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# Towards understanding workplace incivility: gender, ethical leadership and personal control

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## ABSTRACT

Few public management studies have examined the prevalence of workplace incivility and ways to reduce uncivil behaviour towards women and minority groups. The present research examines the influence of employee gender, personal control, and ethical leadership on workplace incivility experiences in public workplaces using data collected from government and non-profit employees in Pakistan. We find that women are more likely than men to experience workplace incivility, but this relationship attenuates when the direct supervisor exhibits ethical leadership. We also find that ethical leadership and personal control are associated negatively to workplace incivility experienced by both male and female public employees.

**KEYWORDS** Gender; workplace incivility; ethical leadership; personal control; Pakistan

## Introduction

Societal transformations driven by globalization, immigration, and other socio-economic changes have brought increased attention to managing diversity and creating inclusive work environments in public organizations (Choi and Rainey 2014; Pitts 2012). One focus has been to reduce incidences of mistreatment of women and minorities in the workplace, and to do so governments in many countries have enacted anti-discrimination and anti-harassment laws. With these formal efforts, overt mistreatment of women and minorities have indeed been reduced, but prejudices still persist in subtle ways in organizations (Brief et al. 2000). To combat these more subtle forms of mistreatment, marginalization, and discrimination it may be up to organizational leaders to use less institutionalized ways.

In this study, we focus on one particular type of subtle mistreatment: workplace incivility. Workplace incivility refers to ‘low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others’ (Andersson and Pearson 1999, 457). Examples of uncivil behaviour in the workplace include making insulting, demeaning, or derogatory remarks, interrupting a person while she is making a suggestion, ignoring ideas and opinions, and doubting her competence or judgement on a job task over which she has

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responsibility (Cortina 2008; Hershcovis 2011). Such actions do not rise to the level of behaviours like bullying (Hershcovis 2011; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005). Nor is it to the same degree as harassment or discrimination that are prohibited in the workplace, in many countries, by law and through organizational policies.

Showing disrespect or being discourteous or unprofessional may be less intense than bullying or overt discrimination, but it still can have deleterious effects on both employees and organizations (Cortina et al. 2013; Hershcovis et al. 2007; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005). Research shows that besides motivating an employee to leave an organization, uncivil behaviour can reduce employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and increase psychological distress, depression and work withdrawal behaviours (Hershcovis and Barling 2010; Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erez 2016). Workplace incivility can also be the beginning of more aggressive and persistent form of misbehaviour such as bullying (Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005).

There is a long-standing literature in public management on discrimination, particularly on the disparate treatment of women and minority groups by bureaucrats when they deliver services (Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Heinrich 2016; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011) as well as barriers that women and minority groups face as they ascend the hierarchy in public organizations (c.f., Lewis 1997; Naff 1994; Riccucci 2009). Yet relatively few studies have examined the prevalence of workplace incivility targeted towards women generally (Gabriel et al. 2018) or within public organizations specifically (c.f. Cortina et al. 2013). These behaviours can be especially problematic because they can marginalize women and form barriers to advancement. This article addresses this gap in the literature by examining experiences of incivility for women and men as well as contextual factors that can influence incivility incidences.

We also contribute to public management scholarship by focusing on an understudied region and cultural context, Pakistan. Most studies on workplace incivility have focused their attention on organizations in Western countries (Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erez 2016). National culture can shape values and expectations about what constitutes civil behaviour and perceptions of incivility (Welbourne, Gangadharan, and Sariol 2015). Thus, specific cultural differences may make it difficult to generalize findings from Western cultures to countries like Pakistan that have a strong patriarchal society, a majority Muslim population, and relatively low female labour force participation (Abid et al. 2015).

Moreover, our study provides new insight into the context in which public employees are more or less likely to experience workplace incivility. Specifically, we focus on the role of two contextual factors, personal control and ethical leadership, that have not received adequate attention in previous workplace incivility research. Organizational research suggests that power structures in organizations and society play an important role in shaping how women and minority groups are treated and the opportunities that they are afforded within their workplaces (Cortina et al. 2001; Hultin and Szulkin 1999; Kanter 1977). To maintain the status quo or power differences in an organization, members of the dominant or majority group may engage in uncivil interactions with minority group members (Cortina et al. 2001; Cortina 2008). This suggests that experience of incivility is likely to be related to the power that an employee has in his or her organization. We posit that public employees with higher personal control are less likely to experience incivility than those with lower personal control and that this relationship might vary between men and women.

We also assess whether managers can prevent/reduce workplace incivility in public organizations. To the extent that they shape an organization's culture, act as role models, and generally set the tone within organizations, public managers may play an especially important role in whether employees experience workplace incivility. We contend that, by demonstrating ethical leadership, managers in public organizations may reduce the overall level of workplace incivility as well as selective incivility towards women. While the broader management literature has paid a great deal of attention to the consequences of ethical leadership, few studies in public management have examined its effects on public employee behaviours and attitudes (Hassan, Wright, and Yukl 2014; Hassan 2015; Potipiroon and Faerman 2016; Wright, Hassan, and Park 2016). Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, no study in the public sector has examined how ethical leadership may influence workplace incivility targeted towards women. In the next section we define and discuss workplace incivility more extensively.

