Resilience as a Bridge: Unpacking the Impact of Workplace Bullying on Servant Leadership in SMEs

Zainab Ayesha Rubab [1]   Shagufta Ejaz [2]   Aleena Mukarram [3]   Saima Aftab [4]   Shahzad Hussain[5]

ABSTRACT: Bullying at work is a serious organizational problem that has a detrimental effect on workers' productivity and well-being. This study looks at how servant leadership might improve employee resilience and lessen bullying in the workplace. A quantitative research design was used to gather information from 130 workers in a range of examined servant leadership effects on small and medium enterprises within Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Research reveals that servant leadership effectively boosts work-related resilience while simultaneously reducing workplace bullying perceptions. Research findings apply the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) as their theoretical foundation. Resilience played a mediating role, which explained how servant leadership and bullying at work relate to each other. The collected data contributes to research about organizational behaviour and leadership while stressing the urgency of developing servant leadership principles to build supportive work environments. Serious Leadership stops workplace bullying through employee resilience that functions as a connecting factor. Servant Leadership serves as a single-click remedy that resolves all corporate issues and fraud schemes.

KEYWORDS: Servant Leadership, Employee Resilience, Workplace Bullying

[1] MS Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: rababchuadery@gmail.com

[2] PhD Scholars, Foundation University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: shagufta.ejaz3@gmail.com

[3] Faculty Member, Department of Business Administration, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: aleena.mukarram@fjwu.edu.pk

[4] Assistant Professor, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences & Technology (GIKI), Topi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
Email: Saima.aftab@giki.edu.pk

[5] Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: shahzadhussainpeace@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Saima Aftab
✉ Saima.aftab@giki.edu.pk

Introduction

Workplace bullying is one of the most common forms of deviant and unethical behavior experienced by employees across the globe. Victims are often subjected to persistent ridicule, social exclusion, professional sabotage, malicious gossip, and assignment to demeaning tasks by individuals who hold perceived power over them in the organizational hierarchy (Ahmad et al., 2017; De Cieri et al., 2019; Holland et al., 2020). The economic structure of Pakistan depends heavily on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because these companies account for more than 40% of the national GDP while employing a large share of the local workforce (Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority [SMEDA], 2023). In urban centers like Rawalpindi and Islamabad, SMEs drive local economic activity; however, they also face persistent internal challenges, particularly regarding effective human resource management and fostering a healthy

organizational climate. One pressing concern that undermines workplace harmony and employee well-being is workplace bullying, defined as repeated, negative interpersonal behaviors intended to harm, intimidate, or isolate employees (Einarsen et al., 2020). Such behavior adversely affects employee morale, psychological health, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Salin & Hoel, 2018).

Workplace bullying exists significantly but workers tend to hide cases, which get insufficient treatment in South Asian professional spaces. The style that leaders choose to use serves as a primary force that molds an organization's culture, together with its impact on employee conduct. According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership represents an organizational approach that centers on individual service to others while emphasizing ethical choices and humility together with empathy. The leadership style of servant leaders promotes employee growth and psychological safety, and mutual respect, which effectively minimizes workplace hostility (Liden et al., 2014; Eva et al., 2019).

New investigations show that servant leadership creates workplaces that cultivate inclusiveness along with respect, providing protection against bullying dynamics (Xu et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2023). Hu et al., 2023). Employee resilience serves as a vital element for understanding employee responses to adverse workplace conditions because it describes their ability to bounce back from stressors while adapting and achieving growth (King et al., 2016). Staff who demonstrate resilience maintain steady psychological health as well as their performance level when dealing with workplace stressors, including bullying (Cooper et al., 2013; Hartmann et al., 2020). Hartmann et al., 2020). A leader's actions prove vital for developing workplace resilience among employees. Servant leaders, in particular, can strengthen employees' adaptive capabilities by providing emotional support, empowering work practices, and cultivating a shared sense of purpose (Van Dierendonck, 2011); Servant leaders help their employees develop adaptive capabilities through emotional backing and empowerment-focused work methods as well as focus building (Van Dierendonck, 2011). (Zhang, 2021) demonstrates that Employee resilience serves as a middle element that allows servant leadership to reduce workplace bullying effects.

