



Perception of Success Factors of Women in Leadership Roles: An Exploratory Study of Gender and Glass Ceiling in China

Hongmei Han, Ph.D.

Professor, Institute of Disaster Prevention, Sanhe City, Hebei Province, China

Mengdi Liu, Ph.D. Candidate

Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Keith Miller, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, USA

Phylis Lan Lin, Ph.D.

Emerita Professor, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, USA

Abstract

Background: This study explores the enduring issue of the glass ceiling in China—a metaphor for the invisible barriers that hinder women’s career advancement. Despite progress in gender equality, a significant gap remains in leadership representation. **Objectives:** The research investigates how individual, organizational, and socio-cultural factors influence perceptions of the glass ceiling among 548 professional women across various industries and job titles. **Methods/Approach:** The study employs a comprehensive analytical framework to examine perceptions through the lens of personal attributes, workplace dynamics, and sociocultural norms. It compares responses between women in leadership roles and those who are not, highlighting differences in their experiences and viewpoints. **Results:** The findings emphasize the empowering role of individual traits, such as strong networking, self-efficacy, and work-life balance skills. Organizational factors—primarily support systems and belief in women’s advancement—are pivotal. Sociocultural influences, including gender role expectations, also shape perceptions. Women in leadership positions view organizational factors as more critical to career progression than individual or cultural ones. The study identifies six essential skills for women aspiring to leadership, offering practical strategies for advancement. **Conclusions:** The research highlights the multifaceted nature of the glass ceiling and provides a strategic framework for women seeking to overcome it. By contrasting the paths of those who have attained leadership with those still facing barriers, the study provides insights into workplace gender dynamics in contemporary Chinese society. It contributes to the broader pursuit of gender equity.

Keywords: Barriers to Leadership, Success Factors in Leadership, Sociocultural Factors, Organizational Factors, Individual Factors, Gender Roles, Glass Ceiling, Leadership Positions, Leadership Development

Paper type: Research article

Introduction

Women, who make up more than half of most societies, have made significant strides in social and professional life. According to the 2023 World Gender Gap Report, women have been (re-) entering the workforce slightly higher than men, resulting in a modest recovery from the 2022 low (World Economic Forum, 2023). Social and economic developments have encouraged the expansion of women's roles in social and professional life. Today, women are not just potential but significant contributors to the scientific, educational, social, and cultural development of most countries. Their work experience, particularly regarding gender issues related to inclusiveness, diversity, and equality, especially in the promotion process to leadership roles, highlights progress. However, despite these advancements, the glass ceiling persists, an issue that deserves special attention (Ajewumi, 2025; Appelbaum et al., 2019; Ellingrud et al., 2025). The glass ceiling, a metaphor for the intangible barriers that hinder women's career progression and leadership positions in organizations, is an ongoing and global issue that women have experienced in the past and present. The issues and perceptions of the glass ceiling in the American workplace and other Western societies have been widely discussed over the last few decades (Catalyst, 2022; Deane et al., 2015). However, empirical studies of barriers to women in leadership positions in government and corporations in China are scarce.

The present study employed a comprehensive framework to investigate the individual, organizational, and sociocultural factors that shape the perception of the glass ceiling among a diverse sample of 548 professional women across various industries and job titles in China. The study examined how Chinese professional women broke the glass ceiling and identified the factors that contributed to the barriers they faced in doing so. Three pertinent factors were analyzed: structural, cultural, and organizational barriers that prevent Chinese women from achieving senior and leadership positions in different industries and geographic areas in China. The findings underscore the empowering role of individual attributes such as robust networking, self-efficacy, and work-life balance competence in overcoming the glass ceiling. Organizational factors, including support systems and the organization's commitment to women's advancement, are also crucial. Sociocultural factors such as gender role perceptions further mold the reality of the glass ceiling. This study distinguishes between the experiences of women in leadership positions and those who are not, confirming differences in their perceptions of the glass ceiling. Organizational factors are deemed more influential for career progression than individual or sociocultural factors by those in leadership roles. The research also identifies six critical skills for women aspiring to leadership positions. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the glass ceiling and provide a strategic guide for women seeking to shatter it. By comparing the trajectories of those who have achieved some degree of success and those who continue to encounter obstacles, this research offers insights into the glass ceiling in contemporary Chinese society, laying the groundwork for progress toward greater gender equality in the workplace.

Definitions

The following definitions were used for essential terms in this study:

- **Career/Professional women:** Successful career women are those who have achieved reasonable financial stability while also enjoying their work. However,

it goes beyond just financial stability. They are people who are happy and fulfilled with their lives, both professionally and personally.

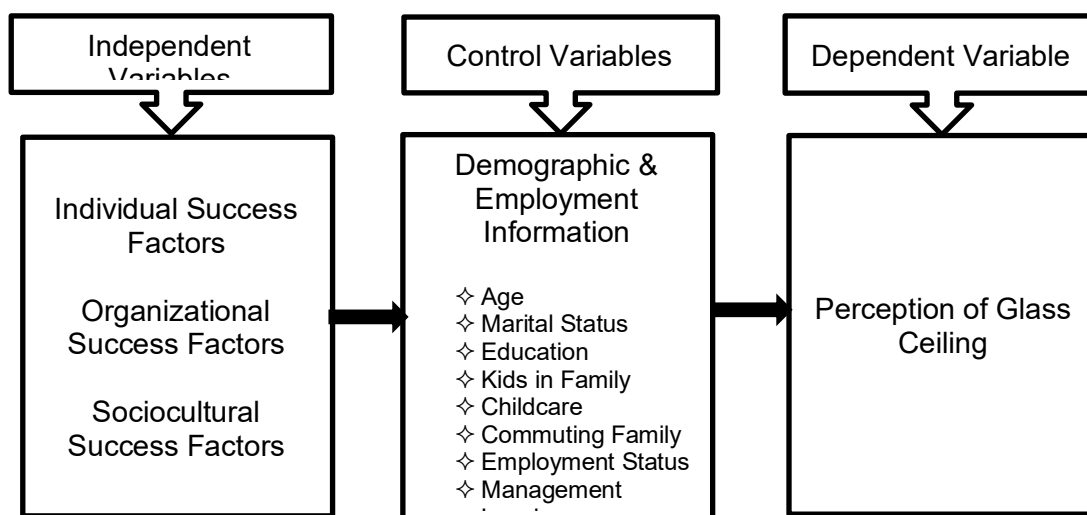
- Gender roles: Gender roles are standards denoting the behaviours (ascribed social roles and status), activities, and positions considered suitable for each gender in both Western and Eastern societies (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019; Saleem et al., 2017). Gender roles and gender biases are social constructs unique to different cultures assigned to individuals when their sex is identified.
- Glass ceiling: An invisible barrier hindering women and minorities from progressing to leadership or managerial positions within an organization or industry (Bloch et al., 2021; Citil, 2022; Hull & Umansku, 1997; Maume, 1999). The term initially and primarily refers to women and individuals from other historically underrepresented groups who are often held back by deeply ingrained cultural biases within organizations.
- Glass Ceiling Commission: In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor defined glass ceiling as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions.” (Report on the Glass Ceiling Initiative. U.S. Department of Labor, 1991. Available in the Catherwood Library at HD 4903.5 U6 U585.) The department’s Glass Ceiling Commission (1991-1996) studied these barriers not only as they apply to women but also to minorities (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1991-1996). The final report of the Glass Ceiling Commission was issued in November 1995. Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 created the 21-member, bipartisan Federal Glass Ceiling Commission.
- Leadership position: An individual filling a senior or top-level management position in an organization or company. The term is synonymous with executives, senior leadership, and/or leadership and managerial positions.
- Work-life balance: Balancing the demands of work with the responsibilities of home requires compromises in both areas (Lee & Koo, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework guided the research design based on the literature review.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



