Role of Leadership in Gendered Workplace Ostracism: Evidence from Higher Education Institutions of Pakistan

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT

Abstract

Gender discrimination remains a persistent barrier to women's advancement in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan. This study investigates the impact of perceived gender discrimination on workplace ostracism among female academic staff and explores how leadership styles moderate this relationship. Using a quantitative exploratory research design, data were collected through structured questionnaires from female faculty members across public and private universities in Punjab. The findings reveal a significant positive association between perceived gender discrimination and workplace ostracism. Moreover, negative leadership styles were found to intensify this relationship, while supportive leadership mitigated the effects. The study underscores the importance of inclusive leadership and institutional reforms to counteract gender-based ostracism in academic environments. The findings provide practical insights for university policymakers and leaders to create a more equitable and inclusive work culture.

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Introduction

Despite increasing research on ethical leadership and its implications in the business industries, only a few studies explore the effects of ethical leadership on workplace ostracism (Mrayyan & Algunmeeyn, 2025). Leadership has always been a deciding factor in how people behave and interact socially and professionally (Websters & Adams, 2025). Gender discrimination remains a persistent challenge in many professional environments globally, particularly within the academic sector. Female employees in higher education institutions (HEIs) often face both overt and subtle forms of discriminatory practices that undermine their sense of inclusion and professional value. One significant consequence of such discriminatory experiences may lead to perceived workplace

ostracism, the feeling of being excluded or ignored by colleagues during social interactions or activities within the workplace where inclusion is expected (Robinson, O'Reilly, and Wang, 2012; Williams, 1997; Williams, 2001). Previous studies strongly suggest that workplace ostracism is alarmingly prevalent. Fox and Stallworth (2005) discovered that 66% of full-time workers said their supervisors or co-workers purposefully ignored them. Similarly, 71% of respondents to a survey by O'Reilly et al. (2015) reported having been socially excluded in some capacity within six months. This perception of ostracism can be particularly damaging to female employees who may already contend with gender-based stereotypes, biases, and unequal opportunities (Berdahl, 2007).

Workplace ostracism at work may result from both deliberate exclusion (acts of commission) and passive neglect (acts of omission). In contrast to behavioural definitions, which are behavioural-focused (Yang & Treadway, 2018), perceptual definitions are victim-focused (Jahanzeb, Fatima, & Malik, 2018; Quade et al., 2018). Importantly, this study adopts a victim-centered perspective by focusing on perceived ostracism, how individuals interpret and experience exclusion regardless of intent.

The leadership within these organizations plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational culture and mitigating or amplifying the effects of gender discrimination. Positive and supportive leadership can foster inclusion, while negative leadership behaviors such as favoritism, neglect, or passive-aggression may strengthen exclusionary culture (Eisenbeiss et al., 2019; Ferrer et al., 2021). The damaging effect of leadership in maintaining discrimination against women at work can have a major impact on organizational inclusion and equality. However, the role of negative leadership behaviors-such as hostility, favoritism, or neglect- in reinforcing or exacerbating workplace ostracism remains largely unexplored. Although research on gender discrimination and perceived workplace ostracism already exists, there is a theoretical gap in our knowledge of the specific leadership behaviours and organizational culture aspects which unintentionally aggravate or contribute to female workers' perceptions of being excluded from work, after being discriminated.

This study seeks to address this gap, investigating the relationship between gender discrimination and perceived workplace ostracism among female academic staff in Pakistani universities. It also examines how negative leadership may moderate this relationship, potentially intensifying the adverse effects of discrimination.

This study explores how leadership behaviors may unintentionally exacerbate the perceived workplace ostracism experienced by female employees facing gender discrimination. While prior research has examined both issues separately, limited attention has been given to the interplay between leadership and ostracism in this context. By investigating the leadership traits and organizational dynamics that may contribute to or mitigate these negative experiences, the study aims to offer insights into fostering inclusive leadership and workplace culture to promote gender equality.

Objectives of the study are 2-fold, firstly, to examine the impact of gender discrimination on perceived ostracism among female employees in higher education institutions. Secondly, to assess

the moderating role of negative leadership in the relationship between gender discrimination and perceived workplace ostracism.

Research Questions

1. Does gender discrimination significantly predict perceived workplace ostracism in female employees?
2. Does negative leadership moderate the relationship between gender discrimination and perceived workplace ostracism?