### **Workplace incivility**

Studies of harassment in the workplace have increased substantially since the late 1980s (Neall and Tuckey 2014) and 'exploded' since the mid-1990s (Hershcovis 2011). This research has been conducted under a variety of labels and numerous constructs, such as bullying, victimization, emotional abuse, social undermining, abusive supervision, and incivility (Hershcovis 2011; Neall and Tuckey 2014). These constructs vary on dimensions such as intensity, intent, frequency and the identity of the perpetrator (Hershcovis 2011). Grouped together, these forms of interpersonal mistreatment represent counterproductive work behaviours and the 'dark side' of organizational life (Cortina and Magley 2003, p. 247; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005). Here we focus specifically on one type of interpersonal mistreatment, workplace incivility. Incivility has been identified as 'one of the most pervasive forms of anti-social behavior in the workplace' (Cortina 2008, 56) and unfortunately is quite common in today's workplaces (Cortina et al. 2017). Workplace incivility's 'low intensity' and 'ambiguous intent' differentiates it from other negative workplace interactions that fall under the broader harassment or 'counterproductive workplace behaviors' umbrella (Hershcovis 2011; Neall and Tuckey 2014; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005). Also notable is the mundane nature of these behaviours; that is, albeit they are 'rude, condescending, and ostracizing' and 'violate workplace norms of respect,' they may otherwise appear to be everyday interactions (Cortina et al. 2017, 299).

Workplace incivility is closest conceptually to workplace bullying, the next 'step' up in terms of the level of the behaviour's intensity (Hershcovis 2011; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005) Workplace bullying can be defined as a situation in which one or more individuals persistently perceives themselves as being on the receiving end of negative or hostile actions from one or several persons and where the target finds it difficult to defend themselves against these actions (Einarsen and Skogstad 1996; Nguyen et al. 2018). Bullying is characterized by persistent or repeated exposure to aggressive and hostile behaviour in which the target is singled out and victimized by one or more people (Nielsen and Einarsen 2012; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath 2005). It is high intensity, intentional, and frequent (Hershcovis 2011). By contrast, workplace incivility is a more subtle, lower intensity form of mistreatment

in which the intent to harm the target is often ambiguous (Cortina 2008; Hershcovis 2011; Pearson, Andersson, and Porath. 2005). Despite its lower intensity, incivility can be just as harmful as bullying and other more intense forms such as social undermining, emotional abuse, and abusive supervision (Andersson and Pearson 1999; Hershcovis 2011).

Experiencing or witnessing incivility often affects employees, workgroups and organizations negatively (Cortina 2008; Cortina et al. 2017; Miner and Eischeid 2012). At the individual employee level, incivility can result in the disruption of employee relationships, loss of organizational commitment, higher turnover, anxiety, depression and stress, and lower job satisfaction and self-esteem (Cortina 2008; Estes and Wang 2008). The more an employee experiences incivility, the less they like their job, their stress increases and the more likely they are to become disengaged from work (Cortina et al. 2017). Organizational performance can be negatively affected because employees who experience incivility may be more apt to reduce work efforts, cease any extra-role behaviours, refuse to cooperate with each other, or leave their job entirely (Cortina 2008; Estes and Wang 2008).

Employees may engage in incivility because it may act as a mechanism for asserting power and maintaining power differences (Cortina et al. 2001). Cultural and social expectations and norms can confer a greater power status on certain identity groups over others. Within organizations generally, these power bases can be rooted in one's position in the hierarchical structure, or in gender, race and ethnicity (Cortina et al. 2001). In particular, to maintain power differentials, members of the dominant or majority group may engage in uncivil interactions with minority group members (Cortina et al. 2001; Cortina 2008). Such interactions can further marginalize these groups and maintain the status quo of the majority group.

The broader national culture and societal context may also encourage or deter workplace incivility. The strength of organizational anti-discrimination policies and cultural traditions of sexism can influence how overt or subtle such behaviour is (Cortina 2008). The broader culture also sets overall behavioural norms and expectations on which an organization's culture may be based. As such, the national culture may also shape whether or to what extent organizational leaders and members will tolerate incivility within the organization (Cortina 2008).

Some scholars have linked incivility to discrimination (e.g. Cortina 2008; Cortina et al. 2013). Implicitly held stereotypes may result in what Cortina (2008) describes as 'selective incivility' where women and people of colour disproportionately experience uncivil behaviour at work. Even among employees who explicitly oppose sexism or racism, implicit bias and preferences to associate with others like themselves may lead to incivility towards women and people of colour (Cortina 2008). In such situations, incivility may be 'a covert manifestation of gender and racial bias' and can be considered a subtle form of discrimination (Cortina et al. 2013, 1581). But implicitly held biases and stereotypes may not be the only source of incivility towards women and people of colour. In some cases, employees may be conscious of their biases and make little attempt to conceal overt uncivil behaviour (Cortina 2008).

Several studies have shown that women in a variety of professions report experiencing more instances of incivility than men (Cortina et al. 2001, 2013, 2017; Gabriel et al. 2018), although at least one study found that men report more incivility (Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erez 2016). Prior research on selective incivility in three public sector organizations (a U.S. city government, a U.S. law enforcement agency,

and the U.S. armed forces) found that women report more incidences of incivility than men, and these experiences are linked to higher turnover intentions (Cortina et al. 2013). Moreover, the likelihood that women experience incivility is higher in male-dominated professions, workgroups and organizations (Cortina et al. 2002, 2013, 2017). This latter finding may be especially relevant for nations where women's workforce participation is particularly low or just developing, making consideration of gender and incivility especially relevant for our context of Pakistan, as we discuss further in the next section.