This study proposes three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a descriptive difference in the perception of the glass ceiling between individuals in leadership positions and those who are not.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Success factors (individual, organizational, and sociocultural) predict respondents' perceptions of women's glass ceilings in their workplaces.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Those in leadership positions consider *organizational* factors more salient than individual or sociocultural ones for career women to break the glass ceiling.

This study aims to shed light on these issues and pave the way for a more equitable future.

Literature Review

The term “glass ceiling” exemplifies the barriers and challenges women have met in their quest to become leaders in senior management roles in the corporate world (Bloch 2021 et al.; Citil, 2022; De Neve et al., 2023; Field et al., 2023; Glass & Cook, 2016; John, 2013; Punnett, 2016; Sandeep et al., 2023). The “glass ceiling” also refers to an invisible upper limit in corporations and other organizations, above which it is difficult or impossible for women to rise in the ranks. It is not an explicit practice of discriminating against women, although specific policies, procedures, and attitudes may inadvertently create this barrier without the intention to do so. In 1978, as a panellist at the Women's Exposition in New York, Marilyn Loden coined the term “glass ceiling” to describe the invisible barriers that women face when aspiring to advance to prominent leadership levels within their career fields (Melamed, 1995). This metaphor represents the invisible barriers that hinder not only women but also other highly qualified minorities in their career progression and access to positions of higher authority within organizations (Hideg & Krstic, 2021; Hideg & Wilson, 2020; Saleem et al., 2017). Studies acknowledge that the advancement of women is hindered by patriarchal social norms, organizational policies and cultures, and collective structures (Williams, 2021).

Several multidimensional studies have revealed that women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across various fields, including business, finance, marketing, psychology, higher education, healthcare, banking, and law, compared to men (Martínez-Fierro & Sancho, 2021). The most recent data showed that the share of women in senior management is increasing. In 2021, the proportion of women in senior management globally grew to 31%, the highest number ever recorded. As of 2021, ninety percent of companies worldwide have at least one woman in a senior management role (Grant Thornton International, 2021).

However, recent studies have persistently indicated the unyielding presence of the glass ceiling. A McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org report (Field et al, 2023) reveals that women possess an 18 percent lower probability of promotion than their male counterparts. Geographical disparities in the proportion of women in senior management were noted in 2021, with figures varying across regions (Catalyst, 2022). In Europe, a meagre 23.3 percent of board members and 5.1 percent of CEOs in major publicly listed companies are women, despite their 45 percent share of the labor force (European Union, 2016). As *The Wall Street Journal* reported, the number of female CEOs among Fortune 500 companies declined to 5.4% (27 out of 500) in 2017

(Zuckerman Law Group, 2017). This statistic alone helps illustrate the presence of glass ceiling/promotion discrimination within corporate America. However, certain Asia-Pacific countries, such as Japan (15%), India (10%), and Pakistan (4%), exhibit alarmingly low female representation in management. Workplace inequality is evident in Zimbabwe, as seen in the legal profession (Maunganidze et al., 2021). The glass ceiling, deeply rooted in gender discrimination and other factors, has historically restricted women's access to leadership across sectors and countries. It not only reflects gender discrimination but also embodies the challenges women face in attaining leadership roles. Therefore, further research and proactive measures are needed to address this complex and persistent issue.

Barriers to the Leadership Position in the Workplace

Based on Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the U.S. Congress enacted the *Glass Ceiling Act*, establishing the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, a 21-member, bipartisan commission to study the barriers to the advancement of minorities and women within corporate hierarchies (US Department of Labor, Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The commission aimed to study barriers that have prevented women from achieving higher managerial and executive positions in organizations. It included four categories: (1) how businesses fill management and decision-making positions; (2) the developmental and skill-enhancing practices used to foster the necessary qualifications for advancement into such positions; (3) the compensation programs and reward structures currently utilized in the workplace; and (4) the creation of an annual award for excellence in promoting a more diverse skilled workforce at the management and decision-making levels in business. The commission reported societal, governmental, internal business, and business structural barriers to the success of women and minorities in reaching the top echelons held by men (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The Commission's mandate was to study the glass ceiling barriers to the advancement of minorities and women within corporate hierarchies, issue a report on its findings and conclusions, and recommend ways to dismantle it. Societal barriers to opportunity and attainment include gender and race bias and cultural factors.

It is evident that women disproportionately need to attain leadership positions but continue to remain underrepresented at senior management levels in Asia, Europe, and North America (Field et al., 2023). Based on (1) economic participation and opportunity, (2) educational attainment, (3) health and survival, and (4) political empowerment, the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 (pp. 10-12) stated:

The 2023 Global Gender Gap Index showed that no country has yet achieved full gender parity. However, the top nine countries (Iceland, Norway, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Germany, Nicaragua, Namibia, and Lithuania) have closed at least 80% of their gap. For the 146 countries covered in the 2023 index, the Health and Survival gender gap has closed by 96%, the Educational Attainment gap by 95.2%, the Economic Participation and Opportunity gap by 60.1%, and the Political Empowerment gap by 22.1%.

