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An Investigation on the Career Experiences of Women in China's Construction Industry to Explore Leadership Identity Construction

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ABSTRACT: China's construction industry is fast soaring propelled by urbanisation, economic expansion and big infrastructure projects. But women still struggle to build leadership identities in male-dominated work environments. This study, therefore, explored how women in the Chinese construction industry construct their leadership identities and how they gain authority, recognition and influence in their organisations. A qualitative research method and phenomenological design were employed to obtain a deeper understanding of women's leadership experiences. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with women who occupy leadership and executive positions in a range of construction-related occupational activities in China. The results revealed that resilience, adaptability and strategic networking were needed to significantly influence leadership identity construction. It was discovered that the professional networking, mentorship relationships and involvement in women-focused industry forums were significant approaches to boost leadership confidence, visibility and career growth. The study also found that leadership identity is defined by a continuing process of negotiating expectations in the workplace, challenging gendered preconceptions and building supportive professional relationships. The findings add to a more holistic understanding of the development of women's leadership identity in the construction industry and emphasise the importance of organisational policies supporting mentoring, networking and inclusive work conditions. The findings of this study have practical implications for organisations to enhance gender diversity and allow women leaders to perform well in the construction sector in China.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership identity has become an increasingly significant field of study in modern organisational theory, as effective leadership is often dependent on how people see themselves as well as how they are viewed by others. Women who work in the professional world dominated by men regularly face demands that tend to equate leadership with masculinity, thus making it difficult for them to achieve legitimacy and influence (Tragantzopoulou et al., 2025). Identity building has thus become a continuous activity whereby women construct their identities in relation to the experiences in the workplace and build their authority. Recognition from peers, managers and the professional network plays a major role in developing leadership self-identity. The leadership of women involves combining different elements of femininity and leadership so as to produce a good leadership identity, which is highly authentic and professional. The perceptions in the organisation become very important in relation to the development of the leadership identity. At the same time, identity negotiation helps in establishing leadership influence and authority. This becomes even more critical, especially when the leadership roles have been traditionally associated with men. With the interaction

with organisational requirements, professional accountability and social relations, it is possible for a good leadership identity to be developed and enhance leadership influence (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024).

Professional environments with high gender normative climates can determine how leadership identities are formed and enacted. The notion of leadership remains bound with the concepts of power, control and decision-making skills that are traditionally seen as typical masculine qualities within organisational contexts (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023). Thus, female leaders who aspire to take up leadership positions need to address both professional expectations and social perceptions of gender. Identification is an ongoing process of interaction between what happens at the workplace and personal interpretation of leadership. Organisational culture is essential here, as the organisational context determines participation and visibility options. Favourable organisational environments enable women to feel confident and credible. At the same time, marginalising practices may prevent identification and leadership enactment. Through mentoring relations, networks, and positive interactions at work, perceptions of being a leader are fortified, and leaders are encouraged to take part in decision-making processes. The strong leadership identity increases confidence, fosters professional involvement, and helps build a career. A study of these processes allows us to gain knowledge about the factors affecting the leadership development of women (Hopkins et al., 2021).

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

China started economic reforms in the late 20th century, which resulted in the rapid growth of its building sector. Until 1949, women were scarcely involved in any construction job, as a result of the prevalent socio-cultural attitudes that kept women away from all kinds of technical and managerial occupations (Ghanbaripour et al., 2023). After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese policy supported women's participation in the labour force in order to promote the idea that women would have an equally vital role in establishing the nation. The trend remained throughout the decades of the 1950s and 1960s and increased even further (Hershatter, 2019). The increasing need of specialists in the building sector led to higher involvement of women in the construction industry as engineers, architects, project managers and technical professionals. Despite these improvements, there remained a limited number of women in high leadership roles in the construction business. The growing attention towards diversity in the labour market and gender equality in the past two decades have encouraged organisations to increase the number of women in their professions in the construction sector (Afful et al., 2025). The encouragement of female involvement and education programs undertaken by the government demonstrates an increasing interest in women within construction careers. The growth of their career pathways is, however, influenced by organisational and workplace policies, career prospects and work experiences in the profession. In fact, the historical development of women's leadership in the Chinese construction sector is closely related to the development of Chinese socio-economic policies (Amponsah-Asante et al., 2025). Therefore, knowing the career trajectories and leadership pathways of women in the construction sector in China is critical to identifying the characteristics that facilitate or inhibit the emergence of women into leadership roles.

2. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The goal of this qualitative research project was to understand how women develop their leadership identities within male-dominated professional contexts and how women construct authority, influence and professional legitimacy across their career paths. The increased presence of women in leadership roles has brought to the fore difficulties of identity construction in professional contexts where leadership is usually immersed in masculine norms and expectations. Despite increased academic interest in women's leadership experiences, there was little knowledge about how women construct their identity as a leader, how they are recognised by others as a leader, and how they enact their leadership in male dominated contexts. The impact of workplace attitudes, organisational culture, professional connections, networking opportunities and career experiences on the formation of leadership identity was especially emphasised. The study also wanted to see how women respond to gender preconceptions, how they create credibility and build confidence as leaders. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a qualitative phenomenological method to gain rich perspectives from women in male-dominated occupations. Thematic analysis was then employed to discover essential patterns in leadership identity creation, professional recognition, and authority and leadership development.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Thaiduong (2025), the study found that career advancement was influenced by organisational support, professional networking, mentoring, work environment and personal resilience. Women leaders used relational techniques and personal resilience to increase their leadership status despite traditional attitudes and hurdles to job growth. The study underlined the

need for identity negotiation to gain visibility and authority in a male dominated organisational context. However, this study is done in the context of manufacturing and technology businesses in Vietnam, and there is not enough information about the construction business in China (Thaiduong et al., 2025). Similarly, another study by O'Brien et al. (2024), showed that mentoring, networking opportunities, visible career trajectories and inclusive workplace cultures were major contributors to increased leadership confidence and professional growth. Organisational practices experienced by women leaders included a sense of belonging, acknowledgement and leadership growth. Results indicated that workplace support and personal agency are associated with career advancement and leadership identity. The study was not confined to the building business but involved various industries. Little attention has been given to how women form leadership identities and negotiate authority in the particular cultural and organisational context of China's construction sector (O'Brien et al., 2024).

Leadership identity is developed by the interaction of personal beliefs, job requirements and social acknowledgement. Repeatedly, women met gender stereotypes that challenged the validity of their leadership and the way in which their authority was understood. Leadership identity was strengthened by professional achievements, prominence in the organisation and positive experiences at work. The findings suggested that women navigated established gender roles and leadership duties to acquire acceptability and influence in businesses. However, the study was limited to corporate settings and did not assess construction. Women working in construction companies in China have not been paid sufficient attention to their unique organisational culture, work environment and leadership experiences. Thus, a vacuum remains in knowing how women build and manage their leadership identities in a male-dominated construction workplace (FIGUEREDO & Cavazotte, 2023). Another study by Bao and Yuan (2024), explored the career experiences of Chinese female academics and examined how gendered expectations at work influence professional identity and career progression. The study showed how women were continuously negotiating professional and gender identities as they sought respect, power and career development in institutions where leadership was often equated with masculine ideals. Organisational culture, career options and social expectations affected views of leadership aptitude and professional validity. The findings showed that identity construction was a continuous process, affected by interactions and working experiences at the workplace. But the study was on higher education institutions and not on the building industry. However, the development of leadership identity among women in male-dominated occupations such as construction has been under-emphasised. There remains a gap in the ways in which women in the construction sector in China establish leadership identities and maintain authority in challenging professional circumstances (Bao & Yuan, 2024).

