



“Studying the Ethical Leadership Skills of Public Sector University Leaders”

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ABSTRACT

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An increasing shift is being noticed on considerations towards ethics and morals in organizational practices and policies as well as role of leaders in demonstrating and ensuring such practices. The purpose of this study was to investigate the ethical leadership skills of university leaders and how ethical leadership implementation differs by gender in public sector universities of Quetta, Balochistan. The study was based on quantitative approach and survey design. The proportional stratified sampling was used as technique for data collection where a total of 230 (151+79) respondents were randomly selected from two leading co-educational universities. Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLIS) was adopted as a scale for measuring ethical leadership skills. For data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the level of ethical leadership of university departmental chairpersons through cross-tabulation method. Moreover, independent t-test were performed to identify the if there was a mean difference of male and female university faculty members about the implementation of ethical leadership. The data analysis revealed that majority of the respondents from the both universities considered the ethical leadership level of their chairperson low. This indicated that the departmental chairpersons lack required ethical leadership skills as leaders. Besides, the results indicated that there was not any significant difference between mean scores of the ethical leadership of male and female faculty members. The implications of the study and recommendations for future researchers are also outlined.

Introduction

The globalization and technological advancements have made 21st century leadership more demanding and challenging (Ahsan, 2025; Bhakuni, 2024). Leadership now has become more focused on goal achievements, efficiency, sustainability, profitability and competitive positioning. As a result, new leadership styles are emerging as digital leadership, AI-driven leadership, green leadership, agile leadership, sustainable leadership and inclusive leadership (Bethlem et al., 2024; Mandal & Pal, 2025; Mudunuri et al., 2025; Nurasa et al., 2024; Polat et al., 2017; Savandha & Fitriyani, 2025; Wijayanti & Susanto, 2025). On one hand, all these emerging leadership styles demand leadership to be ethically sound in order to tackle the challenges in decision-making, adaptability, transparency, privacy and fairness (Janjua et al., 2025; Savandha & Fitriyani, 2025; Ullah et al., 2019). On the other hand, uncountable cases are being reported against leaders being involved in unethical practices or scandals (Bhakuni, 2024; Bush et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2023). Majority of cases and scandals target women. As Young et al. (2021) reported that women in organizations experience more incivility as compare to men in organization.

Therefore, an increasing shift is being noticed on considerations towards ethics and morals in organizational practices and policies as well as role of leaders in demonstrating and ensuring such practices. As a consequence, “in 21st century the main purpose of leadership has shifted more on “means” than the “ends” where leaders influence their followers for being ethical (Sabir, 2021, p. 29).

Problem Statement

Ethical leadership greatly influences different aspects and functions of organizations and its members. It increases

the performance of an organization by increasing efficient and profitability (Bhakuni, 2024). It also positively influences teachers commitment, loyalty and satisfaction, as a result a positive effect is observed on achievement of overall organizational goals (Sabir, 2021). Ethical leadership positively affects the creativity and innovation of the organizations and it also reduces stress towards innovation (Haque & Yamoah, 2021). It also boosts organizational members’ work meaningfulness as they create a strong ethical work environment where workers feel relaxed and proud (Z. Wang & Xu, 2019).

Ethical leadership is highly appreciated for being capable in producing ethically appropriate organizational members because leadership is influential when it is governed by ethics and virtue with an utmost efforts to work for the betterment of the workers (Alkharman et al., 2024; Ching et al., 2025). Ethical leaders not only influence the organizational members within their moral domain but also outside the domain (Ching et al., 2025). Ethical leadership has been found to positively affect organizational members’ motivation, self-efficacy, empowerment, work engagement, job commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, performance, innovation, social responsibility and team building (Aloustani et al., 2020; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Flores & Zacarias, 2024; Kalshoven et al., 2013; Sarwar et al., 2020; Yates, 2014). Besides, it has been declared to be helpful in reducing negative work-related factors such as workplace jealousy, stress, unethical pro-organizational behaviour, inequalities, injustice and employees’ turnover (Babalola et al., 2014; Y. D. Wang & Sung, 2016; West & West, 2012).