Women's advancement into the upper echelons of business management, government, and academia continues to attract attention and provoke ongoing debate. Yet, across different regions, gender disparities remain evident in persistent pay gaps, unequal opportunities for career advancement, and the underrepresentation of women

in leadership roles (Ellingrud et al., 2025). The glass ceiling continues to shape women's professional experiences by reinforcing these inequities. For example, women consistently report lower levels of job satisfaction and encounter disadvantages in areas such as work-life quality and organizational socialization. According to Fernando et al. (2020), the incorporation of distinct female perspectives and leadership styles can equip gender-diverse top management teams with a managerial capability advantage over equally talented yet homogeneous male teams. This link between gender diversity and organizational capability is expected to be more pronounced during times of crisis. Moreover, researchers have also analyzed the motives of women entrepreneurs in sustaining their businesses (Rey-Marti et al., 2015). It is also implied through their research that women who pursue a better work-life balance are less likely to succeed in their professional lives. On the positive side, studies have shown that companies with the best records for promoting women outperform their competitors on every measure of profitability (Field et al., 2023). In addition, a few studies showed that when all leadership contexts are considered, men and women do not differ in perceived leadership effectiveness; in many cases, companies that are best able to hire and maintain a diverse workforce are expected to outperform those who do not (Glass & Cook, 2016; Offermann & Foley, 2020; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017; Zadoorian, 2018). The government, employers, leaders in every organization, academic institutions, society in general, and women are essential players in breaking down barriers that hold women back. Gender diversity challenges (and therefore opportunities) are global ones.

In short, barriers for women to assume leadership and managerial positions in organizations can be grouped into individual, organizational, and sociocultural factors (Cohen et al., 2018; Fry et al., 2023; Kaur & Mittal, 2022; Manzi & Heilman, 2021; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2023), consisting of gender bias, unequal access to development opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making networks among others. Women continue to face lower job satisfaction, limited career advancement opportunities, and challenges in balancing work and family life.

Individual Factors in Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Despite extensive legislation outlawing gender-based discrimination, is the glass ceiling a reality or a myth? What are the perceptions of gender inequality in the workplace? What are the gender limitations in workplace promotion? What are the perceptions of women in the leadership role of their success stories of moving to the higher echelon in the corporate hierarchy or to the full-professor rank and administrative roles, e.g., president and provost positions? Breaking the glass ceiling is a complex process that requires action on multiple fronts. What are the success factors of those who have achieved leadership and managerial positions? The research found that the following were the most significant components that best described individual factors that may help women be successful while climbing the career ladder: (1) training; (2) mentoring and coaching; (3) networking; (4) ability to balance careers in leadership and their personal life; (5) organizational policies and practices that assist women; (6) leadership capacity; (7) ability to remember one's self-worth and confidence; (8) motivation and opportunities; and (9) fair hiring and promotion processes (Richards, 2017).

Organizational research suggests that female leaders bring a unique constellation of leadership-related traits, attributes, and behaviours to the workplace that may provide

advantages to their organizations. Organizations, managers, and individual women must make a joint effort to get more women into leadership roles (England et al., 2020; Fry et al., 2023; Hideg & Krstic, 2021; Paustian-Underdahl, 2014; UN Women, 2025).

Professional Women and the Glass Ceiling in China

Family status affects women's career mobility in China and other modern urbanized societies (Bächmann & Gatermann, 2017; He & Wu, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2023; Moore, et al., 2023; Shen & Jiang, 2020; Sung, 2023; Wang & Yang, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022; Zhou, 2015). In 2012, China issued the *Regulations on Labor Protection for Female Workers and Employees*, which, for the first time, enshrined the right to maternity leave for female workers in China (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2012). In 2016, the Chinese government implemented a two-children policy. However, the institutional and family systems have not provided sufficient support for career women in advancing their opportunities (Shen & Jiang, 2020). Moreover, Chinese working women in their traditional patriarchal society are adversely affected by marriage and having dependent children. It is harder for working mothers to maintain a family-work balance due to traditional gender role expectations. They are more likely than men to experience involuntary job exit to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers; thus, motherhood has hindered the career mobility of working mothers (He & Wu, 2021).

According to CGTN (China Global Television Network, 2019), the implicit bias that denies women equal opportunities still exists in the work world in China. For example, it is not uncommon to see companies in banking and many industries list "male-only" in their job advertisements. The latest breakthrough occurred in 2019, when China issued a notice banning employers from inquiring about female applicants' marital and childbearing status. However, no empirical studies were found to support the evidence that companies have fully or partially followed the government's guidelines.

Since China's social and economic reforms in the 1980s, the number of women who have received formal education and attended higher education institutions has significantly increased. Official figures from 2017 showed that female undergraduate students outnumbered male students for nine consecutive years. Women also pursue careers in traditionally male-dominated fields, including science, technology, engineering, and math. Voyles (2014) reported that family pressures and workplace biases mean that women in China have only a one-in-15 chance of reaching the highest management levels in a company. Bain & Company, as cited in Han et al. (2023), recently reported that despite high workforce participation, fewer women advance to the executive level in China than in other countries. The study identified four barriers that prevent women from becoming executives: family responsibilities, hesitation, lack of sponsorship, and unconscious biases. This report examined publicly available data on 486 companies operating in China, including those on the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and U.S. companies, as well as multinational organizations with business operations in the Chinese mainland. The researchers surveyed over 30 female Chinese executives and conducted interviews with approximately a dozen female executives and scholars. The study concludes that "China needs more women in executive leadership" (Han et al., 2023, p. 1). Although gender equality at work is gaining popularity in various mass media discussions and special reports, empirical studies are scarce regarding the constellations and interplay of individual, organizational, and sociocultural factors.

The current study examines the potential impediments faced by women seeking to break through the glass ceiling, drawing on the work and life experiences of women who have achieved leadership and management positions versus those who have not. In Chinese culture, women are often expected to be polite, submissive, accommodating, nurturing, and faithful in pursuing family caretaking roles. So, despite their career aspirations, women continue to shoulder the brunt of household chores. Juggling these family responsibilities often stresses women as they attempt to rise to the corporate ranks, competing for jobs with men who do not meet those expectations. According to Field et al. (2023), 18 percent of women in the US are mistaken for more junior workers, and this percentage showed no improvement between 2019 and 2024. These biases make it more challenging for women to attain and succeed in positions of power. Therefore, the research question is: What are the experiences and perceptions of working women regarding their encounters with the glass ceiling in contemporary China?

