

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND DECENT WORK IN PAKISTAN: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH (SDG 8)

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Purpose

This is research on the significance of ethical and sustainable leadership practices in enhancing decent work and inclusive economic growth in Pakistan. The study is based on the Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) and explores the dimensions of leadership behaviours influencing fairness, employee well-being, job security, participation, and inclusive organizational outcomes in a developing-country setting that is institutional constrained.

Design/methodology/approach

The research design used in the study is qualitative in nature, and it applies semi-structured interviews with managers, employees, and human resource professionals in Pakistani organizations in manufacturing industries, services, as well as governmental institutions. The thematic analysis method was applied as a six-phase process to data to enable inductive insights and theory-driven insights to come out (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Findings

The results show that, ethical leadership promotes decent work by transparent decision making process, procedural fairness, employee voice, and observance to labour rights. Inclusive growth is also enhanced with the help of sustainable leadership, where close attention is paid to long-term relationships in employment relations, constant skills enhancement, and workers well-being. Nonetheless, presence of macroeconomic instability, informality and inability to enforce empirical rules limits achievement of SDG 8 at the organizational level.

Research limitations/implications

The research specifically targets one national context and this might restrict generalization. Comparative or longitudinal qualitative designs might be employed in future studies that endeavor to enhance the investigation of the leadership-based routes to decent work in less developed economies.

Practical implications

The results can give practical suggestions to organizational leaders, HR managers, and leadership formation institutions that would like to instill ethical and sustainable leadership practices that will advance decent work and inclusive growth.

Originality/value

This can be explained by the fact that by empirically connecting ethical and sustainable leadership with SDG 8 using qualitative data about Pakistan, the study expands the existing body of leadership and sustainability literature beyond Western application and therefore directly addresses the literature demands of contextually sensitive leadership studies.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; Sustainable leadership; Decent work; Inclusive growth; SDG 8; Pakistan.

1. Introduction

The question of leadership has been identified as a key process by which organizations react to the sophisticated social, economic and sustainability issues. Over the last few years, organizational leaders have had to meet an increased number of expectations they include ethical behaviors, social responsibility, employee welfare, and long-term sustainability in addition to the conventional measures of performance and efficiency. This move is supported by the global policy frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which point out the importance of institutional, governmental,

and leadership efforts to attain inclusive and sustainable development outcomes (United Nations, 2020).

One of the SDGs is Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) that is especially related to the field of organizational leadership. SDG 8 provides that sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work should be encouraged to all. Decent work focuses on fair pay, work security, social welfare, safe work environment and respect to labour rights (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2021). Although SDG 8 is sometimes talked about at a macroeconomic level or policy level, this is just the tip of the iceberg because a cohesion of micro-level organizational practices requires micro-level leadership behaviours and decision-making in their realisation.

The nexus of leadership-decent work is even more important in the developing economies. Such labour markets are often informal, precarious, unequal wages, weak labour regulations enforcement and weak institutional protection (ILO, 2021). In the given circumstances, business executives tend to become informal leaders of equity and professionalism in the workplace. Their leadership style and moral background may play a great role in making the employees feel belonging, safe and respected or, on the contrary, being exploited and marginalized.

The concept of ethical leadership has thus continued to receive more scholarly interest as a leadership style that is able to mitigate these situations. Ethical leadership is often characterized as the exhibition of normatively reasonable behavior in personal performance and interpersonal relations and encouraging such behavior among the followers in terms of communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown and Treviño, 2021). The recent empirical research published after 2020 continuously shows that there is a plethora of positive employee outcomes related to the ethical leadership (such as trust, job satisfaction, voice behaviour, psychological well-being, and perceptions of organizational justice) (Afsar et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021).

Ethical leadership is closely linked to the practice of sustainable leadership that is based on people creation of long-term values, stakeholder inclusivity, continuity of human and social capital, and intergenerational responsibility (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2021). A sustainable leadership goes beyond the short term and profit-driven methods focusing on the development of employees, their employment stability, and resilience of the organization. According to recent studies, sustainable leadership practices are positively related to sustainable performance, staff commitment, and correspondence with the SDGs, such as SDG 8 (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2021; Maqsood et al., 2023).

