

In a man's world: exploring women's perceptions and motivations for entering into traditionally male-dominated occupations in Ghana

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Abstract

Women's participation in the labour market is increasing globally, with many women entering traditionally male-dominated occupations (MDOs). In Ghana, while this trend represents a departure from existing gender norms and practices, there is a lack of scientific insights into the perceptions and motivations that drive women to enter these workspaces. This study explored women's perceptions and motivations for entering MDOs in Ghana. Data were gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with 40 women working in the construction, engineering, automotive mechanics, and commercial driving sectors. Thematic analyses of the data revealed that women perceive these occupations as gender-neutral (reflecting a seeming paradigm shift) and embrace them as opportunities to challenge traditional gender norms. External factors such as training programmes and support for gender inclusion, alongside internal motivations like passion and personal interest, were found to drive these career choices. The findings highlight evolving gender role ideologies in Ghana and emphasize the role of advocacy and structural support in advancing gender equality in the labour market.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, women's participation in the global labour market has steadily increased despite persistent gender inequalities in access to employment and career advancement. Recent estimates indicate that following a decline in women's labour force participation during the COVID-19 period, women's re-entry into paid work has occurred at a faster rate than that of men, contributing to a modest improvement in global labour force participation parity (Gomes & Rijal, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023). These upward trends have been reported primarily in Europe and parts of Asia, where female employment rates have continued to rise over time (European Commission, 2020; Marjanović et al., 2024; Sulaiman et al., 2024; Textor, 2021). Although data from the Sub-Saharan African region seems to show an undulating trend, there is a general acknowledgement that women's participation in the labour market within the sub-region has increased steadily over the last three decades (Ngoa & Song, 2021; Ud Din et al. 2020; World Bank, 2020). The region has seen high female economic activity, largely driven by informal sector employment and necessity-based participation (Backhaus & Loichinger, 2022; Ngoa & Song, 2021). Country-specific data from Ghana, for example, puts the current participation rate at 65.27% (Alnaa & Matey, 2023; Orkoh et al., 2022). Interestingly, while women's overall participation is relatively high, the quality and occupational distribution of their work remain highly gendered.

An important dimension of the recent labour landscape is women's gradual entry into Traditionally male-dominated Occupations (MDOs). MDOs are commonly defined as occupations that comprise 25% or less women (Campuzano, 2019; Riddle & Heaton, 2023). Such occupations include law enforcement, firefighting, truck driving, building construction, technology, engineering and other skilled trades (Campuzano, 2019; Riddle & Heaton, 2023). Historically, women's participation in these sectors has been minimal as a result of deeply entrenched gender norms, physicality stereotypes, and institutional barriers that associate technical and manual work with masculinity (Heilman, 2012). Furthermore, women's historical exclusion from MDOs is attributed to a combination of socio-cultural, organisational, and structural factors. Societal expectations often discourage women from pursuing technical jobs, while workplace cultures in MDOs tend to follow uninterrupted work patterns, physical endurance, and long working hours which disproportionately disadvantage women (Hart, 2025; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021; Mahadew, 2024; VanHeuvelen & Quadlin, 2021). These dynamics lead to occupational segregation, with women gravitating towards care-oriented and administrative roles perceived as more compatible with gendered expectations around family and caregiving (Chesters, 2022; Heilman, 2012; Ibáñez & García-Mingo, 2022; Tunji-Olayeni et al., 2017).

Women and MDOs in Ghana

In Ghana, research shows that even at the level of career aspiration, gender norms shape occupational choices, with women less likely to aspire to technical and engineering professions (Ayentimi & Abadi, 2023; Wrigley-Asante et al., 2022). Women's participation in MDOs in Ghana is shaped not only by socio-cultural factors but also by legal and institutional frameworks. Ghana's labour regime, guided by the Labour Act, 2003 (Act 651) and Article 24 of the 1992 Constitution, prohibits sex-based discrimination and ensures safe, fair, working conditions, and the National Gender Policy promotes women's economic empowerment (Labour Act, 2003 (Act 651); Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP), 2015). However, research shows that the impact of these protections varies by sector, with strong enforcement in formal public sector employment than in informal and private sector work where many MDOs are found (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018; World Bank, 2020). In the informal sector where many Ghanaian women work in MDOs, gendered workplace norms that work to the detriment of women persist (Ibáñez & García-Mingo, 2022; Mahadew, 2024). The sector is characterised by weak labour law enforcement, job insecurity, and limited social protection (Charmes, 2019; Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), 2019; Tsikata et al., 2021). Thus, whereas informality can facilitate women's entry into male-dominated trades, it often reinforces precarity and limits career mobility (Ngoa & Song, 2021; Wrigley-Asante et al., 2022).

