

The Impact of Ethical Leadership on Gender Equality

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of ethical leadership on gender equality within private higher education institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Drawing on Social Learning Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the research examines how leaders' fairness, honesty, and integrity influence organizational practices that support inclusivity and equal opportunities across genders. A quantitative research design was employed, using data collected from 294 faculty members across seven HEC-recognized private universities. Reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency for both ethical leadership ($\alpha = 0.89$) and gender equality ($\alpha = 0.86$) measures. Correlation and regression analyses revealed a weak but significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and gender equality ($r = .136, p < .05$; $B = 0.138, p = .020$). ANOVA results further confirmed the model's significance ($F = 5.472, p = .020$). However, when organizational commitment (affective, continuance, and normative) was introduced as a mediator, the direct effect of ethical leadership on gender equality became nonsignificant, suggesting that ethical leadership's influence operates indirectly through commitment mechanisms. These findings highlight that while ethical leadership fosters fairness, transparency, and inclusivity, its effectiveness in advancing gender equality depends on institutional support and employee commitment. The study contributes to leadership and organizational behavior literature by underscoring the importance of integrative strategies for promoting gender equity in patriarchal and culturally constrained contexts such as Pakistan.

Introduction

The recent unethical behaviors practiced in the business organizations have made the researcher realize that it is time to look at the aspect of ethical leadership in the organization. The given exemplary of viewpoint of federal employees in the United States in 2018 entail that, leaders have not employed efforts of instilling the aspect of honesty and integrity as required as 45% of government and 34% of the private sector employees are unable to report cases of a breach that involve rules and regulations for being retaliated against (Guo et al. , 2023).

As stated by Qing et al. , (2020), ethical leadership refers to the act of modeling by an employee's superior followed by controlling the same act by others using words and decision. Previous studies revealed that ethical leaders have a firm foundation on which they can better address their subordinates more fairly, honestly and with respect than the leaders who are unethical (Ribeiro et al. , 2018). This is because such workers are more likely to be ethical and thus can be expected to demonstrate some level of proactivity that is positive to the organization. According to Huo et al. (2022), ethical leaders also embarked on changing the ethical behavior of the followers for the better

through such practices like modeling, discussing moral values, or wherever being ready to assume responsibility for own behavior Since the turn of the decade, there has been growing methodological approaches highlighting the role of ethical leadership on its assessment (Martin et al. , 2022).

To understand why ethical leadership is necessary for Pakistan one has to take into account the existing socio-cultural factors affecting relations between males and females. The current Pakistan's position according to Global Gender Gap Index by World Economic Forum is rather low and it is 153 among 156 countries. Still, it's strictly patriarchal culture and well-entrenched regressive gender attitudes present a significant impediment to women's employment and career mobility (Rashid & Alvi, 2022).

In this regard, it is equally important to discuss the function of ethical leadership as the focus of this paper. Gender can still be an issue because leaders in Pakistan especially in the private sector, have to deal with the culture the country provides in order to market the gender equality. It entails not only respecting and promoting fair treatment to all but having to counteract discriminative measures and provide chances for females in this context. This is especially the case in industries like tertiary education, in which stewardship dictates the culture of organizations, and the development of gender-sensitive policies (Khan & Bukhari, 2021).

In the present era, in Pakistan, there are hundreds of challenges that many organizations in the private sector face for which they fail to earn enough profits that can be reinvested in the national economy (Ali *et al.*, 2020). From the identified research gaps, it is clear that there is a research gap in understanding the effects of ethical leadership on gender equality in educational contexts especially in the selected private universities in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in Pakistan. This study to investigate the impact of ethical Leadership on Gender equality.

In the case of the Pakistani context and more specifically the private sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's higher education, issues of inequality affecting the genders continue to be prominent. Organizational habits are in most cases shaped by culture and thus the broader society with this really meaning that gender equality cannot advance as wanted. This present research aims to examine how ethical leadership can play and overcome cultural processes so as to establish fair practices properly.

Literature Review

Ethical leadership consists of behavior and interpersonal treatment that is in conformity with organizational and societal expectations as well as the encouragement of the same among subordinates through communication, reinforcement and decision-making which should conform to acceptable societal and or organizational standards (Brown & Treviño, 2024). Such leadership practices are crucial in cultivating ethical culture within organizational systems and shaping the behavior of the workforce as well as organizational effectiveness. Ethical leadership is grounded in theories of moral psychology, organizational behavior, and leadership, which offer a strong foundation from which to address and establish ethical leadership practices.