Even with the increasing literature of ethical and sustainable leadership, there are a number of significant gaps that may need to be filled. To begin with, leadership research remains dominated by attempts that utilize Western and developed economies, which interacts with the concept of contextual relevance and applicability of the current theories (Yasir and Majid, 2021). There has been a growing demand among scholars that leadership research should be sensitive to both institutional and cultural, and economic variations among contexts especially those of the developing and emerging economies.

Second, although SDG 8 has been greatly addressed within policy based research, there is a paucity of empirical research on the contributions of organizational leadership practices to decent work at the micro level. Motivated research on SDG literature inhabits so much about national indicators, labour market statistics, or regulatory frameworks, but there is relative lack of research on the SDGs that relates to the day-to-day practices of leadership that dictate the live lives of employees in workplaces.

The situation in Pakistan presents a rather relevant setting in which these gaps can be addressed. Pakistan is a developing economy that continues to have issues with informal

employment and underemployment, gender inequality, low wages and lack of equal application of labour standards (UNDP, 2022). ILO (2021) states that quite a large percentage of workers works in informal or precarious practices and cannot receive social protection or decent working environments. Ethical and sustainable leadership in organizations in such an environment have the potential to determine positive or negative progress on decent work.

The prevailing literature in leadership in Pakistan has the majority of quantitative designs and has addressed the outcomes level that includes job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or performance (Rashid et al., 2020; Yasir and Majid, 2021). Although useful, these researches paint few pictures of how leadership practices are actualized, comprehended, and sense-written by the players in an organization relating to decent work and inclusive development. The limitation is particularly well addressed by the qualitative research since it becomes possible to go deep into a meaning, context, and lived experience.

In this regard, the study takes a qualitative research design to investigate the role of ethical and sustainable leadership on promotion of decent work and inclusive economic development in Pakistan. The study aims at answering the following guiding research question using thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews from organizational leaders and employees:

What are the ways ethical and sustainable leadership practices can define organizational courses in the direction of decent work and inclusive, sustainable economic growth (SDG 8) in the Pakistani context?

The study has addressed this question by making a number of contributions. To start with, it further extends ethical and sustainable leadership theories, placing them within a developing-economy perspective. Second, it is relevant to SDG-oriented organizational studies, as it makes the point of linking leadership practices with decent work outcomes can be done through empirical studies. Lastly, it also answers the calls of Emerald-published leadership journals to provide a qualitative study that is contextually rich and contributes to theory and practice.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This part will examine and synthesize the current literature regarding ethical leadership, sustainable leadership and decent work with a specific emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). It also builds up the hypothetical framework of the research carrying out leadership theories incorporating the agenda of decent work into a developing-economy milieu. In compliance with Emerald publishing conventions, the focus is on the recent literature (2020 and on) that was peer-reviewed and on the ability to determine the specific gaps in concepts that support the current qualitative research.

2.1 Ethical Leadership in Emerging and Developing Economies

The issue of ethical leadership has become a significant construct in organizational research especially in situations where institutional weakly, policy openness and inequality have been observed. Brown and Treviño (2021) develop ethical leadership theoretical framework in a dichotomy of moral personhood and moral management in which not only do ethical persons act ethically successful; they also propagate the ethics through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. It can be also stated that due to increased output of empirical studies since 2020, ethical leadership has become more relevant to staff attitudes, behaviours and well-being.

In the developing and emerging economies, ethical leadership is even more critical because of the poor quality of formal governance and uneven application of labour laws (Bedi et al., 2021). According to the recent researches, employees tend to use more moral judgement and perceptions of fairness demonstrated by leaders than the institutional protection in such

workplaces (Islam et al., 2021). Ethical leaders are thus able to play the role of informal organization influencing norms of fairness, accountability and respect in the workplace.

Ethical leadership and trust in management, employee voice behaviour, psychological safety and perceived organizational justice have a positive correlation with each other, as revealed by empirical evidence in South Asia and similar contexts (Afsar et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). Indeed, Afsar et al. (2020) discovered in a study of Pakistani organizations that ethical leadership improved the desire of employees to raise their voice and combat unethical behaviors, which led to more inclusive and transparent work environments. On the same note, Yasir and Majid (2021) document that the adverse consequences of power distance are reduced by ethical leadership as power distance is usually also acute in collectivist cultures.

More recent literature has embarked on providing connections between ethical leadership and more extensively sustainability performance. Maqsood et al. (2023) show that ethical management instils a long-term orientation and sensitivity of stakeholders in the minds of managers who are critical to sustainable human resource practices. Such results indicate that ethical leadership is not interpersonal only but also strategic in nature that determines the organizational alignment with the sustainability objectives.

