demonstrate that gender roles have serious effects in the economic sphere, which are maintained over time, since it has been the institutions that have been responsible for perpetuating inequalities between men and women. In addition, there is a greater presence of women in fields of knowledge and careers linked to the social and administrative sciences, a reality that complicates their situation in the global economic market, which prefers careers in exact sciences and engineering, which are normally associated with the masculine. They also argue that women who graduate from these areas of lesser female preference are able to find employment in highly specialized fields. However, this has caused forms of segregation within the female collective, differentiating those who have training from those who do not.

The scope of higher education for women from minority social groups, such as indigenous communities, has also been analyzed. Segura

et al. (2022) present the experiences and significance of university for these women, as well as the personal and academic obstacles they have encountered in their university life. In the first place, they highlight the fact that university studies are a form of economic improvement for these young women who enter eminently agricultural careers that are rooted in men. Among the personal difficulties is the fact that some of them have had to combine motherhood with their studies. On the other hand, with regard to the academic aspect, it was mentioned that the teachers showed a differentiated treatment, with a strong sexist charge and gender stereotypes.

Opportunities for social mobility provided by higher education for young women graduates

The struggle for egalitarian higher education has antecedents in European countries such as Ireland. According to Harford (2023) this struggle began in the mid-nineteenth century when some women supported by progressive men founded women's colleges influenced by the colleges of higher education in England. These schools promoted rigorous curricula to align women's education with that of men. The purpose of this was to develop cultural and social capital that would allow women to access the labor market. Thus, education became an emancipatory project, as it gave them the right to decide for themselves and not to depend on the men in their families, nor to cede their power to them. Finally, in 1879, women gained access to higher education and their struggle continued against the stereotypes of male environments.

On the other hand, Mendoza and Moreno (2023) refer that currently there is equal access to higher education for women and men, and even point out that women with higher education and postgraduate studies have access to better jobs with higher remuneration, thus achieving better working conditions; greater stability and benefits. This would mean a reduction in the social gaps that would allow more women to access higher education. However, this study also shows that women are required to have a greater number of academic certifications in relation to men for the same jobs, even the latter are hired with less preparation.

Likewise, Mejía-Pérez *et al.* (2023) in their study on intergenerational social mobility of a group of women inserted in the labor field, found that these graduates went through processes

of upward intergenerational social mobility, in dimensions such as education and occupation. However, the presence of social advancement does not necessarily guarantee them better working conditions. This study confirms that an important group of women are excluded from the system due to prejudices and established gender roles, where the role of wife-mother predominates over that of professionals. This is an indicator that despite the numerical growth of women with higher education, this has not meant the reduction of social gaps, as these are sustained by historical causes that allow their transcendence.

The levels of access that women from indigenous communities in Mexico have had to higher education have also been analyzed. Ramos (2021) shows that, despite the increase in access to higher education for many women of Mayan origin, they still have to deal with many disadvantages associated with poverty, gender roles in their families and the disadvantages they encounter in university contexts. When these women achieve uninterrupted linear educational trajectories, upward social mobility processes are observed, even if this often means leaving aside cultural and ethnic aspects.

Development of a gender equality approach in higher education

As seen above, higher education institutions are perceived as spaces where sexual harassment occurs and is normalized. However, since 2018, various groups and associations have gained social relevance and started to demand legal regulations that fight against violence against women. There are a number of experiences such as the one presented by Adamu (2023) in countries with patriarchal societies such as Ethiopia, where emphasis has recently been placed on introducing mechanisms that promote equal treatment between men and women; since some institutions that provide higher education have put in place institutional policies and strategies that guide what universities will do in the short and long term. These policies seek to encourage women to take on leadership roles. However, they still have a lot of work to do to break down the barriers that separate men and women.

A similar situation has occurred in Peru, where according to Fernández (2019), after the detection of a case of sexual harassment, a

means was implemented to receive complaints about harassment at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), which arose from the mobilization of student groups and teachers of the Master's Degree in Gender Studies. As a result, in 2015 a normative document with policies on gender equality came into force, and the following year the regulations for taking preventive actions and intervening in circumstances of harassment, applicable to both students and teachers, began to be implemented. In addition, a Special Commission was in charge of receiving complaints, investigating them and, if appropriate, sanctioning them. Thus, the PUCP became the first higher institution to incorporate in its management a specialized means to address this problem. However, it should be mentioned that, in the short term, the increase in rules and regulations will not change the institutional culture. Nevertheless, situations such as this one creates a precedent for the creation of protocols in entities that share the same educational nature.

With respect to the gender equality perspective, Herrero-Villarreal *et al.* (2023) found in their study very specific results on the status of women in the scientific field, because although their contributions and professional trajectory are highlighted, they found a series of prejudices, including discriminatory attitudes towards women in scientific communities. The scarce dissemination of women's contributions to science is remarked, but also a desire to deepen in physics topics linked to the work of women scientists who faced adversities due to their gender condition. It is important to emphasize that the latter implies an advance towards inclusion, but more critical reflections are needed on the structural and emerging causes that prevent the intervention of women in science. The results they obtained show a process of analysis on aspects that are traditionally excluded in Physics courses and they considered the inclusion of these thematic fields appropriate.