Despite importance of ethical leadership, the current literature on ethical leadership is in its infancy. Different researchers have

recommended more studies on the impact of ethical leadership on different components and functions of organizations as well as on different types of organizations such as universities (Haque & Yamoah, 2021; Mahsud et al., 2010; Mubarak et al., 2022; Shaheen et al., 2021). It has also been suggested to conduct more studies in different countries (Jin et al., 2024). Sarwar et al. (2020) claimed that current literature is limited in terms of ethical leadership by culturally-distinctive countries and its implementation on different organizational components and functions.

Moreover, it is found that educational environment of the universities in Balochistan are not conducive and therefore the faculty members have depression, anxiety and stress (Bibi et al., 2012; S. Khan et al., 2024). Amin and Shahab Uddin (2023) claimed that gender prejudice exist against the female students, faculty members and staff in Pakistani universities which greatly effects their career developments and goals. Women in universities get limited opportunities to work at administrative positions and promotions (Amin & Shahab Uddin, 2023). Gopang (2024) also declared gender discrimination as one of the major discrimination still existing in Pakistan.

Thus, university leaders as ethical leaders can play an important role in creating a conducive organization environment (Martins et al., 2023). Ethical leaders in the universities reduce prejudice and discrimination among colleagues of diverse characteristics (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). They reduce gender biasness by creating a asexual environment in their organizations (Martins et al., 2023). Furthermore, Alkharman et al. (2024) suggested that there is a decisive need to conduct more studies on ethical leadership at university level. Likewise, Shoaib et al. (2024) found different unethical practices being involved in universities of Punjab,

Pakistan and suggested more studies at university level in other areas of Pakistan such as Balochistan in our study. Naeem and Syed (2024), also illuminated a dire need to conduct more studies on ethical leadership in contextually different higher educational institutions in Pakistan.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to contribute and fill the gap discussed above by studying the ethical leadership skills of university leaders in public sector universities of Quetta, Balochistan. More specifically, the research intends to achieve the research objective below:

- To what extent do university leaders implement the ethical leadership competence?
- Is there a mean difference in ethical leadership implementation based on gender?

Limitations of the Study

This study also had some limitations. First, in this study the data was collected from the faculty members only. Second, this study was limited to only quantitative study using PLIS scale. Moreover, due to limitations of time and resources in this study data was only collected from the university faculty members from the universities of Quetta, Balochistan only.

Significance of the Study

This study would provide valuable insights for Pakistani universities, leaders, faculty members and Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. Firstly, ethics, justice, fairness and other moral and ethical values are considered as basic and most important building blocks of any society weather cultural or organizational. This study intends to achieve this vision by highlighting importance of ethical leadership in the Pakistani universities. University leaders may use the results of this study to better recognize themselves and reinforce their own leadership skills. Based on the findings of the study,

Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, university Human Resource Departments can organize more trainings and workshops for both leaders and faculty members to inculcate ethically appropriate practices for leadership.

Literature Review

Ethics, which is rooted in Greek word *ethos* stands for practices, motives, customs or characters that a society or a person finds appropriate and acceptable (Northouse, 2016). Ethical theory provides a system of rules or principles that guide us in making decisions about what is right or wrong and good or bad in a particular situation (Bhakuni, 2024). This moral theory distinguishes between moral and immoral actions and reasons (S. R. Khan et al., 2020).

Leaders in their organizations set norms, create work environment, assign tasks and responsibilities, assess their performance and make decisions. These all practice require ethical actions, reasons and skills (S. R. Khan et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, today's leadership is to be rooted in ethics (Bhakuni, 2024). Therefore, ethical leadership is being considered as the most popular theory in social sciences nowadays (S. R. Khan et al., 2020). Ethical leadership is defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making." (Brown et al., 2005, p.120).

Trevino et al. (2000) argues that a leader in order to be an ethical leader has to develop a positive reputation as a moral person as well as a moral manager. As a moral person s/he is appraised based on his/her honesty, integrity, justices, respect, love, care, and principled decision making and as moral manager s/he is appraised based on his/her ability to maintain ethics in the organizations. As a moral managers, leaders intentionally demonstrate morally appropriate practices in the organizations as well as ensure the presence of ethically appropriate practices in their organizations through reward and punishment (S. R. Khan et al., 2020). In addition, as moral manager they consider themselves and the employees accountable (Brown et al., 2005).

Hence, in ethical leadership a reciprocal relationship is developed between leader and followers. The reputation of leaders influences followers' ethical practices in organizations (Ching et al., 2025) as followers closely observe their leaders' both positive and negative ethical practices (Sabir, 2021).