Although there have been these advances, there are significant limitations in the literature. Most of the available studies are based on cross-sectional surveys and they may not provide much understanding of how ethical leadership is applied in the day-to-day organizational activities. In addition, although more studies are accepting the applicability of ethical leadership in sustainability, there is a paucity of studies that expressly relates ethical leadership behaviours to the decent work agenda as stated in SDG 8. The gap is notably evident in the qualitative studies, which are context-specific studies in the developing economies like Pakistan.

2.2 Leadership, Decent Work and Sustainable Development Goal 8

Decent work as postulated by the international labour organization describes productive work, decent income, workplace safety, social safety, social dialogue, and respect of the labour rights (ILO, 2021). SDG 8, which aims at supporting inclusive and sustainable economic growth and full and productive employment of all people, is a key action encompassed within decent work. Whereas SDG 8 is often discussed in the framework of macro-policy, researchers start to acknowledge the role of the organizational-level processes in implementing this goal in practice (Cooke et al., 2022).

The leadership is highly influential in determining the decent or indecent work experiences of employees. Leaders determine the decisions touching on wages, work, employment, and stability as well as health and safety and influence on decision making. Recent studies propose that ethics and sustainability based leadership styles are especially favourable to decent work performances. As an example, Suriyankietkaew et al. (2021) demonstrate that sustainable leadership practices are linked to the increased level of employee well-being and the sense of meaningful work, which is closely tied to the notion of decent work.

Informality and labour market dualism add another point to the leadership-decent work relationship in the developing economies. UNDP (2022) claims that in Pakistan, a significant number of employees work in informal setups where they receive low levels of social support. In that regard, the organizational leaders usually have a great discretion in terms of employment. According to Cooke et al. (2022), institutional weaknesses can be addressed to some extent through leadership commitment to decent work principles because they would incorporate the elements of fairness and dignity in the organizational practices.

The recent empirical researches that took place since 2020 have started to correlate leadership behaviours explicitly with SDG 8 outcomes. According to Khan et al. (2023), values-based leadership has a positive impact on the perception of employment security and equity in

South Asian organizations. On the same note, Islam et al. (2021) note that ethical leadership helps in inclusive decision making, which enhances social talk in the workplace. Yet, such researches are mostly quantitative and offer little information about how leaders and workers decipher and haggle over the meaning of decent work in the day-to-day organizational contexts.

Another issue brought out in the literature is that decent work requires contextualized understandings. Defining what is decent in an employment might be dependent on socio-economic and cultural contexts (ILO, 2021). Qualitative methods are thus absolutely targeting the capturing of the perceptions of the employees regarding dignity, fair and security in the workplace environment in the developing economies and the influence of leadership practices in forming the perceptions. This highlights the suitability of thematic analysis as a research methodology of the current study.

2.3 Integrating Ethical and Sustainable Leadership: Theoretical Framework

This paper combines the ethical leadership theory with the views on sustainable leadership to create a contextualized theory of how leadership practices can be related to the enhancement of decent work results as a part of SDG 8. Sustainable leadership builds on ethical leadership by focusing on long-term value-generation, inclusiveness of stakeholders and protection of human and social capital (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2021). In this view, ethical behavior is a moral requirement besides being a pillar of sustainable organizational performance.

The theoretical approach relies on the concept of the triple bottom line logic which focuses on the reliance of economic, social, and environmental performance (Elkington, 2020). Theorized are those leaders who are ethical and sustainable who can affect decent work in various ways such as fair treatment, participatory decision, employment stability and employee development investment. These lines are in direct alignment with the dimensions of core of the decent work as defined by the ILO (2021).

Placing the ethical and sustainable leadership in the Pakistani context, this framework recognises the influence of institutional constraints, the cultural norms and labour market conditions on the leadership practices. It is the framework of thematic analysis based on the sensitivity of the study to the enactment, justification and experience of leadership behaviours by differentiating them against decent work. In this way, it ensures a theoretically based rationale of studying how the leadership of an organization can play its part of SDG 8 emergence in developing economies.