Despite these barriers, recent studies suggest there has still been a noticeable upsurge in women's participation in MDOs in the sector (Charmes, 2019; Forkuor et al., 2020; Herbst, 2018; Klasen, et al., 2021; Ngoa & Song, 2021). Recent trends in Ghana's labour demographics indicate an increasing number of women entering into commercial bus driving, fuel truck driving, engineering, construction and artisanal trades (Forkuor et al., 2020; Klasen et al., 2021; Torre & Jacobs, 2021). This trend has resulted in the emergence of women-focused professional networks and advocacy groups such as Women in Engineering (WINE), Women in Mining (WiM), Network of Women in Growth (NEWIG), Power Queens Club (PQC), Artisan Association of Ghana (AAG) among others.

While the increasing entry of women into MDOs has drawn research attention, existing scholarship on the issue has largely focused on patterns of representation, career progression, and policy effectiveness (Arthur-Holmes, 2021; Awuku & Sakyi-Darko, 2025; Ofosu et al., 2022, 2024). Although these studies offer valuable insights, comparatively little attention has been paid to women's own perceptions, motivations, and lived experiences that shape their decisions to enter and remain in MDOs across formal and informal sectors in Ghana. This gap limits understanding of the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes through which women navigate gendered labour markets.

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to explore how women in Ghana perceive MDOs and the factors that motivate their entry and continued participation. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do women working in MDOs perceive their professional roles and the nature of their work? (2) What factors motivate women to enter and continue working in MDOs in Ghana? By foregrounding women's lived experiences, this study contributes empirical depth to ongoing debates on gender, work, and occupational change in sub-Saharan Africa. Two research questions were explored: (1) How do women working in MDOs perceive their professional roles and the nature of their work? And (2) what factors motivate women to enter and continue working in MDOs in Ghana?

Theoretical consideration

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1997) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay of personal, environmental, and systemic factors that probably shapes women's motivations for entering male-dominated occupations in Ghana. Social Cognitive Theory rejects solely structural or individualistic explanations of behaviour, instead suggesting that occupational choices emerge through reciprocal determinism, where personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioural actions constantly shape one another (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023). A core construct of SCT is self-efficacy which is defined as an individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform a task or behaviour (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023). In the context of male-dominated occupational environments, self-efficacy can explain how women see themselves as competent to enter and remain in occupations historically and traditionally framed as masculine. From the literature, training programmes, skills acquisition, and successful task performance improves women's sense of competence, enabling them to challenge internalised gender stereotypes and thrive in MDOs despite socio-cultural and organisational barriers. Another tenet of the SCT is Outcome Expectation which provides a lens for viewing women's assessment of the potential costs and rewards associated with breaching gendered occupational norms. Observational learning, which is also a core construct of SCT further shows how exposure to role models shape women's occupational aspirations. Seeing other women succeed in male-dominated roles can disrupt prevailing gender norms, reduce perceived risk, and expand women's sense of what is achievable (Chhaochharia et al., 2022). The construct of reciprocal determinism which is also key in the SCT theory further explores the bidirectional relationship between women's agency and external environmental structures (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023). While workplace cultures, labour market segmentation, and institutional constraints influence women's opportunities, women's participation and performance in MDOs can gradually challenge and transform these environments. Applied to the Ghanaian context, SCT provides a coherent lens for

understanding how women's motivations, perceptions, and lived experiences are shaped and in turn reshape gendered occupational structures.

Methods

Research design and setting

The study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach, exploring the lived experiences of 40 women in MDOs in Ghana. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how women perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences of entering and working in occupations traditionally dominated by men. The study was conducted in Accra and Kumasi because of their economic vibrancy and diverse formal and informal occupational opportunities available which include occupations traditionally dominated by men. The two settings therefore provided access to women working across a range of male-dominated occupational contexts.