Rodriguez *et al.* (2023), from their study on harassment and bullying in higher education, emphasize the importance of these educational centers becoming appropriate environments, where those who have been victims of harassment and any type of sexual aggression are attended with relevance in order to repair and restore student safety and confidence; this will allow warning contexts of violence and its effects.

The implementation of intervention mechanisms can facilitate coping with the problem and help women victims to report without fear of being repressed or ignored. Likewise, Espinoza and Albornoz (2023) point out that it is vitally important in higher education to strengthen mechanisms to develop equity between men and women, as this will make it possible to achieve inclusive university communities free of gender inequality. They suggest the use of gender equity protocols and guidelines that are already being used in some institutions. In addition, they indicate that it is essential to mainstream the gender approach at the higher education level so that it becomes an essential part of institutional policies. In addition, their findings show the need for teacher training in gender equality, based on the reflection of the effects that the beliefs of genders as complementary opposites have on teaching practices, as well as the detrimental impact of sexist practices on students' learning and attitudes. Likewise, according to these authors, it is urgent to apply a gender perspective in the planning of thematic areas and the curricular structure of all academic programs, especially in masculinized careers.

DISCUSSION

According to what has been presented, several studies confirm a problem in women's higher education related to the lack of mechanisms to deal with gender-based violence. The research by Trujillo and Contreras (2020) and Espinoza and Albornoz (2023) are aligned with that presented by Loayza-Maturrano, *et al.* (2021) who show the incidence of gender violence exercised by male students and teachers, whose existence is determined by the exercise of power. One aspect that has been highlighted in reviewed research (Cazares-Palacios *et al.*, 2022; Peña *et al.*, 2023) is the effect that these acts of violence have on the victims' emotions.

Likewise, authors such as Cano-Arango *et al.* (2022) and Nahuel di Napoli and Pogliaghi (2022) and Cazares-Palacios *et al.* (2022) point out that the most frequent reactions to reports of gender-based violence are silenced and do not contribute to the solution of the problem. On the other hand, responses to complaints collide with institutional obstacles and insufficient mechanisms that

violate the victims a second time. On the other hand, research such as Cazares-Palacios *et al.* (2022) and Peña *et al.* (2023) emphasize the existence of spaces of power taken over by male presence, which become places where harassment of women is normalized.

A series of studies also reveal sexist dichotomies in the curricula of careers that are traditionally aimed at men, underscoring the need to implement a cross-cutting gender approach at the higher education level (Herrero-Villarreal *et al.*, 2023; Salinas *et al.*, 2023). This inequality is replicated in eminently masculine work environments where there is a greater demand, on the part of women themselves, to achieve performances similar to those of men (Garrido and Tapia, 2022).

With respect to social mobility, research shows that there is currently equal access to higher education for women and men, and that women with higher education have access to better jobs with higher salaries (Castro *et al.*, 2023; Mendoza and Moreno, 2023). However, the exclusion of an important group of women from the system is still observed for reasons related to the gender roles still demanded by society (Ramos, 2021; Mejía-Pérez *et al.*, 2023) or a greater demand for preparation for women's access to the labor market in relation to that of men (Mendoza and Moreno, 2023). As an aspect to highlight, the research by Mejía-Pérez *et al.* (2023) and Ramos (2021) coincide in the existence of upward social mobility, referring to the dimensions of education and occupation.

Finally, with respect to the gender equality approach, research such as those of Adamu (2023) and Fernández (2019), give an account of experiences for the mitigation of gender violence at the higher education level, which means that a problem that has been dragging on for many years is beginning to be made visible. Likewise, Herrero-Villarreal *et al.* (2023), Rodríguez *et al.* (2023) and Espinoza and Albornoz (2023) highlight the importance of inclusion mechanisms, either by rescuing the contributions of women in the fields of science, the adaptation and introduction of the gender perspective in the curricula, and the training of teachers in gender equality.

CONCLUSIONS

Higher education, especially university education, was conceived as a masculine space, which would explain a series of problems for female students related to gender violence, stereotypes, segregation and the excessive demands made on female students, especially in careers traditionally intended for men. Likewise, the lack of pertinent institutional mechanisms to confront cases related to sexism and sexual harassment in university environments is evident.

In recent years, there has been a greater presence of women in higher education, which has allowed them upward social mobility. However, this has not always guaranteed them better working conditions. Likewise, this has meant a greater demand for preparation in relation to that of their male peers and suffering from gender role stereotypes.

There are experiences where attempts have been made to effectively introduce a gender equality approach at the higher education level. However, real progress towards inclusion requires deeper measures that reflect on the origins of this problem.

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