

Female Leaders in the Male-Dominated Industry: Is that Possible?

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Abstract

This study examines the leadership potential of professional women in Indonesia's male-dominated construction industry, addressing a critical issue: approximately 80% of female employees exit the workforce after marriage. Employing a qualitative approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling to engage 27 professional women across various sectors and hierarchical levels within the industry. Thematic analysis reveals that different stages of womanhood require tailored industry support to foster a more inclusive work environment while maintaining equal employment opportunities. A key finding highlights the crucial role of spousal support - particularly from husbands - in enabling women to sustain and advance their careers. Additionally, professional women emphasize the need for merit-based career progression, underscoring the importance of gender-neutral advancement opportunities. By addressing the unique challenges faced by women in the Indonesian construction sector, this study contributes to broader discussions on gender disparities and women's empowerment within underexplored contexts. The findings align with the Indonesian government's initiatives to strengthen women's empowerment policies in the construction industry, supporting good corporate governance and facilitating women's access to leadership positions. Beyond theoretical contributions, this research offers practical insights to promote gender inclusivity and empower professional women in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

Keywords: *Women; Empowerment; Professional; Leadership; Construction Industry.*

Introduction

For over two decades, scholars have explored various strategies to enhance women's representation in the construction industry, a sector historically dominated by men. This study builds on four key approaches identified in the literature: expanding educational opportunities, increasing workplace engagement, ensuring equitable employment access, and advocating for policies that promote women's empowerment. Despite these efforts, progress toward gender parity remains inconsistent, particularly in countries like Indonesia, where deeply rooted patriarchal norms persist.

Education has been a cornerstone of empowerment initiatives, with informal learning methods—such as training programs, internship placements (Haupt & Fester, 2012; Sertyesilisik, 2022), career development workshops (Abdullah et al., 2013), and IT training for aspiring female leaders (Weber-Lewerenz & Vasiliu-Feltes, 2022)—playing a significant role. While practical education enjoys strong institutional support, Ikiano (2019) underscores the critical role of government intervention in ensuring equitable access to formal education. Aligning with this perspective, this study examines the motivations of female students pursuing construction-related studies and their expectations for careers in Indonesia's construction sector.

Beyond education, numerous scholars have highlighted the importance of workplace empowerment. Ndinda (2009) and the Canadian Construction Sector Council (2010) emphasize the need to expand women's participation across professional roles to enhance career progression. Similarly, Ngubo & Mubangizi (2020) and Kumar et al. (2022) advocate for initiatives that support women's advancement into leadership positions within the construction sector. This study critically examines the challenges and opportunities facing professional women as they navigate leadership pathways in Indonesia's male-dominated construction industry.

A central focus of this research is the principle of merit-based, gender-neutral employment opportunities. Equal employment access has been widely recognized as a key driver of women's empowerment in construction (Sertyesilisik, 2022; Baruah, 2022; Bag & Barman, 2022). However, while various policies aim to support women's career advancement, their effectiveness is often constrained by a lack of contextualization. Thurairajah & Baldry (2010) argue that policies must be tailored to local cultural and industrial dynamics to achieve meaningful outcomes.

This study situates the issue of gender disparity in leadership within the specific socio-cultural and industrial context of Indonesia's construction sector. Women's empowerment remains a global priority, as reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (quality and inclusive education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), which emphasize education and equality as fundamental to economic development and societal well-being (Van Eerdewijk et al., 2017).

Despite global progress, women remain underrepresented in Indonesia's construction industry, where entrenched patriarchal norms continue to pose significant challenges. This study, therefore, poses a critical question: Can professional women break barriers and thrive as leaders in Indonesia's construction sector? By addressing this question, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender equality in the industry and inform actionable strategies to foster meaningful change.

Women's Empowerment Theories: A Foundational Framework

Women's empowerment has been extensively examined through various theoretical lenses, with Kabeer's (2010) framework standing as one of the most influential contributions. Kabeer defines empowerment as a strategic intervention within societal structures that enables individuals to achieve their desired outcomes. Her framework underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of social transformation, positioning the theory of change as a fundamental pillar of empowerment initiatives.