Servant leadership is grounded in the principle that the fulfillment of employees' needs and aspirations is essential for achieving an organization's long-term goals (Lee et al., 2020). As defined by Eva et al. (2019, p. 114), servant leadership is "an other-oriented approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community." The COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) serves as this study's foundation to explain how individuals must protect important resources like emotional support and self-efficacy because these help manage stress and maintain personal well-being. An organizational environment of bullying exposes valuable resources to threats, which then produce psychological stress and employee withdrawal. When leaders operate as resource providers, exactly like servant leaders, they enable employees to develop resilience, resulting in decreased bullying exposure (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This research uses COR theory to understand how servant leadership creates reduced workplace bullying by fostering employee resilience in small businesses operating throughout Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

Theoretical Background

Servant Leadership and Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying represents a chronic organizational problem involving multiple negative, recurrent actions like social ostracism and intimidation, and humiliation that damage professional well-being and work performance (Einarsen et al., 2020). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) suffer particularly harsh outcomes because their weak formal structures, alongside undeveloped human resource systems, fail to properly manage such misconduct. Employees in small and medium enterprises remain highly vulnerable to workplace bullying because such entities lack the institutional protection mechanisms that otherwise protect their workforce from this behavior. This ongoing exposure to bullying results in workplace stress as well as decreased employee morale and overall reduced performance output.

The emerging research demonstrates that servant leadership functions as an appropriate leadership approach to stop workplace bullying. Greenleaf (1977) first defined servant leadership through its core elements, which combine humility with empathy and stewardship, along with leaders who prioritize their followers' personal development. Leaders with these characteristics develop professional environments that respect ethics while promoting clear verbal communication methods and forming dependable relationships that transform bullying risks into safer conditions (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014). Servant leadership and workplace bullying relations can be better understood when analyzed using the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Through COR theory, researchers demonstrate that people actively pursue essential resources, including emotional support, alongside respect and psychological safety. Workers exposed to bullying experiences at their workplace face major risks to their valuable resources, which triggers emotional exhaustion and disengagement and eventually leads to worker turnover (Hobfoll et al., 2018)Through its resource-generating mechanisms, servant leadership enables employees to build psychological and social resources that protect against stress while minimizing workplace bullying incidents.

A leader who displays servant characteristics particularly through active listening and compassion and proves genuine concern for employee well-being creates a work environment which makes bullying behaviors both socially unacceptable and structurally improbable ((Van Dierendonck, 2011) leadership development with servant characteristics works to lower hierarchical mistreatment while building relationships based on equality through inclusive practices and justice and respect (Coetzer et al., 2017). Empirical investigations confirm the theoretical relationship between these concepts. The servant leadership approach resulted in reduced bullying at the workplace because it strengthened teamwork and boosted inter-different trust, according to Xu et al. (2022). According to Hu et al. (2023), servant leadership reduces bullying through its creation of moral environments, along with its promotion of transparent and respectful workplace communication.

H1: Workplace bullying shows negative relationships with servant leadership perception.

Servant Leadership and Employee Resilience

Employee resilience is defined as an individual's ability to adapt, recover, and thrive in response to workplace challenges, stress, or adversity (Bardoel et al., 2014) In today's fast-paced and uncertain organizational climate—particularly within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—resilience has emerged as a vital

psychological resource that enhances employee well-being, engagement, and sustainable performance (Kuntz, 2017). Resilient employees are better equipped to manage workplace demands, resist burnout, and respond positively to stressors such as role overload, ambiguity, and bullying (Robertson, 2015).

According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership emerges as a human-centered leadership model that includes multifaceted skills such as empathy combined with listening abilities and stewardship activities with commitment to follower growth. Servant leadership stands opposite authoritarian approaches because it develops safe psychological environments together with proper ethical conduct while providing emotional assistance for creating an empowering organizational atmosphere (Eva et al., 2019). Employee resilience develops through servant leadership behaviors, which strengthen individuals mentally while creating important connection-based resources.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory by (Hobfoll, 1989) illustrates this relationship effectively because the theory shows individuals move to acquire and maintain important resources, which include optimism and social support, and psychological stability for handling stress efficiently.. Leadership that emphasizes resource enrichment and support helps employees develop resilience by reducing resource depletion and enhancing recovery processes. In this context, servant leadership functions as a resource caravan passageway, enabling employees to accumulate and maintain critical psychological resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Through leader support and empathy, employees gain psychological security because they perceive higher value, which improves their adaptive response to challenging situations (Harzer & Ruch, 2015). SME employees benefit from such attributes because their jobs require tolerance for stress from informal work systems and limited safety programs, and insufficient resources (Malik & Björkqvist, 2022).

