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A Study to Recognise the Exceptional Journey of Leadership: Examining the Professional Barriers of Women in Construction Sector of China

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ABSTRACT: The construction industry of China is developing as an important economic contributor gradually, and a significant part of women are participating in this industry being a major drive to boost the development of this industry. However, a significant disparity in the engagement of female employees persists within this industry, as females are undervalued for administrative and managerial responsibilities, while male employees occupy higher-ranking positions and dominate critical roles from entry-level to senior management. Despite having significant qualities of engineering, project management, taking important decisions of administration, they are marginalised in this industry. This study endeavoured to determine the factors that diminish the capabilities and opportunities of women to become leaders, including inadequate support systems from family and office, poor relationships with other employees and higher-authority figures, and improper institutional mechanisms. Therefore, the study highlighted on the problems of male-dominations in this specific industry and inspired to enrich the growth of construction sector by increasing progression of women leadership development. Data for the research were collected by semi-structured interviews from the women leaders working on various construction industry and a qualitative approach was used to analyse the data. Purposive sampling technique was used to choose respondents to verify their related professional records. The acquired information was examined by the thematic analysis for repetition of themes. The outcomes showed that supportive work situations, positive relationships, and effective institutional mechanisms promoted women's career progression, contributing to both individual leadership development and the overall growth of China's construction industry. Therefore, women leaders are much necessary in the construction industry for both of their personal career growth and economic growth of the Chinese nations

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is a major contributor to financial growth and is extensively liable for China's economic expansion. The constant technological innovation and modern urbanisation have generated excessive employment opportunities in the construction industry with all industries over the past few decades in China (Guo et al., 2026). Well trained and experienced workforce with leadership qualities is considering very essential for this industry to fulfil the economic development of China. Usually, the construction sector in China is developed as a male-dominated sector, and all executive and leadership positions are acquired by men. China has transformed the policies of gender equality and women's involvement in advanced education

system and higher managerial positions, but there is still a loophole which shows that women are mostly unrecognised in the senior leadership positions of the construction industry compared to men (Yan et al., 2026).

Chinese government has taken several programs to decrease gender gaps and to improve academic inclusion of women in advanced studies, real effort of this learning in their career path, and to foster overall economic development in China. Consequently, a noticeable number of women are entering the construction industry as engineers, architects, project managers, quality surveyors, and technical experts. Economic growth has effectively increased simultaneously (Pathak, 2026). However, career progression and leadership advancement of women are continuing successfully, but it is noticed that women are employed mostly in entry level and middle levels of management; very few are encouraged to get senior leadership position and administrative position in the construction industry in China (Chang et al., 2026).

Progression or upgradation in career take place when persons progress in their careers by learning skills, proficiencies, responsibilities, and leadership positions during their professional lives. This progression is often followed by some sequence of personal, professional, and socio-cultural factors (Borg et al., 2026). Leadership development is not utterly supported professional knowledge or strong academic background, but it is inclined by office culture, administrative practices, access to supervising opportunities, strong professional networks, and insights regarding gender equality. Consequently, women's career experiences present effective points of view on the issues that make limitation to improve in the career within the industry (Stahl et al., 2026).

Previous studies described that female leaders frequently face infrastructural, professional, and barriers generating from personal life during their career journeys. Infrastructural difficulties may create promotional complications, unequal access to leadership progression initiatives, and underestimation of critical thinking in women regarding administrative practices. Professional obstacles often arise from usual myths regarding gender that indicate male leadership, toxic office culture, limited support from higher authority, and exclusion from significant professional networks. These challenges may lower career promotion and leadership chances for females with the mandatory qualifications and eligibilities (Ndakolonkoshi et al., 2026).