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          │ Leadership Style│
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│  Gendered   │────────▶│Perceived Workplace│
│Discrimination│        │    Ostracism     │
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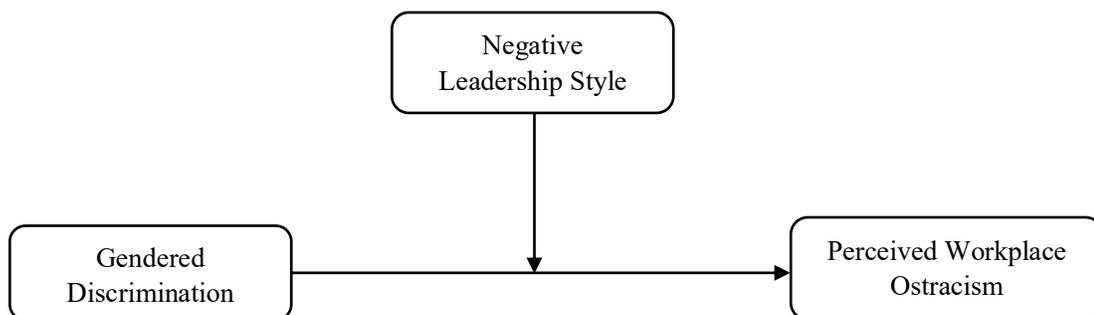
Significance of the Study:

This study carries significance both in terms of theoretical contribution and practical relevance, particularly within the socio-cultural and organizational landscape of Pakistan. Gender discrimination and the resulting workplace ostracism are persistent issues in many sectors, especially in educational institutions where leadership plays a central role in shaping organizational culture. Despite various gender equity initiatives, women's experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and limited advancement remain underexplored, particularly through the lens of leadership behavior.

The current research offers an understanding of how leadership styles can either aggravate or alleviate the perception of workplace ostracism among female employees subjected to gender discrimination. By examining this intersection, the study extends existing theories on organizational behavior and gender dynamics and contributes to the growing body of literature that emphasizes contextual and culture-specific influences on workplace experience.

In the Pakistan context, where traditional gender roles often inform workplace hierarchies, the study's findings may offer critical insights into how institutional norms, leadership approaches, and cultural values interact to challenge exclusionary practices. This is especially important in educational institutions where leadership governs policy.

Practically, the research has the potential to inform organizational leaders and policymakers about the unintended consequences of their behaviors on marginalized groups. It highlights the need for leadership development programs that incorporate gender-sensitive training and promote inclusive

practices. Furthermore, it provides direction for institutions aiming to foster psychologically safe environments where all employees, regardless of gender, can thrive.

By situating the research within the cultural framework of Pakistan and focusing on female voices within academic institutions, this study not only fills a significant gap in the literature but also serves as a foundation for future reforms in leadership and policies. The insights derived from this work may support more inclusive strategic decisions and encourage leadership models that foster equity and belonging across gender lines.

Theory and Hypothesis Development:

Gender Discrimination in HEIs

Disparities in access to opportunities, resources, and recognition result from gender discrimination, which is the unfair and uneven treatment of people based only on their gender. Such discrimination is commonly ingrained in organizational practices and cultures within academic institutions, showing up as biased performance evaluations, unequal promotion pathways, partial recruitment procedures, and restricted access to leadership positions and research funding (Morley, 2013). Women are disproportionately affected by these institutional restrictions, which impede their ability to advance academically and gain professional recognition. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2022), institutional inertia and deeply rooted gender stereotypes frequently serve as reinforcements for the structural inequality that still exists in educational institutions around the world. The underrepresentation of women in prominent academic roles and decision-making bodies persists as a major concern, notwithstanding numerous governmental interventions and pledges to gender parity. This persistent disparity restricts the diversity of viewpoints necessary for academic success and innovation in addition to undermining the values of justice and meritocracy.

Perceived Workplace Ostracism

Perceived Workplace Ostracism is defined as the sense of being ignored, excluded, or treated as though one is invisible, sometimes without express explanation or conflict. Many negative psychological and behavioral outcomes, such as increased job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, decreased organizational commitment, and increased turnover intentions, have been linked to perceived ostracism in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2008; Williams, 2007). These consequences affect overall organizational performance in addition to lowering employee well-being. Because intersectional discrimination and institutional neglect reinforce each other, the negative effects of ostracism are typically exacerbated for women, especially those who experience gender-based exclusion. According to Jones et al. (2020), a cycle of marginalization and invisibility is reinforced when gender bias combines with organizational silence or indifference, making women feel alone and ignored. Such encounters may restrict access to professional networks, impede job advancement, and ultimately deter long-term employment. Therefore, creating more inclusive and equitable organizational policies requires an awareness of the gendered aspects of workplace ostracism.