Participants and participants selection

The study included 40 women working in traditionally MDOs in Accra and Kumasi, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Eligibility was limited to women working in MDOs who were willing to participate and could communicate in English or Twi. Of the 40 participants, 24 worked in the formal sector and 16 in the informal sector. They were aged 25-58 years, with 29 aged 25-35, five aged 36-45, three aged 46-55, and three aged 56-58. Seven had postgraduate qualifications, nine bachelor's degree, 20 professional/vocational/diploma qualifications, three middle-school education, and one had no formal education. Participants comprised fuel tanker drivers (6), bus drivers (8), mason (2), aluminium fabricators (2), tilers (3), painters (4), electricians (3), auto-mechanics (3), and engineers (9). Twenty-seven had 0-5 years of work experience and 13 had 6-10 years. Regarding marital status, 23 were single, 15 married, one divorced, and one widowed.

Interview guide

Drawing on literature on women's participation and experiences in traditionally MDOs (Ayentimi & Abadi, 2023; Bridges et al., 2023; Chhaochharia et al., 2022; Wrigley-Asante et al., 2022), we developed a semi-structured interview guide for the study. Major questions included: "How do you perceive the type of work you do?" "What influenced your decision to enter this occupation?" "What motivates you to continue working in this occupation?", and "What has your experience been like as a woman working in an

occupation traditionally dominated by men?” Follow-up questions were used to probe participants’ responses and obtain further clarification.

Procedure for data collection

Data were collected over an eight-week period using in-person individual interviews and focus group discussions. Before data collection, we provided participants with information about the purpose of the study, what participation would involve, and their rights as research participants. Those who agreed to participate provided written informed consent before the interviews and focus group discussions commenced. We conducted the interviews in either English or Twi, depending on the participant’s preference, to enable participants to express their experiences comfortably and comprehensively. Individual interviews lasted approximately 40-50 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants’ permission. Each participant was interviewed once, although follow-up contact was made where clarification of particular responses was required. Field notes, observations, and relevant information arising from informal conversations were also documented to complement the interview data and provide contextual information.

Data analysis

All audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Twi were translated into English during the transcription process. The transcripts were considered alongside field notes, observations, and relevant information from informal conversations to develop a comprehensive dataset for analysis. The data were managed using QDA Miner and analysed using Attride-Stirling’s (2001) Thematic Network Analysis (TNA). The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, identification and coding of meaningful segments of text, and systematic examination of patterns across the dataset. The initial codes were reviewed and grouped into related categories. Following the principles of TNA, these were progressively organised into basic themes, organising themes, and global theme. This process facilitated the identification of relationships among participants’ experiences and supported the development of an integrated interpretation of the findings. To enhance the consistency, credibility, and dependability of the analysis, we initially coded the data independently. We subsequently compared our coding and discussed areas of agreement and disagreement. Differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion and consensus, resulting in an agreed coding framework that guided the subsequent analysis. This process allowed alternative interpretations to be considered while maintaining a systematic and transparent analytical procedure.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the Humanities (ECH), University of Ghana (ECH No. ECH 145/19-20). Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained after participants were informed about the study and their right to withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing identifying information and using pseudonymous labels. Audio recordings were stored on the lead author's password-protected computer, and only anonymized transcripts were shared with the other researchers. Potentially identifying details in reported quotations were generalized to protect participants' identities.

Findings

Following data analysis, the perceptions and motivations of women in MDOs were grouped into three broad themes: external motivations, internal motivations and perceptions of MDOs. Targeted training programmes and mentorship emerged as key external drivers, alongside socio-cultural influences, the desire to challenge societal norms, and economic necessity. Internal motivations were rooted in passion for their careers and resilience. Participants largely viewed MDOs as gender-neutral spaces where both men and women can thrive. Many found these occupations safe, accessible, and rewarding, particularly with determination, training, and support. However, some acknowledged on going physical challenges and societal biases shaping their experiences. These themes are elaborated below:

External motivations

Training programmes and mentorship

The study found that targeted training and support programmes play a critical role in enabling women to enter MDOs. Narratives from participants in the construction and transportation industries during the in-depth interviews revealed that many entered their occupations through NGO or government-sponsored initiatives that equipped them with employable skills. For example, fuel tanker drivers reported that their company actively sought to empower women by offering specialized training programmes tailored to equip them with the necessary skills and confidence to operate heavy vehicles.

“...I can say it is the opportunity the company has given us to be part of this type of work, which is meant for males...The company has empowered us by training us to drive these big fuel tankers...” (P19, a fuel tanker driver)

“I heard that the government was training young people for free to start their own business...and that they are looking for more women, and acquiring the

skills was also free...I just put down my name...to take part... (P8, female tiler).