Analysing the professional experiences developed by women leaders is therefore very vital to identify the key factors that affect career development and leadership journeys in the construction industry of China. Particularly, examining the support systems from family and office, relationships in the professional world, and institutional mechanisms that impact absolutely on women's accomplishment of their career objectives gives meaningful insights into career journeys. The lack of such assistance can generate significant obstacles to improve whole of the career (Rebelo et al., 2026). Therefore, this study aimed to identify the extraordinary path of leadership by exploring the professional experiences of women in China's construction industry. The research tried to explore how support systems, personal and professional relationships, and executive activities affect women's career progression and leadership development. The findings contributed to the previous literature on women's leadership while giving actual recommendations for making strong support systems and advancing equivalent career development chances within China's construction industry.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The construction industry of China has witnessed substantial development in the past few decades. The more this sector expanded, the more the need of experienced and qualified professionals increased. This necessity generated trained and educated professionals, men and women both. But women professionals were not joining or were not willing to make their profession significantly in comparison to male leaders. Due to gender misconceptions, lack of appropriate support systems in family and office, lack of institutional mechanisms, and poor mentorship, the number of women leaders was so insignificant in China's perspective of vast and diversified employment situations (Huang et al., 2026). Women are very competent in senior administrative positions with their fostering and supervising abilities; they can transform and control various industrial sectors (Swider, 2026). These principles were reinforced after the rapid evolution of government initiatives and reformations. It helped them to enthusiastically contribute to various sectors, especially in the construction industry (Li, 2026). Women are now entering as engineers, project managers, technical assistants, and senior executive roles in the construction industry. But having all the necessary qualities, still women are underrepresented in senior supervisory and executive positions and decision-making positions. Some previous research proposed that upgrading of career in the construction industry does not vary on professional capabilities and experiences only, but a right support system from family and workplace, relations with co-workers, and institutional practices like specific rules for specific sector (in this case it is construction industry), employment and promotion strategies, programmes for leadership development, encouragement provided by senior professionals, monthly or yearly

performance evaluation systems etc. are also responsible for development in career specially for women (Sun et al., 2026). Women normally face challenges related to restricted access to get the opportunities, strong professional channels, leadership development policies, and structural support mechanisms (Zhang et al., 2026). These factors hamper their ability to obtain higher posts in the construction sector. Some earlier research further indicated that the previously mentioned hurdles, when effect undesirably, women struggle with these matters and their focus on career development becomes distracted; they feel demotivated sometimes and lose all enthusiasm to improve in developing their career (Kuruneri et al., 2026). Their family also produced troubles by giving mental pressures, gender partiality, and extra worries of responsibilities in the entire journey of the career (Long et al., 2026). Colleagues sometimes make the circumstances unbearable by doing unnecessary irritation, a lack of institutional supports like inappropriate guidance, and promotional difficulty for females, which also influences the growth of female leadership roles in the construction sector of China (Kunkcu et al., 2026). Therefore, the study facilitated to recognise the reasons that delay the chances of growth and progression in case of women's leadership, and gave a thorough picture of women's struggle in construction industry so that strategy makers and higher officials can emphasis on their issues and make some noticeable renovations for the favour of women to get more opportunities in higher executive positions of construction industry in China.

3. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The research emphasised on the obstacles like support systems, professional relationships, and institutional mechanisms that make restricted promotions of women's careers in the Chinese construction industry. Despite the increasing employment of female employees in the construction industry, this is not at the level that they deserve according to their academic and working credentials. Prior studies primarily observed the impact of gender disproportions on women in offices, but this study focused not only on these matters but also identified other major issues like inadequate support systems, unprofessional relationships, and improper institutional mechanisms that hamper women's careers and explored a clear picture of this in the Chinese framework of construction related occupation. The research also recommended that there is a need to examine the impact of mentorship, strong official systems, co-workers with a friendly and helpful nature, policies made by governments and executives, and leadership development prospects shaping the journey of women's careers in the construction industry of China. The study expected in-depth understanding of the challenges that constrained women's progression into leadership positions. It examined how women's occupational journey is inspired by the perfect support systems and institutional environments. Additionally, the study had practical consequences for construction sectors, lawmakers, and human resource (HR) professionals thinking the promotion of gender equality and inclusion of leadership of women. A correct understanding of obstacles faced by women in getting promotions in higher decision-making and leadership designations can decrease needless and excessive male dominance in workplaces and can enrich the opportunities for leadership roles for women in the construction industry in China and other industries also.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few decades, researchers have given attention to understand the problems received from women's experiences about career progression and leadership development in male-influenced industries. Despite an improvement in women's involvement in construction sectors, many women experienced inadequate leadership opportunities and career development. Previous studies showed that career development for women is impacted not only by individual proficiency and professional experiences but also by getting the support systems, relationships with co-workers and executives, and healthy institutional situations that reduce women's professional development (Deng et al., 2026).

