

Negotiating Gender Equity through Ethical Leadership: Insights from Female Leaders in Qatar's Hospitality Sector.

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of ethical leadership and gender equity within Qatar's hospitality sector, focusing on the lived experiences, perceptions, and leadership strategies of women navigating a complex and rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape. Despite national initiatives aimed at promoting gender inclusion under the Qatar National Vision 2030, the hospitality industry continues to reflect stark gender imbalances, particularly in senior and executive roles.

Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with female leaders in mid- to senior-level positions across a range of international and local hotel brands in Qatar, the study examines how ethical leadership practices shape inclusive workplace cultures and influence professional advancement. Core themes include values-based leadership, ethical decision-making, gendered power dynamics, institutional barriers, and the socio-cultural norms that mediate women's leadership pathways.

Findings indicate that ethical leadership, characterised by fairness, transparency, integrity, and interpersonal consideration, plays a critical role in facilitating gender equity in organisational settings. Female leaders often act as ethical agents and role models, contributing to inclusive policies, organisational learning, and community trust. The study also underscores the significance of mentorship, supportive HR systems, and alignment with national and corporate ethics frameworks in creating environments conducive to women's advancement.

By positioning female leadership as a form of ethically driven innovation, the paper offers new insights into how gender equity and ethical governance can be strategically embedded into hospitality management. The findings have direct implications for talent development, organisational sustainability, employee retention, and alignment with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards increasingly prioritised in the Gulf region.

Contribution to Knowledge:

This study contributes to the limited body of literature on gender and leadership in the Gulf hospitality context by providing an ethically grounded analysis that moves beyond

descriptive accounts. It presents an evidence-based framework for integrating ethical leadership and gender equity in hospitality strategy and offers actionable recommendations for managers, educators, and policymakers seeking to institutionalise ethical and inclusive governance in tourism and service industries.

Keywords:

Ethical leadership, gender equity, female leadership, hospitality sector, Qatar.

1. Introduction

The global hospitality industry stands at a pivotal moment of transition, driven by technological innovation, evolving consumer behaviours, environmental accountability, and a growing demand for more equitable and inclusive workplaces. Amid these transformations, the issue of gender equity in leadership has emerged as both a moral imperative and a strategic challenge for organisations seeking long-term sustainability. Despite considerable progress in some regions, the persistent underrepresentation of women in executive leadership positions remains a structural concern worldwide. This disparity is particularly visible in the hospitality sector, where women form a significant portion of the operational workforce but remain markedly absent from top-tier managerial roles. Scholarly research and international labour reports consistently identify gendered organisational cultures, entrenched biases, and weak enforcement of equality policies as major inhibitors of women's leadership advancement.

In many global contexts, hospitality firms have introduced diversity and inclusion initiatives, leadership training programmes, and gender-balanced hiring targets. However, the effectiveness of such measures often depends on their cultural adaptability, institutional backing, and integration into broader systems of ethical governance. In regions where socio-cultural norms continue to prioritise traditional gender roles, particularly those tied to family structures, public participation, and career mobility, the path to leadership for women becomes even more challenging. These structural inequalities are frequently reinforced by organisational cultures that privilege male leadership archetypes and reward masculine-coded behaviours, leaving women to navigate a complex web of formal exclusion and informal marginalisation.

Qatar offers a compelling and distinctive setting in which to explore these issues. As a country undergoing rapid economic and social transformation, Qatar has positioned itself as a leader in sustainable development, educational reform, and gender inclusion in the Arab Gulf. Under the framework of the Qatar National Vision 2030, the nation has prioritised human capital development, including expanding opportunities for women in education, employment, and civic engagement. Qatari women are now among the most educated in the region, with university enrolment and graduation rates surpassing those of men in many disciplines. Despite these advances, gender parity in senior leadership remains elusive, particularly in the private sector and within industries such as hospitality where tradition, hierarchy, and international corporate influence intersect.

The hospitality industry in Qatar has experienced unprecedented growth over the past decade. As the country has emerged as a regional tourism and events hub, hosting mega-events such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup and investing heavily in luxury hospitality

infrastructure, the demand for qualified leadership talent has increased. Yet, women continue to be underrepresented in senior hotel management, general manager roles, and executive boards. While recruitment and workforce participation have improved in numerical terms, vertical mobility remains stunted for women. This disparity raises critical questions about the role of leadership ethics, workplace culture, and institutional accountability in fostering (or hindering) gender equity within Qatar's rapidly expanding service economy.

This study seeks to investigate these questions through the lens of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is broadly defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, rooted in principles such as fairness, integrity, transparency, and care. This leadership model is especially relevant in service-based industries like hospitality, where leaders must constantly navigate interpersonal dilemmas, cross-cultural teams, employee well-being, and customer satisfaction within high-pressure environments. Ethical leadership has been positively associated with inclusive organisational climates, employee engagement, retention, and psychological safety, factors that are essential to empowering women and dismantling exclusionary workplace dynamics.

In the context of gender equity, ethical leadership serves both an individual and systemic function. At the individual level, it reflects the moral agency of leaders who act as role models, uphold justice, and inspire trust across diverse teams. At the organisational level, ethical leadership supports the development of cultures, policies, and practices that institutionalise fairness, promote accountability, and create space for alternative leadership styles. For women in male-dominated industries such as hospitality, ethical leadership may offer both a mechanism of resistance and a framework for empowerment, enabling them to assert authority without conforming to traditional or masculine norms of command.

The present study draws on qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews with a sample of experienced female leaders currently working in various hotels across Qatar. These participants occupy mid-to-senior level roles, including departmental leadership, human resources, operations, and general management. Their perspectives provide a critical lens through which to examine how ethical leadership is conceptualised, enacted, and challenged in practice. The study explores the everyday experiences of these women as they confront gender-based barriers, navigate organisational politics, uphold ethical standards, and influence their teams. In doing so, it sheds light on the informal power structures, cultural constraints, and institutional contradictions that shape women's leadership pathways in the Qatari hospitality sector.