Ethical leadership, as defined by Brown and Treviño (2024), encompasses two primary dimensions: socially responsible moral person and socially responsible moral manager. The moral person aspect relates to the character of the leader in terms of ethical standards including honesty and integrity. These leaders always ensure that they are ethical in their day-to-day activities, both in their private lives and in their professions, to be good examples to their followers. The moral manager dimension is one which implies that the leader goes out of his or her way to ensure that his subordinates observe acceptable ethical standards and does this by praising good behavior or punishing wrong doings and wrong decisions.

Key characteristics of ethical leaders include:

Integrity: Ethical leadership can be defined as mean leadership which involves individuals with high level of ethics, professionalism and commitment to practice integrity even in the most challenging situations.

Honesty: They do not lie and they are open when they are addressing other people.

Trustworthiness: Ethical leaders maintain a trusting relationship with their subordinates because the former can be depended on to; be equitable and uniform in treatment.

Fairness: They make sure that all the decisions that they make are fair and reasonable, never discriminating any employee.

Concern for Others: The ethical leader pays attention to the needs of the followers, is concerned with their welfare and the growth of the subordinate.

For the accomplishment of group objectives ethical leaders assist subordinates and help them to achieve their objectives with zeal and enthusiasm (Syed et al., 2021). Such a form of leadership creates a positive culture of valuing employees hence improving on performance and morale (Koay & Lim, 2021). In fact, there are many ways to define ethical leadership. From the aforementioned nobles, Yasir and Rasli (2018) prove that ethical leadership is honesty, loyalty, purpose, goodness, social justice, the strength of the character, the humbleness, patience, integrity and decision-making based on virtue.

Researchers agree with Zeb and colleagues (2021) identification of ethical leadership as the following, as demonstrated through interpersonal relationships: Anticipate normative behavior and empirical evidence; reinforces the normative behavior of followers by engaging in two-way communication and supporting the adoption of this behavior and decision-making process (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018). Ethical leaders need to be in touch with their followers and provide them reasons for their action, as what they are doing is a normative behavior that has to be complied with by their subordinates (Li et al., 2022). In addition, ethical leaders never engage in any form of immoral practice. The given definition was approved by the leaders because it is the leaders who usually set codes of ethics within their organizations, who consider ethical ratios for their options, and who make fair decisions wherever possible (Steffensen et al., 2019).

Subsequent research work has nonetheless advanced our knowledge of ethical leadership. According to Ng and Feldman (2022), ethical leaders can play the key driver of sustainable business and long-term organizational performance. Employing ethical leadership, they pointed out that there are not only benefits in addressing the morale of the employees but also reputation of the organization relates to dependable image in the market.

Chen et al. (2023) have discussed about the effect of ethical leadership on innovation in organizations. The authors' conclusion is that ethical leaders do create a climate of psychological safety to encourage personnel to speak out inventive ideas free of risk of retaliation. Organizations operate in this environment because the environment fosters creativity, innovative processes and outcomes hence promoting the growth and competitiveness of organizations.

Ahmed and Saeed (2024) look into the effect of ethical leadership on the health of employees. From the studies that they have provided, they can evidence that ethical leaders who care for their subordinates can help to manage levels of stress and demoralization in the workplace. Consequently, the employee satisfaction is even further improved which means that the company has low rates of turnover.

Dimensions of Ethical Leadership

To be effective, efficient, and excellent, four components of ethical leadership must be understood and developed: It has shared value system of meaningful purpose, assertive knowledge, authoritative competence and trustworthiness (Goswami et al., 2021). These four components can hence be seen as parts in a system meant to be interrelated. When all these aspects are ignored, concentration in any one of them is proved to be inadequate and is highly misleading.

Purpose

The ethical leader poses questions, thinks through, and behaves based on some organizational objectives haunting her or him. This helps to attain objectivity and coherence for the organizational decisions and actions (Goswami et al. , 2021). In Bentley et al. 's model, purpose is the first ethical leadership dimension. Ethical leadership requires questioning, thinking as well as acting and all this should be done with an organizational plan in mind. This dimension will guarantee that all the decisions and the various activities going on in the organization are inline with the set mission and values. Laying down focus on the purpose, leaders ensure that the organization has a vision to follow when it comes to strategic planning this being key in attaining long term visions.