“...we were trained on the job, and one good thing is also that we had temporary mentors who were guiding our progress every step of the way...it really helped...” (P3, female tiler)

The quotations above emphasize the critical role of targeted training programmes, often led by NGOs or government initiatives, in attracting women to MDOs.

Socio-cultural factors

The study found that family and spousal support played a critical role in enabling women's entry into MDOs by challenging traditional gender expectations and reinforcing women's confidence. Several women described how encouragement from significant others—particularly fathers, husbands, and intimate partners legitimized their career choices and strengthened their determination to pursue work traditionally reserved for men. Such support was important social resource, reducing anticipated stigma and fostering a sense of self-belief and financial independence. For many participants, these interpersonal endorsements were critical in transforming interest in male-dominated work into tangible occupational actions.

Beyond family support, the study discovered public recognition and admiration as significant influence on women's occupational experiences. Many women reported that being acknowledged by clients, colleagues and the public enhanced their sense of professional identity, pride, and self-worth. Acts of admiration such as verbal praise or gestures of appreciation were understood as validation of competence and evidence that women's presence in male-dominated spaces was becoming more socially acceptable. As one female bus driver explained:

“When people see you driving and commend you for it, you gain respect. It makes you feel proud that you are doing the same job as men and doing it well.” (P20)

However, these positive experiences were not universal. Some women also reported encounters with overt discrimination and resistance, including clients or co-workers who openly rejected their presence based on gender. Such incidents served as reminders of the persistent entrenched socio-cultural norms that still frame certain occupations as masculine. The existence of affirmation and rejection highlights the uncertain social terrain women navigate in MDOs—where growing acceptance exists alongside enduring prejudice. Overall, these findings show that social support and public validation heighten women's occupational self-efficacy and commitment, while discriminatory encounters pose emotional and psychological challenges. This dichotomy underscores the complex

and uneven natures of gender norm transformation within male-dominated work contexts.

Personal interest in changing societal norms

The study also found that some women actively engage in work in MDOs to challenge and change societal norms. This was reported by almost all the women participants across all the sectors during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. They narrated that one of the motivating factors was a personal endeavor and an attempt to make a broader societal statement that women have the capabilities to perform in any job, notwithstanding gender role stereotypes.

“I intentionally joined this industry to challenge the perception of male-dominated occupations as exclusively masculine and to contribute to their transformation into gender-inclusive spaces.” (P18, electrical engineer)

“The world is changing, and women must also be part of this change. Entering these occupations begins with individual action, which can encourage other women to follow.” (P6, mechanical engineer)

The findings demonstrate that socio-cultural support, public respect, and personal interest in challenging societal norms are interconnected and equally significant in motivating women to enter MDOs.

Economic necessity

The research also found that the need to work is a considerable factor driving women to seek jobs in MDOs. For some participants, the decision to pursue work in these fields was driven by financial challenges and the need to provide for their families. Limited job opportunities in other sectors compelled some women to consider unconventional career paths as a means of achieving economic stability and independence. This demonstrates the resilience of women in navigating economic hardship and underscores the complex motivations behind their career choices in MDOs. It is important to know that this finding elicited the fewest responses, meaning it is not as predominant a factor as others in the decision to enter MDOs.

Some women turned to MDOs due to a lack of job opportunities elsewhere, reflecting broader economic hardships. P29 had this to say:

“...this country is hard. Even after completing school and obtaining a certificate, jobs are scarce. You cannot remain at home doing nothing—the family has to survive.” (P29, professional bus driver)

Regarding the personal sense of fulfilment, more women felt complete having a job to do in general, regardless of the nature of their work. Many participants agreed with the feeling of some fulfilment for working as long as they can prove to the society that they have a job or are independent.

“...beyond the financial benefits, I chose this work so I could take care of myself and my children. I wanted to demonstrate to my husband and his family that I did not depend on their money...” (P14, a female painter)

“...One day my brother told that I should go out there and look for a job... it was time for me to be independent, so I didn’t even worry so much that it is an automotive industry...I just accepted the job offer...” (P32, an aluminium fabricator)

It can be deduced from the narrative of participant 32 that she did not think much about working in MDO until her senior brother told her one thing. The findings reveal that economic necessity often drives women to enter MDOs, highlighting the complexity of their choices.