This paper also situates its analysis within broader academic and practical discourses on ethically driven organisational innovation. In contemporary hospitality and tourism research, innovation is increasingly understood as encompassing not only technological or market disruptions but also strategic shifts in organisational values, governance, and social responsibility. Promoting gender equity through ethical leadership aligns with this expanded understanding of innovation, offering a means to redefine what constitutes responsible and effective leadership in multicultural service contexts. Such an approach has implications that go beyond internal HR practices, touching on brand identity, stakeholder trust, corporate ethics, and alignment with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria that are increasingly used to evaluate business sustainability in the Gulf and globally.

By embedding the experiences of women leaders in Qatar's hospitality sector within a framework of ethical leadership, this study contributes to a growing body of research that connects gender, ethics, and organisational change. It offers a grounded, empirical exploration of how leadership is not only performed but also contested, negotiated, and transformed through the lens of gender and morality. The findings aim to inform both scholarly debates and practical efforts to foster more inclusive and ethically resilient workplaces in Qatar and other rapidly developing hospitality markets.

2. Literature Review

The subject of ethical leadership and gender equity in the hospitality sector has attracted growing attention in recent years, particularly as the industry grapples with complex challenges surrounding diversity, sustainability, and inclusivity. In hospitality, which is deeply rooted in service delivery and interpersonal interactions, the ethical dimensions of leadership have tangible implications for employee morale, organisational culture, and customer satisfaction. Within this broader landscape, the participation and progression of women in leadership roles represent a persistent area of concern. While the hospitality sector employs a high proportion of women globally, their representation in senior management remains limited. This discrepancy raises important questions about the underlying social and organisational dynamics that shape leadership pathways and the ethical frameworks that may either support or hinder gender inclusion.

In the context of Qatar, these questions gain further significance given the country's rapid socio-economic transformation and national vision for gender equity. The interplay of traditional norms, institutional development, and global hospitality practices creates a

complex setting in which female leadership unfolds. The following literature review critically explores key concepts and existing scholarship on ethical leadership, gender equity in hospitality, and the specific socio-cultural context of the Gulf region, especially Qatar. The review also examines the implications of ethical leadership for supporting inclusive practices and highlights the existing research gaps that this study aims to address.

2.1 Ethical Leadership in Organisational Contexts

Ethical leadership is increasingly recognised as essential to organisational effectiveness, particularly in service industries like hospitality. Defined by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication and reinforcement, ethical leadership is understood as both a behavioural and relational phenomenon. It requires consistency, fairness, integrity, and transparency, and is driven by a commitment to moral values.

In hospitality, where service delivery often involves emotionally intensive interactions, ethical leadership is not merely aspirational but a necessary condition for maintaining employee well-being and customer trust. Kalshoven et al. (2011) note that ethical leadership fosters environments where workers feel respected and valued, thereby reducing turnover and improving service quality. The sector frequently presents situations requiring moral judgement, such as responding to customer misconduct, ensuring fair scheduling, or managing culturally sensitive interactions. Ethical leaders help navigate these dilemmas by prioritising human dignity, open communication, and procedural justice.

Moreover, ethical leadership plays a critical role in mediating organisational cultures and reinforcing ethical climates. Leaders who model ethical behaviour contribute to the development of trust-based relationships with employees and stakeholders. Mayer et al. (2009) demonstrate that such leaders reduce incidences of misconduct and promote psychological safety. This is particularly important in multicultural hospitality workplaces where diverse backgrounds, expectations, and values intersect. Ethical leadership facilitates the integration of different cultural perspectives, supports conflict resolution, and enhances cohesion across diverse teams.

The literature also underscores the distinction between espoused ethical values and enacted behaviours. Martin and Cullen (2006) suggest that ethical climates must be supported not just by policies but by consistent managerial actions. Ethical leadership cannot be reduced to personal charisma; it must be embedded in organisational routines,

training, and evaluation mechanisms. Without institutional reinforcement, ethical leadership remains dependent on individual commitment and is vulnerable to erosion under commercial or political pressures.

2.2 Gender and Leadership in Hospitality

The hospitality industry presents a paradox when it comes to gender representation. While women constitute a large share of the workforce, particularly in customer-facing and operational roles, they are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership. Segovia-Perez et al. (2019) point to the persistence of the "glass ceiling" in hospitality, which operates through informal practices, stereotypical expectations, and institutional inertia.

Leadership roles in hospitality often demand long hours, geographic mobility, and high-stress tolerance, characteristics that are frequently coded as masculine and used to justify the exclusion of women from senior positions. Mooney (2014) argues that such occupational expectations are not neutral but reflect gendered assumptions about authority, decision-making, and emotional competence. Women are often perceived as lacking the assertiveness or strategic acumen required for high-stakes leadership, even when empirical performance suggests otherwise.

The double burden placed on female leaders is also well documented. Eagly and Carli (2007) describe the "double bind" women face: exhibiting traditionally masculine leadership traits can invite criticism for being too aggressive, while conforming to feminine norms may be read as a lack of authority. This creates a narrow range of acceptable behaviours, constraining women's capacity to lead authentically or effectively. These dynamics are further complicated in culturally conservative societies, where gender roles are reinforced through social norms and institutional practices.

Although diversity and inclusion initiatives have been implemented in many hospitality organisations, their impact has often been limited. Jamali et al. (2005) argue that symbolic inclusion, where women are appointed to visible roles without substantive power, can undermine long-term change. Without addressing the deeper cultural and organisational structures that perpetuate inequality, such initiatives risk reinforcing rather than dismantling the status quo.

2.3 Ethical Leadership and Gender Equity

Ethical leadership offers an alternative model of leadership that is more inclusive, collaborative, and values-driven. It resonates with the leadership styles many women are socialised to adopt, such as participatory decision-making, empathy, and relational awareness. As such, ethical leadership can serve as a vehicle for promoting gender equity in traditionally male-dominated environments.