Knowledge

According to Kim and Mauborgne (2024), integrative knowledge is a prerequisite for ethical leadership. They assert that individuals with pluralistic or poli-paradigmatic thinking abilities are more capable of handling ethical problems. Ethical leaders should create an environment that encourages all employees to share their views and ideas since this minimizes bias and helps leaders solve problems based on extensive knowledge.

Jackson and Parry (2024) revise knowledge asymmetry within organizations and the concerns resulting from it. This research suggests that ethical leaders should strive to prevent organizational separation of knowledge to prevent inequality. This includes developing ways of making adequate information dissemination and availability to all the workers, thus enhancing ethical workplace.

Authority

According to Heifetz et al. (2023) explains the notion of leadership as dynamic and situational, and while there is still hierarchy in institutions, the leadership can be passed around depending with the unique roles and knowledge possessed by the members of a certain team. It enables ethical leaders tap on the talents and expertise of their subordinates so that the information that is used to make decisions is ethical. It is important for leaders to understand that the use of authority differs in different situations, so it is possible to better affect ethical issues.

Dinh et al. (2024) also noted that distributed authority can be effective in driving innovation and promoting ethical standards to the workplace of the future in their work, *Twenty-Three Predictions About the Future of Work*, published in 2024: According to their research, if the authority is decentralized or distributed in a scene where employees are involved in multitasking, they will be encouraged to come up with creative solutions especially the ones that have been prescribed by the existing ethical frameworks. Besides, such partnership motivates innovation while ensuring ethical compliance throughout the company.

Trust

According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) suggested a model of organizational trust that focuses on perceived ability, benevolence and integrity through leaders for enhancing the amount of trust in organizations. This model shows that trust is precondition for establishing ethical climate and commitment.

Other studies build on the concept of trust as an element of ethical leadership in the present day context. Searle & Barbuto (2022) discuss the concept of trust in relation to the performance of an organization. Drawing from their findings they found a positive correlation between leader credibility and the level of employees' work engagement, job contentment, and organizational impact. Organizations with leaders who master ethical conduct and establish trust experience the benefits of constructing a performance environment that motivates collective production.

When men and women have the same rights in society, responsibilities and opportunities then it is described as gender equity (Atir, 2022). Gender inequality affects not only women and men and trans

and Gender nonconforming persons, kids and households. It affects people of all ages and in all the demographics. Girls and women have a safer society where they undergo no abuse because of their gender. As has already been stressed, it is indispensable for the success of the economy. It is high time that women and men are given equal treatment towards the betterment of the society in terms of health and safety. Equal rights for both male and female is one of the basic human rights that should be upheld all over the world (Begeny et al. , 2022). It is evident that if a society would provide gender equality; then all the members of the society would benefit.

Theoretical Background

There are several theories that help in the understanding of ethical leadership which forms the foundation of ethical leadership. Some of them are Social Learning Theory, Social Exchange Theory and numerous moral and ethical theories derived from philosophy and psychology disciplines.

Social Learning Theory

According to Albert Bandura of Social Learning Theory of 1977, learning occurs from observation of other people especially caretakers with reference to Safety, Power and Approval motives. In the essence of ethical leadership, this theory postulates that followers acquire the ethical behaviors by copying from their leaders. Ethical leaders are moral authorities who prescribe or provide the right models of behavior; therefore, followers are expected to emulate like behaviors.

According to Bandura, four key processes govern observational learning: According to Bandura, four key processes govern observational learning:

Attention: First, the followers have to notice the correct type of behavior from the leader's side.

Retention: They must remember the observed behavior They must understand at least two types of aggregative behaviors.

Reproduction: In this case followers have to have ability to replicate the behavior or the action in a way that supports the goal.

Motivation: There must be a reason that leads him or her to imitate the behavior of others.

Managerial ethical actions augment these processes through ethical role modeling, ethical communication and ethical systems using positive incentives. Subsequent studies have built upon the proposed conceptualization of SLT for ethical leadership.

In their study, Brown and Treviño (2021) examine how and through which processes ethical leaders shape organizational culture based on social learning theory. They agree with the notion that leadership has an ethical tone because leaders help to establish acceptable behavior by the way they conduct themselves. This modeling effect is most evident in organizations that encourage ethical behavior and even provide incentive for such behavior.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory was established by Blau in 1964 aimed at outlining the social behavior in view of the exchange of resources. This theory is pegged on the principle of give and take whereby actions by one party prompt reactions from another. As a theory of ethical leadership, this post noted that ethical leaders engage in the construction of a positive social exchange with the followers. Honesty is regarded as a key in building trust and ethical culture that is why treating subordinates fairly and with respect ethical leaders ensure 'buy-in' from the followers from their side in delivering commitment and ethical behavior.