3. Research Methodology

This research will be qualitative to understand how sustainable leadership practices and ethical considerations are essential towards the promotion of decent employment in Pakistan in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). A qualitative approach will especially be fitting in the given case since the study will concentrate on getting meanings, interpretations and lived experiences of leadership and work in a particular socio-economic and institutional environment. As per Emerald standards of qualitative research, the research methodology puts focus on transparency, reflexivity, and rigor.

3.1 Research Design

It is based on approach of interpretivist research paradigm which presupposes that the social reality is social, and it should be explained according to opinions of people who live in it. Ethical leadership and decent work are constructs of a subjective nature, and hence situational, thus an interpretivist approach is one that can be followed in its subtle scrutiny of how organizational agents grasp, practice and contest leadership practices in relation to the dignity, fairness and inclusion at work (Creswell and Poth, 2023).

Instead of using a quantitative design, a qualitative design was chosen to overcome some weaknesses that have been found in past leadership studies performed in Pakistan

which have only used cross-sectional surveys mainly. Although they have enabled development of critical associations, such studies have limited information on how leadership can be instrumental in the processes of decent work outcomes. Qualitative inquiry makes it possible to engage in these processes more deeply and align with recent demands of the leadership literature to conduct research based on context and theory-building (Cooke et al., 2022).

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Research Context

The researchers used purposive sampling to get information-rich subjects who were in good position to ponder on leadership practices and working conditions in their respective organizations. The sample was selected by taking both the government and the non-governmental organizations in Pakistan operating in the manufacturing, services, education and administration sectors. This diversity was supposed to represent variation in leadership practices and employment conditions in different organizational situations.

The sample was made up of organizational leaders (e.g. middle and senior managers) and non-managerial employees. By having two categories, it was possible to triangulate the perspectives and minimize the prevalence of a managerial narrative only. Overall, there were 28 semi-structured interviews, which is adequate to collect data regarding the qualitative research to attain thematic saturation and not statistical generalization (Nowell et al., 2020).

The selection of participants was also guided by three factors (1) at least two years of the tenure with the organization so that they ought to have experience with the leadership practices (2) direct engagement in employment related decisions (in case of leaders) or direct exposure to employment related decisions (in case of employees). Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained and all the participants assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection between 2023 and 2024. Semi-structured interviews have been selected because there is a need to ensure that consistency is maintained across all interviews and that they are flexible to allow the issues emerging in detail to be encouraged. The ethical leadership, sustainable leadership and decent work literature were used to create an interview guide. Relevant subjects encompassed sense of moral leadership behaviours, sense of equity and dignity based on the employment, job insecurity, involvement in decision making process and how much the body seems to be socially sustainable and responsible.

English and urdu interviews were applied depending on the preference of the participants to ensure that they feel comfortable and will be able to express themselves as much as they wish. The interviews were 45 to 75 minutes long and audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Transcription of interviews was then done verbatim and where there was need translated to English. In order to get the accuracy, the translation transcripts were compared with the original recordings.

3.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The analysis used thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021) with the 6 steps. The selection of thematic analysis was based on its flexibility and credits to discovering patterns of meaning in a qualitative data, and it is theoretically guided at the same time.

During the first stage, the researchers had previously acquainted themselves with the data by reading and rereading transcripts. The early thoughts and consideration were recorded using analytic memos. The second phase consisted of inductive generation of initial codes which targeted leadership behaviours, procedures and experiences of employment with

regards to decent work. The process of coding was performed manually to be able to be close to the data.

During the third stage, patterns were analyzed on which codes and collected into possible themes. The fourth phase then involved reviewing and refining these themes in order to give them internal coherence and distinct separation of themes. The fifth step consisted in defining and naming the final themes with the specific focus on interpreting their applicability to ethical leadership, sustainable leadership and SDG 8. Lastly, during the sixth phase, themes were combined into a logical story which was backed up by examples.

Though the analysis was more inductive, it was also supported by the theoretical framework that was created in Section 2. This abductive methodology enabled the research to be grounded on the stories of the participants, at the same time dwelling upon the existing theory, and contributing to the theory (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

3.5 Rigor and Trustworthiness

The study adhered to the key standards of qualitative quality such as credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability to guarantee rigor and trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2020). Triangulation between leader and employee points of view and extended work with the data contributed to enhancing the credibility. A small group of the participants was subjected to member checking to check the interpretations of important themes.

