

# Women and Relationship Conflict: Effect of Leadership Preferences, LMX, and Organizational Justice

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**Abstract:** The 2018 report from the Indian Labor Organization (ILO) highlighted the serious issue of slow progression and underrepresentation of women in the global workforce. Several reasons for such underrepresentation have been documented in the literature, including lack of family support, low autonomy over career-related decisions, relationship conflict with superiors, gender discrimination, harassment during work, etc. For the career progression of women, social support not just from the family members, but also from the superiors and colleagues is important. Since there is a substantial difference in the expectations of men and women in the workplace, which often leads to role conflict and relationship conflict, it is significant to understand and align these expectations to develop harmonious work relationships between superiors and their women subordinates to ensure optimum performance. The present study therefore focuses on identifying the leadership behaviour preferences of Indian women employees. The study also aims to determine the effect of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and the perception of Organizational Justice on the Relationship Conflict experienced by women employees vis-à-vis their superiors. The study follows an empirical approach and quantitative research methodology. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were deployed for data collection. Data were collected from 512 Indian women working across various sectors and at various levels in the organizational hierarchy. Descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modelling were used for analyzing the data. Results of the study provide valuable insights into the leadership behaviour preferences of Indian women employees and the relationship between LMX, Organizational Justice, and Relationship Conflict. It is identified that Indian women prefer their superior to possess the attributes of 'respect', 'ethics' and 'communication skills'. The results also indicate that organizational justice mediates between LMX and relationship conflict. The study findings will be useful for managers, HR professionals, and researchers to better understand the concerns of women in the workplace. The insights from the study will aid in gaining a comprehensive understanding of women's preferences at work, which will further help nurture superior-subordinate relationships and address relationship conflict more effectively.

**Keywords:** Leadership Preferences, LMX, Relationship Conflict, Organizational Justice, India, Gender, Women

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations across the globe have reported serious concerns over the slow progression of women in the workplace (Barhate et al, 2021). Although women constitute almost half the world's population; they continue to remain under-represented in the organizational hierarchy (Chaudhari and Inamdar, 2024).

India, the most populous country and one of the fastest emerging economies in the world, scores one of the lowest in terms of female labour participation. Gender studies indicate that the responsibility of domestic obligations is tilted more towards women in India which slows down their progression path (Barua, Haukanes and Waldrop, 2016). According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Report (2022), there is a huge gender imbalance in the Indian workforce, where only 10% of working-age Indian women are either employed or actively looking for jobs in organized sector. The report states that out of 85.2 million salaried employees in India during 2022-23, 76.3 million were males and only 8.9 million were females. The presence of women in top leadership and senior managerial roles is also disproportionately low (Nair, 2023), and women continue to be plagued by discrimination at work.

While both men and women experience workplace discrimination, the psychological consequences of the apparent gender discrimination are different in both men and women, which reduces their sense of belonging (Tost et al, 2022) and increases the chances of potential interpersonal relationship conflict at work (Advani and Gulzar, 2016). Women particularly face challenges in handling discrimination and conflicts at both- the organizational level and individual levels (Inamdar, Chaudhari and Nagendra, 2020) due to domestic obligations, expectations of society, power dynamics, and gendered norms (Kim et al, 2020). Despite advancements in workplace DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) practices, women continue to experience discrimination, conflict and stress in their interpersonal relationships at work resulting in depressive symptoms and job dissatisfaction (Kim et al, 2020).

Research highlights the role of leadership in shaping workplace relationships and conflict dynamics (Yadav, 2022; Larsson and Vinberg, 2010). Literature also confirms that employee work performance and workplace

relationships are highly impacted by the perception of justice (Wolfe and Lawson, 2020) and how the leader leads the team (Larsson and Vinberg, 2010). Therefore, a leader's behaviour forms the core of leadership as leadership is performed through action, not cognition (Denison, Hooijberg and Quinn, 1995). There can be potential conflicts if the behaviour is undesirable, and employees perceive unfairness and injustice (Yadav and Chaudhari, 2020). Hence, Leadership Preferences, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), and Organizational Justice have emerged as key factors influencing relationship conflict in the workplace (Yadav, 2022). While the role of LMX in employee workplace relationships and outcomes is well established, the mechanism through which LMX predicts these relationships and outcomes needs more exploration (Bhal and Ansari, 2007). Moreover, the intersectionality of these factors with Indian women's experiences is yet to be explored.

