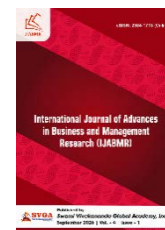




A STUDY FOCUSING ON THE PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS OF WOMEN IN CHINA'S CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY TO DETERMINE THE DISTINCTIVE PATH OF LEADERSHIP



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Original Article

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Abstract

The construction sector of China, being a major contributor to the Chinese economy, has been growing rapidly, creating new opportunities for leadership over the years. Women are increasingly participating in this industry, but they remain marginalised from occupying higher leadership positions. The study focused on the whole journey of women's leadership and examined the experiences they gathered throughout their career paths. Specifically, the research highlighted the advantages of the leadership of women and the organisational, cultural, and structural barriers which are encountered by female leaders. Data for the research were collected through semi-structured interviews with women leaders working in various sectors of the construction industry and a qualitative approach was used to analyse the data. A purposive sampling technique was used to choose respondents to verify their related professional records. The acquired information was examined by thematic analysis for recurring themes and trends. The outcomes of the study showed that male-oriented organisational cultures, insufficient promotional opportunities, gender-related myths, and lack of mentorship were the major challenges faced by the women leaders. Respondents also addressed these problems by adopting flexibility, having work spirit, and devotion to their profession, all of which helped them to progress as good leaders. The findings led to the conclusion that a combination of sociocultural pattern, organisational, and individual circumstances determines women's leadership pathways in China's construction sector. The results highlighted the importance of fair organisational policies, and justice for women in the workplace to promote gender equality and leadership roles in the construction industry of China.

Keywords: *Career Experiences; Construction Industry; Gender Barriers; Leadership Development;*

Women leadership

Introduction

Effective leadership across all industries influences employee supervision and organisational accomplishment by applying critical and analytical thinking abilities to situations with knowledge gathered throughout the journey of one's career; not only male leaders but also female leaders have these abilities to establish themselves as expert leaders. However, some barriers in the workplace reduce the capabilities or destroy the career prospect of women. Gender-based diversity in leadership positions has attracted more attention in recent years as businesses have evolved to recognise the importance of inclusive choices and a range of perspectives. Despite notable improvements in education, professional development, and labour market activity, women continue to be marginalised in leadership positions across many global companies. This issue is most noticeable in the construction industry, specifically in traditional male-dominated sectors [1].

One of the largest and most rapidly expanding industries in the world, China's construction industry makes a major contribution to the country's infrastructure development, urban development, and prosperity. The need for skilled workers and competent leaders has grown enormously as the sector keeps expanding. Women remain disproportionately under-represented in senior managerial and leadership positions in Chinese construction companies, despite improvements in gender equality and labour force inclusion. Few women progress to senior leadership positions in the sector, despite the reality that many of them have excellent educational backgrounds and professional expertise. Academic and career interest in gaining knowledge about the experiences of women achieving leadership roles in the construction industry has developed because of this situation [2].

Previous research suggested that women's leadership growth is often impacted by different barriers operating at various levels [3]. Unequal promotion opportunities, limited access to leadership development programmes, and difficulties in balancing professional and personal responsibilities are included in structural barriers. Cultural barriers often arise from conventional gender patterns, stereotype concepts of gender, and societal expectations regarding the roles of women in the organisations where they work. On the other hand, organisational barriers include male-dominated workplace cultures, lack of administrators, limited networking opportunities, and insufficient organisational support for the better growth of career opportunities. These problems can affect women's confidence, professional development, and capacity to achieve leadership roles despite having an excellent academic background and abilities of administration [4].

Few studies have directly focused on how organisational, cultural, and structural obstacles impact women's leadership pathways in China's construction sector, despite the reality that previous research has examined gender inequalities and leadership challenges across a variety of sectors [5]. Additionally, a lot of research emphasises how women are perceived in positions of leadership rather than the real-life experiences and professional journeys of women who succeeded in overcoming these challenges [6]. Therefore, a deeper investigation of the factors influencing women's leadership development in this industrial and cultural context is still necessary.

Therefore, this study aimed to identify the unique path of leadership by examining the career experiences of women in the construction industry in China. Specifically, the research identified and examined the main structural, cultural, and organisational barriers that women come across on their leadership journey. By examining these experiences, the study intended to provide valuable views into the issues faced by female leaders and strategies they applied to solve them. The outcomes of the research focused on the women leadership and barriers they faced during the journey of career and indicated the need for policies promoting better office cultures, prevention of gender stereotypes and generating fair leadership opportunities in the construction industry of China.