Internal Motivation

Passion for career

Passion plays a pivotal role as many women are not merely seeking employment but are deeply inspired by their own interests and ambitions to excel in traditionally male-dominated spaces. In a focus group discussion (FGD), this was predominantly found among female engineers, drivers, and auto-mechanics, although some females in the construction sector shared similar views. These women were not in their occupations because of a lack of alternatives; rather, they were inspired by their own passion and career interests.

A female bus driver described being interested in driving from a young age, noting a long-standing admiration for women who drove and associating the activity with confidence and aesthetic appeal. For these participants, early interests and self-recognised abilities played a central role in shaping occupational aspirations. This suggests that

intrinsic motivation and formative experiences were key drivers of entry into MDOs. Similarly, one auto-mechanic reflected on discovering her passion early, emphasizing that she had “always enjoyed fixing broken things and seeing them work again,” which later motivated her to pursue advanced training in auto-mechanics (P29)

These quotes highlight the intrinsic motivations driving women to enter and remain in MDOs. Rather than a lack of options, these women are guided by genuine passion, higher education, and aspirations to excel.

Perceptions of MDOs

Perceptions of MDOs are shaped by women’s lived experiences, which reflect both the opportunities and challenges of these roles. Many participants viewed MDOs as accessible and rewarding, especially when equipped with proper training and support, while others acknowledged the physical demands and societal biases that persist in these fields. This section explores women’s nuanced perceptions of workplace safety and ease, work difficulty and physical demands, gender neutrality/equality, determination, and personal bravery, which collectively redefine the narrative around women’s participation in MDOs.

Workplace safety and ease

Twenty-six participants described their perceptions of MDOs as safe and easy, which implied jobs that are safe and easy to handle if one is competent. Women engineers, for example, highlighted comprehensive training programmes and a culture of learning demystifying the industry’s complexities, emphasizing that aptitude and a proactive approach to skill acquisition are pivotal in navigating their professions effectively. This suggests a paradigm shift in which occupations traditionally dominated by men are being recontextualized as domains where women can thrive equally, contingent upon adequate support and training. P13 focused on one’s competence to ensure simple and safe work practices.

“...mining wasn’t as difficult and risky as it was made to look, and all that is required is your expertise and your ability to learn ... because you are trained on the job, there is no risk...” (P13, *Female mining engineer*).

In addition to the above, P31 shared how she enjoys driving a fuel tanker:

“so the work is easy as ever, our fuel tankers are automatic so anyone can drive it as long as you know how to drive... it is in good condition and driving it is very smooth and enjoyable...” (P31, *Female tanker driver*).

The participants perceive their work environments as safe and manageable when equipped with proper skills and training. Collectively, the narratives reveal a shift in

perception, with women viewing MDOs as accessible and welcoming, given adequate resources and support.

Work difficulty and physical demand

On the other hand, in the construction and auto mechanic sectors, women endure a landscape traditionally dominated by men. Participants brought forth nuanced perspectives on the physical demands and gender inclusiveness of these sectors during individual interviews and FGDs. Experiences and insights provided by fourteen participants in individual interviews reveal that they hold both positive and negative views towards MDOs. This was further confirmed in FGDs, where all the women participants from the construction and auto-mechanic sectors discussed examples of difficult and physically demanding tasks they experienced in their work. Yet these women still believe that women can work in these occupations.

“This occupation is for both men and women ... we can all do it ... but you need ‘extra’ physical strength...” (P12, a female tiler).

“Both men and women can do this work, but auto-mechanics is physically demanding. Tasks such as lying under vehicles, lifting oneself off the ground, and removing large tyres require considerable strength...” (P29, female auto-mechanic)

The participants’ quotes shed light on the physical demands and challenges faced by women in MDOs. Despite these challenges, participants shared a belief in their ability to succeed, demonstrating resilience and determination to break gender barriers and affirm their equal capabilities.

Gender neutrality and equality

The findings highlight women’s perception of gender neutrality/equality in MDOs. All the women interviewed strongly believe in their capabilities and the right to equal opportunities in the workforce, regardless of the traditional gender classifications of occupations. In addition to this finding, the research discovered from FGDs that these women perceive MDOs as accessible and suitable for both genders, and they see themselves as equally capable as men, arising from their socialisation, beliefs, observations, learning experiences, and work experiences.