Kabeer's multidimensional perspective conceptualizes empowerment through three key dimensions of power: 'power within,' 'power to,' and 'power with.' 'Power within' emphasizes women's self-awareness and autonomy in making life choices. 'Power to' highlights the behavioural aspects that facilitate women's participation in decision-making and their ability to influence societal structures. 'Power with' underscores the significance of collective support from both genders, particularly during critical intervention stages. Additionally, Kabeer outlines five essential stages in the empowerment process: conceptualizing initiatives, translating them into actionable project designs, implementing strategies, monitoring and evaluating progress, and integrating feedback for continuous improvement.

Building on Kabeer's framework, Mosedale (2005) and Ng et al. (2022) advocate for a constructive interpretation of power, while also acknowledging the detrimental effects of 'power over,' which perpetuates gender inequality. They highlight personal reflection, cultural awareness, and societal expectations as critical components of empowerment, which can be reinforced through education (Dandona, 2015). Mosedale (2005) further emphasizes the role of women as active agents in their own empowerment.

The discourse has evolved with Lombardini et al. (2017), who introduced the Women's Empowerment Model (WEM) to promote tailored empowerment strategies. This model provides a flexible approach by identifying specific attributes and indicators of empowerment, allowing for the development of context-specific composite indices. This perspective aligns with Mosedale's (2005) assertion that empowerment is not a uniform process but rather a dynamic interaction of personal, relational, and environmental transformations.

Dimensions of Change in Women's Empowerment:

- *Personal Change:*
Personal change encompasses shifts in women's self-perception, societal roles, economic participation, and decision-making confidence. Rooted in the 'power within' principle, this transformation is facilitated by stakeholders who create an enabling environment for empowerment (Cornwall, 2016). These changes enhance women's access to resources, education, and employment opportunities, equipping them with greater autonomy over financial and educational decisions while strengthening their leadership and decision-making capacities within households and communities.
- *Relational Change:*
Relational change pertains to the evolution of interpersonal dynamics and power structures within women's social networks. It emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts among stakeholders to reshape household and community relationships in ways that foster empowerment. Transformations at this level are critical for establishing supportive social environments that enable women to navigate and challenge existing power hierarchies.
- *Environmental Change:*
Environmental change involves both informal shifts in societal norms and formal reforms within political and legislative frameworks. Sustainable women's empowerment necessitates systemic transformations, including policy interventions and active family and community engagement, to dismantle entrenched cultural and social barriers that hinder gender equality.

The Women's Empowerment Model provides a nuanced framework for analyzing empowerment across personal, relational, and environmental dimensions. Building on this model, the present study examines how professional women in Indonesia's male-dominated construction industry navigate barriers and advance into leadership roles. By applying and extending women's empowerment theory within this specific context, the research offers insights into the effectiveness of tailored empowerment strategies in fostering gender inclusivity and enabling women to thrive in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

Professional Women's Expectations in the Construction Industry

Professional women in the construction sector advocate for equal treatment, prioritizing fairness over preferential policies. Their expectations centre on equitable employment opportunities that provide meaningful responsibilities and fair compensation, as highlighted in previous studies (Bagilhole, 2005; Martin & Barnard, 2013). These aspirations reflect their

commitment to pursuing long-term career advancement (Martin & Barnard, 2013) and their dedication to continuously developing expertise and competencies within the field (Oo et al., 2020).

A recurring expectation among professional women is the presence of female leaders who serve as role models and mentors when entering the industry (Dainty et al., 1999). This aligns with Mosedale's (2005) empowerment framework, which emphasizes that women thrive professionally and personally when supported by mentorship and structured guidance. However, this expectation is multifaceted; Hayden and Wright (1976) observed that female architects and urban planners often seek flexible work arrangements, highlighting the importance of balancing career progression with family responsibilities.

This study explores the nuanced expectations of professional women regarding their participation and advancement in Indonesia's construction industry. By investigating these perspectives, the research evaluates the extent to which women can not only enter but also progress into leadership roles within this male-dominated sector.

Through this lens, the study contributes to a broader discourse on gender inclusivity in construction, offering insights into how industry stakeholders can align workplace policies and practices with the professional aspirations of women, ultimately fostering a more equitable and supportive work environment.

