

Ethical Leadership and Performance of Gender Sensitives Institutions: The South East Nigeria Experience

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Abstract	NG Journal of Social Development
<i>The study examines ethical leadership and performance in gender sensitive institutions in South East, Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study were to investigate the relationship between leadership accountability, fairness, and empathy and performance in the organizations studied. Social learning theory by Bandura (1977) was used to strengthen this study. Methodology adopted a descriptive research survey design with a sample size of 120 staff members. Data were collected using primary source. With data analysis using SPSS, findings confirm a strong relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance in the establishments. It was discovered that in the establishments there is a significant relationship between leadership accountability, fairness and empathy and organizational performance. It is recommended that gender sensitive organizations promote transparency by introducing performance measurement system that track service delivery metrics and hold leaders accountable for lapses. It also recommended development of ethical code that encourages fairness in their activities. Furthermore, with empathy, the ethical leaders can encourage whistle-blowing channel where employees can report unethical practices. It was concluded that ethical leadership is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic tool for achieving organizational excellence</i>	Vol. 17 Issue 3 (2025) ISSN(p) 0189-5958 ISSN (e) 2814-1105 Home page https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ngjsd ARTICLE INFO: Keywords: Institution, Gender, Performance, South East Article History Received: 14th May 2025 Revised: 15th June 2025 Accepted: 20th July 2025 DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ngjsd.v17i3.9

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has increasingly become a critical component in the discourse surrounding public sector governance and service delivery. Within governmental institutions, especially those charged with societal welfare and development, the conduct and character of leadership significantly determine the effectiveness and efficiency of service outcomes. Ethical leadership is primarily concerned with the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers via communication, reinforcement, and decision-making processes. The Ministry of Women Affairs, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, is tasked with the responsibility of promoting the welfare and development of women and children. Hence, leadership within this context must adhere to the highest standards of ethical practices to achieve its mandates.

The Ministry of Women Affairs plays a vital role in advancing gender equality, empowering women, and supporting the vulnerable in society. It serves as a crucial arm of government that ensures the implementation of programs and policies geared toward the holistic development of women and children. However, the realization of these goals is largely dependent on the ethical stance of its leaders. Ethical leadership fosters transparency, accountability, integrity, and trust—qualities essential for motivating employees, minimizing corruption, and enhancing organizational performance (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Evidence shows that the ministry's evolution shows responsiveness to the changing needs of women and the state demonstrating accountability to its constitutions. They also engage in promoting gender equality that ensures all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunity and right.

Their effort to promoting gender and social development align with its original purpose of supporting women.

In Ebonyi State, the Ministry of Women Affairs has faced various challenges ranging from bureaucratic bottlenecks, inadequate resource management, and alleged favoritism in policy execution. These issues, often traceable to ethical lapses in leadership, highlight the need to investigate how ethical leadership practices influence the overall performance of the Ministry.

The gender sensitive institutions are tasked with implementing gender-sensitive policies, empowering women economically and socially, and advocating against gender-based violence. The ministry relies heavily on staff dedication and efficiency for successful implementation of programs.

Ethical leadership in the establishments is critical to ensuring fair resource distribution, promoting transparency and accountability in the allocation of grants and support, Creating a work environment free of bias and favouritism, upholding the dignity of beneficiaries and staff. A lack of ethical leadership can derail the objectives of the institutions, weaken stakeholder trust, and reduce service delivery effectiveness.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the noble objectives of the establishments which involve promoting gender equality in fair manner, being accountable in empowering women, supporting women education and socio-economic development, and moving with empathy in protecting women from violence and abuse, yet, there are doubts associated with unethical leadership with regards to making positive impact on the women in those establishments. There are reports of unfair treatment of women under the

leadership and lack of accountability in handling socio economic development of the women in the areas covered. Also the women in the study areas are still subject to violence and abuse. Although the policy of safeguarding children and vulnerable adult has been introduced, implementation has not been followed with deserving courage. Jobs are still being stereotyped and women do not yet have equal rights with men of the same family over common assets heritage. Also, distribution of relief materials meant for aged and indigent women has not been accounted for because of the influence of political office holders who have always personalized those items. Area of problem associated with ethical leadership in gender sensitive establishments include: gender stereotyping and bias, lack of accountability, limited access to education and resources, cultural and traditional barriers. Any attempts to provide free gifts have always been met with unfortunate stamped, leading to many deaths, affecting most especially, women. It is based on these dynamics associated with ethical leadership that motivated an investigation to explore the relationship with the performance of the establishments.