The participants believe that women can perform tasks just as well as, if not better than, men. P12 said:

“Women are versatile and capable of performing any job traditionally assigned to men. I deliberately undertake the same tasks as my male colleagues,

including climbing electricity poles, to demonstrate that I can perform them just as well—and sometimes even better...” (P12, a technical engineer).

“As long as we are human, we can do any kind of work. I change gears and drive fuel tankers just like the men, and I see myself as part of the women redefining these roles in Ghana....” (P10, female fuel tanker driver).

The findings show that women in (MDOs) strongly advocate for gender neutrality and equality. They confidently perform tasks traditionally associated with men, emphasizing that competence depends on skill and determination, not gender. This belief is rooted in their socialization, observations, and work experiences, which affirm MDOs as accessible to all genders. Their determination to challenge stereotypes is evident in their ability to compete with, and often exceed, their male counterparts. These women act as change agents, reshaping perceptions of gender roles and paving the way for broader acceptance and inclusion in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Determination

In this study, determination was discovered as a key trait among all the women in this study. There was unanimous agreement among the participants that, with determination, they could perform or even outperform their male counterparts. This determination also manifests in various ways in which women encourage each other to take jobs in MDOs, showing an essence of capability and resilience.

“Women entering this field must be efficient and determined to complete their work ...” (P8, a female tiler).

“Determination, assertiveness, patience, and humility are essential for succeeding in this work.” (P5, a principal technician).

The findings highlight determination as essential for women succeeding in MDOs. Participants stressed that their unwavering resolve enables them to meet role demands and often match or surpass their male counterparts.

Personal bravery

The study discovered that personal bravery is important for women working in MDOs. During the in-depth interview, women drivers and engineers in this study were unanimous in reporting that courage is highly valued for succeeding in challenging roles in their work.

“I became confident because operating a bus requires bravery and determination; panic can interfere with performance and safety.” (P3, a female bus driver)

“Tasks such as drilling and blasting can generate fear and panic, particularly in high-risk environments. ...” (P22, a mining engineer)

The findings highlight that personal bravery is a crucial trait for women navigating the challenges of MDOs. Courage enables them to manage high-pressure situations effectively, such as operating heavy machinery or performing tasks under potentially hazardous conditions. It serves as a foundation for overcoming fear and maintaining composure, which are critical for both safety and performance in their roles.

Discussion

This study explored women’s motivations for entering MDOs in Ghana and their experiences of the field. The paper sheds light on the complexities of their experiences and decision-making processes in a male dominated field. The findings underscore the interplay of internal and external factors influencing women’s entry and persistence in these roles, aligning with and expanding existing literature. Below, we discuss these findings through a theoretical lens and in relation to the broader discourse on gender equality and workforce participation.

Motivational factors shaping women’s entry into MDOs

The interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations emerged as a critical theme in understanding women’s entry into MDOs. Intrinsic motivations, such as passion and personal interest, align with Social Cognitive Theory’s (SCT) focus on self-efficacy, where early exposure to traditionally male activities builds confidence and fosters aspirations. This is consistent with recent research demonstrating that personal interest and self-efficacy are important in shaping women’s STEM-related educational choices and career aspirations (Schelfhout et al., 2021; Chan, 2022) who demonstrated that early engagement in STEM activities enhances self-efficacy among women, leading to increased participation in these fields. Similarly, a study by Chan (2022) found that low self-efficacy is a primary deterrent for women considering careers in STEM, highlighting the importance of fostering confidence through early exposure.

Extrinsic motivations, including advocacy, targeted training programmes and mentorship, reflect the reciprocal determinism inherent in SCT. This finding corresponds with the concept of reciprocal determinism, which examines the dynamic interaction between personal agency and external environmental factors (Little, 2018). The finding also aligns with research works by O’Brien et al. (2024), Carrasco and Lopez (2024), Bridges et al. (2023), Wu et al. (2022) and Lavender and Todak (2022), who found that mentorship and advocacy are crucial in supporting women’s advancement in male-dominated professions.

Furthermore, recent studies have highlighted the significance of role models in motivating women to pursue careers in MDOs. Chhaochharia et al. (2022) found that targeted recruitment strategies, such as providing clear job performance information and showcasing successful female professionals, can increase women's interest in male-dominated fields. Similarly, research by Hatmaker and Hassan (2022) reveals an encouraging trend where women in management positions actively support the hiring and promotion of other women, underscoring the importance of visible role models in fostering women's participation in MDOs.