## Hypotheses

### *Gender, work and workplace incivility in Pakistan*

Full incorporation of women into the labour force is important for equity and economic efficiency reasons (Fatima and Sultana 2009; Mujahid and Uz Zafar 2012). Female labour force participation (FLFP) is fundamental to socio-economic growth and reducing poverty (Faridi, Chaudhry, and Anwar 2009). Empirical support for the role of culture in explaining FLFP has been demonstrated (Clark, Ramsbey, and Adler 1991; Khan & Khan, 2009; Sadaquat and Sheikh 2011). In many predominantly Muslim nations, patriarchy and religious tenants underpin a cultural prescription of separate spheres for men and women (Clark, Ramsbey, and Adler 1991; Hussain 2008). Emphasis on women's roles as mothers and obedient wives often relegates them to the private sphere, excluding them from both participation in public life and from employment in the formal economy (Clark, Ramsbey, and Adler 1991; Kahn and Khan 2009). Cross-national comparison of FLFP considering both material (economic) conditions and cultural realities shows FLFP is lowest in countries with majority Muslim populations (Clark, Ramsbey, and Adler 1991).

Compared to other south Asian countries, Pakistan has a low rate of FLFP (Faridi, Chaudhry, and Anwar 2009). In the 1980s FLFP was only 4%, but it has recently grown rapidly in urban and rural areas of Pakistan as a result of increasing work opportunities arising from economic development (Fatima and Sultana 2009; Mujahid and Uz Zafar 2012) and policies liberalizing trade (Aboohamidi and Chidmi 2013). At the beginning of the twenty first century, 18.9% of women worked in Pakistan's formal economy across agricultural and industrial sectors (Faridi, Chaudhry, and Anwar 2009; Fatima and Sultana 2009). According to the World Bank, FLFP rate in Pakistan has now reached almost a quarter (24%) of women age 15 and older.<sup>1</sup>

The relatively low workforce participation of women in Pakistan can be partly explained by the Muslim religious traditions that have prescribed stringent restrictions regarding male and female interaction (Sadaquat and Sheikh 2011). Hussain (2008) writes, 'most [women] are required to stay within the confines of their homes and forbidden to come in contact with any male outside their family' (p. 15). These social rules apply in private and public spheres so that many women who do work prefer occupations that allow sex segregation (Hussain 2008).

In Pakistan's urban areas, however, female seclusion and pressure to conform to traditional roles have diminished in recent years (Hussain 2008). Women are increasingly choosing a variety of occupations, yet the expanded options and increases in FLFP have largely involved women assuming professions that are undesirable for men (Hussain 2008). These jobs often come with lower pay, poor working conditions,

dead-end roles, or repetitive tasks (Hussain 2008; Sadaquat and Sheikh 2011). Gender-based discrimination frequently results in fewer promotions and lower salaries for women (Sadaquat and Sheikh 2011). Stereotypes influenced by the patriarchal society contribute to the underestimation of the professional and decision making capabilities of women while positions that pay well and offer upward mobility are explicitly reserved for men (Hussain 2008).

Behaviour norms can vary between organizations and cultures (Miner et al. 2017). Abid et al. (2015) note that specific cultural differences may make it difficult to apply findings from incivility research in Western cultures to South Asia due to differences in priority placed on individuality and independence in the West. Prior research in Pakistan has revealed a very high incidence of workplace incivility across education, insurance, banking, and health care sectors in Lahore, but the prevalence and severity of workplace incivility does not appear to differ substantially between organization types (Abid et al. 2015). Ismail and Ali (2016) reported that workplace incivility in Pakistani universities was associated negatively with employee job satisfaction and affective commitment, but it had no association with employee continuance commitment. In the public sector in Pakistan, a robust relationship was found between workplace incivility (operationalized broadly as mistreatment) and interpersonal conflict as well as between workplace incivility and discrimination, work withdrawal, and work behaviours that reduce productivity (Bibi, Karim, and Ud Din 2013; Bibi, Nawaz, and Nawaz 2012).

The strongly patriarchal social structure in Pakistan may lead few women to work outside the home and discrimination and double-burdens of wage work and domestic work for the women that do. In addition to the discrimination in hiring, promotion and pay discussed here, manifestations of incivility that assert power and maintain social power differentials particularly over women in the workplace may be especially relevant for our Pakistan context. More specifically, uncivil workplace interactions can serve as mechanisms to preserve the traditional, patriarchal national culture and act as resistance to women's increasing presence in the workplace. As such, we expect that women will experience incivility more frequently than men.

*Hypothesis 1: Women in public and non-profit organizations in Pakistan experience workplace incivility more frequently than men.*

### ***Personal control and workplace incivility***

Organizational scholars have defined personal control as a psychological construct pertaining to 'the individual's beliefs, at a given point in time, in his or her ability to effect a change, in a desired direction, on the environment.' (Greenberger and Strasser 1986, 165). When an employee believes they have control over both their work disposition (autonomy) and significant work outcomes (impact), then the perception of personal control will be high (Brockner et al. 2004; Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008). Personal control has been included in a wide variety of organizational behaviour theories, such as expectancy theory, goal setting theory, and empowerment theory, to name only a few (Greenberger and Strasser 1986).

Individuals typically seek to increase the level of control or influence that they have in a group or an organization and are active in their efforts to expand actual and perceived control (Greenberger and Strasser 1986). A lack of control is

associated with a variety of negative performance and personal outcomes (Greenberger and Strasser 1986). These outcomes range in intensity from alienation/detachment at work and decreased innovation, to organizational sabotage, stress and depression (Greenberger and Strasser 1986; Spector 1986). In addition to enhanced job performance, personal control is associated with higher job satisfaction (Greenberger et al. 1989; Spector 1986) and organizational identification (Greenaway et al. 2015).