Regulatory Frameworks Governing the Empowerment of Professional Women in Indonesia

Indonesia has established several key legislative frameworks to promote women's empowerment and safeguard workers' rights. Law Number 13 of 2003 on Employment serves as the foundation of labour regulations, aiming to create a fair and equitable work environment. It emphasizes workforce empowerment and humane employment practices (Article 4) while mandating equal employment opportunities without gender discrimination (Articles 5 and 6). These provisions are essential for protecting female workers and ensuring their full participation in the labour market.

Complementing this, the Decree of the Minister of Manpower and Transmigration No. Kep 224/Men/2003, Article 76, requires companies to establish formal employment agreements with female workers, subject to regulatory oversight to prevent exploitation and unfair treatment (Dewi et al., 2022). These measures aim to strengthen workplace protections and uphold the rights of female employees.

Further reinforcing gender equality, Law Number 11 of 2014 on Women's Empowerment serves as a crucial legal instrument. It mandates equal access to employment opportunities, fair treatment in the workplace, and protection against discrimination. Alongside Presidential Regulation Number 65 of 2020, which formalized the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, these policies provide a comprehensive framework to promote women's advancement in the workforce.

Despite these legal protections, significant challenges to gender equality persist. The Gender Development Index (GDI) reveals ongoing disparities, with limited societal awareness of gender equality, entrenched patriarchal norms, and persistent discrimination hindering progress (Pertiwi, 2022).

Within this context, the underrepresentation of professional women in Indonesia's male-dominated construction industry remains a critical issue. This study examines the structural barriers contributing to this disparity and explores strategies to enhance women's participation and leadership in the sector. By situating its analysis within Indonesia's existing regulatory frameworks and sociocultural landscape, the research aims to provide actionable insights for fostering gender inclusivity and professional advancement in the construction industry.

Research Methodology

Interviews serve as a fundamental component of qualitative research, facilitating rapport between researchers and informants while enabling an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena. The interplay between research design, data collection, and analysis is crucial in ensuring methodological rigor. Grounded in established theoretical frameworks, this study employs a structured interview approach that prioritizes informant-centered methodologies, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. These frameworks not only inform the interview design but also guide the data analysis process, ensuring alignment with the study's overarching objectives.

Ethical considerations are embedded at every stage of the research, fostering trust and creating an environment conducive to open and candid dialogue. Semi-structured interviews, selected for their flexibility and depth, allow for the exploration of nuanced perspectives. Carefully formulated questions, such as "What are your expectations regarding the construction industry?", were designed to elicit comprehensive and meaningful responses from participants.

The data collection strategy is meticulously structured to ensure both depth and representativeness. The study employs snowball sampling, a widely recognized qualitative research technique that leverages social networks and referrals to identify relevant participants. The process began with a purposive selection of key informants who met predefined inclusion criteria. These initial participants, recognized for their professional expertise, subsequently referred additional participants who also met the selection criteria. This iterative recruitment method facilitated access to a diverse range of informants, encompassing professional women with at least an undergraduate degree, employment in various types of construction firms (State-Owned, Joint-Venture, and Public Listed), roles spanning from staff to directors, and a minimum tenure of one year (see Table 1).

To ensure analytical rigor, the study employs thematic analysis - a systematic qualitative method used to identify, analyse, and interpret recurring patterns within the dataset. This approach enables the emergence of critical insights aligned with the study's objective of examining the participation and advancement of professional women in Indonesia's construction industry.

By adopting this layered methodological approach, the study enhances the reliability and validity of its findings, offering a comprehensive examination of participants' expectations and experiences. The thematic analysis results, discussed in subsequent sections, provide a nuanced interpretation of gender dynamics within male-dominated industries and offer insights into fostering greater inclusivity and professional advancement for women in the construction sector.