Background of study

The growth of the construction industry in China is very impressive, serving as one of the country's most significant sources of infrastructure, development of urban areas, and financial growth since the foundation of economic restructuring in the late 20th century [7]. The misconception about the construction industry was that it is typically male dominated due to traditional sociocultural beliefs that relate to technological, scientific, and managerial jobs. Women were mostly excluded from construction-related professions, and they were considered undervalued and unsuited to this industry before 1949 [8]. But when the People's Republic of China was established, government policies actively promoted gender equality as an essential component of national growth and supported women to enter the labour market. As a result, throughout the 1950s and the subsequent decades that followed, the number of women entering technical and professional careers progressively increased [9].

More women were encouraged to enter the construction sector as architects, engineers, project managers, and technical specialists because of the sector's rapid expansion and increasing need for skilled labour. The rising proportion of women employed in construction-related fields is also a consequence of government programmes promoting women's participation in higher education and employment. Accordingly, a remarkable number of women have chosen the construction sector as a career and occupied the position of engineers, architects, project managers, and technical professionals. However, despite this kind of growth of women in this field, women are still undervalued, and they are not properly recruited into various job roles in this industry, such as higher administrative and managerial positions. Very few women get opportunities for promotion, though recruitment at entry and middle management levels in this industry has increased [10].

According to former research, various kinds of barriers created by organisational, cultural, and structural factors, appearing at various stages, may influence women's leadership capability development in the construction business. Inadequate opportunities for promotions, reduced access to leadership skills, and challenges in balancing work and personal life are examples of structural constraints. Cultural difficulties are commonly caused by cultural expectations about the responsibilities of women, usual gender preconceptions, and beliefs about management suitability [11]. Male-dominated office cultures, restricted networking prospects, a lack of mentorship, and a lack of organisational support for career development are examples of organisational challenges. Despite having good qualifications, abilities, and working background, these obstructions may prevent women from progressing to higher positions [12].

The gender equality reforms undertaken by the Chinese government and major changes in sociocultural thought have a direct influence on the historical development of female leadership in China's construction industry. But the present continuation of organisational, cultural, and structural problems indicates that obstacles for women in the workplace still prevail. Therefore, the key aims of this study were to examine the types of barriers faced by female leaders and how they impact their work, and career journeys when they approach leadership positions. Proper explanations of the hurdles will improve knowledge of the experiences of female professionals and provide valued perceptions for encouraging more comprehensive leadership possibilities in the construction industry [13].

Purpose of the research

The purpose of the study was to examine the possibilities of leadership for women in China's construction industry. Women were still extremely under-represented in managerial positions despite massive improvements in the construction industry in China. Prior research concentrated on problems of gender biases and women's occupational position, with insufficient attention focused on the career-related obstacles that shaped women's leadership achievements. Consequently, it is indispensable to arrange a study highlighting the issues that impact women's leadership accomplishment in China's construction industry, such as office advantages, professional obstacles, organisational culture and practices, and career involvements. The research tried to pay attention to the perspective of women leaders in the Chinese construction industry. Women leaders are undervalued in the construction industry in China. It gave the concept of how leadership is delivered, experienced, and performed in a unique way depending on gender, cultural setting, and industry-specific elements, targeting beyond common evaluations of men and women. Specialists with knowledge of lawmaking who are working on gender equality and inclusion, can also benefit from this study. The laws related to gender equality and proper leadership training can change the environment of the Chinese construction industry and other industries that are male dominated by following and gathering knowledge directly from female leaders.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, much research has been done on the issues faced by women leaders in the workplace; however, there are still major discrepancies in general male-dominated industries, specifically the construction industry [14]. Study on leadership has repetitively revealed that females are equally suitable for leading positions as men, but many organisational, cultural, and structural challenges undermine their capacity to serve as leaders at higher levels of administration. Despite women having strong academic backgrounds and professional capabilities, these blockades commonly restrict career improvement and limit opportunities for leadership [15].

Structural obstacles have become a noticeable barrier in the career paths of women leaders. Choi et al. [16] showed that there is still little exposure in professional relations, policies of leadership growth, and possibilities of progress. The "glass ceiling" occurrence prevents women from advancing up the corporate ladder. The concept of the "glass ceiling" explains an invisible obstacle that prevents a qualified woman from acquiring a senior leadership role despite having the necessary skills and experience [17]. Women may encounter additional obstacles to job progress and professional acknowledgement in the construction industry, where leadership positions are frequently linked with considerable experience in the field and typically male-dominated occupational responsibilities. Researchers suggested that barriers to a healthy balance between work and life, family responsibilities, and standardised corporate frameworks are additional factors contributing to women leaders' delayed career progress [18].