Leadership Styles and Gender Equity

According to Einarsen et al. (2007) and Schyns & Schilling (2013), negative leadership is a collection of dysfunctional behaviours that include harassment, micromanagement, favoritism, authoritarian control, and a general lack of emotional intelligence or support. These behaviours not only damage individual well-being but also exacerbate the effects of pre-existing discrimination, especially among already marginalized groups, by reinforcing exclusionary practices and escalating feelings of insecurity and isolation. Negative leadership can be particularly harmful at educational institutions where intellectual freedom, teamwork, and mentoring are crucial. It hinders both individual and institutional progress by discouraging diverse viewpoints, stifling creativity, and preventing open communication. Such settings frequently result in less opportunity for development, less involvement in decision-making, and heightened susceptibility to workplace exclusion for women and other underrepresented groups. Therefore, eliminating bad leadership is essential to creating a positive academic environment based on fairness, dignity, and inclusivity.

Hypothesis 1: *There is a significant relationship between GD and PWO.*

Hypothesis 2: NL *plays a significant moderating role between GD and PWO.*

Underpinning Theories

This study is grounded in the following theories:

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

SIT provides a thorough framework for analyzing the complex dynamics. SIT states that people divide others into social groups according to traits they have in common, including gender. This classification affects how people see themselves and other people in the workplace profoundly; it is not just a cognitive process.

As powerful individuals in an organization, leaders are essential in helping their team members develop their social identities. Biased leaders who show a preference for one gender over another are actively involved in the creation of in-groups and out-groups. When it comes to gender discrimination, this could show itself as biased decision-making that perpetuates pre-existing gender stereotypes, preferential treatment, or uneven chances.

When considering such biased leadership acts from the perspective of SIT, the repercussions become even more substantial. One of the main ideas of SIT is in-group favoritism, which describes people's propensity to give preference to those in their own social group. This can result in one gender being treated more favorably than the other at work, which makes the marginalized group feel excluded and shunned frequently, in this case, female staff members.

Positive treatment from the company or its executives encourages dedication, loyalty, and productive behaviour from employees, according to the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which holds that interactions at work are essentially based on the reciprocity principle. On the other hand, people are likely to respond with decreased engagement, a decline in organizational citizenship behaviours, and ultimately psychological or physical withdrawal when they experience unfairness or mistreatment—such as gender discrimination, ostracism, or a lack of emotional and professional support. Recurrent instances of marginalization for female employees indicate a violation of the expected social contract, which undermines their motivation and trust.

Dark leadership theory is closely related to the study of the dark side of leadership and how it contributes to female employees' perceptions of being shunned at work in the context of gender discrimination. The concept of "dark leadership" refers to a variety of unfavorable leadership actions and characteristics that harm both people and businesses. Discriminatory practices, toxic leadership, abusive supervision, and other dark leadership behaviours become especially pertinent in the particular setting of gender discrimination and perceived ostracism.

Methodology
Research Design

This study aimed to put gender discrimination as a factor identified as contributor to perceived workplace ostracism in the female employees of higher education institutions in Pakistan. It employed the cross-sectional survey methodology and quantitative exploratory research design to investigate the relationship between gender discrimination, perceived workplace ostracism among female employees and the negative leadership role in fueling workplace ostracism. The design was chosen due to the limited prior knowledge and research about how negative leadership behaviors moderates perceived workplace ostracism. This method provided precise values for the recognized constructs within the framework. Additionally, the use of quantitative methods ensured a scrutiny of identified values without introducing bias.

Sample and Data Collection

Female academics, employed by Pakistan's public and private universities, made up the target population. The sample consisted of 300 female faculty members from public and private universities in Punjab, Pakistan. To guarantee the inclusion of individuals with pertinent and firsthand knowledge of workplace dynamics pertaining to gender discrimination and ostracism, a purposive/non-probability sample technique was employed. In order to get opinions from those who are most likely to be impacted by the phenomenon being studied, this sampling technique was selected. Data were collected using a standardized and structured questionnaire distributed via online and in physical. The questionnaire was composed of standardized scales:

1. *Gender Discrimination Scale (Bergman et al., 2002)*
2. *Workplace Ostracism Scale (Ferris et al., 2008)*
3. *Negative Leadership Scale (Schilling, 2009)*

Data Screening:

The stages of data screening included missing value analysis, examination of extreme value or outliers, multivariate assumption testing, normality test and multicollinearity assessment.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using statistical methods, SPSS, and ANOVA, to identify patterns, relationships, and moderation effects among variables. The analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, correlation, and moderation analysis.