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, and procedure employed in the study.

Research Design

This quantitative study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate working women's experiences and perceptions regarding their encounters with the glass ceiling and the success factors for women breaking through it in contemporary China. An online survey was conducted through the Wenjuanxing Platform, and a nationwide sample of 548 working women participated in the research.

Participants

The study's sampling frame was a nationwide internet survey targeting a randomly selected respondent cohort. The final 548 survey participants were working women representing over 20 industries and 250 occupational titles across 22 provinces, four autonomous regions, and three municipalities in China. Tables 1 and 2 show detailed information about the participants.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=548)

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	0	0
	Female	548	100
	Other	0	0
Age	20-24	28	5.1
	25-34	147	26.8

	35-44	264	48.2
	45-54	80	14.6
	55-64	28	5.1
	> 65	1	0.2
Marital Status	Single	84	15.3
	Married	446	81.4
	Divorced	12	2.2
	Separated	2	0.4
	Engaged	3	0.5
	Widow	1	0.2
Number of Children	0	113	20.6
	1	353	64.4
	2-3	81	14.8
	> 3	1	0.2
Childcare	None	150	27.4
	1	342	62.4
	2-3	56	10.2
Commuting Family	Yes	122	22.3
	No	423	77.2
	Other	3	0.5
Employment Status	Full-time	522	95.3
	Part-time	14	2.6
	Contract/Temporary	6	1.1
	Unemployed	3	0.5
	Other	3	0.5
Management Level	Clerk	333	60.8
	Middle Management	144	26.3

	Executive Management	19	3.5
	Senior Management	41	7.5
	Other	11	2
Leadership Position	Yes	244	44.5
	No	304	55.5
Years at Work	< 1	5	0.9
	1-5	181	33
	6-10	192	35
	> 10	170	31
Education	Secondary School/Ordinary Level	2	0.4
	High School/Advanced Level	15	2.7
	College diploma	56	10.2
	Bachelor's degree	397	72.4
	Post-graduate degree	78	14.2

Table 1 shows that nearly half of the respondents fall into the **35-44** age category (48.2%), followed by those aged **25-34** (26.8%). These women are predominantly **married** (81.4%), with a smaller portion identifying as **single** (15.3%) or in other marital categories, such as **divorced** (2.2%) or **separated** (0.4%). Regarding family structure, 64.4% have **one child**, **20.6%** have no children, and the remainder have **two or more** children. For childcare, **62.4%** have one child that needs care, **27.4%** have no childcare needs, and **10.2%** must look after two or three children.

Employment data indicate that **95.3%** of respondents work **full-time**, with a small proportion working **part-time** (2.6%) or on **contract/temporary** terms (1.1%). Regarding the management level, most respondents are at the **clerk level** (60.8%), while **26.3%** occupy **middle management** positions, and a smaller fraction are in **senior or executive management** roles. Leadership roles are relatively evenly distributed, with **44.5%** of individuals holding leadership positions and **55.5%** not holding such roles.

Regarding work experience, 35% of participants have 6–10 years of professional experience, 33% have 1–5 years, and 31% have over 10 years of experience. Only a tiny proportion (0.9%) have worked for less than one year. Education levels are notably high, with 72.4% of respondents holding a bachelor's degree and 14.2% completing postgraduate studies. The remainder possess a college diploma (10.2%) or a high school education (2.7%).

Table 2

Industrial Sections of the Samples (N=548)

Industrial Section	No. of Samples
Professional, scientific, and technical activities	173
Administrative and support service activities	115
Education	49
Wholesale and retail trade; Repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	42
Information and communication	37
Manufacturing	17
Accommodation and food service activities	17
Financial and insurance activities	17
Human health and social work activities	14
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	12
Construction	4
Real estate activities	3
Other services	3
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	2
Transportation and storage	2
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	1
N/A	40
Total	548

Table 2 reveals that the occupations of career women are distributed across various industries, as classified by the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC). The largest groups work in professional, scientific, and technical activities (173), followed by administrative and support services (115) and education (49). Other notable sectors include wholesale and retail trade (42), information and communication (37), manufacturing, accommodation and food services, and financial activities (17 each). Fewer women are represented in health and social work (14),

public administration and defence (12), and construction (4). A smaller number are involved in real estate (3), other services (3), agriculture (2), transportation (2), and arts (1). There are also 40 cases where occupation data are unavailable.

Additionally, there is an open-ended question regarding participants' job titles. The data reveal that the participants reported 252 job titles, with 244 (96.4%) indicating leadership responsibilities and 8 (3.2%) without. The leadership roles are predominantly managerial and supervisory, encompassing positions such as manager, director, and supervisor. These span diverse sectors, including finance, education, and administration. Some entrepreneurial roles, such as founder and CEO, are also represented. In contrast, participants without leadership roles occupy a more comprehensive range of operational or specialized roles, such as accountant, nurse, salesperson, programmer, and product designer. Common positions, such as clerk and ordinary employee, also appear frequently, suggesting a concentration in support or junior-level functions.

Instrument

The data was collected using a research-developed, self-administered survey. The survey included informed consent statements for the study, procedure, benefits, conflict of interest, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information. The main body of the survey consists of four sections: (1) demographic and employment information; (2) perception of success factors for women in leadership roles; (3) perceptions of the glass ceiling and work experience; and (4) selections for the critical skills or efforts for women to assume leadership roles in the organization.

For this study, the primary constructs examined are Success Factors and Perceptions of the Glass Ceiling, each differentiated into individual, organizational, and sociocultural dimensions. Success Factors are used to evaluate what traits, characteristics, and contexts promote female success within an organization. The construct Perceptions of Glass Ceiling assesses respondents' views and experiences regarding gender-based barriers in professional advancement. Higher scores in this construct reflect stronger perceptions of obstacles related to gender, age, family obligations, and organizational culture that hinder women's career advancement. All items in the construction were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating agreement with item statements and lower scores representing disagreement with the statement. The meaning of higher and lower scores for each construct and its dimensions is detailed in the subsequent sections.