Support systems are valuable influencers of women's leadership development. Researchers clarified that suitable guidance and motivation from higher authorities, leadership training programmes, development of working progresses, support from family members, and industrial support systems help to intensify confidence and make strong personality, build right knowledge in leadership roles, and build strong occupational career (Smith, 2026). Earlier research indicated that women who become leaders by getting proper leadership guidance were more likely to enhance in career progression and approached to senior leadership posts. However, low accessibility of such support systems often limited women's progression in their career goals (Gao & Chen, 2026).

Official relationships and a strong network in profession play an important part in acquiring women's career objectives. Beneficial relationships with supervisors, co-workers, guides, and industry professionals help to build a strong career in construction and other industries. These factors allow women employees to gain precious tips and information regarding

career, sponsorship, and occupational transparency (Ibrahim et al., 2026). On the other hand, women working in male-dominated industries are continuously underrepresented; they are kept apart from important decision-making activities, and in this way, they cannot make a strong professional network in their career path. Such restrictions reduce their ability to achieve goals related to their profession; all concentration is wasted in struggling with the obstacles from the trajectory of their career progress (Brandt et al., 2026).

Another major problem is institutional systems. Institutional policies regarding promotion, evaluation of performance, leadership development, flexible office infrastructure, and gender diversity programs affected women's benefits for the development of the profession. Healthy office cultures and valuables sensitive gender related policies should be taken to increase the involvement of women in the construction industry, while unsuitable promotion systems and weak leadership development programmes often hamper career progression. In many cases, institutional mechanisms do not always identify gender-specific problems, reducing their opportunities to achieve leadership positions (Yu & Zhang, 2026). In China, cultural stereotypes and conventional gender policies often act as obstructions to careers. Women frequently battle with difficulties arising from support systems, institutional mechanisms in the workplace, etc., and face problems in maintaining professional and personal life balance. Societal beliefs also hinder their smooth upgrading in their careers. In the construction industry, similar obstructions with the addition of male dominance, weak professional networks, week relationship with colleagues are also the main barriers for women's career development (Song & Wang, 2026).

Even though former research has examined these difficulties faced by women but not done so systematically. There should be more comprehensive research concerning these issues faced by women throughout their career path (Usman et al., 2025). The previous research only emphasised gender preferences in office cultures faced by women in different industries or sectors, but few studies identified these same obstructions in the construction industry in Chinese context. Obstacles in other industries are examined, but the construction industry in China is still neglected; basically, women's career obstacles, progression in profession, and male dominance are fundamental parts for future research (Jiang et al., 2024). Therefore, the study examined barriers like support systems, institutional obstructions in the construction industry, and to what extent they affected women's career development goals.

5. RESEARCH QUESTION

- What support systems, relationships, or institutional mechanisms have helped or hindered their career progression?