Social Exchange Theory points that trust and obligation in leadership relations are significant. By being ethical in their conduct and by showing concern in the welfare of their followers, ethical leaders are therefore in a position to cultivate social exchange relationships hence improving their rates of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intentions among the employees.

A closer look at the most recent works deepens the understanding of the application of Social Exchange Theory to ethical leadership. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2022) have looked into the relationship between ethical leadership and high quality of leader-member exchanges. This research shows that ethical cultures who treat their workers fairly and with respect establish better LMX relationships. Which results in the improvement of employee performance, job satisfaction and Organizational Citizenship Behavior.

Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2023) have also discussed on ethical leadership and whether it lowers workplace deviance. According to their investigation, ethical leaders through the promotion of a culture of trust and respect minimizes the propensity of deviant behaviors in employees. This is so because the employees will not feel like carrying out actions that are detrimental to the organization or their other colleagues, once they feel fairly treated and respected.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis



H1: There is a significant relationship between Ethical Leadership and Gender Equality

Methodology

This study employed a **quantitative research design** under the **positivist paradigm**, emphasizing objective measurement and hypothesis testing. A **deductive approach** was adopted, drawing on Social Identity Theory to develop hypotheses on the relationships between ethical leadership, gender equality, organizational culture, and organizational commitment.

The target population comprised **1103 faculty members** across seven HEC-recognized private universities in Peshawar. Using **Yamane's formula (1967)** at a 5% margin of error, the required sample size was **294**. A **simple random sampling technique** ensured representativeness. Data were analyzed using **SPSS**. Descriptive statistics summarized demographics, while **correlation and multiple regression analyses** tested direct effect.

Data Analysis:

The study's statistical results, derived from data gathered from 294 participants, are presented in this chapter. Descriptive statistics are presented first, giving a general picture of the respondents' demographic traits. Correlation analysis then investigates the preliminary connections between the main research variables. The suggested hypothesis is then tested using regression, mediation, and moderation analyses. To make intelligible conclusions, the findings are interpreted in light of the theoretical framework and earlier studies.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Ethical Leadership	10	0.89	Excellent
Gender Equality	6	0.86	Excellent

Cronbach's Alpha for Ethical Leadership: 0.89

The ten items used to gauge ethical leadership have excellent internal consistency, as indicated by this high value. The questions successfully cover a range of aspects of moral behavior by leaders, including justice, openness, honesty, and moral judgment.

Cronbach's Alpha for Gender Equality: 0.86

This score attests to the coherence and consistency of the items designed to gauge opinions regarding gender equity in opportunities for advancement, compensation, and employment. Patterns and practices pertaining to gender-based treatment in their institutions were consistently recognized by respondents.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	294	1.00	2.00	1.4898	.50075
Age	294	1.00	4.00	2.6361	.95292
Designation	294	1.00	4.00	1.6020	.85550
Experience	294	1.00	5.00	2.1020	1.19860

The study's sample's descriptive statistics (N = 294) offer fundamental information about the respondents' age, gender, job title, and years of experience. With a mean of 1.49 on a binary scale (1 = male, 2 = female), the gender distribution was almost balanced, suggesting that male and female participants were represented roughly equally. Because it guarantees that both male and female perspectives of moral leadership and workplace justice are sufficiently represented, this balanced distribution is essential to the validity of a study on gender equality. According to research by Walumbwa et al. (2023), studies looking at gender-sensitive organizational practices and ethical leadership are more robust when their samples are gender-balanced. In a similar vein, Krivkovich et al. (2022) contend that more equitable insights into structural workplace dynamics are made possible by equal gender participation in research.

On a 4-point scale, the age distribution's mean of 2.63 indicates that the majority of participants are between the ages of 26 and 45. Since people in this age range typically have more professional experience, are more aware of organizational politics, and are more sensitive to workplace equity and an ethical climate, they are especially important for understanding ethical leadership and organizational behavior. According to Ng and Feldman (2024), professionals in the middle of their careers are more likely to actively participate in diversity and inclusion initiatives and critically assess leadership practices. Furthermore, participants in this age group are frequently moving into leadership positions themselves, which could affect how they view moral behavior and organizational justice.