Results
Descriptive Statistics

Study comprised a total of 300 participants which targeted female workforce only. 95% of the respondents were female working class. In terms of education level, the majority of the respondents held master's degree (42.9%), whereas 28.6% obtained MS/Mphil degree and 23.5% held a bachelor's degree. 7% were on the PhD level of education. Experience status showed that 57.3 % had moderate experience (5 years) and 43% were classified as experienced professionals having experience of more than 5 years).

Correlation Analysis

Results displays that Gender Discrimination (IV) in the workplace is positively correlated to the dependent variable Perceived Workplace Ostracism (DV).   The value of 0.483 shows strong correlation between the two. Moreover, Negative Leadership (moderator) is moderately correlated with Perceived Workplace Ostracism with the value of 0.381 and strongly correlated with the Gender Discrimination with the value of 0.47. These findings categorically prove that negative leadership in an organization plays a major role in the gender discrimination, which fuels the ostracism in females further.

Correlations

		PWO	NL	GD
PWO	Pearson Correlation	1	.381**	.483**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	200	200	200
NL	Pearson Correlation	.381**	1	.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	200	200	200
GD	Pearson Correlation	.483**	.470**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	200	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Regression
Variables Entered/Removed

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	GD[b]	.	Enter

a. Dependent Variable: PWO
b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.483[a]	.233	.229	.59083

Predictors: (Constant), GD

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	20.983	1	20.983	60.109	.000[b]
	Residual	69.119	198	.349		
	Total	90.102	199			

a. Dependent Variable: PWO
b. Predictors: (Constant), GD

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.009	.139		7.238	.000
	GD	.447	.058	.483	7.753	.000

a. Dependent Variable: PWO

Model summary displays that the change in DV (Perceived Workplace Ostracism) is due to the IV (Gender Discrimination), and the value is 0.23, which implies that 1% change in the IV will bring about a 23% change in DV, which is quite significant. The results of the regression analysis clearly showed that hypothesis 1 is accepted and proved.

Moderation Analysis

Model Summary

R   Change Statistics

Model	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.674[a]	.454	.445	.46985	.454	52.015	2	125	.000
2	.678[b]	.460	.447	.46939	.09	1.245	1	124	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), NL, GD

b. Predictors: (Constant), NL, GD, GDxNL

Research Question 2 states that *leaders contribute negatively to the perception of workplace ostracism stemming from gender discrimination,* such that if negative leadership is higher than the relationship between gender discrimination and perceived workplace ostracism will also be high. It can be observed from the moderation test, R-squared change has a positive value i.e. 0.09 (9%), which is highly significant. This implies that the negative leadership (moderator) supports/increases the perceived workplace ostracism (DV). Thus, hypothesis 2 is also accepted and proved.

Discussion

This thesis clarifies the intricate dynamics of the dark side of leadership and its significant influence on fostering female employees' perceptions of workplace ostracism in the context of gender discrimination. It has become clear from a thorough analysis of the literature and empirical data that sidelining and discrimination are key components of the hostile work environment that fuels ostracism in women.

In many countries of the world, especially in Pakistan, it is believed that women are a lower species of humans. According to Chaudhry and Rahman (2009), women in Pakistan are viewed as less valuable than men in all spheres of life due to the male-controlled nature of the country. Within the workforce, women are often viewed as less competent than men (Goheer, 2003) and are typically expected to handle household duties (Alireza, 1987; Asian Development Bank, 2008). According to the Labour Force Survey of 2009–2010 (Government of Pakistan, 2011), the percentage of females in Pakistan's labor force is 15.5% of the total population, while the percentage of males is 49.5%. (Bahria Journal of Professional Psychology, Jan 2016). Moreover, in Pakistan, there are contentious but significant gender disparities in the fields of education and in the workplace (Shaukat & Pell 2016). Shaukat, Siddiquah, and Pell (2014) assert that Pakistan is among the developing nations whose educational systems exhibit gender disparities.