The support was provided by maintaining an audit trail documenting the sampling decisions, procedures during the interview process, coding procedures and development of the themes. The assumption of the researchers and positionality was also recognized by reflexive journaling where the researchers own assumptions and positionality were critically examined as a result of the familiarity of the Pakistani context in the researcher.

Transferability was taken care of by giving us a rich description of the research setting, the people involved, as well as the organizational environments allowing the readers to evaluate how the research would be applicable to other developing economic background. On the whole, these plans adequately guarantee that the research qualified as per the requirements that Emerald has of qualitative methodological rigor.

4. Findings

The sub-special section aims to present the results of the thematic analysis performed on the data of the interviews. There were four interconnected themes that demonstrate the influence of the ethical and sustainable leadership practices in creating avenues toward the realization of decent work within Pakistani organizations in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). The results are provided with explanatory extracts to make the results more transparent and trustworthy.

4.1 Ethical Leadership as a Foundation for Fairness and Dignity at Work

In the interviews, respondents highlighted fairness and dignity as the major attainments of ethical leadership. The staff talked of ethical leaders as someone who showed equity in decision making, openness in the distribution of resources and respect of employees irrespective of their rank in the organization. These behaviours were viewed as being especially important within Pakistani context where power distance and favouritism are reportedly common challenges within the workplace.

Some of the employees emphasized that ethical leaders were active opponents of favoritism and nepotism that were accepted within the local organizational culture. One of the respondents was of the view that by using rules equally, the staff members feel that they are treated as human beings rather than workers. This impression is consistent with the existing study indicating that ethical leadership contributes to organizational justice and trust as well as elements that are relevant in developing economies (Afsar et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2021).

Even leaders admitted that one had to make a conscious effort when acting ethically, especially in situations where unethical forces influenced the mind to give favors. It is the centrality of moral leadership as a decision instead of a personal disposition that was however seen as ethical. This observation confirms the idea presented by Brown and Treviño (2021) regarding ethical leadership as an active moral management and regular signalling ethical standards.

4.2 Leadership and Inclusive Decision-Making: Strengthening Employee Voice

A second theme of predominance was related to the inclusive decision-making and facilitation of the employee voice. The participants often associated ethical leadership with openness to feedback, consultation and participatory practices. According to employees, inclusive and psychological safety were brought by leaders who facilitated dialogue and addressed concerns.

Managers in several organizations talked about putting in place formal and informal ways of getting employee feedback including frequent meetings, open door policies and anonymous feedback channels. These practices were a source of respect and recognition to the employees which made them willing to deal with the management constructively. This is because one of the employees said that, when leaders listen to them even bad news is easier to accept.

This theme is very much consistent with the social discussion of decent work as stated by ILO (2021). In line with recent results offered by Khan et al. (2023), inclusive leadership practices were also linked to fairness and shared responsibility. The results indicate that ethical leadership is an important contributor to SDG 8, not only in material conditions, but also in participatory organizational cultures.

4.3 Sustainable Leadership and Employment Security

The third theme came out as employment security, especially as far as sustainable practices in leadership are concerned. Respondents made the difference between short-term managerial judgments and leadership strategies that would deal with long-term organizational stability. It was mentioned that sustainable leaders focus on continuity of the workforce, skill enhancement, and responsible growth rather than on taking short-term economic steps to reduce the costs.

Workers complained that the leaders who maintained open communication regarding organizational issues and its future decreased anxiety on job insecurity. One respondent noted that in problematic moments, we felt safe due to sincere and open communication as we were sure of our positions. The result is reminiscent of Suriyankietkaew et al. (2021) who highlight the importance of having sustainable leadership as a way of supporting the well-being and resilience of their employees.

Leaders also expressed that there existed a close connection among employment stability and the sustainability of an organization. Some of the managers pointed out that they needed to retain qualified employees and invest in them to perform in the long run. This view demonstrates the principles of sustainable leadership espoused by Avery and Bergsteiner (2021) and pinpoints the congruence of the ethical leadership notion and the sustainable human resource practice and the decent work agenda.

4.4 Leadership, Well-Being and Meaningful Work

The last theme is associated with employee health and a perception of purposeful work. The respondents often rated ethical leadership in terms of supportive behaviours, empathy and care towards work-life balance. Leaders who were accommodating to personal situations and kept track of workload and expressed concern about mental health were reported by employees as having a positive effect on their general quality of life work.