Success Factors

Individual

The *individual* dimension focuses on personal attributes, beliefs, and skills contributing to leadership attainment. Items assess self-efficacy, confidence, and the ability to balance priorities. For instance, statements like "I am confident that I will be promoted in my organization" and "I can set my priorities in life" demonstrate personal agency and life-management skills. Notably, these items are self-assessed, capturing personal beliefs, perceptions, and experiences in leadership roles. The authors hypothesize that higher scores for these items represent more positive, confident, and optimistic views of one's opportunity and ability to demonstrate leadership capabilities.

Organizational

The *organizational* dimension represents perceptions of workplace support. This includes mentorship, supervisory support, feedback, and retention of talented women. For example, items such as “My male supervisor actively supports me at work” and “I have received helpful feedback and support from my superiors” reflect the role of supportive relationships. Further items, such as “My company has made efforts to keep talented women,” emphasize organizational commitment to promoting gender equity. Higher scores for this dimension indicate that respondents perceive excellent organizational support.

Sociocultural

The *sociocultural* dimension reflects the respondent's perception of the broader societal attitudes and cultural support that impact women's success in and towards leadership roles. Items include “Society is on the right track for changes for gender equality” and “I believe the situation (gender equality) at work will continue to improve in my country.” These items assess the perceived progress and cultural context surrounding gender roles in society and work. Higher scores on these items intuitively represent a more progressive and positive outlook on women's roles in the workforce.

Perceptions of the Glass Ceiling

Individual

In the *individual* dimension, perceptions of the glass ceiling reflect personal beliefs and experiences related to self-confidence, career progression, and internalized limitations due to gender or family responsibilities. Items such as “Lack of self-confidence makes it difficult to let others know my ability” capture the role of self-perception in navigating advancement. Additionally, experiences of discrimination or interruptions in career due to family care, as indicated in items like “I have experienced career interruption by staying home to care for my young children,” highlight how personal experiences can shape individual perceptions of the glass ceiling. Higher scores in this dimension suggest a belief that personal and gender-based factors, such as confidence and caregiving roles, can limit career advancement. In comparison, lower scores reflect fewer perceived personal barriers.

Organizational

The *organizational* dimension captures perceptions of structural and procedural barriers within the workplace that hinder women's progression to leadership roles. Items like “The promotion procedure in my organization is not fair” and “Men are more likely than women to be promoted faster to a higher (or decision-making) position” reflect perceptions of inequity within organizational systems. Higher scores in this dimension suggest a strong belief that organizational policies or practices favor men in leadership roles and present a significant barrier for women. Conversely, lower scores indicate that respondents perceive fewer organizational barriers and may feel that promotions and advancement opportunities are distributed equitably.

Sociocultural

The *sociocultural* dimension examines broader societal and cultural factors influencing the perceived glass ceiling. Items such as “The male perspective in patriarchal culture is rooted in my society” and “Gender pay inequality still exists in my country” reflect beliefs about entrenched cultural attitudes and societal norms that contribute to the

glass ceiling. Higher scores in this dimension suggest that respondents perceive societal norms, patriarchal values, and systemic inequities as persistent barriers to gender equality in the workplace. Lower scores indicate that respondents perceive fewer societal limitations or believe that cultural shifts toward gender equality are occurring, which may reduce the impact of the glass ceiling.

Critical Skills for Women to Assume Leadership Roles

Items related to Critical Skills encompass a range of competencies and support mechanisms that are perceived as essential for women to assume leadership roles within organizations. This construct includes individual skills, such as time management, prioritization, self-confidence, and organizational efforts that foster a supportive environment for female leaders. Items such as “Learn how to develop effectiveness on all fronts” and “Learn how to balance family-work life” imply personal skills that empower women to manage their responsibilities and advance in leadership. Respondents selected five of the skills that they deemed to be most important.

Moreover, this construct encompasses interpersonal and strategic skills, including networking, developing positive communication skills, and addressing discrimination, which are essential for navigating professional environments. These competencies empower women to build influence, advocate for themselves, and foster connections that can facilitate career advancement. Additionally, the presence of role models in leadership and organizational efforts to protect labor rights and provide support for working mothers underscores the importance of external resources and support systems.

To ensure the validity and reliability of this instrument, a pilot survey and an item-objective congruence (IOC) test were conducted. The pilot study yielded a Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of 0.868, while the final formal study achieved a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.808.

Data Analysis

The analysis for this study focused on examining the Success Factors and Perceptions of the Glass Ceiling through individual, organizational, and sociocultural dimensions. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted and then modified to determine items that best fit each dimension of our two constructs. We report the modified model for the CFA to demonstrate an adequate model fit of the dimensional structure.

Once the CFA was completed, the remaining hypotheses were tested using the constructs confirmed by the modified model. Hypothesis 1 states, “There is a descriptive difference in the perception of the glass ceiling between individuals in leadership positions and those who have not.” This was tested with a Mann-Whitney U-test to determine the statistical differences between self-identified leaders and non-leaders in Success Factor (SF) and Perception of Glass Ceiling (PGC) scores. Hypothesis 2 states, “Success factors (individual, organizational, and sociocultural) are predictors of respondents’ perception of women’s glass ceiling in their workplaces.” Multi-linear Regression tested this. Hypothesis 3 states, “Those in leadership positions consider organizational factors more salient than individual or sociocultural ones for career women to break the glass ceiling.” This was also tested using multi-linear regression analysis.

Procedure

After finalizing the survey, a pilot study was conducted to assess the instrument's clarity and relevance. The survey was distributed via WeChat, using a snowball sampling method to recruit participants. One hundred eleven respondents completed the pilot survey, generating a dataset suitable for preliminary analysis. Three scholars reviewed the study by completing an item-objective congruence (IOC) form to establish further validity and reliability, which ultimately refined the instrument to 61 items. Following these steps, formal data collection was conducted on the Wenjuanxing platform, resulting in 548 samples. After data collection, SPSS was employed for data analysis, including the Mann-Whitney U-test, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and multiple linear regression.

Results

This section presents the data analysis results in alignment with the hypotheses proposed in this study, as well as a descriptive analysis of the critical skills necessary to encourage women to assume leadership roles.