Gender discrimination is mostly evident in the higher education institutes of Pakistan. According to the study done by Sadia Shaukat1, Anthony William Pell (2016) a prevalent issue in our culture is the prevalence of male-dominating leadership roles, which are evident in almost all educational institutions. In academia, men are assigned to leadership roles and they predominate in the majority of higher academic posts. Compared to their male counterparts, females have fewer opportunities to engage in professional development activities such as training. The ratios of men to women in

decision-making, especially in the educational sector, are severely biased against women. Those at the higher levels see less inequality. Those at lower levels, especially lecturers, see more. With a high proportion of females at the lecturer level, this can appear as a straightforward gender polarization of views. According to Sumera et al.'s research (2021), Pakistani university students are aware of the problems surrounding gender discrimination and believe that it occurs in the workplace. In addition, female students believe that gender discrimination has a greater detrimental impact on their lives and professions. They believe that discrimination based on their gender has an impact on their career advancement, confidence, and talents. This could lead the female employees to perceive workplace ostracism, consequently affecting their mental state and productivity.

Conclusion:

The results highlighted the pressing need for organizations to address discrimination against women in the higher education institutions of Pakistan. It is essential to implement initiatives that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to not only lessen the negative consequences of leadership's darker side but also to foster a climate of dignity, justice, and community.

According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, an employee who experiences exclusion will eventually experience stress and exhaust their psychological resources. This study lends validity to this notion. When this happens, it is very difficult to deal with stressful situations and day-to-day job responsibilities at the same time.

Theoretical Contribution

Firstly, the present study established and proved the relationship between gender discrimination and perceived workplace ostracism in female employees. It established the fact that gender discrimination has an effect on the psychological wellbeing of the female employees in an organization. Discrimination forces them to perceive themselves as ostracized and sidelined.

Secondly this study introduced and identified negative traits of leaders as a moderator between workplace ostracism and gender discrimination in an organization. The relationship between workplace ostracism and gender discrimination in an organization can be greatly aggravated by negative leadership attributes. The values and prosperity of the organization are compromised by these negative leadership qualities, which foster a poisonous work environment where discrimination against women and ostracism thrive.

The findings of this study emphasize on the dire need of the more positive and inclusive behaviour of the leaders towards their female employees. Leaders must exhibit positivity and diversity to improve the overall culture and environment of their workplace. Consequently, psychologically female employees will feel more empowered, valued and inclusive, resulting in the increasing overall productivity of the organization. An employee's ultimate goal is to save their psychological resources to deal with job tasks more efficiently and effectively.

Managerial Implications

The study under consideration holds various practical consequences that could potentially benefit organizations operating in Pakistan. It's clear that workplace exclusion is a serious problem that receives very little attention. According to the study's important findings, workplace exclusion causes employees to engage in counterproductive job practices. For organizations, there are several recommendations.

This research has the potential to identify those who are more vulnerable to experience ostracism at work. This recognition offers a different perspective to the existing literature on ostracism's causes, which exclusively blames the employees for being uncooperative, unhelpful, or unpleasant. This study gives us insight that the cause behind this sort of behaviour lies with the discrimination faced by female employees which force them to feel ostracized and behave in such manner.

These findings highlight the urgent need for policy reforms within higher education institutions to address the persistent issue of discrimination and ostracism. Policy makers must realize that the leaders shape the organizational culture. By acknowledging the moderating role of leaders, organizations can re-evaluate current practices, training modules and development programs of leaders. Clear policies should be devised to include clear mechanism of reporting, addressing, and preventing gender-based discrimination and ostracism. transparent accountability frameworks must be established.

This study emphasizes the value of leadership development courses that help managers become more conscious of their own prejudices and promote inclusive management techniques. Organizations may foster a more encouraging and fair work environment for all employees by providing leaders with the abilities and information needed to identify and confront discriminatory practices. Organizations that are worried about attracting and keeping workers from a variety of demographic backgrounds may find this material very helpful.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study tried to eliminate all the problems, but still there are some limitations that must be avoided in the future. One authentic concern that may affect the quality and dependability of the results is the potential for response bias in studies that ask participants about their immediate leaders. For a variety of reasons, including fear of retaliation, the desire to keep good ties with their superiors, or worries about confidentiality, participants may be reluctant to give truthful or impartial answers. Secondly, in the absence of in-person interaction, participants might be less likely to be truthful or specific in their comments, which could lead to data that is superficial or shallow. Conducting a qualitative study with participant interviews that are carefully chosen is a useful method for getting fair and honest feedback regarding immediate leaders in the context of workplace discrimination against female employees. Qualitative interviews facilitate a deeper investigation into the viewpoints, emotions, and experiences of participants.

Also, study was limited to the universities of the Punjab, which may not fully represent the experiences of female faculty members across the country. Furthermore, the data was collected at a single point which limits the ability to draw causal conclusion. Longitudinal study instead of cross-sectional study can better capture the evolution of workplace dynamics over time.

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