Higher personal control is likely to be associated with a higher sense of power or interpersonal influence within the organization (Kanter 1977). Research also shows that perception of personal control is related positively to exercising voice, which includes speaking up and speaking out about problems, constructively expressing concerns and opinions and offering ideas to address problems or issues (LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Tangirala & Ramanujam 2008; Van Dyne and LePine 1998). Voice may be used to improve one's situation at work and is a strategy that employees may choose to counter instigated incivility (Cortina and Magley 2003; Parker 1993). Voice may take the form of confronting the instigator of the incivility or reporting the misbehaviour to superiors (Cortina and Magley 2003). Thus, when an employee has a high sense of personal control, one might expect that she or he will be more likely to engage in voice because she or he believes there is a chance of success in enacting change (Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008). Having a high sense of personal control may also help the employee overcome fears associated with exercising voice (Hassan 2015; Hassan, DeHart-Davis, and Jiang 2019). An employee, especially in a situation in which the employee is experiencing incivility, risks the interpersonal relationship with the other when engaging in voice. This fear, coupled with the realization that she or he may be going against existing norms or expectations or be the target of retaliation (Cortina and Magley 2003) may increase the likelihood she or he will remain silent unless she or he believes in the likelihood of successfully enacting change by speaking up.

Although the influence of personal control on individual behaviour has been studied extensively, even within public organizations (Hassan, DeHart-Davis, and Jiang 2019; Hassan 2015), the connection between personal control and workplace incivility remains largely unexamined. The dynamic situational model of personal control holds that when employees compare their perceived and desired levels of control and find a mismatch, the employee will actively work to increase control by changing attitudes or behaviours (Greenberger and Strasser 1986). For example, an employee may engage her or his voice to change the situation or behaviour of the instigator. This suggests that personal control has a negative relationship with experiences of workplace incivility. Individuals possessing high personal control may be empowered in the workplace in a way that excludes her or him from being an easy target of incivility. In other words, high personal control may correlate with low experience of uncivil behaviour because the employee with control might be in a position to initiate defensive consequences for uncivil behaviour in order to change the hostile environment. Uncivil workplace behaviour may be reserved for those with less power or influence at work, meaning lower personal control corresponds with higher reports of workplace incivility.

*Hypothesis 2a: Employees with higher levels of personal control will report fewer workplace incivility experiences than employees with lower levels of personal control.*



However, with respect to how a sense of personal control may influence men's and women's experiences of personal control in the workplace differently, the expected relationship is not clear. This relationship is likely to differ on the basis that women's workplace experiences differ from those of men and that women are more likely to experience incivility than men. However, the directionality of this influence could be either positive or negative for women. On the one hand, when women perceive they have personal control in the workplace they may engage voice to prevent or stop uncivil interactions or to change the organization's values, rules, or even culture to stop the interactions. In this case, there is a level of confidence that they can affect change, and they may in fact be able to do so. On the other hand, when women perceive they have personal control and use their voice, they may experience a backlash based on the cultural expectations, especially in the case of a patriarchal hierarchy or culture. In these cases, women's sense of power or influence may actually be related to an increase in the experiences of workplace incivility. Hence, we hypothesize generally that gender moderates the relationship between personal control and incivility but do not predict in which direction the effect might be.

*Hypothesis 2b: The association between personal control and workplace incivility will vary between women and men.*

### **Ethical leadership and workplace incivility**

Ethical leadership may play an important role in reducing incidences of incivility in the workplace. Ethical leadership has been conceptualized as being comprised of three components: "being an ethical example, treating people fairly, and actively managing morality (Mayer et al. 2012, 151). The third component, the '*moral manager*' (Mayer et al. 2012, emphasis from the original authors), consists of actions on the part of the manager that may specifically affect incidences of workplace incivility. These actions include encouraging, rewarding and discouraging certain behaviours, communicating ethical expectations, and punishing unethical behaviour (Mayer et al. 2012). While ethical leadership shares similarities with transformational and authentic leadership models, ethical leadership's focus on transactional managerial behaviours (e.g., sanctioning people) distinguishes it from authentic as well as transformational leadership styles (Brown and Trevino 2006).

Ethical leadership may reduce workplace incivility in several ways. Ethical leaders model normatively appropriate behaviours through their interactions with employees and others at work (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison 2005). Social learning theory suggests that followers learn appropriate behaviour by observing, and subsequently emulating, what credible models value and how they behave (Brown and Trevino 2006). When leaders possess both power and status (authority), followers are more likely to pay attention to them (Brown and Trevino 2006). Ethical leadership practices signal what constitutes appropriate interactions in the workplace and employees perceive these signals as indicators that the organization values and supports norms for the respectful treatment of others (Walsh et al. 2017). Moreover, ethical leaders hold employees accountable to standards of behaviour (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison 2005; Walsh et al. 2017).

Social learning and social exchange theories both argue for the ability of ethical leaders to influence the behaviour of others when followers identify with leader models (Brown and Trevino 2006). Ethical leaders attempt to guide employees to exhibit proper workplace conduct by inspiring employee reflections of right and wrong (Thaler and Helmig 2016). Recent experimental research finds that ethical behaviour positively influences the attitude of employees (Thaler and Helmig 2016). Others have found that by providing rewards and punishments and setting an example through their own actions, ethical leaders can prompt prosocial behaviour and stimulate civility (Brown and Trevino 2006; Taylor and Pattie 2014).