Hickey and Cui (2024) explored the experiences of women leaders in male-dominated fields and studied how gendered organisational practices affect leadership development. The research suggested that workplace structures, promotion procedures, leadership expectations and organisational culture all had a major impact on women's access to leadership opportunities. Implicit bias and institutional barriers were generally experienced by women that prevented their career advancement, even with the ability and qualifications. The findings also demonstrated that enhanced leadership growth and career progression were aided by more supportive organisational climates, inclusive leadership practices and professional recognition (Hickey & Cui, 2024). Also, Akanji et al. (2024) showed that women often came across occupational stereotypes and social dominance attitudes which questioned their competency and fitness to hold leadership roles. Both studies found that women used tactics of resilience, professional credibility, networking and identity management to acquire attention and influence in their workplaces. Findings show the significance of organisational environment and human response to hurdles for the development of leadership. However, both studies were based on broad male-dominated occupations and did not particularly discuss how women build leadership identities in the construction industry in China. Little emphasis has been paid to the process of how women manage power, legitimacy and leadership identity in the specific cultural and organisational setting of Chinese construction workplaces. Thus, there is a huge knowledge gap in the formation of leadership identity for women in the construction industry in China (Akanji et al., 2024).

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

- How do women construct their leadership identities in a male-dominated professional environment?

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional and qualitative research design was used to analyse to explore the leadership experiences of women in the Chinese construction industry. The primary data were collected from the women who work in the construction industry in a leadership position. Interviews were conducted in via face-to-face or virtual meetings (Zoom/WeChat Video Call). Interviews

and thematic analysis conducted over a defined period using an inductive coding approach were useful for data analysis. The data analysis used here for research was a thematic analysis, which included the assessment of underlying themes and patterns about the female leaders, capturing their perceptions, challenges, and career trajectories. This approach provided empirical evidence which intends to investigate the strategies, coping processes and resilience of women leaders, giving insights that quantitative methodologies may overlook due to their concentration on generalisability over depth. Interviews were subjected to analysis using thematic analysis by inductive coding. The process of thematic analysis was useful as it helped in the process of systematically identifying, organising, and interpreting any patterns that emerged in the interviews. The method helped in the creation of themes that addressed the experiences, issues, and opportunities that women in China's construction industry went through when developing their careers. The process of using thematic analysis helped in putting experiences together under different categories while maintaining the depth of the information provided. Moreover, the approach helped in the examination of the factors that affected leadership development, as well as the creation of insights related to women's experiences and strategies for becoming leaders in the construction industry.

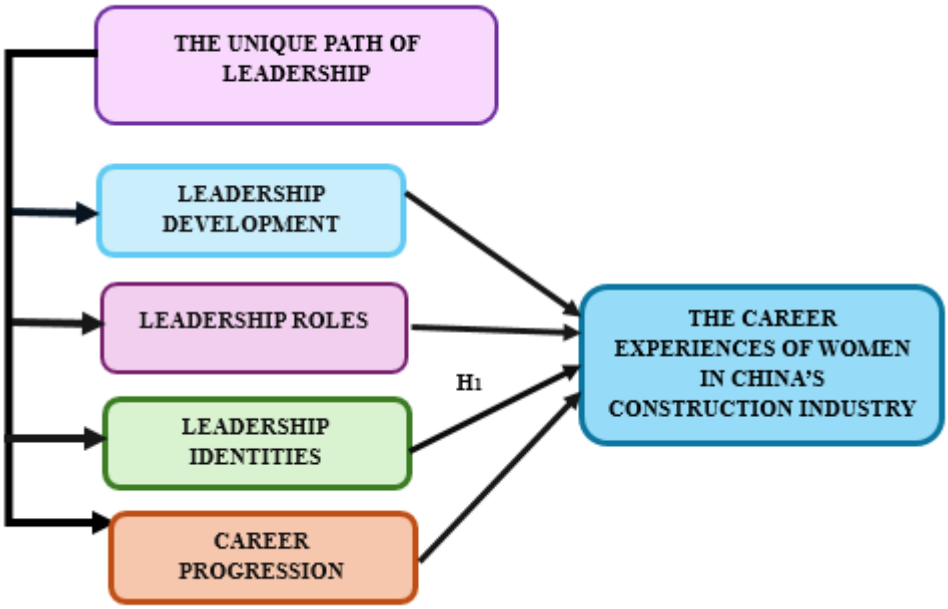
6.1 Sampling

The purposive sampling technique resulted in 387 participants being chosen for the qualitative analysis. The sample consisted of women in leadership positions who were working in the construction industry. A purposive approach was employed to ensure that participants possessed rich and relevant experiences related to leadership development, career progression, and leadership identities in the construction industry of China. This method of sampling allowed for the collection of comprehensive and relevant data so that the research objectives could be explored in-depth, within the contextual parameters of the leadership experiences of women in the Chinese construction industry.