Women's experiences in leadership are also strongly influenced by cultural barriers. In many countries, including China, assessments of effective leadership remain affected by societal standards and traditional gender norms. Leadership has been correlated with manly qualities like authority, power, and boldness, whereas women are naturally accepted to play the role of caring and beneficial conducts [19]. Conceptions like this are liable for discrimination in appointing women employees, progression, and performance evaluations. According to previous studies, women leaders often faced questions and had to prove their capability in many challenging situations where male employees got easy approvals for the posts. Common beliefs about gender in the Chinese cultural background may create an obstacle, further delaying the growth of women in leadership roles [20].

Organisational problems are considered another crucial factor. Jackson and Copperman [21] analysed the common problems that are involved in male-dominated office cultures: a lack of proper guidance, elimination of unofficial interaction possibilities, and unsatisfactory business support. Patronage and mentoring in a proper way are identified as major elements to boost leadership development. Women in the construction industry regularly face limited opportunities to be employed with powerful advisors and role models. Furthermore, organisational reform may not properly address the gender-related problems, and that may reduce possibilities for leadership development and career support [22].

Previous studies have examined the challenges faced by women leaders in different industries, but limited research has highlighted the issues of women's leadership in Chinese construction industries [23]. The earlier studies have often focused on office engagement, gender biases, or representation of women as leaders, without examining the overall reasons for facing organisational, cultural, and infrastructural obstacles and their impact on women's leadership journeys. Consequently, there is still a great challenge to learn about the exceptional capabilities of women who are eligible for positions of leadership in this industry [24].

The study employed a qualitative research design to understand the diverse cultural, organisational, and structural barriers because of which women struggle to achieve high positions in the journey of their career. Purposive sampling has become much more important in such studies because it allows researchers to choose participants with direct leadership experience and widespread knowledge of the event under research. The collection of authentic and detailed data becomes easy by using a qualitative approach and gives deep insight into women's leadership trajectories within specific organisational and cultural contexts [25].

Research question

- What are the barriers—cultural, organisational, and structural—that women struggle with in their journey to leadership roles, and how do they resolve these issues?

Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional qualitative research design was used to investigate the unique path of leadership by analysing the career experiences of women in China's construction industry. The primary data were collected from women currently and formerly employed in leadership or supervisory roles within various sectors of the construction industry across China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through online and offline channels with the eligible participants. A qualitative approach was appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth examination of participants lived experiences and perceptions. Interviews and thematic analysis conducted over a defined period using an inductive coding approach was useful for data analysis. The method used here for research was a thematic analysis, which included the identification of relevant sectors, recruitment of participants who have had direct experience of leadership in the construction industry, conducting interviews, transcribing their responses and using a systematic approach to analyse the data to discover empirical themes relevant to the leadership role in various fields of the construction industry within the context of China.

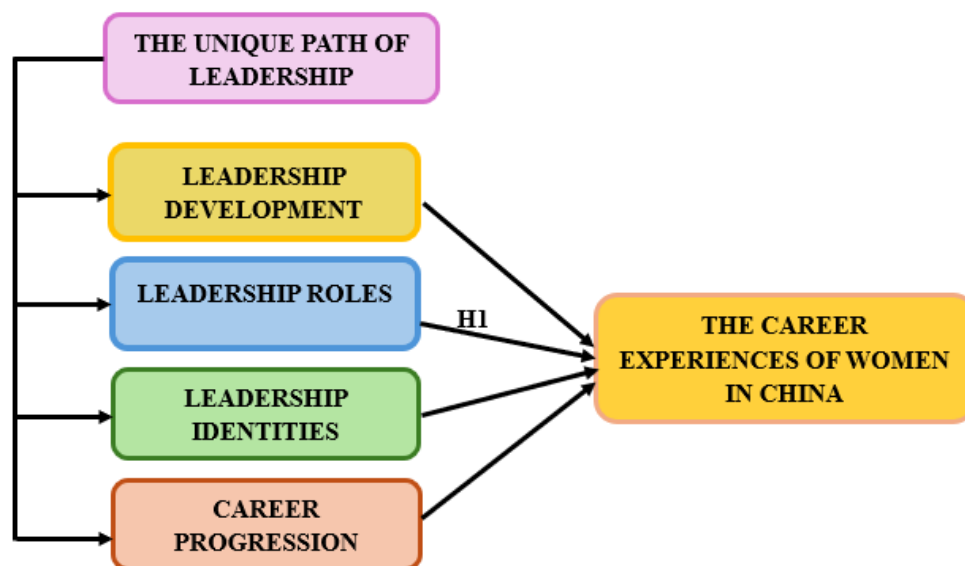
Sampling

The participants were recruited by a purposive sampling method for qualitative study of the research. A total of 387 women currently or formerly employed in leadership or supervisory roles in various sectors of China's construction industry participated in this research. The participants who took part in the research had comprehensive and relevant knowledge about their professional journeys, development of leadership experiences, and the challenges they faced along their journey, which ensured the authenticity of the research. The sampling method enabled and simplified the process of obtaining thorough and valuable information, allowing the research purposes to be analysed in depth within the organisational, industrial, and socio-cultural background of the construction industry in China.