Ethical leaders use different techniques to influence organizational members. They act like role models through ethically appropriate practices in decision making as well as in interrelationships (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). They practically set examples by behaving rightly and obeying core values of organizations (Bhakuni, 2024). They not only make ethically appropriate decisions but also encourage their employees for such decisions (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). Ethically driven leaders create an inclusive climate of care, cooperation, respect, and affirmation (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2013). They are more encouraging, supporting and motivating (Flores & Zacarias, 2024; Haque & Yamoah, 2021). They build a positive organizational culture through developing a trusting and respectable bond among their employees (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). They empower their followers, boost their confidence and demonstrate transparency while making decisions (Bhakuni, 2024).

Ethical leadership has been found positively effecting different organizational aspects, functions and processes. Islam et al. (2024) examined how ethical leadership positively influences followers work engagement. They suggested that when a leader fairly deals and involves workers in decision-making, it increases their work engagement and builds trust among employees to work harmoniously.

Ethical leadership has been found positively effecting the organizational culture and innovation. Fatih et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative study to examine role of ethical leadership on green innovation. They found that green organizational culture mediates the relationship between both. Likewise, Haque and Yamoah (2021), found that ethical leaders positively affect the creativity and innovation among organizational members. They also asserted that for being innovative a person has to be morally sound. Ullah et al. (2019) declared that ethical leadership and corporate

social responsibility are strongly related where intellectual capital and organizational culture play a mediating role.

Besides, Sabir (2021) conducted a study on how teachers perceive their school leaders as ethical and relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' commitment in Punjab, Pakistan. He found that ethical leadership positively effects teachers' commitment. In addition, he found that the results for gender doesn't affect teacher perception about ethical leadership. Alkharman et al. (2024) found that the perception male and female teachers were also different where male faculty members demonstrated higher means.

Similarly, Young et al. (2021) claimed that women in organizations experience more incivility as compare to men in organization. According to them, when leaders show ethical leadership the relationship between workplace incivility and employees gender diminishes. Haque and Yamoah (2021) found that male receive more support for innovative work behaviour from their leaders in both Pakistan and Canada. However, this study found that although ethical leaders' support is vital in fostering innovative behaviour, males are more often risk takers while females are generally risk-averse, irrespective of the ethical leadership support that is provided or available.

Moreover, ethical leadership has been found influencing the organizational members. For example, Bhakuni (2024) examined how ethical leadership motivates organizational members. He claimed that ethical leaders appreciate the opinions of organizational members for the benefit of the organization and they value their talent. They provide their employees equal opportunities in decision making regardless of their gender, cast and creed (Ouakouak & Zaitouni, 2020).

Ahmed and Khan (2023) argued that ethical leaders not only make ethically appropriate decisions but also encourage their employees for such decisions. They keep their employees motivated that increases their commitment and engagement. Flores and Zacarias (2024) concluded that ethical leadership is associated with student engagement and classroom

management. Similarly, the research indicated that there is a significant association between ethical leadership and motivation. The teachers who perceive leader as ethical are more likely to be motivated when it comes to work. By promoting ethical leadership, the management officials empower and support teachers which results in professional development and boosts overall educational outcomes.

Ethical leadership helps organizations in dealing with ethical dilemmas and unethical behaviour but the case is not always similar. Ahmed and Khan (2023) conduct a study to examine how ethical leadership effects employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviour and found a positive relationship between both. That means the more leaders are ethical the more employees turn to be involved in unethical behaviour such as unethical pro-organizational behaviour. According to them, ethical leaders are considered to be just and sometimes employees consider some organizational rules as unjust and therefore intend to violet it. The second reason might be that sometimes leaders don't mind if a rule is broken for the betterment of the organization. According to Young et al. (2021), women in organizations experience more incivility as compare to men in organization. When supervisor shows ethical leadership the relationship between workplace incivility and employees gender differences diminishes. When it comes to ethical leadership and personal control and their association with workplace incivility the correlation is negative experienced by both women and men.

Methodology

Being based on positivist paradigm, the study was based on quantitative approach of inquiry. In quantitative research the aim is explaining why a certain phenomenon is occurring and respondents' tendency towards a particular problem and the differences of responses among respondents are described (Creswell, 2012). Survey research design was adopted as design of the study. Survey design is used when the research intends to find answer of a specific question based on the opinion of respondents (Gay et al., 2012).