CFA

CFA was conducted to evaluate the validity of the constructs representing Success Factors at the individual (SFI), organizational (SFO), and sociocultural (SFSC) levels. The results, presented in Table 3, demonstrate mixed model fit. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df = 2.562$) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.053) indicate acceptable and excellent fit, respectively, while the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.856) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI = 0.846) fall below the ideal threshold of 0.90. Nevertheless, the significant factor loadings of all indicators on their respective latent constructs, as shown in Table 4, confirm the constructs' structural validity. The Cronbach's α value of 0.808 indicates good internal reliability, further supporting the robustness of these measures.

Table 3

CFA Model Fit Index

Fit Index	Evaluation Criteria	Result	Judgment
χ^2/df	< 3	2.562	Reasonable
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.053	Excellent
CFI	> 0.90	0.856	Poor
TLI	> 0.90	0.846	Poor
SRMR	< 0.08		

Table 4

CFA Factor Load and Reliability

Factor	Indicator	Estimate	SE	C.R.	p
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SF Individual	Q16_Row2 2	1.000			
	Q16_Row1 9	1.374	0.126	10.933	< .01
	Q16_Row1 8	0.619	0.095	6.494	< .01
	Q16_Row1 7	0.573	0.096	5.953	< .01
	Q16_Row1 6	1.547	0.162	9.551	< .01
	Q16_Row1 4	1.236	0.119	10.404	< .01
	Q16_Row1 3	1.156	0.108	10.662	< .01
	Q16_Row1 1	0.772	0.099	7.813	< .01
	Q16_Row9	0.787	0.104	7.592	< .01
	Q16_Row8	0.854	0.107	7.996	< .01
	Q16_Row4	1.632	0.147	11.068	< .01
	Q16_Row1	1.388	0.126	11.059	< .01
SF Organizational	Q16_Row2 5	1.000			
	Q16_Row2 4	1.027	0.074	13.809	< .01
	Q16_Row1 5	1.006	0.094	10.747	< .01
	Q16_Row1 0	0.754	0.064	11.735	< .01
	Q16_Row7	0.784	0.064	12.173	< .01
	Q16_Row3	0.823	0.072	11.372	< .01
	Q16_Row2	0.803	0.074	10.808	< .01
SF Sociocultural	Q16_Row2 1	1.000			
	Q16_Row2 0	1.150	0.084	13.762	< .01
	Q16_Row5	1.002	0.083	12.123	< .01
PGC Individual	Q17_Row1	1.000			
	Q17_Row2	1.222	0.063	19.529	< .01
	Q17_Row3	0.983	0.063	15.639	< .01
	Q17_Row1 0	0.770	0.061	12.553	< .01
	Q17_Row1 3	0.655	0.067	9.776	< .01
	Q17_Row2 1	0.569	0.058	9.835	< .01
PGC Organizational	Q17_Row6	1.000			
	Q17_Row7	0.921	0.041	22.252	< .01
	Q17_Row1 4	0.707	0.048	14.788	< .01
	Q17_Row1 6	0.635	0.053	11.946	< .01
	Q17_Row2 0	0.493	0.049	10.100	< .01

PGC Sociocultural	Q17_Row4	1.000			
	Q17_Row5	1.074	0.064	16.889	< .01
	Q17_Row1	0.617	0.057	10.803	< .01
	2				
	Q17_Row1	0.585	0.051	11.543	< .01
	5				
	Q17_Row1	0.962	0.063	15.330	< .01
	7				
	Q17_Row1	0.797	0.056	14.194	< .01
	9				
Cronbach's α		-	-	-	0.808

Mann-Whitney U-Test for H1

H1: There is a descriptive difference in the perception of the glass ceiling between individuals in leadership positions and those who are not.

As the data are not normally distributed, a non-parametric test, Mann-Whitney U-Test, was conducted to assess the differences between the 'Lead' (those in leadership positions) and the 'non-lead' (those in non-leadership positions) groups concerning Success Factors (SF) and the Perceptions of the Glass Ceiling (PGC). Table 5 shows the results.

Table 5

Mann-Whitney U-Test Results

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
SF	Lead	244	343.31	83767.50	20298.5	0.000
	Nonlead	304	219.27	66658.50		
PGC	Lead	244	247.87	60481.00	30591.000	0.000
	Nonlead	304	295.87	89945.00		

As can be seen in Table 3, the Mann-Whitney U-test for SF revealed a significant difference between the 'Lead' and 'Nonlead' groups ($U = 20298.5$, $p < 0.001$). The 'Lead' group ($N = 244$) had a higher mean rank (343.31) compared to the 'Nonlead' group ($N = 304$) with a mean rank of 219.27. The sum of ranks for the 'Lead' group was 83767.50, while the 'Nonlead' group had a sum of ranks of 66658.50.

Similarly, the Mann-Whitney U-test for PGC indicated a significant difference between the 'Lead' and 'Nonlead' groups ($U = 30591.000$, $p < 0.001$). In this case, the 'Lead' group ($N = 244$) had a mean rank of 247.87, lower than that of the 'Nonlead' group ($N = 304$) with a mean rank of 295.87. The sum of ranks for the 'Lead' group was 60481.00, whereas the sum for the 'Nonlead' group was 89945.00.

Regression Analysis for H2 and H3

H2: Success factors (individual, organizational, and sociocultural) are predictors of respondents' perception of women's glass ceilings in their workplaces.

Regression analysis was performed with Perceptions of the Glass Ceiling (PGC) as the dependent variable and Success Factors (SFI, SFO, and SFSC) as independent

variables. The results, presented in Table 6, support H2. Individual Success Factors (SFI) positively influence PGC ($B=0.286$, $p=0.001$), indicating that more substantial individual-level factors heighten perceptions of the glass ceiling. In contrast, organizational (SFO, $B=-0.374$, $p<0.001$) and sociocultural factors (SFSC, $B=-0.313$, $p<0.001$) negatively impact PGC, suggesting that well-developed organizational and sociocultural success factors reduce perceptions of glass ceiling barriers.

The regression model is statistically significant ($F=35.449$, $p<0.001$), with an adjusted R^2 value of 0.159, indicating that the model explains 15.9% of the variance in PGC. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values are below 3, confirming no multicollinearity issues. These results underscore the differential impacts of success factors, with *organizational factors* emerging as the most influential predictor.