The theoretical perspective receives backing through recent empirical studies. Jaiswal and Dhar (2017) similarly demonstrated that servant leadership increased employee resilience through greater psychological empowerment and perceived organizational support. More recently (Wang, 2022) reported that servant leadership fostered relational trust and emotional stability, which in turn enhanced employees' capacity to navigate organizational change and adversity.

H2: The research demonstrates that employee resilience shows a positive relationship with servant leadership.

The Research Investigates Resilience as a Mediator between Servant Leadership and Workplace Bullying

According to King et al. (2016), employee resilience functions as the psychological capability of people to overcome difficulties, adjust constructively to changes, and maintain operational output during stressful periods. Organizational resilience functions like a psychological protective mechanism for employees who experience workplace bullying challenges by managing emotional reactions and boosting adaptive behavior outcomes. Research has demonstrated that servant leadership promotes employee resilience by fostering an environment characterized by trust, empowerment, and emotional support (Harzer & Ruch, 2015).

According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), people work to acquire and protect beneficial elements that contain psychological resilience among these elements. Stress develops when valuable resources suffer from threats or deficits that stem from continuous workplace bullying. Inside

this system, servant leadership operates as a context-based resource that generates resource gain spirals by providing followers both emotional and moral backing. First-level organizational support develops internal resources, including resilience, while simultaneously decreasing the impact of stressors that drain resources like bullying (Pan & Lin, 2023; King et al., 2016). King et al., 2016). According to COR theory, employee resilience acts as a mediator between servant leadership and workplace bullying practices. Leadership characterized by service increases resilience (resource acquisition), so workplace bullying decreases in impact or occurrence (resource preservation).

The research builds the following hypotheses by considering what the theory and evidence show.

H1: Workplace bullying negatively correlates with leaders' self-perceived servant leadership behavior.

H2: The adoption of servant leadership by supervisors leads to increased employee resilience, according to this study.

H3: The connection between servant leadership practices and workplace bullying gets mediated through employee resilience levels.

Literature Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on servant leadership and its positive organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee well-being, its specific role in reducing workplace bullying remains underexplored. The current research has been conducted within the context of large organizations in Western countries, leaving a significant contextual gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in developing countries. SMEs in Pakistan, especially those in Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

This study addresses both a geographical and organizational gap by applying the servant leadership–resilience–bullying model within Pakistani SMEs, a context where such investigations are scarce. By examining employee resilience as a mediator, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how psychological resources can mitigate the effects of workplace bullying in less structured work environments. Furthermore, the integration of the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory offers a novel theoretical lens to explain how servant leadership can reduce bullying by fostering resilience, a perspective not widely applied in the existing literature concerning SMEs.

Conceptual Framework
Figure 1
Conceptual Framework.
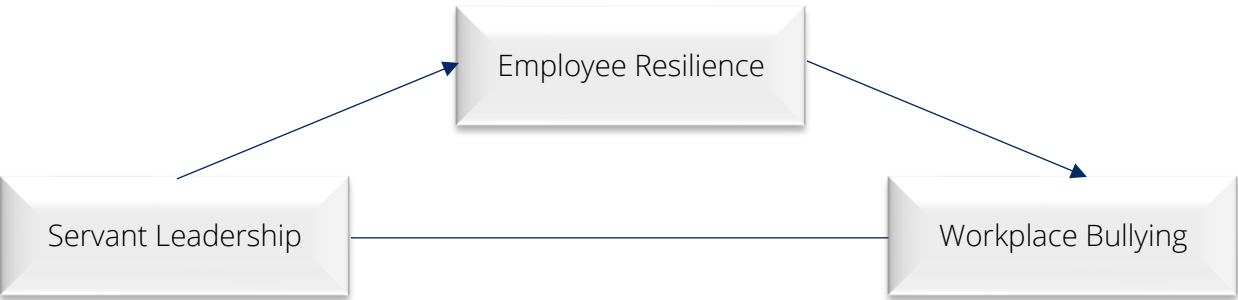
Research on servant leadership has expanded along with its documented positive outcomes, yet scientists have not sufficiently examined how servant leadership reduces workplace bullying. The examination took place in large Western corporate settings and therefore created a major gap in understanding the workings of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) throughout developing nations. Small and medium enterprises operating in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, along with other regions of Pakistan, form the subjects of this research. The research fills two important gaps through its investigation of the servant leadership–resilience–bullying model in Pakistani SMEs, where such studies remain rare. This research analyzes employee resilience as a mediating element to provide better knowledge on how mental strength buffers the impact of workplace harassment in informal organizational settings. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory provides original theoretical foundations to explain servant leadership's bullying reduction through resilience development, although the literature about SMEs lacks this approach. This research logic and past studies led to the development of the following hypotheses:

Methodology

Data Collection and Research Sample

Quantitative research methods guide our study because they produce results from tested and dependable scientific techniques. Servant leadership works to bring meaningful changes to small and medium enterprises by addressing workplace bullying issues. A survey gathered data to test this proposed model (Figure 1) from employees in SMEs throughout Rawalpindi and Islamabad's public and private sectors. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed using multiple channels, including in-person distribution, email, and online platforms. Of these, 130 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 65%. Recent studies indicate that workplace bullying is a widespread issue in Pakistani organizations, underscoring the need for research-based strategies to effectively manage this problem (Ahmad et al., 2017). The survey tools for this research drew their basis from validated measurement scales within existing scholarly studies.

Measure

The five-point Likert scale with values from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) measured both servant leadership and employee resilience and workplace bullying constructs.

Servant Leadership: The six-item measure presented by Sendjaya et al. (2019) served to assess the dimensions at Time 1.

Workplace Bullying: This research employed seven items adapted from Einarsen et al. (2009) to assess workplace bullying perceptions.

Employee Resilience: A three-item evaluation scale from Luthans et al. (2007) served to measure the construct. The research analyzed data using IBM SPSS software, which ran regression tests alongside correlations and reliability assessments to validate servant leadership measurements alongside workplace bullying relationships.

Sampling

The data collection process included multiple control measures for maintaining both high data quality as well as adherence to ethical research standards. Technical staff who received training conducted surveys with

standardized procedures to decrease procedural inconsistencies. Each participant received assurance of confidentiality and anonymity during a formal informed consent procedure. Each participant received a distinctive coded identifier for response tracking at both Time 1 and Time 2 without compromising their privacy. A thorough data cleaning process included three steps: elimination of incomplete surveys and identification of abnormal response sequences, followed by matching response validation checks. Preliminary statistical examinations were conducted to discover outliers and evaluate the distribution pattern of the study data.

Data Analysis

Table 1

Respondent Characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	65	50
Male	65	50
Total	130	100
Age		
18- 25 years	62	47.7
26-35 years	34	26.2
36-45 years	25	19.2
Less than 18 years	2	1.5
More than 45 years	6	4.6
Total	130	100
Employment Status		
Home maker	6	4.6
Retired	5	3.8
Salaried Employee	48	36.9
Self-employed	27	20.8
Student	31	23.8
Unemployed	13	9.2
Education Level		
Completed high school	20	15.4
Graduate	77	59.2
Retired	4	3.1
Postgraduate	29	22.3
Total	130	100

Correlation Analysis

This table represents the correlation matrix for three variables: Servant Leadership, Employee Resilience, and Workplace Bullying, along with their mean and standard deviation (SD). On average, respondents perceive a moderate level of servant leadership, with responses varying moderately, Mean = 3.27, SD = 0.8594. Employee resilience is also moderate, with a slightly broader range of responses. Mean = 3.32, SD = 1.00. Workplace bullying has a moderate mean, with slight variation across responses. Mean = 3.27, SD = 0.90, The

direct effect of the independent variable (e.g., Servant Leadership) on the dependent variable (e.g., Workplace Bullying) is positive and statistically significant ($p<.01$$p < .01$$p<.01$). This indicates that even when the mediator (e.g., The accounting of Employee Resilience variables maintains a robust positive relationship between predictors and outcomes. Although the confidence interval excludes zero, the positive statistical significance shows a significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable through the mediator. Correlation Coefficients. An analysis showed that servant leadership and employee resilience shared a strong positive relationship that yielded a .609r correlation. Employees who receive higher levels of servant leadership demonstrate greater resilience. r=.534r, indicating a moderate positive correlation.