Prior research has indicated that ethical leadership reduces unethical behaviours among employees, but it has not extensively considered workplace incivility per se (Brown and Trevino 2006; Taylor and Pattie 2014). In one study, Walsh and colleagues (2017) found that ethical leader behaviours are linked to lower workplace incivility. More specifically, they found that when leaders set a good example through their behaviours and decisions, employees perceive that the organization has norms for mutual respect, which then is related to lower workplace incivility (Walsh et al. 2017, 2). The study, however, did not examine whether the effects of ethical leadership differ for women and men who experience incivility. To the extent that ethical leaders try to influence employees by role modelling appropriate behaviours and in consideration of the historical patterns of discrimination and harassment against women, they may especially focus on professional and respectful interactions with women. Therefore, while we expect that ethical leadership by public managers will reduce workplace incivility for all public employees, we hypothesize that this effect may be greater for women.

*Hypothesis 3a: Ethical leadership mitigates incidences of workplace incivility.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Ethical leadership will moderate the connection between employee gender and the experience of workplace incivility.*

## **Data and methods**

### **Sample and procedures**

We test the three hypotheses with data that were collected in 2015 using a questionnaire from employees working in various public and non-profit organizations throughout Pakistan. The employees were participants of a five-year long institutional capacity building programme funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The main objective of this program was to assist government and non-profit organizations in Pakistan to develop institutional capacity for effectively implementing development projects. Assessments and trainings for the program were conducted by the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). The trainees were selected from USAID partner organizations in Pakistan and consisted of 60 government, 82 non-profit, and 12 for-profit organizations. Most of the trainees were nominated by their supervisors, while some nominated themselves to join the program. The training areas were financial management, human resource management, procurement, program monitoring and evaluation, leadership, fiscal decentralization, gender, communication,

and forensic auditing. An average training lasted for three to five days and consisted of 30 participants. Over the course of the program, more than 3,000 employees from all four provinces of Pakistan received training in one or more subject areas. The vast majority of the trainees were professional employees; 56% of them were employed in government agencies, 41% were employed in non-profit organizations, and 3% were employed in private firms. Most of the trainees (85%) were men.

In the fall of 2015, we approached the program's manager about the study and requested access to the trainees' email addresses. The program manager was able to provide email addresses of 2,436 trainees. After removing duplicate names and trainees who were employed in private companies, the sample size was 2,335 public and non-profit employees. Of these, 207 trainees were unreachable or did not have valid email addresses, further reducing the sample size to 2,128. Using Qualtrics, the trainees were invited to take part in the study and complete a survey. The recruitment email explained the study's purpose, noted that participation was voluntary, and assured participants that their responses would remain anonymous. The survey asked respondents about experiences of incivility, their supervisor's ethical leadership, and perceptions about their work environment. Both the recruitment email and the survey were written in English. The survey remained open for one month. Three email reminders were sent to boost the response rate. Altogether 741 surveys were returned for a response rate of 34.8%. Fifty six percent of the respondents were employed in public agencies and 44% were employed in nonprofits. The average age of the sample was between 30 and 39 years; 13% of the respondents were women, which was close to the percentage of women (15%) who participated in the training.

## Measures

We measure *workplace incivility* with five items in the survey. The items were developed by Cortina et al. (2001). The respondents were asked how often they were subject to incivility in their workplace. The items (shown in Table 1) had five response choices (1 = never, 5 = very often). The internal reliability for the measure was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ).

We assess *personal control* with four items in the survey that were taken from the *autonomy* and *impact* subscales of Spreitzer's (1995) psychological empowerment questionnaire. The two subscales have been combined in many studies to measure employee personal control (Brockner et al. 2004; Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008; Venkataramani and Tangirala 2010; Hassan 2015). The four items (see Table 1) had a six-point Likert-style response format (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for the measure was .78.

Ethical leadership was measured with 10 items from the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) developed by Yukl et al. (2013). The ELQ items capture different aspects of ethical leadership and include both ethical traits and behaviours. Respondents rated their supervisor's honesty, integrity, fairness, accountability, and ethical guidance. All ELQ items had a six-point Likert-style response format (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The internal reliability of this measure was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ ).

We measure respondent and their supervisor's gender each with a dummy variable (female: 1 = yes, 0 = no). To isolate the relationship of personal control and ethical

**Table 1.** Standardized factor loadings from CFA.

Constructs	Items	Factor Loadings	Average Variance Extracted
Workplace Incivility	Put you down or was condescending (disrespectful) to you?	.74	.53
	Paid little attention to your ideas or showed little interest in your opinion?	.57	
	Made an insulting remark about you?	.82	
	Addressed you in unprofessional manner, either publicly or privately?	.77	
	Doubted your judgment or ability on a matter over which you have responsibility?	.74	
Personal Control	I have considerable influence over what happens in my office	.62	.49
	I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job	.66	
	I have a great deal of control over what happens in my office	.83	
Procedural Fairness	I can decide on my own how to go about my work	.68	.53
	Have you been able to express your views and feelings during those procedures?	.70	
	Have you had influence over the outcomes arrived by those procedures?	.68	
	Have those procedures been applied consistently across people?	.74	
	Have those procedures been free of personal bias or favoritism?	.71	
Ethical Leadership	Have those procedures been based on accurate information?	.80	.69
	Shows a strong concern for ethical and moral values	.85	
	Communicates clear ethical standards for members	.85	
	Sets an example of ethical behaviour in his/her decisions and actions	.89	
	Is honest and can be trusted to tell the truth	.86	
	Keeps his/her actions consistent with his/her stated values ('walks the talk')	.89	
	Can be trusted to carry out promises and commitments	.88	
	Insists on doing what is fair and ethical even when it is not easy	.85	
	Regards honesty and integrity as important personal values	.85	
	Opposes the use of unethical practices to increase performance	.72	
Holds members accountable for using ethical practices in their work	.65		

leadership with workplace incivility, we control for employee perceptions of procedural fairness. The extent to which formal procedures related to employee selection, pay, and promotion are applied in a fair way is likely to be related to reports of ethical leadership and personal control (Hassan 2015). Procedural fairness may also be related to workplace incivility. We measure *procedural fairness* with five items in the survey. The items are based on the Procedural Justice Scale developed by Colquitt (2001). The items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = to a great extent) and asked respondents to rate fairness of procedures used for allocating rewards (i.e., pay, promotion, and performance evaluation). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this measure was .70.