Research by Ng and Sears (2012) shows that ethical leaders are more likely to implement policies and practices that support procedural justice and equal opportunity. They create workplace environments where employees feel respected and valued regardless of gender, ethnicity, or background. Ethical leadership is thus closely aligned with the principles of fairness and inclusivity that underpin gender equity. Martin and Cullen (2006) further highlight that ethical climates foster conditions where underrepresented groups can thrive, including access to mentorship, fair promotion criteria, and work-life balance.

Moreover, ethical leadership enables women to challenge the prevailing norms and redefine leadership on their own terms. As role models, female ethical leaders disrupt stereotypical associations between masculinity and authority. They demonstrate that moral courage, emotional intelligence, and relational competence are not just compatible with leadership but essential to it. This redefinition opens up new leadership pathways for women and contributes to a broader cultural shift within the industry.

In environments where legal protections for gender equity are weak or inconsistently enforced, ethical leadership becomes even more critical. It fills the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that commitments to fairness and diversity are operationalised at the organisational level. Ethical leaders take responsibility for cultivating inclusive workplaces, even in the absence of external enforcement, and thus contribute to sustainable organisational change.

2.4 The Gulf Context and Gender in Hospitality

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Qatar, present a distinct context for examining gender and leadership. These societies are characterised by rapid economic development, state-led modernisation, and deep-rooted cultural traditions. As part of Qatar National Vision 2030, gender equity has been identified as a national priority, leading to substantial investments in female education, professional development, and employment. Women in Qatar now outnumber men in higher education and are increasingly present in the labour force.

However, these advancements have not been matched by proportional representation in leadership roles. Traditional expectations regarding gender roles, familial obligations, and women's mobility continue to shape career trajectories. Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) note that social perceptions about leadership, particularly in sectors like hospitality, still privilege male authority and visibility. This creates a dissonance between policy discourse and lived reality.

In the hospitality sector, the situation is further complicated by its international character and reliance on expatriate labour. Many hotels in Qatar are part of global chains that

promote diversity and ethical governance as part of their corporate identity. Yet, the implementation of such values is mediated through local management practices, cultural norms, and operational pressures. This creates a hybrid organisational culture where progressive ideals coexist with traditional hierarchies, and where ethical leadership is both enabled and constrained by institutional and cultural dynamics.

Leadership development programmes in the region often adopt Western models that may not fully align with local expectations. Tlaiss (2014) argues for the importance of culturally responsive leadership development that acknowledges the specific challenges faced by women in the region. Ethical leadership frameworks need to be adapted to reflect the values, religious principles, and social obligations that define leadership legitimacy in the Gulf.

2.5 Research Gaps and the Contribution of the Present Study

Despite the growing interest in ethical leadership and gender equity, there remain significant gaps in the literature, especially concerning the hospitality industry in the Middle East. Much of the existing research is situated in Western contexts and assumes a normative framework that may not hold in societies with different cultural, legal, and organisational configurations.

Few studies have explored how ethical leadership is practiced and experienced by women in the hospitality sector in Qatar (Metcalf, 2008; Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Al-Kwafi et al., 2020). Even fewer have examined how female leaders navigate ethical dilemmas, build credibility, and promote inclusive practices within this complex environment (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2020; Sidani, Konrad & Karam, 2015; Al-Hamadi & Budhwar, 2006). The existing literature often treats ethical leadership and gender equity as separate domains, missing the opportunity to explore their intersectional dynamics. This study addresses these gaps by offering an empirically grounded analysis of ethical leadership as practiced by female leaders in Qatar's hospitality industry. It brings together insights from organisational ethics, gender studies, and Middle Eastern socio-political analysis to construct a nuanced understanding of leadership in context. By doing so, it contributes to the development of ethical leadership models that are culturally sensitive, gender-inclusive, and practically relevant for the hospitality sector in Qatar and similar settings.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in an interpretivist epistemology. The aim was to explore how female leaders in Qatar's hospitality sector perceive and enact ethical leadership, and how their leadership practices intersect with

gendered expectations, organisational cultures, and broader societal dynamics. Given the nuanced and context-dependent nature of the research objectives, qualitative inquiry was deemed the most suitable approach to gain insight into the lived experiences and internal value systems of the participants.

3.1 Research Design

The research employed a multiple case study design, focusing on several hospitality organisations within Qatar as individual case contexts while allowing for comparative analysis across institutions. The case study design enabled a holistic investigation into how ethical leadership is interpreted and practiced by female leaders, considering both individual agency and structural constraints. The study's overarching research questions were as follows:

1. How do female leaders in Qatar's hospitality industry perceive and define ethical leadership?
2. What organisational and cultural challenges or enablers shape their ethical leadership practices?
3. How does ethical leadership influence their career progression and the ethical climate within their organisations?

A case study strategy was chosen because it supports the analysis of phenomena within real-life settings, especially where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. In this study, the influence of cultural, organisational, and sector-specific factors could not be isolated from participants' leadership experiences and therefore required a design that embraced contextual complexity.

3.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting women in mid- to senior-level leadership positions within hospitality organisations in Qatar. The inclusion criteria required that participants:

- Identify as female leaders working in the hotel industry in Qatar
- Have at least three years of experience in a leadership role
- Be employed in international or local hotel chains currently operating in Qatar

Initially, fifteen potential participants were contacted, but following availability and consent processes, in-depth interviews were conducted with four key participants who met all criteria and agreed to participate fully. While the sample size is limited, the depth

and quality of insight were prioritised over numerical representation, in line with qualitative best practices.

Participants came from diverse nationalities including Qatari, Arab expatriate, and non-Arab international professionals. Their roles included HR Director, Operations Manager, Guest Services Head, and Marketing and Communications Lead. This diversity allowed for a multi-dimensional view of ethical leadership that transcended nationality, but remained rooted in the Qatari context.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English, which was the professional working language of all participants. Where clarification was needed, bilingual support was provided to ensure that participants could fully express themselves without language constraints. Interviews were held either in person or through secure video conferencing, depending on participant availability.