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional qualitative research design was used to examine the exceptional path of leadership analysing the occupational experiences of women in China's construction industry. The primary data were collected from women presently and formerly occupied in leadership or supervisory roles within various sectors of construction industry across China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through online and offline mediums with the suitable participants. A qualitative approach was adopted as it allowed for a detailed examination of respondents lived experiences, and perceptions of the respondents. Interviews and thematic analysis conducted over a defined period using an inductive coding approach was effective for data analysis. The method used here for research was a thematic analysis, which included the determinations of relevant sectors, employment of participants who have had direct experience of leadership in construction industry, conducting interviews, recording their responses and using a systematic approach to scrutinise the data to discover empirical themes relevant to the leadership role in various fields of construction industry within the background of China.

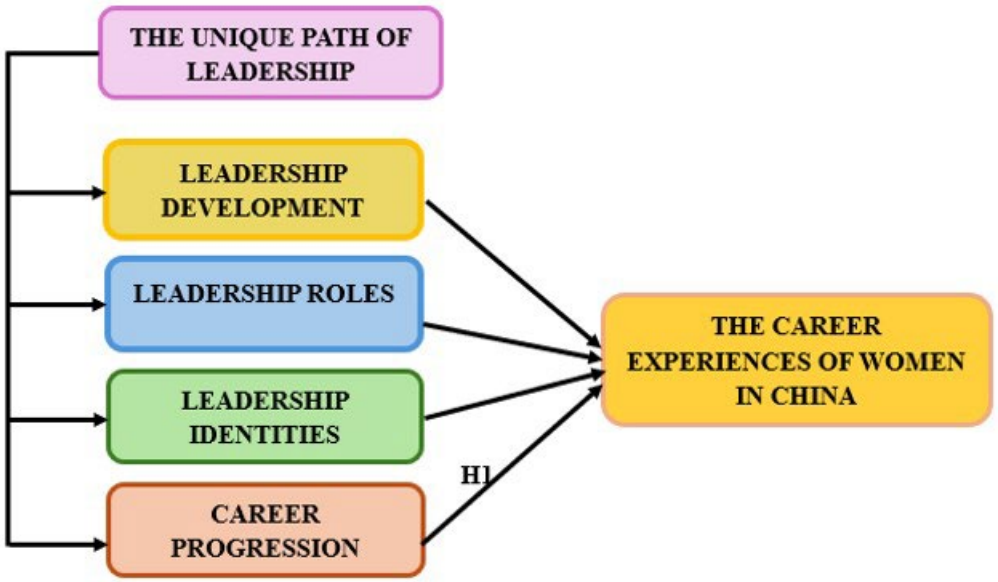
6.2 Sampling

The participants were selected by purposive sampling technique for qualitative research design of the study. 387 women recently or previously employed in leadership or supervisory role in various sectors of China's construction sector were involved in this research. The participants who took part in the study had inclusive and relevant knowledge about their occupational journeys, development of leadership capabilities, and the barriers they struggle along their journey confirmed the authenticity of the research. The sampling method allowed and made easy of the procedure of acquiring detail and valuable information, making the research aim to be analysed thoroughly the issues like support systems, relationships and institutional mechanisms of constructional industry in China.

6.3 Data and Measurement

Semi-structured interviews were applied to collect data for gaining redundancy or full data saturation. By using this process, the scholars ensured that enough information was accumulated to properly understand the career track and leadership development prospects of women in China's construction sector. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants who had efficiency in managerial, leadership, or career advancement positions in the construction industry. Participants' professional pathways, leadership experiences, institutional obstacles, support systems provided by their family and workplaces and methods they adopted along the journey were all considered during the interviews. A thematic analysis approach was employed to examine the data acquired. The information was methodically analysed to find common trends and substantial results after the interview was transcribed and confirmed by member checking. The open coding method was used to first classify the data, axial coding (standard coding) was next employed to determine the connections between newly formed categories. The primary sections of women's leadership experiences were subsequently recorded through the development of themes utilising an inductive coding technique. The production of whole outcomes about the blockades, career choices, and leadership progression experiences of women in China's construction sector was made realisable by this process, which provided a clear and planned representation of participants' standpoints.

7. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



8. RESULT

The present research was conducted for exploration of the responses collected from the women participants engaging or was engaged in different parts of constructional industry in China, through a qualitative and inductive coding approach. Attention was given to the obstacles of the career they faced which could be institutional, lack of proper support systems and lack of good relationships with co-workers and higher authorities, combatted throughout the whole journey of leadership. Four qualitative conditions were employed to confirm trustworthiness and rigour of the results- credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These four conditions supported the application of thematic coding analysis for analysing the effective narrative data assembled from participants and identifying repeated structures regarding women's leadership development and career progression.

The credibility of the study was employed to prove by engagement with respondents and the collection of valuable qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with women occupying leadership positions and managerial positions within China's construction sector. Participants also were encouraged to evaluate their interview transcripts and primary outcomes through member checking, making sure that the explanations exactly reflected their knowledges. The intensity and values of the narratives enabled the determination of significant outlines relating to leadership development, career development, mentorship, gender bias, support from the organisation and family. Therefore, thematic analysis was perfect choice for analysing these constant experiences and creating credible decisions based on participants contexts.

Transferability was applied through detailed validation of the research context, the backgrounds of participants, institutional environments, career progression by facing various obstacles and leadership experiences within China's construction industry. Participants were selected because of their direct involvement in leadership responsibilities and their wide experiences of career growth and promotional procedures in a male-biased industry. The part of precious information ensured the development of themes that may offer ideas relevant to other industries and industrial infrastructure where women encounter similar obstacles of leadership.

The process of dependability was also employed through an organised and clear method. The entire practices of information collection, inductive coding were applied throughout the research. The various coding sequences including open coding, axial coding and selective coding were implemented for achieving thematic analysis. These procedures enabled the stability and consistency of the thematic assumptions and demonstrated that the outcomes were originated through an acceptable analytical process.

Confirmability used to confirm that the results were derived completely from experiences of participants rather than from researchers' expectations. A systematic process for collecting data, field notes, and regular revise of coded information helped to keep transparency during the investigation. The development of themes was collected and confirmed from respondents' descriptions about leadership chances, obstacles facing at office, gendered beliefs, mentoring interactions, professional flexibility, and lack of support systems. According to the in-depth process of the study, the themes proved the real clarifications of women's leadership involvements of China's construction industry and controlled the appropriateness of thematic coding analysis for understanding the difficulty of leadership trajectory within a gender based industrial background.

Thematic Coding:

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Quote (Participants' Response)
Change and progress	Increased Visibility of women leaders	It is inspiring to finally see women heading major projects.
	Shifting Attitudes	Younger male colleagues are more open-minded and collaborative.

Theme 1: Change and Progress

The thematic analysis denoted the gradual changes and progress in career experienced by the women throughout the leadership journeys in China's construction industry. The outcomes revealed that the supporting role of the family and profession, strong professional relationships and institutional mechanisms inspire a woman to be an expert leader. Participants described that a well mentorship initiative, guidance from senior colleagues, supportive professional and family environments and professional networks help to build confidence, strong personality among women leaders. These support structures provide valuable opportunities for learning, visibility, and access to leadership designations.

The results derived from this theme stated that institutional policies such as leadership training programmes, professional growth and opportunities, gender-related workplace initiatives contribute to positive leadership development for women. Many women participants responded that after taking such initiatives of gender-equality and diversity, good mentorship programmes, help of co-workers in construction industry, women can assume managerial and leadership responsibilities. However, the remarkable career progression can be varied across various industrial sectors and different stages in career. While some participants observed significant professional advancement due to supportive role of profession and family environments, others reported slower improvement because of poor mentorship in office, limited networking opportunities and lack of leadership development resources. Despite these differences, most participants agreed that positive institutional changes will be beneficial for women leadership development, liberal attitude of co-workers and higher officials to women promotes them to a higher position and responsibilities in construction sector of China. Although this theme highlighted that present situation of construction industry is more evolving and gradually shifting to the development-oriented programmes and initiatives for women leaders, young colleagues are very friendly and supportive in nature, they also inspire women to grow as a strong leader in future. Therefore, this theme clearly mentioned that well supportive systems, professional

relationships and institutional mechanisms can create an expert, skilled and properly knowledgeable woman leader in near future for construction industry in China.