Table 6

PGC as the Dependent Variable, SFI, SFO, and SFSC as Independent Variables

PGC	Unstandardized Coefficients B	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	4.655	19.740	0.000		
SFI	0.286	3.212	0.001	0.420	2.382
SFO	-0.374	-5.294	0.000	0.432	2.317
SFSC	-0.313	-5.082	0.000	0.533	1.876
F	35.449***				
Adjusted R ²	0.159				
Durbin-Watson	2.047				

*** $p<0.001$

H3: Those in leadership positions consider organizational factors more salient than individual or sociocultural ones for career women to break the glass ceiling.

A subgroup analysis was conducted to examine leadership respondents ($n=244$) and assess their prioritization of success factors. As shown in Table 7, H3 is supported. For this group, individual success factors (SFI) are not significant ($B=0.200$, $p=0.183$), while both organizational ($B=-0.348$, $p=0.001$) and sociocultural factors ($B=-0.328$, $p<0.001$) remain substantial predictors of PGC. The adjusted R^2 for this model is 0.137, explaining 13.7% of the variance.

These findings underscore the importance of systemic and structural factors in influencing leaders' perceptions of the glass ceiling. Organizational factors (SFO) consistently demonstrate the most substantial influence, reinforcing the view that institutional and workplace reforms are pivotal in mitigating career barriers for women.

Table 7

Leadership-position respondents' data (244) as the database

PGC	Unstandardized Coefficients B	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	4.934	10.726	0.000		
SFI	0.200	1.336	0.183	0.510	1.961
SFO	-0.348	-3.283	0.001	0.587	1.704
SFSC	-0.328	-3.872	0.000	0.689	1.452
F	13.819***				
Adjusted R ²	0.137				
Durbin-Watson	1.907				

Critical Skills to Encourage Women to Assume Leadership Roles

To break the glass ceiling, working women must have skills that prepare them to assume leadership roles. The research identified sixteen leadership skills, from which the subjects selected the six most critical skills to assume leadership roles. Table 8 reflects the choices. Of these, the most essential skills for women to take leadership roles in an organization are, in order of importance, “Learn how to develop effectiveness on all fronts,” which was selected by 56% of respondents, followed by “Learn leadership skills”, chosen by 51.3%. “Continuously networking” was also highly ranked, with 48.7% selecting it, indicating the value of building professional relationships. “Learn how to balance family-work life” was identified as crucial by 48.2%, highlighting the need for work-life integration. Rounding out the list, “Learn how to prioritize things and duties” and “Learn time management” were each selected by 42.3% of respondents, emphasizing the significance of organizational and time management abilities for women aiming to advance into leadership positions.

Table 8

Six Most Critical Skills to Encourage Women to Assume Leadership Roles in an Organization

Rank	Items	Selected Frequency	Percent
1	Learn how to develop effectiveness on all fronts.	307	56
2	Learn leadership skills.	281	51.3
3	Continuously networking.	267	48.7
4	Learn how to balance family and work life.	264	48.2
5	Learn how to prioritize things and duties.	232	42.3
6	Learn time management.	232	42.3

Summary

The data analysis confirms that success factors at different levels play specific roles in shaping perceptions of the glass ceiling, with organizational and sociocultural dimensions being notably more influential than individual factors.

However, while less influential, individual factors still play a significant role in shaping women’s intentions to pursue leadership roles. Although women may have limited control over organizational environments, they can enhance their

career prospects by developing critical skills such as leadership, personal effectiveness, networking, work-life balance, prioritization, and time management.

Discussion, Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Discussion

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the glass ceiling phenomenon affecting working women in China. The findings support all three proposed hypotheses, shedding light on the factors that shape women's perceptions of the glass ceiling and the role of different success factors in overcoming it.

H1 posited that there would be a descriptive difference in the perception of the glass ceiling between individuals in leadership positions and those who were not. The data supported this hypothesis. This suggests that once women break through the glass ceiling, they are more likely to perceive fewer obstacles, possibly due to increased opportunities, support systems, and more significant experience in navigating challenges. These findings align with previous research suggesting that access to leadership positions can alter perceptions of gender bias and organizational limitations (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989).

H2 investigated whether individual, organizational, and sociocultural success factors were predictors of respondents' perceptions of women's glass ceilings in their workplaces. The data also supported this hypothesis. The study found that all three success factors contributed to women's perceptions of the workplace glass ceiling. Individual factors such as self-confidence, work-life balance, and networking abilities were identified as critical elements in advancing women's careers. Organizational factors, such as supportive supervisors and gender-inclusive policies, played a key role in shaping women's perceptions of their career prospects. Sociocultural factors, including evolving attitudes towards gender roles and supporting systems, were also influential in determining whether women felt they could overcome the glass ceiling. These findings align with literature on individual resilience, organizational support, and changing societal norms in addressing the glass ceiling (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Powell, 2018). For example, Ibarra et al. (2013) argued that combining personal agency and supportive organizational cultures was vital for women's career success and ability to shatter the glass ceiling.

H3 hypothesized that women in leadership positions considered organizational factors more salient than individual or sociocultural factors for career women to break the glass ceiling. The data also supported this hypothesis. While individual and sociocultural factors were acknowledged, organizational factors were seen as the most influential in helping women advance to leadership positions. This aligns with previous research highlighting the significance of organizational structures and policies in advancing women's careers (Davidson & Burke, 2011; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kanter, 1977; Littman, 2009). For example, Ely & Meyerson (2000) proposed assessing and revising organizational culture to

create changes “from formal policies and procedures to informal patterns of everyday social interaction” (p. 139) to achieve gender equity.

These results reinforce the significance of individual and organizational factors in shaping perceptions of the glass ceiling. However, they also suggest that organizational change may be the most effective approach for breaking the glass ceiling and ensuring that women have equal opportunities to advance to leadership roles. Moreover, it calls for broader societal shifts in gender norms, which, while necessary, may take longer to manifest compared to the more immediate impacts of organizational reforms.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

Although the findings supported all three hypotheses, the present study had limitations: (1) The study proposed an integrated conceptual framework highlighting the success factors for overcoming the glass ceiling. However, it did not go one step further to analyze the impact of these factors’ interactions or interplays; (2) This study is only generalizable to the Chinese population. It would be worthwhile to replicate this study in other Asian countries and global contexts. A cross-cultural comparative survey will help readers understand whether the experience of the glass ceiling (i.e., gender equality, diversity, inclusion, and women’s leadership roles at work) is global and culturally universal. Additionally, conducting cross-cultural studies would facilitate a more comprehensive examination of construct validity across various cultural contexts. Future research should also aim to establish discriminant validity, which involves empirically distinguishing between key theoretical constructs and ensuring their conceptual distinctiveness.