The interview protocol was designed to explore topics such as:

- Participants' personal definitions and expressions of ethical leadership
- Gender-specific leadership experiences and obstacles
- Perceptions of organisational support, culture, and policies
- Ethical dilemmas encountered in the workplace
- Intersections between cultural expectations and professional conduct

All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants and later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised to protect confidentiality, and participants were assigned pseudonyms in all records and publications.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the author's institution. All participants received an information sheet outlining the research objectives, their rights as participants, and data protection protocols. Participants provided written informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.

In accordance with ethical research practices, all identifiable data were securely stored, and only anonymised findings are reported. Participants were offered the opportunity to

review their transcripts for accuracy and to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the interview data, using the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved the following steps:

1. Familiarisation – Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain an immersive understanding of the content.
2. Generating Initial Codes – Coding meaningful units of text using NVivo software.
3. Searching for Themes – Identifying recurring ideas, patterns, and concepts across the dataset.
4. Reviewing Themes – Refining themes to ensure they were coherent and distinct.
5. Defining and Naming Themes – Developing detailed definitions and labels for each theme.
6. Producing the Report – Synthesising findings into an analytical narrative supported by participant quotes and existing literature.

An inductive coding process was used to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being imposed from pre-existing theoretical frameworks. However, codes were then interpreted in light of relevant concepts such as ethical leadership theory, gender equity frameworks, and regional sociocultural literature.

3.6 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher identifies as a female academic and practitioner with extensive experience in hospitality education in Qatar. This insider status facilitated access to the field and helped establish rapport with participants. At the same time, the researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the research process to mitigate bias and ensure credibility. Reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and critical self-evaluation were employed to challenge assumptions and consider how personal experiences might shape data interpretation.

While the shared gender identity between the researcher and participants may have enhanced openness in the interviews, care was taken not to project expectations or over-identify with participants' narratives. The focus remained on amplifying participants' voices rather than interpreting them through a singular lens.

3.7 Limitations

This study, while rich in insight, has some inherent limitations. The small sample size limits generalisability, though the aim of the study was depth rather than breadth. Additionally, participant perspectives may have been shaped by specific organisational cultures or expatriate experiences that do not fully represent the broader Qatari workforce. Another limitation lies in the potential for social desirability bias, where participants may have presented their leadership practices in a more favourable light due to the sensitive nature of discussing ethics and gender in professional settings.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable empirical data to an under-researched context, offering a textured understanding of ethical leadership through the lived experiences of female hospitality leaders in Qatar.

4. Findings and Discussion

Ethical leadership among women in Qatar’s hospitality industry emerges as a nuanced and contextually driven practice that balances individual moral agency with institutional norms, social expectations, and industry pressures. Drawing from the voices of four senior and mid-level female leaders working in prominent hotels across Qatar, this chapter explores how ethical leadership is conceptualised, experienced, and practiced. The findings are categorised into six thematic areas that reflect critical intersections between ethics, gender, and organisational life in the hospitality sector. Each theme draws directly on participant testimonies and is analysed through relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

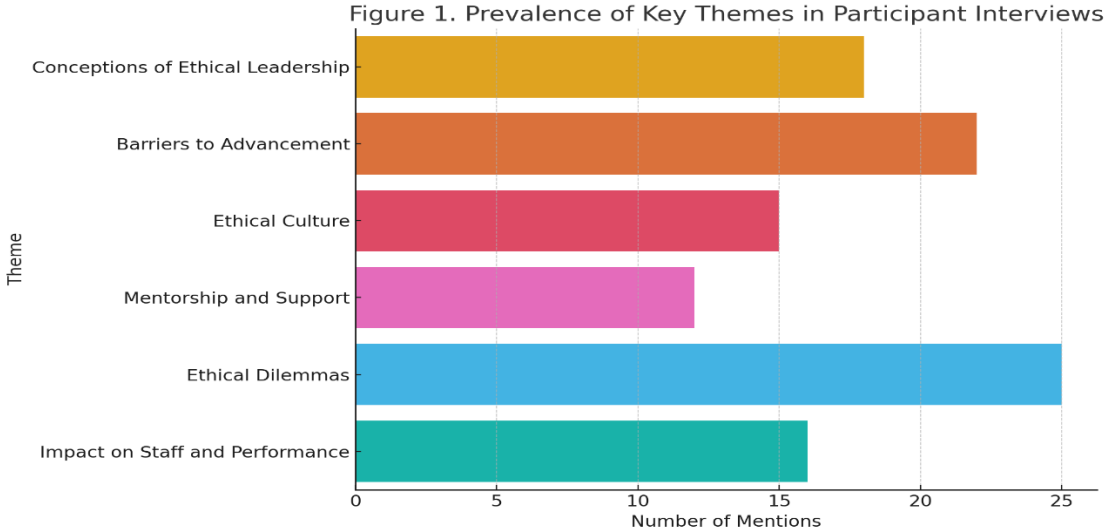


Figure 1. Prevalence of Key Themes in Participant Interviews

The above bar chart illustrates how frequently each of the six major themes appeared across the five participant interviews, emphasizing the prominence of ethical dilemmas, conceptions of leadership, and structural barriers.

The below table illustrates the number of times each major theme was referenced across participant interviews, highlighting the prominence of ethical dilemmas and barriers to advancement as dominant concerns among female leaders in Qatar’s hospitality sector.

Theme	Number of Mentions Across Participants
Conceptions of Ethical Leadership	18
Barriers to Advancement	22
Ethical Culture	15
Mentorship and Support	12
Ethical Dilemmas	25
Impact on Staff and Performance	16

Table 1. Frequency of Themes Across Interviews

4.1 Conceptions of Ethical Leadership

All participants articulated a deep personal commitment to fairness, respect, and integrity as core tenets of ethical leadership. These principles were not treated as abstract ideals but as concrete tools for navigating daily workplace realities. One participant, a hotel department head, explained, “Ethical leadership for me means treating everyone with fairness, even when the workload is intense or when I am under pressure. My team watches what I do more than what I say.” This view reinforces Brown and Treviño’s (2006) assertion that ethical leadership involves consistent modelling of desirable conduct through actions that promote integrity and moral clarity.