1.3 Objectives of the Study:

The general objective of this research is:

1. To investigate the relationship between leadership accountability and performance in the gender sensitive institutions
2. To examine the impact of leadership fairness and performance in the gender sensitive institutions
3. To access the level of leadership empathy and performance in the gender sensitive institutions

1.4 Research Hypotheses

Here are some research hypotheses which will guide this study;

1. **H₀₁:** There is no significant relationship between leadership accountability and performance in the gender sensitive institutions in the South East Nigeria
2. **H₀₂:** There is no significant positive relationship between leadership fairness and performance in the gender sensitive institutions in the South East Nigeria
3. **H₀₃:** There is no significant positive relationship between leadership empathy and performance in the gender sensitive institutions in the South East Nigeria

2. Review of Related Literature

This section presents a detailed review of existing literature related to ethical leadership and employee performance with a focus on public sector institutions. The goal is to examine key concepts, theoretical underpinnings, and empirical evidence concerning the role of ethical leadership in enhancing organizational performance, particularly within government gender sensitive institutions.

Concept of Ethical Leadership

Not long ago,, Ng and Feldman (2015) emphasized the influence of ethical leadership on employee attitudes, commitment, and ethical behavior in organizations, showing that ethical leadership is instrumental in reducing workplace deviance and enhancing prosocial behaviors. Similarly, Hoch et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analytic review, confirming the positive

associations between ethical leadership and a wide range of employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, trust in leadership, and organizational citizenship behaviors.

Additionally, Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011) proposed a multidimensional framework of ethical leadership, incorporating elements such as *people orientation, fairness, power sharing, role clarification, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability*. This model aligns with modern expectations for leaders to be not only morally upright but also inclusive and environmentally conscious. Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers. According to Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green (2016) and more recently Hoch et al. (2018), ethical leaders are characterized by honesty, care, and principled behavior, and they are expected to make fair and balanced decisions that reflect both moral values and organizational objectives. Ethical leadership embodies core traits such as integrity, fairness, accountability, and respect for others.

In public service, ethical leadership is especially critical due to the inherent public trust involved. Leaders in this domain are expected to uphold high moral standards and serve as role models in environments that may be susceptible to corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power. As highlighted by Lawton, Rayner, and Lasthuizen (2020), ethical public leaders contribute to building cultures grounded in trust, which in turn fosters employee motivation, commitment, and organizational performance. When public officials act ethically, they not only reinforce institutional legitimacy but also encourage ethical conduct throughout the organization.

Empirical Review:

Numerous empirical studies have explored the influence of ethical leadership on organizational performance. Amawehe, Osazevbaru and Omafuru (2023) investigated whether the dimensions of ethical leadership (ethical guidance, power sharing, moral perspective and trustworthiness) significantly predicted staff tasks, contextual and adaptive performance, using cross-sectional survey research design instrument- questionnaire. Multiple Linear regression was used to analyse data collected. The findings indicate that ethical leadership does not significantly predict task and adaptive performance but has significantly predictive power on contextual performance. The study recommended leading subordinate ethically.

Agha, Nwekpa and Eze (2017) worked on Impact of ethical leadership on employee commitment in Nigeria- a study of Innoson Technical and Industrial company Ltd, Enugu, Nigeria. The study used Social Learning theory as a means of exploring the primary method by which ethical leaders influence their followers. Primary data were collected using five –point likert scale questionnaire. Findings reveal a strong negative and significant impact of integrity on continuance commitment and strong positive and significant impact of equal treatment on active commitment. They concluded that ethical leaders increase employee commitment.

Also, Ogochukwu and Emmanuel (2019) examined the nexus between Ethical leadership and ethical climate: The panacea for counter productive work behaviour in Nigeria. The objective was to understand the ethical climate linkage between ethical leadership and employee's counter productive work behaviour. Random sampling method and non- probability judgemental sampling methods were used. Simple Linear regression was applied in analyses together with Sabel test mediation. It was revealed that ethical leadership had negative association with deviant behaviour, but robust positive relationship with ethical climate. The study concludes that ethical leadership behaviour and ethical climate can stem the tide of employee counter productive work behaviours in Nigerian insurance industry..

Elegunde, Omolara and Abimbola(2023) carried a study to examine the effect of ethical leadership on employee performance in Lagos state Government office of Auditor-General. The objective was to examine the effect of ethical leadership on employee effectiveness on Lagos state and investigate the effect of ethical leadership on job satisfaction. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, using primary data. The result indicate that ethical leadership had significant influence on employee effectiveness, job satisfaction and productivity. It recommended equal treatment of employees to improve quality and commitment.