Table 1.
Informant Profiles

No.	Code	Type of Construction Firm (TCF)	Tenure	Employment Level
1	PW27	PL (Public Listed)	6 years	Senior Manager in Water Treatment
2	PW28	PL	15 years	Senior Manager in Environmental Science
3	PW29	PL	1 year	Staff Quantity Surveyor
4	PW30	PL	2 years	Staff in Water Treatment
5	PW31	PL	1 year	Staff in Tenant Relations for Residential Properties
6	PW32	PL	1 year, 4 months	Staff in Tenant Relations for Industrial Properties
7	PW33	PL	3 years, 7 months	Staff in Tenant Relations for Property Management
8	PW35	JV (Joint Venture)	5 years	Staff in Business Development for Residential Properties
9	PW36	JV	7 years	Supervisor in Collections
10	PW37	JV	4 years	Staff in Accounting
11	PW38	JV	1 year	Staff in Customer Service for Residential Properties
12	PW39	JV	12 years	Staff in Customer Service for Residential Properties
13	PW40	JV	6 years	Senior Manager in Civil Engineering for Residential Properties
14	PW41	JV	2 years	Staff in Collections for Residential Properties
15	PW42	JV	13 years	Staff in Accounting
16	PW43	JV	7 years	Supervisor in Administration
17	PW45	JV	2 years	Senior Manager in Landscape for Residential Properties
18	PW47	JV	1 year	Staff in IT
19	PW48	PL	4 years	Staff in Project Health, Security, and Environment
20	PW49	PL	3 years	Architect in Project Management
21	PW50	SO (State-Owned)	9 years	Architect in Project Management
22	PW51	SO	26 years	Director of Project Architecture
23	PW52	SO	11 years	Director of Quality Control
24	PW55	SO	23 years	Director of Civil Engineering
25	PW56	SO	6 years	Director of Risk Management
26	PW57	SO	12 years	Director of Accounting
27	PW59	SO	20 years	Director of Accounting

This table presents a comprehensive overview of the informants' diverse profiles, detailing their tenure, employment levels, and the types of construction firms they represent. The distribution of participants illustrates the wide range of expertise and roles within Indonesia's construction industry, highlighting the distinct perspectives each informant contributes to this study.

Research Findings and Discussions

Women-Friendly Work Environments: A Key Factor in Participation and Retention

In-depth interviews with professional women in the construction industry reveal that a women-friendly work environment is not only a crucial motivator for entry into the sector but also a

fundamental expectation for sustained participation. Such environments enable women to balance their dual roles as professionals and caregivers, thereby fostering long-term retention. Central to this expectation are supportive policies, such as flexible working hours, which allow women to fulfill caregiving responsibilities without compromising their professional commitments.

For example, one informant, PW39, highlighted her long tenure at a construction firm, attributing her job satisfaction to the company's flexibility despite lower pay and limited career progression:

"At my workplace, there's a straightforward policy regarding lateness or absences. It allows me to prioritize my family when necessary. If my husband or children are unwell and require medical attention, I only need to inform my supervisor. Even though the salary here is lower than in other companies, I've been content working here for 12 years." (PW39)

This narrative underscores the broader trend that non-financial factors, such as work-life balance, significantly influence women's job satisfaction in the construction sector, aligning with the findings of Sangweni and Root (2015). While flexible work arrangements enhance job satisfaction, they often coexist with challenges such as limited career advancement opportunities.

Gender-Specific Provisions: Advancing Workplace Inclusivity

Senior female leaders, such as PW57 from a state-owned construction firm, emphasized the role of additional benefits in promoting women's retention in the sector. These benefits include gender-segregated accommodations, free medical services, and opportunities for relocation to urban centres with better educational facilities for children. Such provisions are essential in fostering an inclusive work environment where women can thrive, particularly in male-dominated sectors.

Despite these advancements, gender disparities persist. Professional women continue to advocate for merit-based employment opportunities and comprehensive support mechanisms throughout different life stages—from early career development to post-maternity transitions. This aligns with previous research by Bagilhole (2005) and Martin and Barnard (2013), which emphasizes the need for gender-neutral employment policies and highlights the gap between ideal workplace inclusivity and existing industry practices.

Challenging Gender Bias and Male Favouritism

A recurring theme among informants was the prevalence of gender bias and male favouritism, particularly in project assignments. One informant, PW49, an architect, recounted being overlooked for a challenging project in favour of a male colleague due to concerns about safety at remote sites - an issue that reflects the broader tendency to undervalue women's professional capabilities despite their qualifications and expertise.