6.3 Data and Measurement

The data collection through semi-structured interviews was conducted until the collected information became redundant or saturated. In this context, women's were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they possessed leadership experience of working in the construction industry. Further, the collected data were assessed through a thematic analysis process. In this process, after collecting the data from the interview, it was categorised following its underlying patterns. Further, the collected data were developed into themes by following an inductive coding approach. Later, this helped in a simplistic representation of information gained from the experiences and knowledge of the interview participants to develop generalised findings on the research context.

7. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



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8. RESULT

The current research explored that how women construct their leadership identities within the male-dominated construction industry in China. To ensure that the research was credible and trustworthy, four criteria were employed: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The four criteria justified using thematic analysis for interpreting the rich experience-based data collected from participants.

The credibility of this study was established by gathering relevant qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 387 intentionally chosen women from the construction industry in leadership position. The in-depth nature of the data collected from these perspectives allowed for the use of thematic analysis.

Transferability was supported through comprehensive contextual descriptions of women who work in the leadership position in construction industry. Participants were selected based on their direct experience of leadership development, career progression, and leadership identities in the construction industries of China, which enabling the identification of themes via thematic analysis.

A consistent research process was followed to ensure the dependability of the collected information via methods that include purposive sampling, structured data collection and consistent application of inductive methods. The coding during the analysis of data are examples of how the reliable documentation of the methods used throughout the process of identifying themes from qualitative data.

Confirmability was established through a focus on ensuring that findings were based solely upon the responses provided by participants and not upon the researchers' assumptions. The use of inductive methods of coding in the process of developing themes allowed for themes to be generated directly from the data. Thus, this resulting in increased objectivity of the research and consequently supporting.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Illustrative Quote (Participant's Response)
Navigating Male-Dominated Spaces	Resilience & Adaptability	I learned to be twice as prepared in meetings just to be taken seriously.
	Strategic Networking	Joining women-in-construction forums helped me connect with mentors and allies.

Theme 1: Navigating Male-Dominated Spaces

The negotiating male-dominated spaces theme includes: resilience and adaptability, and strategic networking. The theme was derived from the repeated terms and phrases in the participants' responses, such as preparedness, tenacity, adaptation, credibility, recognition, resilience, networking, mentorship, professional relationships, collaboration, support, and career growth. These domains represent the manner in which women create and validate their leadership identities in a professional environment that has been historically male-dominated.

The resilience and adaptability domain addresses the capacity to effectively manage workplace obstacles and leadership demands. Participants often talked on the need to be well prepared, knowledgeable and flexible in professional circumstances in order to get recognition and to develop credibility. Many of the participants felt that women had to show higher levels of preparedness and performance than their male counterparts in order to be taken seriously in leadership-related discussions and decision-

making processes. Women's resilience helped them break down barriers in the workplace, to be confident and continue to pursue leadership chances even when they faced prejudices and questions about their capacity to lead. Adaptability also helped with leadership identity development by assisting women to adjust to organisational expectations and negotiate difficult workplace dynamics.

Strategic networking domain was extracted from ideas of mentoring, professional networking, collaboration, connection development, industry forums, support systems and career prospects. Participants underscored the value of interacting with women-in-construction networks and professional groups for access to mentors, assistance, and leadership opportunities. Strategic networking gave access to rich resources that boosted professional confidence and leadership visibility within the sector. The participants said that these contacts were a source of encouragement, provided them with practical guidance and enabled them to benefit from the expertise of other experts.