We also control for organization type (government: 1 = yes, 0 = non-profit), employee age, and organization tenure. Age was measured with a single item: ‘What is your current age.’ The five response choices for the item were: 1 = between 20 and 29 years, 2 = 30–39 years, 3 = 40 to 49 years, 4 = 50 to 59 years, and 5 = more than 50 years. Tenure was measured with a single item: ‘How long have you worked in your current office.’ The five response choices were: 1 = less than 6 months, 2 = 6 months to a year, 3 = 1 to 2 years, 4 = 2 to five years, and 5 = more than 5 years.

## Results

### Confirmatory factor analysis

We performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to assess construct validities of the study measures. Table 1 summarizes CFA results. As shown in Table 1, all of the scale items have statistically significant factor loadings ( $p < .05$ ) for their respective latent constructs. The standardized factor loadings ( $\lambda$ s) range from a low value of .57 to a high value of .89 and most items have loadings above .70. The average variances extracted (AVE) by the items for the four measures range from a low .49, for personal control, to a high .69, for ethical leadership. The AVE value for each measure is higher than square root of the correlation between each pair of latent measures. The values of the fit indices of the measurement model are:  $\chi^2(246) = 797.55$ , CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .04. These results indicate that the four measures have sufficient convergent and discriminant validity.

### Bi-variate analysis

Table 2 reports means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the study measures. Looking at the table, we see that women on average are more likely than men to experience workplace incivility ( $r = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ), though the strength of this relationship is relatively weak. The table also shows that ethical leadership, personal control, and procedural fairness have negative associations with workplace incivility ( $r$ s =  $-.34$ ,  $-.32$ , and  $-.22$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ). The inter-correlations among the predictor measures are low to moderate. The highest correlation is between personal control and procedural fairness ( $r = .49$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Workplace Incivility	2.15	0.85	–						
2. Government	0.56	0.50	0.03						
3. Age	2.21	0.92	0.01	–0.11					
4. Tenure	3.99	1.07	–0.04	0.05	0.02				
5. Female	0.13	0.33	0.12	–0.07	0.01	0.21			
6. Procedural fairness	3.12	0.93	–0.22	–0.16	–0.01	0.06	0.01		
7. Personal control	4.32	1.08	–0.32	–0.05	–0.06	0.05	–0.05	0.49	
8. Ethical leadership	4.73	1.05	–0.34	–0.12	–0.01	0.01	–0.01	0.32	0.33

Notes: All correlation coefficients above 0.10 are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

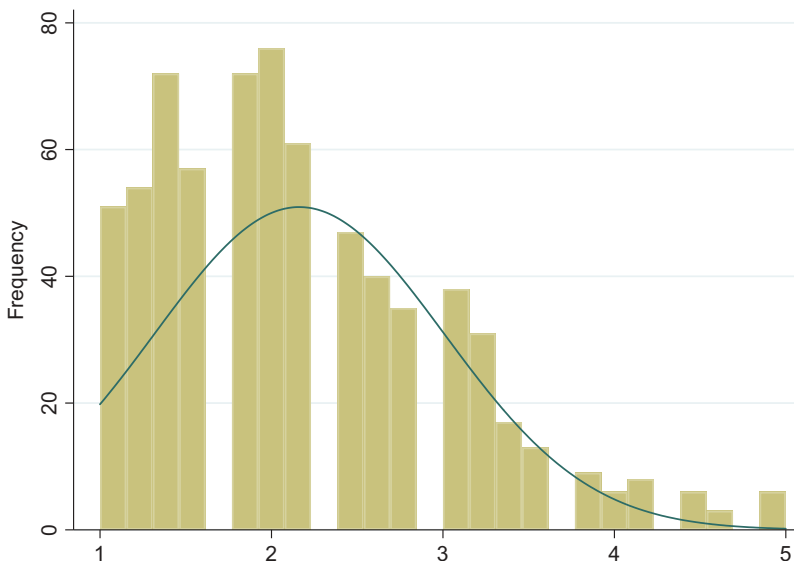
## Regression analysis

We performed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The descriptive analysis indicated that the scores of the workplace incivility scale are positively skewed (see [Figure 1](#)). To address this problem, we use a natural log transformation for the dependent measure. We centred the composite scale scores of the predictor measures before estimating the OLS models to reduce the likelihood of multicollinearity. We used robust standard errors clustered around the organizations to assess the statistical significance of the regression coefficients. [Table 3](#) reports the OLS estimates for the predictor measures.

Hypothesis 1 suggested that the workplace incivility scores of female employees would be higher than the workplace incivility scores of male employees. As shown in model 1 in [Table 3](#), the coefficient for gender is positive and statistically significant. The workplace incivility scores of female employees are nine percent higher than the scores of male employees.