Instances of hiring discrimination were also reported. For example, PW45 described a delayed job offer despite meeting all qualifications, as the company initially prioritized male candidates. Conversely, PW30 acknowledged that specific roles might be more suitable for men, particularly those requiring significant physical exertion or involving high-risk conditions. This

nuanced perspective highlights the complexity of gender expectations in the construction industry - where women seek equal opportunities while recognizing the practical considerations of certain roles.

Emerging Insights: Addressing Overlooked Challenges

A key contribution of this study is its examination of previously unaddressed challenges, particularly those faced by pregnant women in the construction sector. Informants like PW50 highlighted the lack of support from spouses and families, revealing the emotional and logistical difficulties of balancing pregnancy with career aspirations. Notably, PW50 expressed a desire for independent marriage counselling, underscoring the need for external support systems that facilitate women's career progression in male-dominated fields.

Additionally, PW56 provided insight into the reluctance of some women to accept remote postings, despite the additional benefits offered by employers. Her preference for office-based roles stemmed from concerns about the impact of remote work on family life, particularly for women with partners in different industries. This finding adds a new dimension to discussions on workplace flexibility, suggesting that professional women's location preferences are shaped by broader family dynamics rather than solely by employer policies.

By shedding light on these underexplored challenges, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's participation, retention, and advancement in the construction industry. It highlights the critical need for policy adaptations that address both systemic barriers and the diverse personal and professional aspirations of women in this sector.

Family Support: A Critical Enabler for Women in the Construction Industry

This study examines the pivotal role of family support in facilitating the careers of professional women in the Indonesian construction industry, particularly in balancing their dual responsibilities as professionals and caregivers. As Mosedale (2005) highlights, acknowledging and addressing the complexities of women's roles is essential for fostering their empowerment. The findings indicate that many professional women in this sector rely significantly on support from their husbands or parents to navigate these responsibilities effectively.

Informants with young children (e.g., PW52, PW55) emphasized the necessity of familial assistance, often preferring childcare arrangements that involve supervision by parents or husbands, rather than daycare services. These women underscored the importance of shared parenting responsibilities, particularly their husbands' active involvement, as a crucial factor in their job satisfaction and overall well-being. For many, family obligations take precedence over professional aspirations, aligning with PW35's perspective and mirroring the findings of Hussein (2017) regarding women in Bangladesh. Furthermore, Indonesia's collectivist cultural values and societal expectations, which prioritize family responsibilities and obedience to husbands, present significant challenges to women's empowerment in the workplace (Riantoputra & Gatari, 2017). One informant expressed this sentiment:

"I strive to fulfill the role of a devoted wife, as dictated by my cultural and religious beliefs. While sacrificing my career ambitions may be acceptable, ensuring my children's well-being and upbringing remains my top priority."
(PW35)

This statement underscores the profound influence of cultural norms on women's career decisions, shaping their professional trajectories and personal commitments.

Additionally, the study identifies several industry-specific challenges, including extended working hours, night shifts, and safety concerns in remote project locations. Informants such as PW27 described the constant demands of their roles, requiring them to be available 24/7 to address unforeseen issues, often leveraging technology to manage workloads remotely. Safety concerns are particularly pronounced for unmarried women, with parents expressing heightened apprehensions regarding late-night commutes and work-related travel. As one informant noted:

"My parents always worry when I come home late at night. They frequently question my safety and express concerns about the risks associated with working late shifts." (PW51)

These safety concerns, compounded by the prevalence of crime in certain areas, contribute to increased family scrutiny over women's participation in the construction industry, further reinforcing societal limitations on their professional engagement.

The findings highlight the indispensable role of familial support - particularly from parents and spouses - in helping women navigate the competing demands of work and family. This insight advances the discourse on women's empowerment in the Indonesian construction sector, illustrating how family dynamics influence career sustainability in male-dominated industries (Tijani et al., 2020). By shedding light on these interdependencies, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the structural and cultural barriers shaping women's experiences in the workforce.