For the data collection, two leading universities in Quetta namely Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS) and University of Balochistan (UoB) were selected. The third leading university named as Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University (SBKWU) was excluded because it was only a female university and could have different organizational culture and leadership.

The proportional stratified sampling was used as technique for data collection where the total number of faculty members from both universities were considered as subgroups and an equal proportion of the both groups were selected randomly as respondents. The table below presents the details of the sample:

Table 1
Details of the Sample Size

University	Frequency	Percent
BUIITEMS	151	65.7
UoB	79	34.3
Total	230	100.0

For data collection, Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLIS) by Craig and Gustafson (1998) recommended by Northouse (2016) was selected as a scale for measuring a leaders ethical skills. The respondents were requested to evaluate their departmental chairperson's ethical practices against each item. The scale contained 30 items. The scale was originally four-point liker scale and was changed into five point Likert scale between strongly disagree to strongly agree. As suggested by Northouse (2016) the scores between 30–32 indicated a leader being considered as highly ethical and 33-45 moderate ethical and 46-120 low ethical. However, as the scale was changed from four-point Likert scale to five point Likert scale, following were the new scores for interpretation of the results:

1. 30–33 High ethical:
2. 34–50 Moderate ethical:
3. 51–150 Low ethical:

For data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the level of ethical leadership demonstrated by university leaders in Quetta, Balochistan. For which Cross-tabulation method was employed and independent t-test were performed to identify the if there was a mean difference of male and female university faculty members about the implementation of ethical leadership.

Findings

The data analysis revealed that 0.7% of the university leaders/chairpersons were considered high ethical by the respondents of university A while respondents of university B considered 2.5% of their university leaders as highly ethical. Thus, overall 1.3% considered their Chairperson as highly ethical. Whereas, 6.6% of the chairpersons were categorized as demonstrating moderate level of ethical leadership in university A while 6.3% in university B. In total 6.5% university leaders were considered having moderate level of ethical leadership. Lastly, 92.7% and 91.1% of the university chairpersons were considered having low level of ethical leadership in university A and B consecutively. In total, 92.2% of the university leaders were considered demonstrating low level of ethical leadership skills.

Table 2.

Ethical Leadership in Co-educational universities of Quetta

Universities	Ethical Leadership Levels			Total
	High Ethical	Moderate Ethical	Low Ethical	
University A	0.7%	6.6%	92.7%	100%
University B	2.5%	6.3%	91.1%	100%
Total	1.3%	6.5%	92.2%	100%

The results of independent t-test were performed to identify the if there was a mean difference of male and female university faculty members about the implementation of ethical leadership. The results indicated that there was not any significant difference between mean scores of the ethical leadership of male faculty members (M=83.79, SD=28.26) and female faculty members (M=83.43,

SD=24.27), $t(228) = 0.10$, $p = 0.919$. The results concluded that gender does not have any effect of implementation of ethical leadership. Table 3 below presents the details of independent t-test:

Table 3.

Ethical Leadership Implementation Based On Gender						
Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	df	t	Sig.
Male	10	83.79	28.265	22	0.1	0.91
	0	00	09	8	0	9
Female	13	83.43	24.275			
	0	85	23			

Discussion on the Findings

The data analysis revealed that majority of the respondents from the both universities considered the ethical leadership level of their chairperson low. This indicates that the departmental chairpersons lack required ethical leadership skills as leaders. Low level of ethical leadership has been considered as the darkest side of leadership leading towards destruction in the organizations. When leaders are considered having low level of ethical leadership skills, they might use leadership for their personal interests and gains (Northouse, 2016). On the other hand, (Bhakuni, 2024) claimed that one of the reason of leaders' low ethical leadership level is extreme workload and demand for achieving the goals which results in making leaders more ego-centric and individualistic. Furthermore, it has been reported that some leaders' violate or mold rules for the betterment of the organization however followers consider such practices as unethical (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). Moreover, some leaders are considered to be low in ethical leadership because they humiliate their followers, procrastinate on work and falsify receipts (Joosten et al., 2013). They also set bad examples through misusing their power, blaming others for their mistakes, acting for egotism, having hidden agenda, avoiding responsibilities

and lacking accountability (Resick et al., 2011).