Respect also emerged as a foundational value, particularly in diverse, multicultural teams where hierarchies of nationality, language, and class often influence workplace dynamics. A participant in a supervisory role shared, “You can have authority, but without respect, you lose the team. I never speak down to anyone, even the lowest-paid staff. I see that as a moral responsibility.” This comment resonates with Gilligan’s (1982) ethic of care, which views moral reasoning as relational, context-sensitive, and deeply embedded in empathy.

Moreover, ethical leadership was seen to involve discretionary flexibility to accommodate cultural and religious diversity. “During Ramadan, I changed the team roster so my Muslim colleagues could rest more. No one asked me to do it, but I knew it was right,” said a

manager. This reflects a culturally responsive form of ethical leadership, aligned with Resick et al.'s (2011) view that ethical leadership must be adapted to local cultural norms while upholding universal ethical standards.

Participants also highlighted the small, everyday actions that reflect ethical commitment. Greeting team members personally, acknowledging distress, and offering guidance during difficult moments were frequently mentioned. One leader explained, "It's not always about policies. Sometimes, it's noticing who looks upset or who's working extra hard. Ethics is in the details." These findings echo Robinson et al. (2019), who argued that ethical leadership in hospitality must be understood through the lens of emotional intelligence and daily relational engagement.

4.2 Barriers to Advancement and Gendered Leadership Challenges

Despite their commitment to ethical leadership, participants experienced substantial gender-based barriers in their leadership trajectories. Disparate standards in evaluating male and female behaviours were a recurring concern. One manager recounted, "When I spoke up for my team, I was told I was being emotional. But when my male colleague did the same, he was praised for being assertive." Such experiences confirm Ridgeway's (2011) theory of gender status beliefs, where similar actions are interpreted differently based on gendered assumptions.

Exclusion from informal social networks was another commonly cited barrier. "The men would go for shisha or golf, and that's where decisions were made. I was not invited," said a front office supervisor. These social dynamics align with Tlaiss and Kauser (2011), who argue that gender exclusion in Arab business environments often operates through informal, male-dominated networking rituals that limit access to key decision-making forums.

The perception of tokenism was also psychologically burdensome for participants. A marketing manager noted, "People said I got promoted because of the diversity policy. It made me doubt myself, even though I worked hard." This highlights Jamali et al.'s (2005) warning that superficial diversity strategies can unintentionally delegitimise the very women they aim to support unless accompanied by genuine culture change.

Certain roles were consistently viewed as inappropriate for women, especially in high-pressure scenarios. One leader shared, "When there was a major client complaint, they didn't involve me. They said I might be too soft. But I'm the one who knows the operations best." Such assumptions reinforce Mooney's (2014) critique of hospitality's gendered labour logic, where leadership is associated with stereotypical masculine traits and emotional labour is undervalued.

Barrier	Frequency Mentioned	Illustrative Quotes
Exclusion from informal networks	High	“The senior guys would play golf or smoke shisha. I was never invited.”
Gendered double standards	High	“I was called emotional; he was called passionate.”
Tokenism and credibility doubts	Moderate	“People said I got promoted because of a diversity quota.”
Limited role allocation in high-pressure tasks	Moderate	“They never considered me for crisis management.”

Table 2. Reported Barriers to Female Advancement in Hospitality

4.3 Ethical Culture and Organisational Inconsistencies

The ethical climate within organisations was largely perceived as personality-driven rather than systematised. As one participant explained, “In one hotel, everything was ethical because the GM made it that way. In another, the same rules existed but no one followed them.” This confirms Martin and Cullen’s (2006) distinction between espoused ethical climates and enacted ones, suggesting that formal policies are insufficient without consistent leadership enforcement.

A lack of accountability mechanisms was also noted. “When something unethical happened, it was brushed under the rug unless the GM cared. HR rarely intervened,” said another manager. These gaps suggest weak institutional frameworks, where ethical enforcement depends more on individual discretion than organisational standards.

Participants reported that commercial pressures often undermined ethical leadership. “If a guest complains, even if they are racist or abusive, we are told to apologise. I’ve seen staff cry, but we are told ‘the guest is always right,’” shared a front desk supervisor. This mirrors Kalshoven et al.’s (2011) finding that hospitality employees often experience ethical dissonance due to customer-centric policies that ignore staff wellbeing.

Hotel Type	Ethical Culture Characterisation	Participant Description
International Chain	Formal policies, weak enforcement	“Policies exist, but whether they’re followed depends...”
Boutique Hotel	Leader-dependent, inconsistent	“It all depends on who the GM is.”
Local Hotel	Reactive rather than preventive ethics	“Only addressed issues after complaints.”

Table 3. Organisational Ethical Culture by Hotel Type

When ethical stances clashed with management expectations, participants described professional risks. “I defended my staff against a rude guest. My boss was furious. I didn’t get the promotion that year,” said one participant. This case reflects the moral cost of ethical resistance and the structural disincentives to act with integrity, which Mayer et al. (2012) warn can undermine ethical cultures over time.

4.4 Mentorship and Organisational Support

Mentorship was identified as a missing yet crucial element in participants’ professional development. “No one mentored me. I had to learn everything the hard way,” said a duty manager. The absence of formal mentoring confirms Brownell’s (2010) observation that female leaders in hospitality often navigate career development in isolation, reducing their strategic adaptability and leadership confidence.

Where informal mentorship occurred, it was transformative. “A senior colleague once told me not to let others silence me. That was the first time I felt like I belonged in leadership,” said a supervisor. This kind of support affirms the findings of Linehan and Scullion (2008), who argue that mentoring serves not only a developmental but also an emotional and political function for women in male-dominated fields. The below chart presents the range and frequency of support systems described in the interviews, indicating a heavier reliance on informal mentorship and peer networks over formal structures.