Bridging the Gap: Equal Opportunities and Family Support

Informants emphasized the need for a comprehensive support system within the construction industry that caters to women's evolving professional and personal needs. One key recommendation was the establishment of employer-provided childcare facilities - an initiative highlighted by PW59 as essential for enhancing women's retention and work-life balance. Her suggestion that construction firms integrate high-quality, on-site childcare services underscores a critical gap in current industry practices.

Beyond equitable employment opportunities, many women stressed the importance of targeted support in leadership development, career progression, and family-friendly workplace policies. PW27 reflected on the factors that have enabled her to navigate career challenges, highlighting skill acquisition, passion for the profession, work-life balance, and technological adaptation as critical to sustaining long-term success in the construction industry.

These findings reinforce the necessity of institutional reforms that not only promote gender equality in hiring and promotions but also recognize and address the intersection of work and family responsibilities. By fostering an inclusive and supportive work environment, the construction industry can better retain skilled female professionals, ultimately contributing to a more diverse and sustainable workforce.

Conclusion

This study offers a transformative perspective on the experiences of professional women in Indonesia's construction industry, emphasizing their potential to attain leadership roles despite the sector's entrenched male dominance and the broader patriarchal societal framework. The findings identify two critical enablers of women's empowerment in this field: institutional support within the construction industry and spousal support. These factors highlight the tangible and achievable pathways for female leadership in a traditionally male-dominated sector, providing fresh insights into overcoming systemic barriers.

First, fostering a women-friendly work environment within the Indonesian construction industry is essential to ensuring equitable career opportunities. This involves implementing gender-neutral, merit-based hiring practices and providing equal access to career advancement. These insights hold significant practical implications, offering a strategic framework for construction firms to adopt corporate governance practices that advance gender equality. Such efforts align with Indonesia's legal framework, including Law Number 13 of 2003, Law Number 11 of 2014, and Presidential Regulation Number 65 of 2020, reinforcing national commitments to gender equity in the workplace.

Equally important is the role of spousal support in redistributing caregiving responsibilities, a necessary shift to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles within households. In a societal context where caregiving is predominantly viewed as a woman's duty, this research advocates for a paradigm shift in domestic responsibilities, ensuring that women can pursue professional growth without being disproportionately burdened by caregiving duties. The active involvement of spouses in balancing work and family commitments emerges as a key strategy for facilitating women's career progression and leadership in the construction sector.

By addressing both institutional and familial dimensions of empowerment, this study makes a novel contribution to the discourse on gender equity in male-dominated industries. It not only fills a critical gap in the literature on women's participation in Indonesia's construction sector but also provides a foundation for future research and policy initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive, supportive, and gender-equitable work environments. These insights can serve as a catalyst for broader industry reforms, paving the way for a more diverse and sustainable workforce in Indonesia and beyond.

Recommendations

This study underscores the need for further research into transformative strategies that empower women in male-dominated industries, particularly within the construction sector. Gender disparity in this field is not merely a localized issue but a global challenge requiring urgent attention and innovative solutions from scholars, industry leaders, and policymakers.

Building on this study's findings, the Indonesian construction industry - and similar sectors worldwide - must prioritize progressive corporate governance practices that actively promote gender inclusivity. A key step is fostering meritocratic workplaces where career advancement is based on skills and performance rather than gender. Additionally, tailored support systems should be developed to address the distinct challenges faced by professional women, particularly those managing both career and caregiving responsibilities. These initiatives could include independent marriage counselling services, flexible work arrangements, and access to clean, well-equipped breastfeeding and childcare facilities. Such measures are critical to ensuring women's professional advancement while maintaining their overall well-being.

Furthermore, this study highlights an often-overlooked factor: the crucial role of spousal support in enabling women's career progression. For women to succeed in leadership roles within the construction industry, there must be a cultural shift toward shared domestic responsibilities, particularly in societies with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Encouraging active participation from husbands in caregiving duties is essential in creating an environment where women can pursue professional growth without being disproportionately burdened by family obligations.

By integrating these recommendations into industry practices and societal norms, stakeholders can contribute to dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable workforce.

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