Therefore, through this study, we endeavour to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by exploring:

1. The leadership behaviour preferences of Indian women employees, and
2. The effect of LMX and Organizational Justice on the Relationship Conflict between women employees and their superiors.

A study of this nature is instrumental in the Indian context as it offers a unique perspective, especially in the emerging Indian economy where the progression of women is still sluggish than progressive.

## **2. Relevant Review of Literature and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1 Leadership Preferences**

Leadership preferences are the desired leadership attributes (knowledge, skills and characteristics) that employees prefer in their superiors. Within the constraints of a given situation, these attributes prompt the superior to behave in particular ways (Moss and Jensrud, 1995). Such behaviour of the superior directly impacts employee's work behaviour (positive and negative) and their relationship with the superior (Jackson, Alberti and Snipes, 2014). Research has established that men and women value different aspects at work (Peterson, 2004) and have considerably different preferences regarding leadership behaviour from their superiors (Stewart and Wiener, 2021). Women gravitate towards collaborative, cooperative and relationship-oriented behaviour which is interpersonally oriented, while men prefer action-oriented or task-oriented behaviour which is defined by independent and assertive tendencies (Eagly, 2009; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). The superior-subordinate relationship strengthens when the leadership preferences are met, and conflicts arise when the expectations are unmet (Ruderman, 2008).

### **2.2 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)**

How a superior behaves and deals with the subordinate forms the foundation of the superior-subordinate relationship. The quality and nature of such a relationship are identified by the interpersonal exchange that happens between the superior and the subordinate. The LMX theory examines this relationship in an interpersonal interface (Collins, Burrus and Meyer, 2014) and states that superiors follow different leadership styles while dealing with subordinates as they have different relationships with each of them (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). The theory categorizes the superior-subordinate relationship into "in-group" or high LMX and "out-group" or low LMX. The nature of such relationship exchange impacts the subordinate's outcomes. A high-quality interpersonal exchange between the superior and the subordinate has a positive effect on the subordinate's work outcome (e.g., increased commitment and productivity), whereas the perception of low-level support from the superior leads to the perception of unfairness, conflicts and turnover (Podsakoff et al, 2000). Research suggests that gender also affects the quality of LMX. Superiors exhibit positive bias towards subordinates of the same gender and give higher ratings to them and vice versa (Varma and Stroh, 2001). Since the presence of women in leadership and managerial roles is low (Nair, 2023), most superiors are male, and hence, women fall mostly into the out-group (Andrews, 2019).

### **2.3 Organizational Justice**

The extant literature on Organizational Justice suggests that subordinates perceive the quality of their relationship with their superiors as an indicator of organizational justice, fairness and support (Collins, Mossholder and Taylor, 2012). Organizational Justice is the personal perception of fair and ethical behaviour of superiors and the organization's management regarding the procedures and processes (procedural justice), distribution of rewards, compensation and benefits (distributive justice), information sharing (informational

justice) and interpersonal behaviour (interpersonal justice) towards the subordinates (Ledimo, 2015). Being the personal perception of the subordinate, it is highly subjective as it is based on what the subordinate perceives to be fair rather than on the objective reality (Ledimo, 2015). Perceived injustice and discrimination in the workplace have been associated with negative work outcomes, behaviour and relationships (Kamble, Kumar and Chalise, 2020; Colquitt, 2001), while gender discrimination is specifically said to result in conflicts (Guttek, Cohen and Tsui, 1996). Researchers have documented that women perceive justice much more differently than men, often facing discrimination and bias in the workplace in terms of work responsibility, pay and perks etc. (Deepak, 2021; Guttek, Cohen and Tsui, 1996).

## 2.4 Relationship Conflict

Employees may experience different types of workplace conflicts, which may be related to the task at hand, organizational processes or the interpersonal relationships between the individuals. Relationship conflict in the workplace are perceived interpersonal incompatibilities that are not task-related (Yadav and Chaudhari, 2020). Such conflicts usually occur when the superior and the subordinate perceive that their interests, values, and preferences do not match (Jehn, 1995). Since relationship conflict is interpersonal, it develops on personal and emotional levels. Hence, it has a more negative impact on workplace relationships and team performance than any other type of conflict (Dreu and Weingart, 2003). It has also been documented that women are significantly affected by such conflicts than men, and women see relationship conflict as disruptive (Kirti, 2017). Hence, LMX becomes weak when the women subordinates perceive interpersonal incompatibility with the superiors, resulting in relationship conflict (Yadav and Chaudhari, 2023).