The results of the study are in lined with the previous but limited literature. For example, it has been reported that the working environments in the Pakistani universities are not ethically conducive. They lack policies and practices for increasing inclusiveness by reducing prejudice and discrimination against minority and women (Amin & Shahab Uddin, 2023; Haider et al., 2024; Lak et al., 2023). Similarly, consistent with the findings of this study, Shoaib et al. (2024) declared that in Pakistani universities there are various ethical dilemmas related to academics and research. However, in their study, the ethical issues highlighted were related to university teachers in point of view of leaders. Contradictory to them, in this study from the point of views of the teachers, university leaders such as chairpersons also demonstrate low ethical leadership. Consequently, overall, the working environment of the universities is not ethically conducive as emphasized by (S. Khan et al., 2024). An environment of depression, anxiety, stress, mistreatment, discrimination and unjust prevails in the universities (Bibi et al., 2012; S. Khan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the results if the study revealed that there are statistically significant differences in means of the male and female university leaders for ethical leadership. The findings of the study are consistence with Sabir (2021) who found that the results for the gender do not affect teacher perception about ethical leadership while contradicting with the results of Alkharman et al. (2024) who found that the perception male and female teachers were also different.

This study has made notable contributions into current literature on ethical leadership and has various implications. Firstly, the results of this study exposed an alarming situation of ethical leadership in universities of Balochistan and the

working environment of the universities in other parts of the Pakistan are also unchanged (see, Amin & Shahab Uddin, 2023; Haider et al., 2024; Lak et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2021). Faculty members directly work under the leadership of departmental chairpersons. Therefore, they are to create an ethically positioned working environment in their departments by demonstrating a high level of ethical leadership. They should create harmony and peace in their departments through emotional support of faculty members and staff (Shaheen et al., 2021).

Undoubtedly, faculty members observe and learn from their chairpersons' day to day personal and professional practices and behaviour. By observing low level of ethical leadership of their chairpersons, faculty members would be habitual of practicing unethically in their universities (Sabir, 2021). Consequently, overall an unethical environment would be created in the universities with various undesirable short term and long term effects. As declared by Karaköse and Kocabaş, (2009) leaders low level of ethical behaviour damages the reputation and image of organizations. Hassan et al. (2023) contented that low level of ethical leadership not only erodes the financial aspects of an organization but also the psychological and emotional aspects. Additionally, Ullah et al. (2019) asserted that low level of ethical leadership negatively effects the intellectual capital of the organization.

Secondly, chairpersons mediate the relationship between higher authorities and faculty members. Chairpersons' low level of ethical leadership may create a bad image for higher authorities as well as for overall organizations. Therefore, university higher authorities, such as Vice Chancellors, Registrars, Deans and Directors may play a vital role in ensuring that chairperson behave ethically appropriate with faculty members and staff. A mechanism of proper monitoring and evaluation in this regard maybe developed

and the performance of chairpersons maybe evaluated through faculty members at the end of each year.

In addition, ethics should be reflected in vision and mission of the universities and university Human Resource Departments and Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should develop training programs and modules for university leaders related to ethical leadership skills. As suggested by Ullah et al. (2019) ethical leadership should be given prime importance while selecting and developing leaders. Moreover, Northouse (2016) claimed that although the ethics in leadership are being discussed everywhere, however, development of ethical leadership skills has been ignored in trainings and programs related to leadership. Certainly, as suggested by Amin and Shahab Uddin (2023), the university officials should stress on the strategies and procedures for minimising gender biasness in training and upskill programs. Lastly, a mechanism of reward and punishment should also be devised in the universities for discouraging unethical practices and encouraging and motivating for ethically appropriate practices and behaviour. Babalola et al. (2014) considered this reward and punishment mechanism as source of learning for all organizational members.

Future researchers are recommended to add the voices of leaders, staff and students in order to get a broader picture of the prevailing ethical leadership practices in the universities. Second, Future researchers are recommended to conduct qualitative and mixed method studies and use other validated scales such as scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). Third, as suggested by Naeem & Syed (2024) contextual factors also play an important role while studying ethical leadership. Future researchers may use the impact of different contextual factors of the universities on ethical leadership. Last, researchers may also identify the level of ethical leadership in other educational institutions such as school, colleges and madaris.

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