Data and Measurement

Semi-structured interviews were applied to acquire data for achieving redundancy or full data saturation. By using this method, the researchers were able to ensure that enough information was collected to properly understand the career trajectory and leadership development perspectives of women in China's construction sector. Purposive sampling was used to choose respondents who had personal expertise in managerial, leadership, or career advancement roles in the construction industry. Participants' professional paths, leadership experiences, institutional, cultural, societal, and structural challenges, and methods they adopted along the path were all discussed during the interviews. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data obtained. The information was systematically analysed to find common trends and significant findings after the interviews were transcribed and confirmed by member checking. The open coding method was used to first classify the data, axial coding (standard coding) was next applied to determine the connections between newly formed categories. The primary components of women's leadership experiences were subsequently recorded through the development of themes using an inductive coding technique. The production of detailed results about the barriers, career choices, and leadership growth experiences of women in China's construction sector was made achievable by this process, which provided a clear and organised representation of participants' perspectives.

Conceptual Framework



Results

The present research explored the experiences gathered from the women participants working or having worked in various sectors of the construction industry in China, through a qualitative and interpretative approach. Attention was given to the career obstacles they faced, which could be structural, cultural, and organisational, encountered throughout the whole journey of leadership. Four qualitative criteria were applied to ensure trustworthiness and rigour of the results: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria supported the use of thematic coding analysis for examining the valuable narrative data acquired from participants and identifying recurring structures regarding women's leadership development and career growth.

The credibility of the study was proved by long involvement with participants and the collection of rich qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with women occupying leadership and managerial positions within China's constructional sector. Participants also were invited to review their interview transcripts and primary findings through member checking, making sure that the interpretations accurately reflected their knowledge. The depth and values of the narratives increased the identification of meaningful patterns relating to leadership development, career development, mentorship, gender bias, support from the organisation, and barriers of the offices. Therefore, thematic analysis was perfect for analysing these repeated experiences and creating credible findings based on participants' perspectives.

Transferability was applied through detailed demonstration of the research context, the backgrounds of participants, organisational environments, and leadership experiences within China's construction industry. Respondents were chosen because of their direct engagement in leadership roles and their extensive experiences of career growth procedures in a male-dominated industry. The provision of context-rich information enabled the development of themes that may offer concepts applicable to other industries and cultural infrastructure where women encounter similar challenges of leadership.

The process of dependability was obtained by using a systematic and transparent process. The whole processes of data collection, coding and analysis were employed consistently. The multiple coding cycles including open coding, axial coding and selective coding were applied for conducting thematic analysis. These systems increased the consistency and reliability of the thematic conclusions and described that the results were originated through a reasonable and replicable investigative process.

Confirmability ensured that the outcomes were derived directly from descriptions of participants rather than from researchers' assumptions. Spontaneous journaling, field notes, and regular revision of coded information helped to maintain fairness during the investigation. The development of themes was confirmed in participants' explanations about leadership chances, obstacles faced in the workplace, gendered beliefs, mentoring interactions, and professional flexibility. According to the thorough process of the research, the themes represented the actual explanations of women's leadership experiences in China's construction industry and confirmed the appropriateness of thematic coding analysis for understanding the complexity of leadership trajectory within a gender-based organisational background.

Thematic Coding:

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Quote (Participants' Response)
Leadership Barriers	Gender Bias	There are always assumptions that women cannot handle site management roles due to the physical demands.
	Stereotyping	People often mistake me for an assistant, not the project leader.
	Limited Access to Opportunities	Promotions usually go to male colleagues-even when we have the same qualifications.

Theme 1: Leadership Barriers

This theme, acquired by the thematic coding, gave proof of the effective obstacles that women faced when occupying leadership positions in construction industry in China. The structural, cultural, and organisational barriers, when pursuing the role of leaders influenced the development of leadership and limited women's advantages for career progression. Participants described the difficulties associated with unequal promotion opportunities, restricted access to important professional connections, and the under-estimation of women in senior administrative and managerial positions. Many participants also mentioned that leadership roles were usually correlated with male-dominating features, making it more challenging for women to gain identification and approval as leaders in the construction sector.