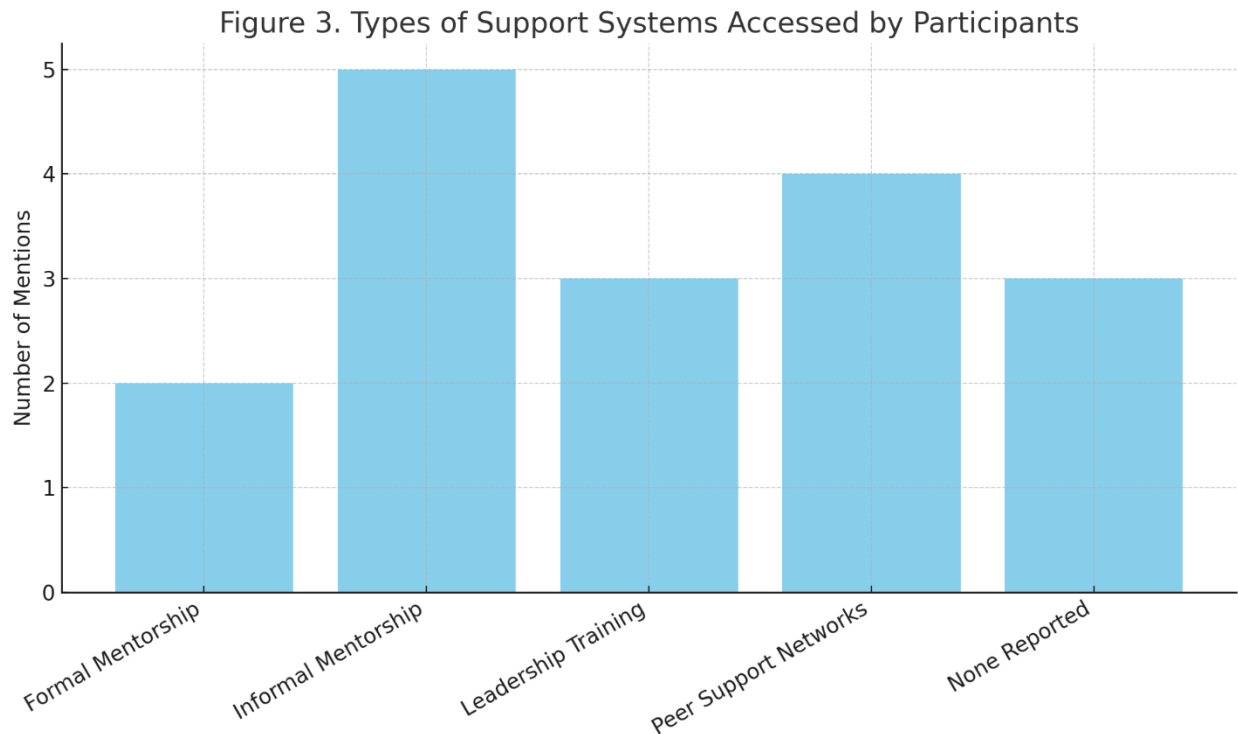


Figure 3. Types of Support Systems Accessed by Participants.

Criticism of externally imposed training was also common. “They send consultants who don’t understand how we work here. The examples are all from Europe or the US,” explained one participant. This aligns with Tlaiss (2014), who argues that Western leadership models often lack cultural relevance in Middle Eastern contexts, leading to ineffective or even counterproductive interventions.

The scarcity of female role models was demotivating. One participant admitted, “Sometimes I feel like I’m trying so hard, but there’s no one to show me what’s next.” Without visible pathways for advancement, ethical leadership becomes an exceptional act rather than an institutional norm, thereby deterring future female talent from aspiring to leadership roles.

4.5 Navigating Ethical Dilemmas

Participants frequently encountered complex ethical dilemmas that required balancing institutional expectations with personal values. One respondent described a case involving false theft accusations: “I demanded an investigation even when HR wanted to fire the staff member quietly. It turned out he was innocent.” This demonstrates the importance of procedural justice and moral courage, as identified by Rawls (1971) and reaffirmed in contemporary hospitality ethics studies.

Religious and cultural tensions also emerged. “I had to balance team complaints about lateness with a staff member’s prayer commitments. It wasn’t easy,” said a shift manager. Resick et al. (2011) argue that cross-cultural ethical leadership involves mediating competing norms, a skill clearly exercised by participants in these examples.

In some cases, participants acted against unethical organisational instructions. “A client complained about food safety. Management told me to ignore it because he was a VIP. I refused and corrected the issue. It nearly cost me my job,” recalled one executive. This case illustrates Eisenbeiss’s (2012) argument that ethical leadership often challenges entrenched power structures and may be met with resistance rather than support.

The below chart illustrates the distribution of ethical dilemmas experienced by female leaders in Qatar’s hospitality sector, based on participant interviews.