Based on the above review of literature, we argue that when the leadership behaviour preferences of women subordinates are fulfilled, there is a strong LMX which results in positive work relationships. However, if the women subordinates perceive low LMX and unfair or unjust practices in the workplace, it negatively influences the relationship resulting in conflicts. Hence, we hypothesize:

*H1: Leadership preferences are positively related to LMX*

*H2: LMX is negatively related to relationship conflict*

*H3: LMX is positively related to organizational justice*

*H4: Organizational justice mediates negatively between LMX and relationship conflict*

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Sample

The present study is focused on the Indian women employees working across various sectors and at various levels in the organizational hierarchy. The sample was selected based on purposive and snowball sampling methods. The online survey questionnaire was floated via WhatsApp, email, and LinkedIn chat, and 512 completed anonymous responses were received. The purpose of the study was detailed at the beginning of the online survey questionnaire and assurance about the confidentiality of responses was given to the respondents. Demographic details of the sample are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Sample**

		Level in Organizational Hierarchy		
		Top-level management	Middle-level management	Lower/junior-level management
Sector of Employment	Public sector	1.5%	18%	9%
	Private Sector	6%	31%	26%
	Other	-	7%	1.5%

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy test was conducted to determine the adequacy of the sample. The KMO coefficient value for the data came out to be 0.956, which is considered marvelous (Kaiser, 1974).

### 3.2 Measures

The primary variables under the study were Leadership Preferences, Leader-Member Exchange, Relationship Conflict, and Organizational Justice. Standardized scales were used to measure the variables.

**Leadership Preferences:** Leader Attributes Inventory (LAI) by Moss et al (1994) was used to identify the preferred leadership behaviour attributes of Indian women employees. A brief description of each attribute was provided for better understanding. The scale included 27 attributes which were rated on a scale of 1 to 6, where 1-not at all preferred and 6-extremely preferred.

**Leader-Member Exchange:** To measure the dimensions of the superior-subordinate relationship, the LMX scale developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998) was adopted. The scale included 10 items that measured affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect towards the superior. Examples of items in the scale are “My superior is a lot of fun to work with”, “I am willing to apply extra efforts, beyond what is specified in my job description, to meet my superior’s work goals”. The items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 5-strongly agree to 1-strongly disagree.

**Relationship Conflict:** The Workplace Interpersonal Conflict Scale (WICS) by Wright et al (2017) was adapted to measure the sensitivity of conflict between the superior and the subordinate. Examples of items in the scale are “How often have you been treated with hostility or rude behaviour by your superior?”, “How often have you felt unappreciated by your superior?” The scale included 8 items which were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 5-always to 1-never.

**Organizational Justice:** A standardized scale developed by Colquitt (2001) and Brashear, Brooks and Boles (2004) was used to measure the dimensions of Organizational Justice. The Colquitt (2001) scale had 9 items which measured Interpersonal and Informational Justice, while the Brashear, Brooks and Boles (2004) scale had 17 items which measured Procedural and Distributive Justice. Examples of items in the scale are “To what extent does your superiors treat you in a polite manner?”, “To what extent are you fairly rewarded for the amount of effort you put forth?” The items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 5-to a very large extent to 1-to a very little extent.

**Personal Demographics:** Single statement items were used to collect demographic information of the respondents such as gender, birth year categorization, sector of employment, and level in the organizational hierarchy.

Cronbach Alpha, the most common method of Reliability Testing for a survey instrument was carried out. The Cronbach Alpha value of each measure indicates that the items have high internal consistency. Refer to Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Cronbach Alpha Values**

Measure	Cronbach-Alpha
Leadership Preferences	.968
Leader-Member Exchange	.890
Relationship Conflict	.924
Organizational Justice	.950

### 4. Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive Statistics were used to determine the highly preferred leadership behaviour attributes of the female employees. Descriptive statistics summarize the data, make information assimilation easier (Hesse and Ofosu, 2017), and help in understanding, comparing, and interpreting the data (Lee, 2020); thereby allowing the researcher to make inferences from the measures of central tendency. Descriptive statistics about the leadership behaviour preferences of women employees (in descending order of Mean value) are presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics: Leadership Behaviour Preferences**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
LP17 (Respectful)	5.62	.866	.750
LP15 (Ethical)	5.60	.797	.635