This may reflect some indirect relationship or context-specific dynamics. ER & WB *r=.641r*, indicating a strong positive correlation. This suggests that as employee resilience increases, perceptions or reports of workplace bullying may also increase, possibly because resilient employees recognize and report bullying more effectively.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation

S.No	Variable	M	SD	Alpha	1	2	3
1	Servant Leadership	3.27948	0.8594	0.763	1	.609**	.534**
2	Employee Resilience	3.32307	1.008	0.695	.609**	1	.641**
3	Workplace Bullying	3.27802	0.9081	0.863	.534**	.641**	1

Table 3

Bootstrapping Results for Direct and Indirect Effects

Direct effect of X on Y					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.2423	.0882	2.7474	.0069	.0678	.4168

Table 4

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:			
Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI
.3224	.0613	.2107	.4511

Table 5

Total effect of X on Y					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.5647	.0789	7.1536	.0000	.4085	.7208

LL, lower limit; UL, upper limit; SE, standard error. N = 130, **p < 0.01.

Table 6

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.534a	0.286	0.28	0.770534127

Hypothesis Testing

Research calculations show how an independent factor (X) creates direct impacts on a responsive variable (Y). A narrow SE value (0.0882) shows better reliability in determining effect size measurements. The resulting t-value of 2.7474 surpasses the standard critical value, thus proving the relationship's statistical significance. The p-value (0.0069) stands below 0.05, indicating a statistical significance of the effect. Statistical significance of the effect is established further through the non-inclusion of zero in the ULCI (0.4168) and LLCI (0.0678) ranges. The standard error (0.0613) demonstrates the existence of indirect effects between X and Y. The estimated reliability improves when the Standard Error values decrease. LLCI (0.2107) and ULCI (0.4511). The indirect effect proves to have statistical significance because zero is excluded from its observed range. The small effect standard error value of (0.0789) demonstrates a reliable reading of the total impact. Also, the high t-value (7.1536) and tiny p-value (0.0000) demonstrate both statistical significance. This indicates that the observed correlation exists beyond random chance. The observed total effect demonstrating statistical importance reveals an interval range between 0.4085 and 0.7208. R=0.534 confirms the presence of a moderate positive link, yet R2=0.286 shows the dependent variable's variance can be explained through the independent variables by thirty percent. The model shows a standard error value of 0.77, which describes how typical data points deviate from estimated model values. The statistical analysis indicated that servant leadership perception created negative links with workplace bullying identifications, thus validating the first and second research hypotheses. Employee resilience displayed inverse connections with workplace bullying according to the research findings.. To further analyze this, we tested the mediation effect of employee resilience using statistical bootstrapping with 130 samples and assessed the upper and lower confidence intervals (CI).

Discussion

This research brings important information about servant leadership on workplace bullying practices within small and medium-sized enterprises operating in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. This study uses servant leadership along with employee resilience to characterize leadership's impact on workplace dynamics and expands the existing research on bullying behavior in Pakistani SMEs.

The study findings strongly underline how servant leadership functions as an essential resource construction instrument. Leaders who demonstrate empathy and skills for active listening as well as ethical judgment maintain workplaces that experience reduced bullying incidents (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2014). According to Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (1989), servant leadership functions as a psychological and emotional resource generator to develop employee resilience. Workers who demonstrate resilience maintain better stress management competencies, which diminish their exposure to bullying events at work. The investigation demonstrates that leadership leads to greater employee resilience because it generates both material resources and improved adversity endurance (Hobfoll et al., 2018)

This research delivers significant findings about servant leadership, together with workplace bullying and employee resilience, yet multiple research paths exist for future investigation. Research examining additional mediators, including psychological safety with organizational justice and emotional intelligence, would offer a complete understanding of the involved dynamic relationships (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Xu et al., 2022). Xu et al., 2022). Research based on longitudinal and experimental approaches could study how servant

leadership causes bullying patterns and sustains employee resilience over time. Extending this research through multiple regions across Pakistan and numerous business sectors will strengthen the study's findings' applicability. Increased research effectiveness would emerge from data obtained through various sources like employee evaluations alongside supervisor feedback (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2011).

Servant leadership training programs should teach SME leaders in Rawalpindi and Islamabad about developing spaces that prioritize trust, combined with empowerment and inclusion. Training programs must teach emotional support methods alongside ethical leadership principles, along with resilience-building tactics that help prevent workplace bullying. SMC leaders who practice leadership with empathy toward employee welfare can address bullying problems and improve organizational results, and build a successful work environment that brings contentment along with enhanced productivity.

This research has demonstrated the essential importance of servant leadership in minimizing workplace bullying through employee resilience enhancement. Under the COR theory of research it becomes clear that servant leadership nurtures resourceful conditions where employees gain strength to confront workplace challenges leading to decreased workplace bullying. The research expands awareness about leadership's effects on organizational atmospheres while offering vital leadership practices for small-to-medium enterprise leaders across Pakistan.

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