Figure 2. Ethical Dilemmas by Type

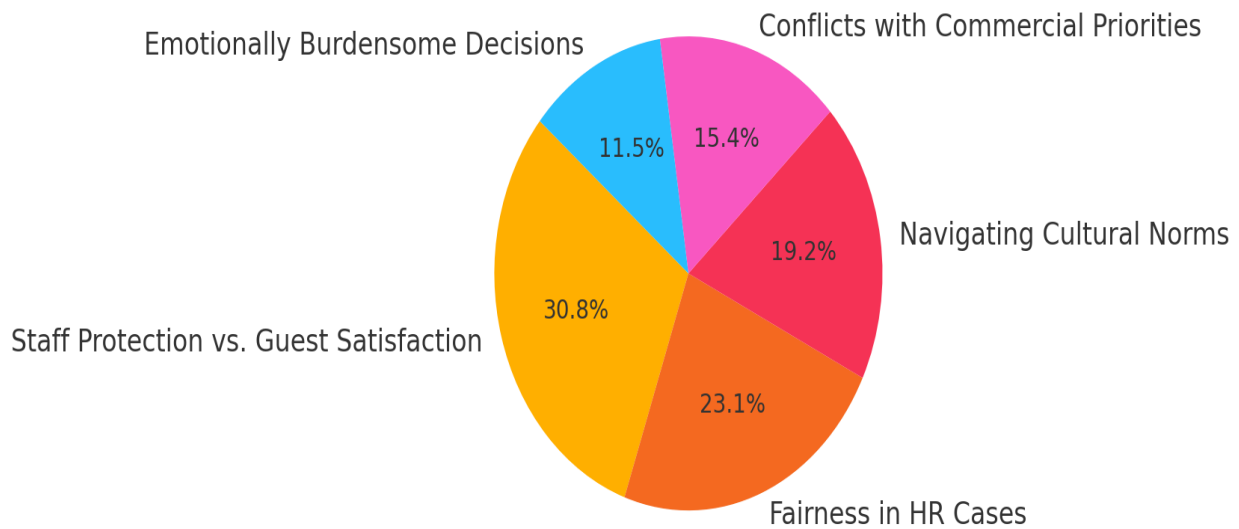


Figure 2. Ethical Dilemmas by Type.

Participants also experienced emotional strain related to ethical decisions. “I had to fire a woman for repeated absenteeism, but she was a single mother. I couldn’t sleep for days,” said one leader. These accounts reveal the emotional burden of ethical leadership and the dual role that leaders play as both decision-makers and moral caregivers, particularly in labour-intensive, emotionally demanding sectors like hospitality.

4.6 Impact on Staff and Organisational Performance

All participants reported that ethical leadership positively influenced team cohesion, trust, and performance. “When I dealt with a bullying case and supported the victim, people started speaking up more. The culture changed,” said a hotel supervisor. This aligns with Neubert et al. (2009), who found that ethical leadership promotes psychological safety, an essential factor in employee engagement and retention.

Ethical leadership also had symbolic power. “Just by being in this role, I show other women what is possible. That’s part of my ethical responsibility,” explained one senior leader. This suggests that ethical leadership extends beyond functional outcomes to include representational and cultural influence, especially in environments where women remain underrepresented in authority.

However, participants expressed concern about the sustainability of their influence. “When I leave, I fear the progress will disappear. It shouldn’t depend on one person,” noted a

general manager. This observation underscores the fragility of ethical cultures that lack institutional embedding and depend solely on individual leadership.

4.7 Summary of Findings

The findings highlight a layered and context-specific understanding of ethical leadership among women in Qatar's hospitality sector. While participants consistently embodied ethical principles in their leadership practices, their effectiveness was constrained by organisational cultures, gendered expectations, and insufficient institutional support. The data reveal that ethical leadership is not only a professional commitment but a form of resilience and resistance in male-dominated environments. Promoting ethical leadership among women in hospitality therefore requires systemic change that goes beyond rhetoric, integrating policy, mentorship, cultural relevance, and institutional accountability.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined how female leaders in Qatar's hospitality sector engage in ethical leadership within complex organisational, cultural, and gendered environments. The findings reveal that ethical leadership, for these women, is not a static or idealised construct but a dynamic and context-sensitive practice rooted in personal conviction, relational engagement, and daily negotiation. Fairness, consistency, and respect emerged as core ethical values, yet these were exercised in work environments where structural inequalities, informal hierarchies, and commercial pressures often resisted such principles. Participants demonstrated moral agency in navigating these constraints, suggesting that ethical leadership among women is a highly active and reflexive process shaped by institutional gaps, cultural expectations, and personal resilience.

The organisational cultures described by participants were frequently informal, uneven, and dependent on individual personalities rather than institutionalised ethical norms. Many workplaces lacked formal structures for mentorship, ethical accountability, or leadership development, leaving women to learn leadership through trial and error. While positive impacts of ethical leadership were evident in team morale, trust, and retention, these outcomes remained contingent on the individual leader's presence rather than embedded in organisational policy. Female leaders faced a dual burden: not only were they expected to perform their roles effectively, but they also had to justify their leadership legitimacy in the face of scepticism, exclusion, and tokenisation.

This study contributes to the growing literature on gender and leadership in non-Western contexts by presenting an empirically grounded account of ethical leadership in Qatar's hospitality industry. It demonstrates that ethical leadership is culturally situated and

shaped by the intersection of gender, organisational norms, and societal expectations. It also underscores the fragility of ethical leadership in contexts where institutional support is lacking, and ethical decisions are often penalised rather than rewarded. The findings carry significant implications for industry practitioners, educational institutions, and policymakers seeking to institutionalise inclusive and ethical leadership practices in the hospitality sector.

5.1 Recommendations for Industry Practice

Institutionalise Ethical Leadership Practices:

Hotels and hospitality businesses in Qatar should establish robust ethical infrastructures that go beyond individual personality traits. This includes codifying ethical standards, creating systems for reporting misconduct, offering regular ethics training, and incorporating ethical behaviour into performance evaluations. Embedding ethics into standard operating procedures ensures that values such as fairness, respect, and accountability are upheld across all levels of the organisation.

Develop Gender-Sensitive Leadership Pathways:

The implementation of structured mentorship programmes tailored to women in hospitality is essential. These programmes should address specific challenges faced by female leaders, including exclusion from informal power networks, limited access to training, and role stereotyping. Locally relevant and culturally aware leadership development schemes should be co-designed with female leaders to ensure alignment with their lived realities and career aspirations.

Address Informal Power Structures:

Organisations must confront the informal practices and social rituals that serve as gatekeeping mechanisms. This includes ensuring that access to leadership and decision-making opportunities is not limited to male-dominated social spaces such as informal gatherings, offsite meetings, or recreational activities. Clear inclusion policies should be implemented for internal promotions, informal networking events, and collaborative forums to dismantle structural exclusions.