The outcomes further revealed that professional rules and cultural norms sometimes created new difficulties for women as they aspired to leadership roles. Participants complained about encountering gender misconceptions, having their ability to lead scrutinised, and having problems balancing work and family responsibilities. Organisational obstacles included a lack of suitable policies of leadership development, a lack of mentorship programmes, and office environments dominated by male employees were sometimes highlighted too. Although female leaders still face these issues, several participants used personal interaction methods, persistence, and constant career development to get beyond hurdles and improve in their professions. The themes highlight how multiple interconnected barriers influenced women's leadership experiences and career paths in the construction industry in China.

Discussion

The research disclosed deep perceptions regarding women's leadership successes in China's construction industry, particularly regarding the organisational, cultural, and structural struggles they confronted along the journey. The outcomes showed that despite having a good academic standard and occupational contribution, women leaders continued to combat major obstacles in achieving leadership responsibilities. Women respondents sometimes complained about promotional delays, being underrated when acquiring senior posts despite having all the required capabilities, and restricted access to powerful professional networks. The results from the present work aligned with the findings of prior research, which were about gender-based discrimination and the "glass ceiling" prevailing in male-dominated industries like the construction industry [26, 27].

Additionally, the findings depicted the picture of gender stereotypes and cultural norms that strongly affected the experiences of female leaders. Many participants explained that many leadership posts are male-dominated, and regular observations were needed for acquiring knowledge of women's leadership capabilities. The results suggest that the suggestions given by previous research on leadership views and growth possibilities for females in technical and managerial positions remain unchanged due to conventional gender partiality and expectations from society. The results agree with the view of another previous study that women leaders face more obstacles and criticism than male leaders [28].

Another important theme is organisational barriers faced by women leaders. Respondents complained about a lack of mentorship, restricted leadership development policies, and male-focused office cultures. These findings are consistent with earlier empirical evidence pointing to the support of organisations, mentoring relationships, and professional networking opportunities as serious factors to be discussed [29]. The lack of such a support system frequently limited respondents' access to leadership pathways and professional development advantages. However, despite these difficulties faced by the women leaders, many female leaders described resilience by engaging in continuous professional development, expanding professional connections, and creating adaptive leadership strategies to overcome organisational obstacles [30].

The research also addressed how women's leadership development is constantly changing. Leadership development was defined by constant interactions between human commitment, organisational environments, and sociocultural factors rather than a straightforward path. This result is like other research related to leadership development, which claims that situations in offices and various contextual factors influence leadership and individual potential. Participants' experiences of their leadership trajectories proved a method of adjustment, acquiring knowledge, and perseverance in the face of several professional troubles [31, 32].

Although women in China's construction sector have made observable achievements in securing positions of higher authority, they still face issues arising from organisational, cultural, and infrastructural disparities. For instance, their

career paths are becoming more limited, as fewer higher-level roles are open to women. For these reasons, encouraging diverse organisational cultures, strengthening mentorship programmes, and offering equal opportunities for leadership growth may help reduce such challenges and enhance women's participation in leadership roles in the construction industry.

Conclusion

The study analysed the trajectory of the career growth of women in leadership in the construction industry of China, with special emphasis on the administrative, cultural, and operational hurdles faced by them while playing the role. The conclusions revealed that while women are engaging in playing the role in higher authoritative positions in the construction industry, several interrelated problems still create a blockage to their promotions to leadership roles. The development of leadership is influenced by corporate hurdles like insufficient mentorship policies and a male-focused office environment, cultural hurdles like gender-related misconceptions and traditional thoughts regarding males and females, and structural obstacles that restrict opportunities for career advancement. The research also concluded that many women leaders effectively play their role of higher authority despite such barriers and challenges in their career journey. They navigate these challenges in the office and simultaneously balance the problems arising in their personal lives like experts. Therefore, support from the family and office, suitable policies that focus not only on men but also on women's problems in the office and the whole journey of a career, and opportunities created through good mentoring are much-needed factors to enable women's leadership capabilities. The study helped to identify the problems and obstacles of women's leadership and helped to drive women's abilities and intellect to achieve higher positions in the construction industry of China. It also highlighted gender equality and emphasised the use of the power of the loving and caring nature of women to enrich leadership capabilities. Future studies may explore leadership experiences in various organisational contexts and geographical areas to improve knowledge of women's leadership development in the construction sector.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Acknowledgement

The authors are thankful to the institutional authority for completion of the work.

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