While economic necessity remains an influential driver, the participants' narratives highlight the importance of policies and programmes that foster self-efficacy and build social networks through mentorship and advocacy. Such findings underscore the value of institutionalizing mentorship and training as part of broader efforts to reduce occupational segregation and enhance gender equity in labour markets (Markle et al., 2022; Villamor et al., 2023). Overall, the findings extend the understanding of women's participation in MDOs by reframing it as a complex interplay between intrinsic passion, self-efficacy, and structural support. This perspective advances scholarship by emphasizing the need for holistic strategies that address both individual aspirations and systemic barriers. By integrating SCT as a theoretical lens, this study highlights how targeted interventions can empower women to redefine occupational norms and contribute meaningfully to the diversification of labour markets.

Reframing gender perceptions in MDOs

The study highlights how women in MDOs actively challenge traditional gender ideologies by asserting their capabilities and reframing these roles as gender-neutral. This aligns with Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), particularly its emphasis on self-efficacy, which underscores the role of personal belief systems in overcoming societal barriers (Bandura, 2006). Participants viewed success in MDOs as dependent on competence and training rather than gender, challenging the stereotypes that traditionally excluded women. Observational learning further reinforced this shift, as role models and mentors demonstrated that women could excel in these roles (Schelfhout et al., 2021). This transformation reflects a broader societal movement towards gender inclusivity, where women's active participation in these roles fosters cultural shifts in the workplace (Bridges et al., 2023).

Moreover, participants rejected stereotypes about women's physical and intellectual abilities, instead emphasizing the increasing reliance on skills and innovation in these fields. Technological advancements and structured training programmes have further democratized access to MDOs, making them less dependent on physical strength (Villamor et al., 2023). Women's agency in redefining these occupational spaces supports

research by Kilu et al. (2021), which demonstrates how female participation in male-dominated fields disrupts traditional gender norms. By perceiving MDOs as gender-neutral spaces, women are actively reshaping societal perceptions and occupational norms, reinforcing SCT's principle of reciprocal determinism, where individuals and environments mutually influence each other.

Mentorship and advocacy emerged as critical factors in shifting occupational narratives. Witnessing other women succeed in these roles encouraged participants to challenge their own limitations and societal expectations. This cascading effect aligns with findings by Bridges et al. (2023), who identified mentorship as a key driver in enhancing women's career trajectories in MDOs. Such collective actions illustrate how structural opportunities interact with individual agency, leading to an evolving workplace culture that increasingly accommodates women.

Respect, recognition, and identity

Respect and recognition emerged as pivotal factors in shaping women's occupational identity in MDOs. Consistent with Brockman, et al., (2022), Keune, et al., (2019), Rosso et al. (2010), participants described how societal and peer acknowledgment of their skills and contributions enhanced their self-worth and reinforced the meaning they derived from their work. Public recognition and positive feedback, such as commendation from colleagues or customers, were seen as validating their presence in these traditionally male roles, contributing to a stronger occupational identity and greater job satisfaction.

However, the duality of societal attitudes was evident, as many participants also reported experiences of disrespect and exclusion. These findings align with Heilman's (2012), work on gender stereotypes, which suggests that women in non-traditional roles often face skepticism about their competence, leading to discriminatory attitudes or behaviors. Such contradictions create an uneven work environment where respect must often be earned through extraordinary effort, further reinforcing traditional biases.

Recent literature highlights the importance of fostering inclusive workplace cultures to normalize women's presence in MDOs. Halliday et al. (2022) emphasize the role of psychological safety in mitigating the negative effects of exclusion, allowing women to thrive despite biases. Additionally, it has been argued that organizational recognition programmes and leadership development initiatives can amplify women's visibility and contributions, reshaping perceptions of gender roles (Wulff et al., 2021).

Beyond the workplace, societal advocacy and public campaigns that celebrate women's achievements in MDOs are critical. Bridges et al. (2023) point to the importance of creating role models to inspire others and dismantle stereotypes. Together, these strategies highlight the need for systemic interventions that address both workplace and societal biases, fostering an environment where respect and recognition for women in

MDOs are not exceptions but norms. This shift is essential for supporting women's long-term engagement and success in these fields.