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
LP16 (Communication- listening, oral, written)	5.57	.783	.614
LP3 (Visionary)	5.56	.776	.603
LP2 (Adaptable to change)	5.55	.792	.628
LP24 (Decision-making)	5.52	.867	.751
LP9 (Enthusiastic, optimistic)	5.50	.830	.689
LP7 (Confident, accepting of self)	5.45	.870	.757
LP27 (Mentoring)	5.45	.943	.890
LP25 (Problem-solving)	5.44	.937	.877
LP22 (Time management)	5.41	.911	.830
LP18 (Planning and organizing)	5.41	.873	.763
LP19 (Delegating)	5.40	.874	.764
LP14 (Intelligent with practical judgement)	5.39	.872	.760
LP23 (Stress management)	5.39	1.001	1.002
LP20 (Coaching)	5.37	.938	.879
LP11 (Dependable, reliable)	5.33	.976	.953
LP5 (Achievement oriented)	5.30	.857	.734
LP4 (Tolerant of ambiguity and complexity)	5.29	.935	.874
LP6 (Initiating)	5.29	.880	.775
LP10 (Tolerant of frustration)	5.26	1.039	1.080
LP26 (Information management)	5.23	.948	.900
LP13 (Even disposition)	5.19	.993	.986
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
LP8 (Willing to accept more duties/responsibilities)	5.18	.969	.940
LP12 (Courageous, risk-taker)	5.14	.979	.958
LP21 (Conflict management)	5.12	1.061	1.125
LP1 (Energetic with stamina)	5.09	.954	.909

Structural Equation Modelling was used to establish the relationship between the variables in the form of a path diagram and to fit the hypothesized model. Hair et al (2015) have suggested the criteria for model fit indices. The Path Diagram of the Structural Model is presented in Figure 1 and the Actual values of the model fit indices are presented in Table 4 below.

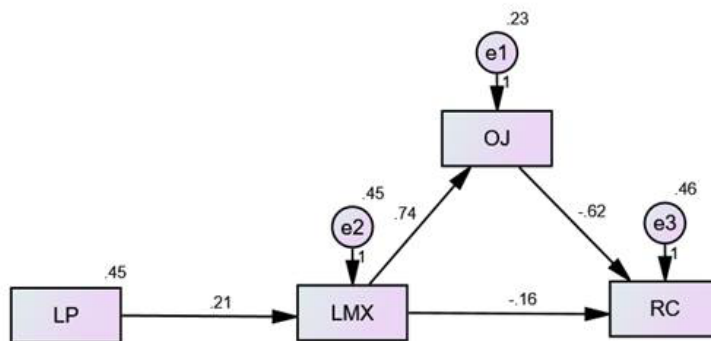


Figure 1: Path Diagram

(LP= Leadership Preference, LMX= Leader-Member Exchange, OJ= Organizational Justice, RC= Relationship Conflict)

**Table 4: Model Fit Indices**

Test	Target Value Criteria	Actual Value of Model
X <sup>2</sup> /df	< 3	2.538
Goodness of Fit (GFI)	> 0.90	0.995
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	< 0.08	0.055
Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)	< 0.10	0.014
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0 < NFI < 1	0.992
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> 0.95	0.995
Tucker Lewis Index (TLI)	> 0.95	0.985

The above structural model (Figure 1) displayed a good fit as all the values of absolute fit indices ( $\chi^2/df$ , GFI, RMSEA, RMR) and relative fit indices (NFI, CFI, TLI) were within the acceptable target criteria as specified by Hair et al (2015).