This theme is directly relevant to the research issue as it shows the ways women develop their leadership identities in a male-dominated professional environment. Resilience and flexibility describe the internal processes by which women build confidence and leadership legitimacy, while strategic networking reflects the professional and social systems that enable recognition, authority and influence. In summary, the results suggest that the development of leadership identity for women in the Chinese construction sector is promoted by their ability to cope with the problems encountered in the workplace and the expansion of a supportive professional network that facilitates leadership development and career progression.

9. DISCUSSION

The findings from the theme of navigating male-dominated areas provide much insight into how women create their leadership identities in the Chinese construction sector. The subject stressed the need of resilience, adaptability and strategic networking in the building of women's credibility, being recognised and increasing their leadership presence in the historically male dominated professional landscape. Participants also commonly reported that overcoming workplace preconceptions and demonstrating leadership competency requires more preparation, perseverance and adaptability. These experiences indicate that leadership identity is not only formed via official leadership positions but also through continual efforts to obtain legitimacy and professional respect. The findings from the theme of navigating male-dominated areas provide much insight into how women create their leadership identities in the Chinese construction sector. The subject stressed the need of resilience, adaptability and strategic networking in the building of women's credibility, being recognised and increasing their leadership presence in the historically male dominated professional landscape. Participants also commonly reported that overcoming workplace preconceptions and demonstrating leadership competency require more preparation, perseverance and adaptability. These experiences indicate that leadership identity is not only formed via official leadership positions but also through continual efforts to obtain legitimacy and professional respect. The same research results were obtained by Figueredo and Cavazotte (2023), leadership identity is negotiated through interaction process, women have to prove their competency and earn leadership position in the work environment (Figueredo & Cavazotte, 2023). Sub-theme of strategic networking highlighted the importance of having professional network, mentoring and attending women-oriented events in their respective industries. Participants said that networking offered them counselling, support and career opportunities which improved their leadership and made them confident. These findings are supported by the results of Hickey and Cui (2024) in which networking, mentoring and professional help were identified as crucial factors for development of leadership skills of women in Architecture, Engineering and Construction industry sector (Hickey & Cui, 2024). Strategic networking is therefore the critical platform for acquiring knowledge about leadership, social support, and building professional influence of women. The study results revealed the interrelation between personal and context resources in the process of constructing leadership identities. Resilience and adaptability are the personal resources that can assist women in overcoming workplace barriers, and networking is the context resource that facilitates leadership development. Both personal and context resources are integral parts of forming leadership identity as they enable women to become visible, authoritative, and influential in their professional sphere. Altogether, the study results confirm that women construct their leadership identities by constantly adapting to workplace obstacles and using their professional networks. Such approach allows women to negotiate authority, build leadership legitimacy and achieve sustainable leadership careers in the male-dominated construction industry of China.

10. CONCLUSION

The study explored the development of leadership identity among women in male-dominated contexts in the construction sector in China. The results demonstrated that resilience, adaptability and strategic networking are important attributes that facilitate

the process of creating a leadership identity in contexts where women usually confront challenges of recognition, credibility and acceptance in the sector. Participants said continuing efforts to demonstrate competence, sustain confidence and adapt to the pressures of work strengthened their leadership identity. The findings also showed that resilience helps women to deal with problems at the workplace and to continue seeking leadership opportunities despite gender stereotypes and doubts about their leadership ability. The ability to adapt allowed women to respond successfully to changing organisational needs and to gain professional credibility in male dominated industries. This gave the participants the opportunity to grow in influence and be recognised as leaders. The study explored the development of leadership identity among women in male-dominated contexts in the construction sector in China. The results demonstrated that resilience, adaptability and strategic networking are important attributes that facilitate the process of creating a leadership identity in contexts where women usually confront challenges of recognition, credibility and acceptance in the sector. Participants said continuing efforts to demonstrate competence, sustain confidence and adapt to the pressures of work strengthened their leadership identity. The findings also showed that resilience helps women to deal with problems at the workplace and to continue seeking leadership opportunities despite gender stereotypes and doubts about their leadership ability. The ability to adapt allowed women to respond successfully to changing organisational needs and to gain professional credibility in male dominated industries. This gave the participants the opportunity to grow in influence and be recognised as leaders.

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