Hypothesis 2a suggested a negative association between personal control and workplace incivility. Looking at model 1 in [Table 3](#), we see that the coefficient for this relationship is negative and statistically significant, confirming Hypothesis 2a. A change in the score of personal control by one standard deviation is associated with an eight percent reduction in the score of workplace incivility. Hypothesis 2b suggested that the effects of personal control on workplace incivility would vary by employee gender. Contrary to our expectation, the regression coefficient for the interaction effect in model 2 is not statistically significant.

Hypothesis 3a suggested a negative association between ethical leadership and workplace incivility and Hypothesis 3b suggested that ethical leadership would attenuate the connection between gender and workplace incivility. We find empirical support for both hypotheses. The coefficient for the direct association



**Figure 1.** Frequency distribution of workplace incivility scores .

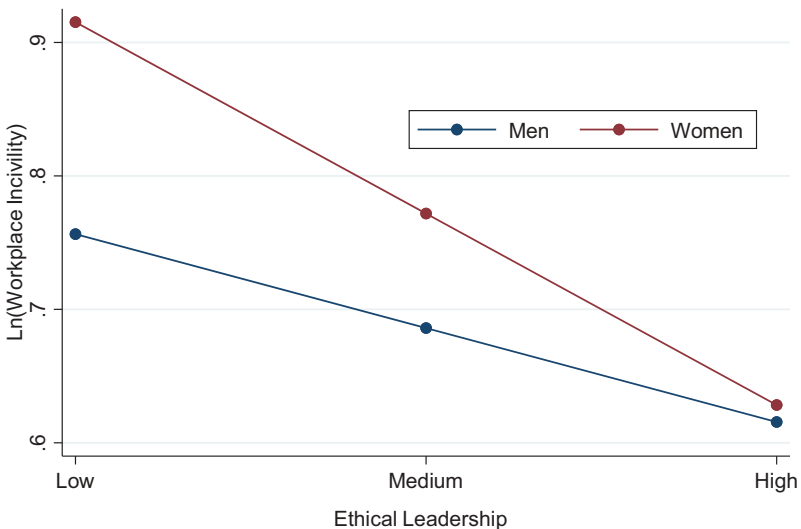
between ethical leadership and workplace incivility is negative and statistically significant (as shown in models 3 and 4). A change in the ethical leadership score by one standard deviation is associated with a seven percent reduction in the workplace incivility score. Moreover, as shown in [Figure 2](#), the negative association between ethical leadership and workplace incivility is significantly stronger

**Table 3.** Results of OLS regression analysis on workplace incivility.

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Government	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)
Female	0.09** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)
Tenure	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Procedural Fairness	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)
Personal Control	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)
Ethical Leadership	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)
Female X Personal Control		-0.00 (0.04)		0.01 (0.05)
Female X Ethical Leadership			-0.07** (0.04)	-0.08** (0.04)
Constant	0.69*** (0.02)	0.69*** (0.02)	0.69*** (0.02)	0.69*** (0.02)
Observations	672	672	672	672
R-squared	0.16	0.16	0.17	0.17

Robust standard errors (clustered around organizations) are in parentheses

\*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1



**Figure 2.** The effects of ethical leadership on workplace incivility by employee gender.

for female employees, confirming Hypothesis 3b. The figure also shows that women are more likely to experience workplace incivility than men when their managers exhibit a low level (1 SD below the mean) of ethical leadership. When the managers exhibit a high level of ethical leadership (1 SD above the mean), both women and men are equally less likely to experience workplace incivility.

## Discussion

Few studies have examined the prevalence of workplace incivility within public organizations and ways to reduce uncivil behaviour towards women. The purpose of our study was to examine individual, job and managerial practices that are related to workplace incivility experiences by public employees in Pakistan. We hypothesized that women would experience more workplace incivility. As expected, the results show that women are more likely than men to experience workplace incivility. However, we also found that ethical leadership mitigates workplace incivility, especially for women. Specifically, when ethical leadership is high, there is no distinction between men and women's reports of incivility. Similarly, a negative relationship exists between personal control and workplace incivility.

These findings are especially notable considering the cultural context and suggest important insights for organizations within Pakistan and beyond. First, these findings suggest that leadership may matter to the extent that behaviours role modelled by leaders may influence experiences of incivility even when those behaviours go against the tide of the national culture. Our findings about the effect of ethical leadership are particularly interesting given the extension of workplace ethics from leaders to organizational climates. Organizations that cultivate formal policies about ethical conduct, ethical leadership models, and informal behaviour norms actively create work environments that promote ethical learning (Brown and Trevino 2006). When the organizational climate promotes ethical leadership, social learning will increase adoption of ethical behaviour. Given that ethical leadership reduces incivility for women, organizations seeking to newly or better integrate women into the workplace can improve employee relations and reduce turnover by taking steps to establish an ethical climate.

We also found that a negative relationship exists between personal control and workplace incivility. This is an interesting finding, given the context and the dynamic, situational nature of personal control. When an employee is cognizant of a mismatch between perceived and actual personal control, they may pursue a variety of steps to improve actual personal control. When an employee is successful in establishing real workplace control, they may be in a position to secure consequences for an individual who directs uncivil behaviour towards him or her. It may also serve to correct the power imbalance that exists between individuals, reducing the potential for workplace incivility. What is more, personal control is a cognitive construct that to some extent is rooted in social interactions; that is, it is '... influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of others' (Greenberger and Strasser 1986, 165). Whether or not an individual actually possesses the power to enact consequences following an uncivil event may be less important than the perceptions of power by others. In other words, if a co-worker with uncivil intentions perceives that the employee has power, and that there may be consequences to their behaviour as a result, he or she may quell the urge to engage in uncivil interactions.