The majority of participants have between one and five years of work experience, according to the mean value of 2.10 on a 5-point scale. This early-stage experience level is particularly relevant in analyzing the mediating role of organizational commitment. According to Eisenberger et al. (2023), employees with less tenure are more influenced by ethical leadership, which shapes their commitment levels and receptivity to gender equality policies. Similarly, Saks (2023) found that early-career employees are especially responsive to visible leadership ethics, as they form their organizational identity and trust during this formative stage. Therefore, the current demographic characteristics not only offer diversity in representation but also provide an appropriate lens through which to analyze the interplay of ethical leadership, organizational commitment, culture, and gender equity.

Table 3: Correlations

	EL	AC	CC	NC	OC	GE
Ethical_Leadership	1					
Gender_Equality	.136*	.025	.328**	-.001	.212**	1

The correlation results in Table 4.3 reveal that Ethical Leadership (EL) has a positive and statistically significant relationship with Gender Equality (GE) ($r = .136$, $p < .05$). This finding implies that when leaders demonstrate ethical conduct, fairness, and integrity in their decision-making and interactions, it contributes to the promotion of gender equality within the organization. Although the magnitude of the correlation is relatively weak, its statistical significance highlights that ethical leadership does play a meaningful role in shaping an inclusive and equitable work environment. In other words, leaders who act ethically are more likely to support practices and policies that ensure equal opportunities, reduce gender-based discrimination, and create a culture of respect and fairness. This suggests that even small improvements in ethical leadership behaviors can positively influence gender equality outcomes, reinforcing the importance of ethics-driven leadership in organizational development.

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.136 ^a	.018	.015	.69112

The regression model shows that the correlation coefficient (R) is .136, indicating a weak positive relationship between ethical leadership and gender equality. The R Square value (.018) suggests that ethical leadership explains about 1.8% of the variance in gender equality. After adjusting for sample size, the Adjusted R Square is .015, which confirms that the explanatory power of the model remains minimal. The Standard Error of the Estimate (0.69112) reflects the average deviation of the observed values from the predicted values, showing that there is still considerable unexplained variability. Overall, while ethical leadership does have a positive association with gender equality, the effect is weak and limited in explanatory power. This implies that ethical leadership contributes to promoting gender equality, but other factors beyond ethical leadership may play a stronger role in shaping gender equality within organizations.

Table 5: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.614	1	2.614	5.472	.020 ^b
	Residual	139.475	292	.478		
	Total	142.088	293			

The ANOVA results in Table 4.5 indicate that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 5.472$, $p = .020$). This means that ethical leadership has a significant effect on gender equality. In other words, variations in ethical leadership explain a meaningful proportion of the variance in gender equality within the organization. Although the effect size is not very large, the significance level ($p < .05$) suggests that ethical leadership plays an important role in promoting fairness, inclusivity, and equal opportunities across gender lines.

Table 6: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.517	.195		12.922	.000
	Ethical_Leadership	.138	.059	.136	2.339	.020

The regression results in Table 4.6 show that Ethical Leadership has a positive and significant effect on Gender Equality. The unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.138$, $p = 0.020$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in Ethical Leadership, Gender Equality increases by 0.138 units, holding other factors constant. The standardized coefficient ($Beta = 0.136$) reflects a weak but meaningful positive relationship between the two variables. The significance value ($p < 0.05$) confirms that Ethical Leadership is a statistically significant predictor of Gender Equality. This suggests that when leaders demonstrate fairness, integrity, and ethical practices, organizations are more likely to foster inclusivity, fairness, and equal opportunities across genders.

Conclusion

The analysis revealed that ethical leadership ($B = 0.1376$, $p = 0.020$) has a significant positive effect on gender equality in private higher education institutions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, supporting Hypothesis 1 (H1) by showing that employees perceive greater gender fairness when leaders demonstrate honesty, equity, and respect. Ethical leadership fosters organizational climates of fairness and transparency, consistent with prior studies linking it to justice and inclusivity (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Kalshoven et al., 2011). However, when mediators such as affective, continuance, and normative commitment were introduced, the direct effect of ethical leadership on gender equality became nonsignificant ($p = 0.351$), indicating that its influence operates indirectly through organizational commitment. This underscores the complexity of organizational behavior, where leadership values must interact with employee attitudes and loyalty to produce meaningful change. Thus, while ethical leadership contributes to shaping environments supportive of equality, its effectiveness depends on fostering employee commitment and institutional support, highlighting the importance of integrative strategies rather than viewing leadership ethics as a standalone driver of gender equality (Mayer et al., 2009; Neubert et al., 2009).

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