We call for a concerted effort to promote global gender equality in the workplace and throughout all aspects of life. Many interrelated themes, such as minority representation in international corporations, the glass escalator, pink-collar occupations, gender equality, diversity and inclusion, overt discrimination, and unconscious bias attitudes (prejudice), can provide a more thorough understanding of the interrelationships between these themes and guide future studies and the policy-making process.

Conclusion

Social and cultural gender biases and stereotypes give rise to individual barriers (e.g., a lack of self-confidence and ambition), organizational obstacles (e.g., discriminatory organizational policies that hinder qualified female workers from obtaining managerial and leadership positions), and sociocultural barriers (e.g., gender role stereotypes and discrimination). The present study highlights contextual variables like level of education, age, marital status, and motherhood status that influence perceptions of the role of different factors in creating a glass ceiling.

Working women continue to aspire to leadership and managerial positions in all industries. However, as the literature has indicated, it has been a persistent challenge. This study examined the perceptions of working women regarding the glass ceiling, specifically those who had reached leadership positions. It explored the factors that they perceived as helping them overcome it. The findings provide valuable insights

into the success factors for women in leadership roles, taking into account the unique individual, organizational, and sociocultural contexts. Moreover, by exploring the experiences of women leaders in China, the study aimed to identify effective strategies and practices that can help overcome the glass ceiling. The findings yield insights into individual factors (e.g., confidence in being promoted, the ability to balance time and set priorities, a robust personal and professional networking system, belief in self-competence, the ability to seize opportunities, maintaining work-life balance, confidence in leadership abilities, and aspirations for promotion, etc.); organizational factors (e.g., support systems from both male and female supervisors, a belief that the organization fosters women's advancement, confidence that the company values and retains talented women, etc.); and sociocultural factors (e.g., belief in the evolving and improving role of women in society). In addition, several critical skills for women to assume leadership roles were identified (e.g., learning to develop effectiveness on all fronts, learning leadership skills, continuously networking, balancing family-work life, prioritizing things and duties, and time management).

This study aimed to shed light on the perception of the glass ceiling among working women in different industries, comparing the experiences of those who have broken through the glass ceiling and those still facing barriers. By delineating working women's perceptions of ways to break the glass ceiling, it offers a roadmap for future progress in overcoming this barrier in contemporary Chinese society.

In conclusion, this study has four implications: (1) to understand the realities and myths of the glass ceiling in contemporary societies; (2) to understand practical positive and negative situations for career development through respondents' perception of the glass ceiling; (3) to suggest to organizational policy change to enhance gender diversity and equality; and (4) to design training programs to assist working women in breaking the glass ceiling and reaching leadership roles. The study's results can help organizations, workplace leaders, and other stakeholders address gender inequality, retain competent female workers, and expand promotion prospects. It also has implications for leadership development. Effective leadership development requires simultaneous efforts at both the individual and organizational levels.

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About the Authors



Hongmei Han, PhD OD, is a Professor of English Language and Literature and serves as the Vice Dean of the School of Foreign Languages at the Institute of Disaster Prevention in the People's Republic of China. Her scholarly pursuits encompass a range of disciplines, including English teaching, translation studies, corpus linguistics, and Organization Development (OD). Her unique focus lies in bridging the gap between OD theories and their practical application in English education. She has innovatively initiated the bilingual "Mindful Leadership" course at the Institute, specifically designed to prepare future leaders for emergency settings. Additionally, she has successfully integrated leadership training into the college students' career readiness curriculum, enhancing their preparedness for the professional world. She once served as the Vice President of Communication for the International Federation of Scholarly Associations of Management (IFSAM) and is a board member of the Asia OD Network (AODN).



Mengdi Liu, a PhD. OD candidate in ABAC Graduate School of Business and Advanced Technology Management, Assumption University, Thailand, a former Hanban Professional/Full-time Chinese Teacher in both University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), Beijing, China, and Confucius Institute in Assumption University (CIAU) in Bangkok, Thailand, and the former Strategic Planning Manager and the Organization Development Manager in Jingtai International Group in Thailand and Yuxuan Halal Food Co., Ltd in Henan, China. She has an academic background in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL), Cross-cultural Communication, Strategic Planning, and Organizational Development. Her current research orientation is Crisis Management and Organizational Resilience.



Keith Miller, MSW, PhD., (He/They), is an assistant professor at the University of Indianapolis in the Phylis Lin Lan Department of Social Work. He uses evidence from social epidemiology and social capital to promote health equity through community-based interventions and policy advocacy. Keith co-founded Pathway LLC, which aims to increase access to mental healthcare in southern Indianapolis and has also provided statistical analysis and policy development in partnership with the Indiana Council of Community Mental Centers and the Division of Mental Health and Addiction. In addition to his research and practice, Keith incorporates a pedagogy of liberation in his teaching and learning. He believes in the power of small collaborative groups to create meaningful change in their communities. Keith's goal is to cultivate a sense of belonging through creativity, relationships, and science, and to work towards a world where people feel a sense of autonomy, dignity, and meaningful connection.

About the Authors



Phylis Lan Lin, PhD, Professor Emerita, University of Indianapolis (UIndy), serves as the senior advisor to the Asia Organization Development (AODN). She received the UIndy Meritorious Award in recognition of 45 years of dedicated teaching, administration, and service. Dr. Lin received a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Missouri in 1972. She is a prolific writer and editor in both Chinese and English, having authored numerous research papers, monographs, and books, including *Organizational Behavior*, *Stress Management: Enhancing Quality of Life*, *Marriage and the Family*, *Crisis Intervention: Theory and Practice*, *Service-Learning in Higher Education*, and *Medical Sociology*, among others. She organized and chaired the International Symposium on China, the International Symposium on Service-Learning, and the International Symposium on Families: East and West. She established the University of Indianapolis Press. The Master Au-Ho-Nien Museum, founded in 2004 at the University of Indianapolis (UIndy), is one of her enduring cultural legacies. Dr. Lin established the Social Work Program at the University of Indianapolis in 1997. The Program has expanded over the years and is now named Phylis Lan Lin School of Social Work and Counselling in her honor.

GLI classification: (89)

Received: January 9, 2025, **Accepted:** April 2, 2025