**Table 5: Path Coefficient Regression Weights**

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
LMX	<---	LP	.213	.044	4.834	***
OJ	<---	LMX	.744	.031	23.720	***
RC	<---	LMX	-.163	.064	-2.542	.011
RC	<---	OJ	-.618	.062	-9.910	***

The path coefficient regression weights (Table 5 above) indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between LMX and RC ( $\beta = -0.163$ , ns), while there is a positive and significant relationship between LP and LMX ( $\beta = 0.213$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and LMX and OJ ( $\beta = 0.744$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results also suggest a negative and significant relationship between OJ and RC ( $\beta = -0.618$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, hypotheses H1, H3 and H4 are accepted and hypothesis H2 is rejected.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Several reasons have been documented in the literature for the slow progression and underrepresentation of women in the workforce. Researchers have identified lack of family support, workplace biases (Inamdar, Chaudhari and Nagendra, 2020), gender discrimination, role conflict (Chaudhari and Inamdar, 2024) etc. as some of the reasons. Although the dynamics of Indian workplaces are changing with more and more women being employed, the progression of Indian women in the workplaces has still been slow (Chaudhari and Inamdar, 2024). Since women constitute almost half of the total Indian population, it is imperative to understand their preferences, experiences and relationships in the workplace to promote equitable representation and provide a conducive work environment.

The findings of our study suggest that Indian women prefer their superiors to be respectful, ethical, communicative, visionary, adaptable to change, good at decision-making, and enthusiastic ( $\bar{X} > 5.50$ ). This indicates that women prefer relationship-oriented behaviour (respectful, communicative) from their superiors, which is in line with the findings of some of the earlier studies that state that women value and engage in more communal behaviours which are interpersonally oriented (Eagly, 2009; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Our results also indicate that women prefer their superiors to possess intellectual and action-oriented attributes (visionary, decision-making, enthusiastic), as well as be fair and just (ethics). Such attributes inspire trust and confidence in the abilities of the superior and women subordinates look up to superiors with these behavioural attributes as role models. Moreover, superiors are more than just managers of work-related outcomes. They also guide, support and inspire their subordinates (Cable and Judge, 2003). Collins, Burrus and Meyer (2014) established that though women prefer communal or relationship-oriented behaviour more than men, both men and women value agentic or action-oriented attributes. They stated that the spillover socialization from non-work roles leads women to value communal or relationship-oriented attributes. Conversely, they prefer intellectual and action-oriented behavioural attributes because of their positive effect on resource allocation (Collins, Burrus and Meyer, 2014).

Women, who mostly face biases and discrimination concerning various aspects of professional life, value justice and consider it as an indication of how their contribution is perceived by the superior and the organization's management (Deepak, 2021). The results of our study are similar. Results indicate that the women subordinates perceive the quality of their relationship with their superiors as an indicator of organizational justice. The findings corroborate some of the earlier studies (Deepak, 2021; Collins, Mossholder and Taylor, 2012) which state that the subordinates may not necessarily be in direct touch with the organization's management; hence, the superior becomes the face of the management and the representative of the organizational justice, support and fairness. The results have also identified that organizational justice mediates between LMX and relationship conflict for the women subordinates, meaning that the perception of injustice acts as scarring for the relationship between the superior and the subordinate resulting in relationship conflict (Yadav, 2022). Women are significantly more affected by such conflicts than men, and they see these conflicts as disruptive (Kirti, 2017).

## 6. Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

The present study has made some significant theoretical contributions. We have contributed to the literature on "leadership behaviour preferences" by identifying the preferred leadership behavioural attributes of Indian women in the workplace. While earlier studies have focused more on the leadership style of the leader, there are limited studies which have explored the preferred leadership behavioural attributes of women. We have also contributed to the growing literature on LMX by identifying the mechanism through which LMX predicts workplace relationships and outcomes for Indian women.

Although both men and women are considered at par with each other in the workplace, equal treatment and consistent norms for both genders are encouraged (the equity approach). Conversely, differences do exist between men and women, therefore, unique norms for both genders should be practiced in the workplace (complementary approach) (Collins, Burrus and Meyer, 2014). Hence, the findings of this study will help superiors to understand that their support and behaviour will ensure more positive work outcomes and relationships with the women subordinates, whereas these behaviours may affect the male subordinates less. This is also consistent with the fundamental principle of LMX that superiors follow different styles while dealing with different subordinates.

The study results will also help HR professionals and policymakers to tailor-make the policies and procedures to ensure justice and fairness for both men and women. Significant measures for ensuring the involvement of women in decision-making, formulation of policies and procedures, and transparency in information-sharing will help reduce the perception of unfairness and discrimination. The experience of fairness will develop a sense of belonging and will improve workplace relationships.

## 7. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

Although the study findings have important implications, it also has potential limitations. Organizational justice is considered a unitary construct in the study. Future studies may look at how various dimensions of organizational justice impact relationship conflict in the workplace. Future studies may even do a comparative study between genders and see how the results differ.

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