The purposeful work was frequently described using the concepts of dignity, respect and consistency of the personal values and the organizational practice. Ethical leadership helped staff realize that their services were socially beneficial and morally satisfactory, especially when through their leaders the staff realized that social responsibility and social contribution to people were valued. This result is consistent with recent publications that associate ethical leadership to purposeful work and employee welfare (Maqsood et al., 2023).

Together, these results prove that ethical and sustainable leadership activities impact various aspects of decent work such as fairness, voice, employment security and well-being. Leadership, by defining material conditions as well as the relationships within the workplace, becomes one of the most important organizational-level procedures of furthering SDG 8 in the Pakistani setting.

5. Discussion

The present research was aimed at investigating the role of ethical and sustainable leadership practices in enhancing the concept of decent work in Pakistan in line with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). Based on qualitative data provided by leaders and employees in the cases of the public and private sector organizations, the results provide secular context-specific information on ways in which leadership operates to change how employees experience the world of work. This part will explain the results in connection with literature available, the theoretical contribution of the study, and how the results would be existing in the wider context of Pakistani society and economy.

First, the results highlight the importance of ethical leadership as a structural tool of promoting workplace justice and dignity. The focus of the participants on impartiality, transparency and respect goes in line with the developed theory on ethical leadership, who theoretically views ethical leaders as moral persons and moral managers (Brown and Treviño, 2021). In line with the previous research and studies held in Pakistan and similar settings (Afsar et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2021), the current results indicate that ethical leadership drives the better perceptions of organizational fairness and employee trust. Nevertheless, this research builds on the available research in demonstrating how the employees are interpreting such ethical practices as core to the experience of the decent work, especially in the field where formal labour protection is eroding or unequally applied.

Notably, the results show that ethical leadership in Pakistan is usually practiced to conflict with the informal values like favoritism and nepotism. Ethical behaviors were cited to be an active and at times expensive decision by leaders and not an automatic act of personal values. This knowledge enhances the existing scholarship on ethical leadership by showing that it is a contextual and controversial issue within the developing economy. It is partisan to emerging demands of institutionalized leadership theories that consider complexism of moralities outside the Western organization context (Yasir and Majid, 2021).

Second, the report identifies inclusive decision-making and employee voice as the important avenues between ethical leadership and SDG 8. Facilitating dialogue, consultation and feedback becomes the most important in regard to the perceptions of dignity and inclusion by the employees. Such results can be attributed to the research which has identified voice behaviour and psychological safety as associated with ethical leadership (Afsar et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023). In terms of a decent work, the findings support the relevance of social dialogue, which is one of the key elements of the ILO decent work framework (ILO, 2021). Showing the ways in which leadership practices can be used to transform the social dialogue into the daily organizational interactions based on an abstract principle, the study will provide a deeper aspect of empirical data to the SDG-focused organizational studies.

Third, the results on sustainable leadership and job security provide significant information on the long-term aspect of decent work. Participants made the distinction between short-term management behavior and leadership behavior that is continuity-focused, workforce growth and responsible growth. The results correlate well with the theory of sustainable leadership, which focuses on the creation of long-term values and retention of human capital (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2021). In line with Suriyankietkaew et al. (2021), the research demonstrates that transparency, as well as investment in employees, is a more effective way of reducing job insecurity and improving well-being even during the unpredictable economic times.

These findings are especially relevant in the Pakistani context, where economic instability and unregulated employment are very common (UNDP, 2022). They propose that the role of organizational leaders is highly significant in buffering by reducing the feeling of insecurity by being ethical and sustainable. This continues the SDG 8 literature by showing that the concept of job security is not merely a macroeconomic or policy challenge, but it also depends on the leadership choices of an organization.

Lastly, the theme of the well-being and meaningful work brings out the relational dimension as well as the psychological dimension of the decent work. Participants linked ethical leadership with empathy, work balance and a sense of purpose, which further supports the recent evidence of ethical leadership related to meaningful work and that ethically oriented employees have better well-being (Maqsood et al., 2023). The finding also broadens the literature on leadership, in that well-being has been placed in the wider context of the decent work and sustainability agenda, and not as a discrete individual outcome.

Combined, the results contribute to some theoretical contributions. First, they combine both ethical leadership and sustainable leadership views to provide a more comprehensive insight of how leadership promotes decent work. Second, they empirically relate the leadership practices and SDG 8 at the micro-organizational level, which is a big gap in the literature on sustainability.