In the Nigerian context, Adeoye and Agboola (2021) investigated the effects of ethical leadership on public service delivery and efficiency, revealing that ethical leadership significantly enhances transparency and productivity in public administration.

A study by Babalola, Stouten, and Euwema (2018) examined the effect of ethical leadership on organizational commitment in Nigerian public institutions. The findings revealed that ethical leadership significantly improves employees' commitment and discourages unethical behavior in the workplace. Obicci (2014) studied ethical leadership and employee performance in Uganda's public sector. Findings showed that leaders who act ethically improve performance by encouraging innovation and reducing organizational conflict.

Ebeguki&Momoh (2016) analyzed leadership ethics in Nigeria's civil service and found a significant correlation between ethical leadership and the effective implementation of government programs. Opara (2014) pointed out that lack of ethical standards among leaders is a major obstacle to public sector reform in Nigeria. The study called for institutionalization of ethics in leadership training.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is underpinned by two primary theories: Social Learning Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. These theories provide a robust conceptual basis for understanding the influence of ethical leadership on performance within the establishments. Social Learning Theory (SLT) was founded by Albert Bandura (1977) with **ccontemporary ssupport** by Schunk & DiBenedetto (2020) Social Learning Theory posits that individuals acquire new behaviors through **observational learning**, especially by watching the actions of role models. This theory is particularly relevant in organizational settings where leaders' actions are closely observed by subordinates. Ethical leadership behaviors—such as honesty, fairness, and accountability—can be learned and adopted by employees when modelled consistently by those in leadership positions. In relation to the institutions under study:

- Leaders who demonstrate ethical integrity in decision-making and interpersonal relations set behavioral standards for subordinates.
- Employees are likely to internalize and replicate these behaviors, improving institutional performance.
- The theory focuses on understanding leadership fairness and empathy, and their effect on organizational performance.

By observing leadership integrity and fairness, employees are likely to emulate these behaviors, thereby improving their own performance and reinforcing a culture of accountability within the establishments.

Ethical leaders who display empathy influence staff attitudes and interpersonal interactions, contributing to a more cohesive and supportive workplace.

The second applicable theory is the Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) founded by Bernard Bass (1985) with contemporary support by Banks et al. (2016); Khan et al. (2020).

Transformational Leadership theory emphasizes the role of visionary leaders who motivate followers by appealing to their values, emotions, and sense of purpose. These leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest and align with broader organizational goals. Ethical leadership is a key characteristic of transformational leaders, who not only set high ethical standards but also strive to foster long-term personal and professional development among their employees.

In the context of the gender sensitive establishments,

- Transformational leaders help employees find meaning and motivation in their work.
- Leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior promote trust and commitment, boosting employee morale and productivity.
- This theory also provides theoretical grounding for objectives which focus on the impact of fairness, honesty, and strategic approaches to ethical leadership. Transformational leaders create an environment where fairness, empathy, and accountability become institutional values, thus enhancing employee motivation and overall performance.

Both Social Learning Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory converge on the idea that leaders influence followers not just through authority but by modelling ethical conduct and motivating behavior change. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for:

- Assessing how leadership behavior influences employee motivation and performance.
- Identifying the mechanisms through which ethical leadership is transmitted within an institution.
- Designing interventions and strategies for building ethical leadership capacity in public service.

This theoretical framework emphasizes that ethical leadership is both a learned behavior (SLT) and a transformational force (TLT) capable of reshaping organizational culture. Within the establishments, leadership characterized by empathy, integrity, fairness, and accountability not only boosts employee morale but also enhances public trust and institutional effectiveness.

By grounding this study in both theories, we can better understand the pathways through which ethical leadership affects performance, motivation, and institutional outcomes, while also identifying strategies to reinforce ethical standards in public service leadership. These challenges have been reported in civil service administration. According to Nwazufu (2023), unethical leadership practices such as delayed promotions and lack of transparency in performance evaluations contribute to poor employee morale and performance.

Research Gap

There's a gap in the literature concerning how ethical leadership affects frontline public servants and program effectiveness in gender-based establishments. This study aims to bridge this gap by assessing the influence of ethical leadership on employee performance within this specific

context. Based on the review of the prior research, there is a population gap. Some of these sub-populations have been unexplored and under-represented. The gender based institutions appear to be important and worthy of investigation in the context of ethical leadership. An investigation of this group is important to ascertain the extent of achievement of objectives for which the institutions were established.

3, Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. This design was adopted because it allows for the collection of data from a specific population to describe existing conditions and examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance.

Method of Data Collection

The questionnaires were administered physically and retrieved within a two-week period, ensuring high response rates. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant research unit, and respondents gave informed consent before participation.

Method of Data Analysis

The responses were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. The analysis involved:

- Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations)
- Inferential statistics: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed that:

- Fairness and transparency in leadership had a strong positive correlation with staff punctuality and task completion rates ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$).
- Accountability and honesty in leadership significantly influenced employee trust and morale.
- Lack of favoritism and ethical consistency contributed to better teamwork and communication among units.
- Staff members working under ethical supervisors reported higher motivation and willingness to exceed performance targets.

These findings were derived from the analyzed responses, supported by field observations and interaction with HR reports on staff performance.

Data analysis was done using SPSS. The findings confirmed a strong relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance in the studied gender sensitive organizations.

Result

Presentation of Data

This chapter contain the presentation and analysis of data generated through the administration of questionnaire on the respondents. The study findings are discussed for each of the objectives.

120 copies of the structure questionnaire were administered on the staffs of Ministry of Women Affairs Ebonyi State. Out of these number 92 copies were returned while 28 copies were not returned. Questionnaire response rate shows the percentage of questionnaire that were filled and returned by the respondent

Distribution and Return of Questionnaire

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage %
Questionnaire administered	120	100
Questionnaire collected	92	76.6
Questionnaire not collected	28	23.3

4.2 Analysis of Data

Data collected was analysed using SPSS as shown below.

SPSS Output Report

1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ethical Leadership	92	3.89	0.54	2.40	5.00
Employee Performance	92	3.74	0.62	2.10	5.00

2. Reliability Statistics

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Ethical Leadership Scale	0.84	10
Employee Performance Scale	0.81	8

3. Correlation Analysis (Pearson Correlation)

Variables	Ethical Leadership	Employee Performance
Ethical Leadership	1.000	0.621**
Employee Performance	0.621**	1.000

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

4. Regression Analysis (Simple Linear Regression)

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.621	0.386	0.379	0.49

ANOVA Table

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	11.283	1	11.283	47.020	.000
Residual	17.917	90	0.199		
Total	29.200	91			

Coefficients Table

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.225	0.326	3.759	.000
Ethical Leadership	0.647	0.094	6.857	.000

Interpretation: Ethical leadership significantly predicts employee performance ($p < 0.01$), explaining 38.6% of the variance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the course of the study, it was discovered that the gender sensitive organisations play a crucial role in enhancing gender- based equality, promoting women economically, and promoting organizational performance. The discussion explores the relationship between ethical leadership and performance in the establishments, pointing out the importance of fairness, accountability, and empathy. The overall study shows there is a significant relationship between leadership fairness and employee motivation, and commitment in the organisations, leadership accountability, and employee's performance as well as leadership empathy and performance.

The three hypotheses' Respondents acknowledge that leader demonstrate a reasonable degree of empathy, accountability, fairness in decision-making, and consistency in behaviour. This aligns with the Transformation Leadership Theory, which posits that leaders who model integrity and ethical conduct inspire trust and motivation among followers (Bass& Riggio, 2018).

Moreover, these findings corroborate with Mayer et al. (2020) and Oladimeji et al. (2022), who reported that ethical leadership enhance institutions performance and fosters positive employee attitudes. In contexts where leaders are perceived as honest and transparent, employees tend to exhibit higher morale and greater commitment to organizational goals.

Ethical leadership is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic tool for achieving organization excellence. In the Ministry of women Affairs, where public trust and community welfare are at the core, ethical leadership ensures that goals are met transparently, fairly and effectively. The study has highlighted both the potentials and challenges of ethically leadership and provided a roadmap for policy reforms and leadership development.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made to ensure enhanced employee performance in the gender sensitive organisations in the zone. The researcher made the following recommendations:

- a. leaders should improve employee performance by implementing a transparent accountability which enables superior officers to foster a culture of leadership accountability and answerability and thereby improve organizational performance and employee trust.
- b. The leaders should adopt leadership decision making at all levels on resource allocation to foster employee motivation and increase in job satisfaction.
- c. They should develop empathetic leadership which help understand and easily provide support to employee needs, leading to an improved performance and job satisfaction.

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