

# Challenging Gendered Boundaries: Women's Experiences and Equal Opportunity in Male-Dominated Engineering-Oriented Sectors in China and Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

This study aims to compare people's perceptions of female underrepresentation in male-dominated engineering-oriented sectors across China and Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on how socio-cultural norms and industry structures shape access to equal opportunity. Adopting an interpretivist qualitative design, the research draws on in-depth interviews conducted in China's engineering and heavy industry context and Sri Lanka's engineering sector, enabling a comparative analysis of gendered experiences within technical and operational environments. The findings reveal that, despite contextual differences, both countries exhibit similar patterns of gender inequality, where engineering-related work is constructed as physically demanding and culturally masculine, limiting women's participation in technical, operational, and leadership roles. In China, women are often channelled into administrative positions due to assumptions about physical suitability and protective attitudes, whereas in Sri Lanka, institutional constraints, gender-segregated labour pathways, and socio-cultural expectations reinforce a persistent glass ceiling. Across both contexts, family responsibilities and traditional gender roles further constrain career progression, although women increasingly challenge these barriers through professional competence and support networks. The study contributes to the literature by offering a cross-national comparison of perceptions in male-dominated engineering-oriented sectors, highlighting how shared cultural and structural mechanisms undermine equal opportunity while calling for integrated organisational and societal interventions to address female underrepresentation in both China and Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** career development; cultural norms; gender inequality; labour market segmentation; qualitative research