All in all, the discussion shows that ethical and sustainable leadership practices cannot become peripheral to the agenda of decent work but are the key mechanisms in the yearning of SDG 8 in organizations in developing economies like Pakistan.

6. Limitations & Future Research

However, this study has a number of limitations that it must be remembered when the results are being interpreted. To start with, the study is dealing with qualitative design which is a semi-structured interview and thematic analysis. Even though this method has allowed giving deep, descriptive insights into leadership practices and employees experience, the results cannot be generalized statistically. Alternatively, they provide critical generalization because they shed light on trends and processes that can be applicable to other organizational settings. The possible future intervention may be an addition to this type of research since using a mixed-method or large-scale quantitative study could be used to verify and expand on the themes reported in the present paper.

Second, the researchers conduct the study on a insufficient number of organizations in Pakistan, mostly occurring in the public and private sector in the services. Though this approach to sampling was suitable to investigate the leadership practices in relation to decent work, it might be unable to capture the diversity of the leadership experience in various industries like manufacturing, agriculture or informal economy where the deficits of decent work are more likely to be severe. Future research must extend the sectoral boundaries to study the operation of ethical and sustainable leadership in various working environments and institutional structures.

Third, the study bases its research on self-reported impressions of the leaders and the employees, and this can be exposed to social desirability or retrospective interpretation. The

participants might have highlighted the positive leadership behaviours or they might have under-reported negative experiences especially those existing in the hierarchical culture of a country like Pakistan. This weakness may be overcome by future studies, as the studies may include various sources of data to include organizational papers, observation or longitudinal designs to contribute to the strengthening and validity of results.

Lastly, although the research directly correlates leadership practices with SDG 8, it does not analyze its relations with other Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 5 (Gender Equality) or SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) which are directly related to the agenda of decent work. Further studies may use a multi-SDG lens to understand how leadership takes initiatives to promote several aspects of sustainable development at the same time. Comparative researches of the developing economies would also be useful in the evaluation of the contextual specificity of the findings and theory-building in the field of ethical and sustainable leadership researches.

7. Conclusion

This paper intended to understand the role of ethical and sustainable leadership practices in supporting the progress of decent work in Pakistan based on Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). Based on a qualitative research design and a thematic analysis, the study offers extensive contextually based information about how employees experience leadership and how leaders act in carrying out leadership in Pakistani based organizations. The research answers a call to increasing scholarship in the leadership and sustainability literature to go deeper into the voices of the public and private sector contexts by foregrounding both public and private sector voices of the developing-country contexts.

The results indicate that ethical leadership through fairness, transparency, respect and integrity is a key factor in determining how the employees view dignity and justice at work. These ethical practices are not symbolic, as they actually translate into actual experiences of inclusion, trust and voice which are fundamental aspects of decent work. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that the presence of sustainable leadership that is long-term, employment and human capital development are vital in reduced uncertainties that result in the unstable economic environment in Pakistan. The combination of these approaches to leadership produces organizational conditions that favor employee well-being and sustainable organizational performance.

Theoretically, the research has a number of significant contributions. First, it incorporates both the ethical and sustainable leadership models to contribute to the deeper perception of leadership towards decent work. Second, it empirically correlates leadership practices at the micro-organizational dimension and the global SDG 8 agenda, which was a significant unexplored gap in sustainability and leadership literature. Third, the qualitative, context-sensitive approach resistance helps to develop the theory by showing that, under institutional limitations, cultural norms and labour market realities, leadership practice in Pakistan is determined.

The practice implications of this study are also very important. The results indicate that the organizational leaders are instrumental in promoting decent work even where law enforcement could be a loose endeavor. In fact, leaders may be instrumental in making SDG 8 a reality in their respective organizations by focusing on ethical behavior, involving every employee in decision making, and empowering employees to develop over the long term. The study is relevant to policymakers and other development stakeholders by showing the need to leverage leadership development programs that integrate ethical and sustainability values and principles into the government employment and labour policies.

To sum up, this paper has shown that central to the decent work agenda in the developing economies is ethical and sustainable leadership rather than a peripheral approach.

The study places leadership in the wider framework of sustainable development to emphasize how organizational leadership can be used as a potent force to social and economic growth in Pakistan. Hopefully this research will spur an essential academic research and practice to the crossover of leadership, sustainability and decent work.

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