Protect Ethical Leadership Behaviour:

Ethical decisions made by leaders, particularly when they challenge guest misconduct, unfair policies, or managerial pressure, must be formally protected. Organisations should introduce non-retaliation clauses for whistleblowing and create recognition mechanisms that reward moral courage. Ethical leadership must be seen as a strength rather than a liability, especially when commercial interests are at stake.

Measure and Monitor Ethical Culture:

Ethical climate audits should be regularly conducted using staff surveys, anonymous reporting channels, and performance reviews. These audits must evaluate perceptions of fairness, team respect, and voice. Based on the insights, targeted interventions can be designed to address ethical blind spots, reinforce ethical standards, and track progress over time.

5.2 Recommendations for Policy and Education

Localise Leadership Education:

Hospitality and tourism management programmes in Qatar should integrate locally contextualised content into their curriculum. Modules on ethics and gender equity must reflect the cultural, religious, and organisational nuances specific to the Gulf region. Teaching should avoid reliance on Western models and instead promote dialogue around leadership styles that are relevant to Arab and Islamic values.

Create Policy Incentives for Ethical Culture:

Government bodies overseeing tourism and hospitality in Qatar could introduce policy incentives that encourage ethical organisational practices. These may include ethical culture benchmarks in licensing procedures, accreditation standards, and public procurement policies. Institutionalising ethics through regulation can accelerate organisational change and reinforce national development goals related to inclusion and accountability.

Publicly Recognise Ethical Leaders:

Professional recognition of ethical leadership should be institutionalised through awards, media coverage, and internal recognition programmes. Recognition not only validates the efforts of female leaders but also contributes to a broader cultural shift that values integrity and inclusivity. By highlighting ethical success stories, the industry can create aspirational pathways for future leaders.

Encourage Research on Non-Western Leadership Models:

Academic institutions and research bodies should invest in studies that explore ethical leadership in the Middle Eastern and Islamic contexts. Moving beyond Western-centric theories will enable the development of leadership models that resonate with local values, social hierarchies, and workplace dynamics. These models can then inform education, policy, and practice across the region.

5.3 Closing Remarks

Ethical leadership in Qatar's hospitality sector is a deeply gendered and contextually nuanced phenomenon. Women who occupy leadership roles engage in continuous moral

negotiation, often bridging the gap between personal values and institutional shortcomings. Their ethical leadership is characterised by fairness, relational attentiveness, and resilience, yet it is enacted in settings that often lack structural reinforcement. These leaders do not merely manage teams; they navigate ethical tensions, challenge discriminatory norms, and redefine what it means to lead with integrity.

Sustaining ethical leadership across the hospitality sector will require more than recognising individual excellence. It necessitates a shift toward organisational cultures that uphold, reward, and institutionalise ethical practices. Empowering female ethical leaders is not simply a gesture of equity; it is a strategic investment in the long-term viability and reputation of hospitality enterprises. In an increasingly global and ethically aware market, organisations that align business success with ethical integrity will be better positioned to attract talent, retain customers, and contribute to national development.

This study calls for a fundamental rethinking of leadership development in Qatar's hospitality sector. It urges practitioners, educators, and policymakers to co-create systems that support ethical leadership, not just in rhetoric but in action. By doing so, the industry can move closer to achieving genuine gender equity and ethical excellence in a way that reflects both local values and global standards.

Reference List

- Brown, M.E. and Treviño, L.K. (2006) 'Ethical leadership: A review and future directions', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), pp. 595–616. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.004>
- Brownell, J. (2010) 'Leadership in the service of hospitality', *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 51(3), pp. 363–378. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965510368651>
- Eisenbeiss, S.A. (2012) 'Re-thinking ethical leadership: An interdisciplinary integrative approach', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23(5), pp. 791–808. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.03.001>
- Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jamali, D., Sidani, Y. and Safieddine, A.M. (2005) 'Constraints facing women leaders in Lebanon: An insider view', *Women in Management Review*, 20(8), pp. 581–594. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420510635213>

- Kalshoven, K., Den Hartog, D.N. and De Hoogh, A.H.B. (2011) 'Ethical leadership at work questionnaire (ELW): Development and validation of a multidimensional measure', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(1), pp. 51–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.12.007>
- Linehan, M. and Scullion, H. (2008) 'The development of female global managers: The role of mentoring and networking', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 83(1), pp. 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9657-0>
- Martin, K.D. and Cullen, J.B. (2006) 'Continuities and extensions of ethical climate theory: A meta-analytic review', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 69(2), pp. 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9084-7>
- Mayer, D.M., Kuenzi, M., Greenbaum, R., Bardes, M. and Salvador, R. (2009) 'How low does ethical leadership flow? Test of a trickle-down model', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 108(1), pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2008.04.002>
- Mooney, S.K. (2014) 'Interrupting the male gaze: Female perspectives on women-only leadership development', *Journal of Management Development*, 33(3), pp. 218–236. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-11-2012-0144>
- Neubert, M.J., Carlson, D.S., Kacmar, K.M., Roberts, J.A. and Chonko, L.B. (2009) 'The virtuous influence of ethical leadership behavior: Evidence from the field', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 90(2), pp. 157–170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0037-9>
- Resick, C.J., Hanges, P.J., Dickson, M.W. and Mitchelson, J.K. (2006) 'A cross-cultural examination of the endorsement of ethical leadership', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 63(4), pp. 345–359. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-005-3242-1>
- Ridgeway, C.L. (2011) *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, S.L., Kiewitz, C. and Tangirala, S. (2019) 'Fairness reactions to others' deviance: The role of ethical leadership in shaping behavioral contagion', *Academy of Management Journal*, 62(2), pp. 495–519. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.0651>
- Tlaiss, H.A. (2014) 'Women's leadership development in the Middle East: Cultural and institutional challenges', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 33(7), pp. 729–744. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-09-2013-0077>

- Tlaiss, H.A. and Kauser, S. (2011) 'The importance of wasta in the career success of Middle Eastern managers', *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 35(5), pp. 467–486. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090591111138064>