9. DISCUSSION

The research provided valuable perceptions into the factors that impacted the career progression of women leaders in China's construction industry, particularly regarding the support systems, professional relationships, and institutional mechanisms that facilitated or hindered their advancement. The findings revealed that women's career development was not determined solely by their professional competence and qualifications but was also strongly influenced by the availability of mentoring opportunities, workplace support, and organisational practices. Participants frequently reported that access to supportive supervisors, professional networks and leadership development programmes positively contributed to their career advancement. These findings were consistent with previous studies, which emphasised the importance of organisational support and mentoring relationships in promoting women's leadership development and career success (Litynska et al., 2026).

The findings further indicated that professional relationships played a crucial role in shaping women's leadership experiences. Many participants described how guidance from senior colleagues, mentorship relationships, and professional networking opportunities enhanced their confidence, leadership capabilities, and visibility within their industries (Vallbé et al., 2026). These findings aligned with earlier research suggesting that access to strong professional networks and supportive workplace relationships increased advantages for promotion and leadership progression. However, some participants reported limited access to influential networks and sponsorship opportunities, which slowed their career advancement and restricted their access to senior leadership positions (Idrovo Carlier et al., 2026).

Another significant finding concerned the influence of institutional mechanisms on career progression. Participants highlighted the importance of organisational policies, leadership development initiatives, and inclusive workplace practices in supporting their professional growth. Where such mechanisms existed, women reported greater opportunities for advancement and leadership development (Nwachukwu, 2026). Conversely, the absence of structured mentoring programmes, transparent promotion systems, and gender-inclusive organisational practices often created barriers to career progression. These findings supported previous empirical evidence that institutional support and organisational commitment to diversity significantly influence women's leadership outcomes (Schulcz & Zsigmond, 2026).

The study also revealed evidence of gradual change and progress within the construction sector. Several participants acknowledged that increasing awareness of gender equality, diversity initiatives, and leadership development programmes had created more opportunities for women than in previous decades. Although, challenges remained, women leaders reported benefiting from evolving professional attitudes and stronger support structures. This finding was consistent with previous leadership studies that suggested professional transformation and inclusive workplace cultures contribute positively to women's career advancement (Leaders, 2026). Overall, the findings suggested that women's career progression in China's construction industry was shaped by a combination of supportive relationships, organisational practices, and institutional mechanisms. While notable progress had been achieved, further efforts to strengthen mentoring systems, professional networking opportunities, leadership development programmes and inclusive workplace policies remained essential for supporting women's continued advancement into senior leadership positions.

10. CONCLUSION

The study examined the trajectory of the career progression of women in leadership in the construction industry of China, with special emphasis on the proper support systems, strong professional networks and essential institutional mechanisms faced by them while playing the role of leadership. The assumptions 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 their personal and professional hurdles like gender stereotypes, over-burdened responsibilities, unhealthy and stressful office environment, strong and proper professional relationships with colleagues and higher-officials, and institutional obstacles like poor mentorship, lack of initiatives related to gender equality 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 their problems happening 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 chances created from good mentoring are much-needed factors to enable capabilities

of women leadership. The study identified the problems of women's leadership and helped to explore women's skills and intellect to attain higher administrative positions in the construction industry of China. It also emphasised on gender disparities in offices and highlighted on the proper utilities of the power of the tender and supervising nature of women to develop leadership capabilities in them. Future studies may investigate leadership experiences in various organisational contexts and geographical areas to improve insight of women's leadership progression in the construction sector.

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