Workplace challenges and strategies for resilience

Despite progress in women's participation in MDOs, significant challenges persist, including physical demands, workplace biases, and societal skepticism. While training programmes and technology have mitigated some challenges, entrenched gender biases continue to pose barriers. Physical demands in MDOs, such as heavy lifting and long hours, were frequently cited by participants as barriers to women's full participation. However, participants described developing confidence in their abilities through structured training and technological advancements, which reduced the physical intensity of their work and made MDOs more accessible.

However, societal skepticism remains a formidable challenge. Women reported being subjected to greater scrutiny and held to higher standards than their male counterparts, aligning with Ibáñez and García-Mingo's (2022) work on the gendered nature of workplace expectations. These biases manifest subtly through questioning women's competence or attributing their success to external factors rather than their skills. Halliday et al. (2022) emphasize that fostering inclusive workplace cultures is crucial in mitigating these biases, as psychological safety and organizational support enable women to thrive despite persistent gender stereotypes.

Resilience was a key theme among participants, as they described relying on determination and peer support to navigate workplace challenges. Social Cognitive Theory highlights how self-efficacy is strengthened by observational learning and social reinforcement. Recent studies suggest that resilience-building interventions, such as stress management and leadership training, enhance women's psychological resources, equipping them to cope with MDO challenges (Bridges et al., 2023). These interventions foster belonging and competence, reinforcing individual agency and promoting workplace inclusion.

Beyond individual efforts, workplace diversity initiatives play a vital role in promoting gender equity. Studies show that organizations with visible diversity policies report higher levels of employee satisfaction and reduced bias-related conflicts (Bridges et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2024). Participants emphasized that diversity-focused workplace policies were crucial in creating supportive environments for women in MDOs.

Implications for policy and practice

This study's findings have important implications for policy and practice. First, gender-inclusive training and mentorship programmes should be expanded to address barriers and build women's competencies, as supported by studies on workplace inclusion (Fouad

et al., 2020). Second, organizational leaders must actively challenge gender stereotypes by fostering environments that prioritize respect, psychological safety, and equitable opportunities (Halliday et al., 2022). Finally, efforts to amplify the success stories of women in MDOs could inspire broader societal change and encourage more women to pursue these careers (Kim et al., 2018).

To sustain these efforts, policies must also focus on creating institutional frameworks that support work-life balance for women in MDOs. As Ibáñez and García-Mingo (2022) and Villamor et al. (2023) suggest, the structural demands of male-dominated industries often conflict with caregiving responsibilities, reinforcing gender disparities. Policies such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and childcare support can alleviate these challenges, enabling women to maintain their career trajectories while balancing personal responsibilities. Furthermore, integrating gender-responsive practices into organizational policies ensures that women are not only recruited into these roles but also retained and supported as they advance in their careers.

Finally, targeted public awareness campaigns can play a pivotal role in reshaping societal perceptions of women in MDOs. These initiatives can highlight the achievements of women in non-traditional roles, showcasing their expertise and contributions. By normalizing women's presence in these fields, such campaigns can challenge stereotypes and inspire young women to consider MDOs as viable career options. Collaborations between governments, non-profits, and industry leaders can amplify these messages, creating a cultural shift toward greater gender parity in traditionally male-dominated sectors. Together, these efforts have the potential to not only increase women's representation in MDOs but also foster more equitable and inclusive work environments.

Limitations of the study

This study faced specific challenges that warrant consideration. First, the qualitative design relied heavily on self-reported data, which may introduce biases related to participants' perceptions or social desirability. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific geographic and cultural context limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs, diverse geographic samples, and mixed-methods approaches to validate and expand upon the results presented here.

Conclusion

This study examines the perceptions and motivations of women in MDOs in Ghana, highlighting their experiences, challenges, and resilience. Findings illustrate what it means, and what is like for women for women to carve out a space for themselves in a work context traditionally dominated by men. It was revealed that intrinsic motivations,

such as passion and interest, and extrinsic factors, including mentorship, training programmes, and societal shifts, influence women's career choices. While many women navigate workplace challenges through determination and agency, systemic barriers like societal biases and unequal respect persist. The application of the social cognitive theory helps underscores the role of personal agency and structural support in shaping occupational outcomes. Practical implications include the need for increased gender-inclusive policies, workplace reforms, and advocacy initiatives to normalize women's presence in MDOs. This approach can foster greater workforce diversity and economic growth. Future research should explore intersectional factors like ethnicity and class to deepen understanding of women's experiences in MDOs across different contexts.

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