These insights about the relationship between personal control and reports of workplace incivility offer important implications for improving work environments and the potential power leaders may have in reducing incidences of workplace incivility. When uncivil behaviour is directed towards or experienced by individuals with low personal control, improving an employee's sense of personal control may mitigate or eliminate the incivility. There are numerous possible actions that managers can initiate to improve employee control (Greenberger et al. 1989; Greenberger and Strasser 1986). One such action involves making explicit action-outcome linkages for employees by creating specific goals and providing subsequent feedback about accomplishment, and eliminating barriers to employee perception of control (Greenberger and Strasser 1986). Another potential action is helping subordinates gain access to resources needed to accomplish goals and, thus, perceive a heightened degree of personal control. Involving employees in decision-making may also improve perceptions of personal control (Greenberger and Strasser 1986). Taking these types of actions to prompt workplace control improvements may return double dividends; not only may the actions result in functional improvements for the organization (Greenberger et al. 1989; Greenberg & Strasser, 1986), but they could lead to reduced incidence of uncivil behaviour as well.

This study also extends the literature on selective incivility generally and in public sector organizations specifically. This contribution is important because selective incivility can be viewed as a 'modern form of discrimination' (Cortina 2008; Cortina et al. 2013) and as such has implications for women's career advancement within the public sector. Despite increasing diversity of public sector organizations, men and women still have differential career advancement opportunities and the upper echelons of public sector organizations, like those in the private sector, still are largely bereft of women (Mastracci and Bowman 2015; Riccucci 2009). Incivility may contribute to the inhibition of women's career progression. Women who experience incivility have been found to be more likely to leave the organization (Cortina et al. 2013; Gabriel et al. 2018), potentially interrupting an upward career trajectory. Uncivil interactions may prevent them from having access to, or believing they can access, resources important to career advancement, such as information, sponsorship, and connections to high-level managers. This marginalization may also keep them on the periphery of informal networks through which they can gain access to these resources (Burt 1992; Ibarra 1992; Podolny and Baron 1997). Our study offers important insights into how public managers may reduce incidences of incivility and attenuate or reduce a barrier to women's advancement.

### **Limitations and future research**

Although this study makes important contributions, some limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional design of this study presents a threat to internal validity. In the future, longitudinal studies on the incidence of workplace incivility could be designed and implemented to strengthen causal claims about the impact of ethical leadership training in reducing gender-based workplace incivility. The use of a prospective, longitudinal design would also help us to assess the impacts of workplace incivility on career trajectories and outcomes for women and other groups historically underrepresented in leadership roles. Second, a behaviour check list was used to construct the incivility measure but no definition of workplace incivility was given to the research participants. Estimates of the prevalence of some forms of

harassment have been shown to depend on the construct measurement method (Neall and Tuckey 2014).

Like most research on workplace incivility (Schilpzand De Pater, and Erez 2016) the questionnaire does not distinguish whether co-workers or supervisors are the instigators of the incivility. As such we cannot determine the more nuanced effects of ethical leadership and personal control in terms of mitigating incivility from supervisors versus co-workers. Doing so may be important because it is likely that incivility from a supervisor is more injurious than that from a co-worker due to the power differential and the dependency of the employee on the supervisor (Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erez 2016). We also do not distinguish between men and women in terms of the instigator of the incivility. Although research has found that male dominated workgroups are linked to harassment, women may experience higher rates of workplace incivility instigated by women than by men (Cortina 2008; Gabriel et al. 2018; Sheppard & Aquino, 2017). Future research should consider the demographics of the instigators as well as more closely examine their identity in different contexts (e.g. male and female-dominated professions and organizations), to better understand how selective incivility operates and the more nuanced effects of interventions (c.f. Gabriel et al. 2018).

### Concluding remarks

In conclusion, our study makes several meaningful contributions to the extant literature. First, to the best of our knowledge, there are no public management studies assessing gender-based workplace incivility and ethical leadership and in particular in a majority Muslim country. Our study fills a crucial gap in knowledge about workplace incivility in Pakistan, a context differing in many ways from the Western workplaces studied almost exclusively to date and one that is undergoing expansion in female labour force participation. We add to the public management literature by focusing on problematic workplace interactions that are more subtle in nature, not rising to the level of intentional, overt or explicit bullying, harassment or discrimination. Although these interactions may not be overt or intentional, they may still prove to be harmful. Our contribution in particular provides understanding of what might affect such workplace interactions. Specifically, our findings suggest a management strategy to mitigate workplace incivility, ethical leadership.

Returning to the specific national context of Pakistan and the relevance of the findings, to the extent that incivility is a subtle form of discrimination, this study may have considerable implications for better integrating women into the paid economy of Pakistan. Research conducted in the public sector in Pakistan has shown a statistically significant relationship exists between mistreatment and discrimination, and that individuals subjected to incivility withdraw or engage in other work behaviours that diminish productivity (Bibi, Karim, and Ud Din 2013; Bibi, Nawaz, and Nawaz 2012). While these studies did not examine the effects of gender, and the present study does not directly measure discrimination or outcomes of incivility, taking them together points to the need for increased attention by scholars and organizational leaders. As economic growth prompts increasing numbers of women to enter workforces throughout South Asia, these findings may influence policies and

practices crafted to ensure a culture of diversity and inclusion in public and private sector workplaces.

## Note

1. See, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=PK>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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