

Revisiting Islamic Work Ethics Concepts and Employee Diversity in the Workplace: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Employee diversity has become increasingly important in modern organisations as firms navigate globalisation, demographic changes, and competitive pressures. In developing economies such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), organisations in the energy and infrastructure sectors employ multinational and multi-ethnic workforces, making diversity management a strategic priority. Islamic Work Ethics (IWE), derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, provide a moral and philosophical foundation that increasingly shapes organisational culture and managerial practices in Muslim-majority contexts. This conceptual paper examines how IWE principles align with contemporary diversity management frameworks, with particular emphasis on recent empirical findings linking IWE to employee voice behaviour, organisational identification, prosocial conduct, and inclusive workplace dynamics. Drawing on structural topic modelling research and emerging organisational scholarship, the paper develops an integrated conceptual framework that positions IWE as a values-driven approach to fostering workplace inclusion, justice, and employee well-being. The paper contributes to the growing body of literature on religion-based work ethics and diversity management by proposing theoretical linkages between IWE dimensions and diversity outcomes, highlighting practical implications for organisations in Muslim-majority regions, and identifying directions for future empirical research.

Keywords: Islamic Work Ethics, Employee Diversity, Diversity Management, Inclusion, Organizational Justice

Introduction

Organizational Context

The economic health of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) depends significantly on major entities in the energy and infrastructure sectors. Qaiwan Group, a multi-sector conglomerate based in Sulaymaniyah, is a leading private-sector employer. While prioritising local employment, particularly among Kurdish youth, the group also integrates international expertise for specialised technical and managerial roles (Qaiwan Group, 2023; Kurdistan Business Journal, 2022). This dual approach supports both regional economic growth and skills development. In contrast, Dana Gas, a publicly listed gas producer headquartered in Sharjah, UAE, holds key operational stakes in the KRI gas fields (Dana Gas, 2023). The company maintains a notably diverse global workforce, employing between 200 and 500 staff, with significant numbers in Iraq (182), the UAE (105), and Egypt (118) (Zawya, 2022). Both companies use their operational scale to foster inclusive workforce environments, making them relevant case studies for examining modern corporate behaviour in developing economies (Ali, 2020). Dana Gas, for example, explicitly promotes multinational representation and gender balance, alongside merit-based career progression (Gulf Energy Review, 2023).

Conceptual Background

Employee diversity encompasses various dimensions, including demographic, cognitive, and cultural variations. In the Middle Eastern business context, the management of this diversity is intrinsically influenced by Islamic Work Ethics (IWE), which provides an overarching value system. IWE is fundamentally integrated within the Islamic moral code (Akhlaq), underpinned by Aqidah and Ibadah (Nasution & Rafiki, 2020). Recent bibliometric analysis reveals that IWE research has expanded significantly, covering ten major themes, including workplace dynamics, organisational work ethics, employee citizenship behaviour, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and performance enhancement (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025; Alam et al., 2024). This paper proposes that IWE principles – specifically the core requirements for justice and generosity in professional conduct – serve as a foundational normative framework shaping diversity and inclusion policies in Muslim-majority organisational contexts.

Problem Statement

Despite clear public statements by organisations about their commitment to inclusive hiring and diversity, academic literature currently lacks explicit connections between corporate diversity policies and the fundamental principles of Islamic Work Ethics that shape the broader regional business ethos. While recent research shows that IWE positively influences employee voice behaviour (Irshad et al., 2024), prosocial conduct (Akhmadi et al., 2023), organisational identification (Akhmadi et al., 2023), and workplace citizenship behaviour (Pasaribu et al., 2023; Romi et al., 2020), the mechanisms by which IWE principles are translated into diversity management practices remain underexplored. Moreover, emerging studies on IWE highlight its role in promoting equality and diversity as one of five core characteristics, alongside righteousness, devotion, conviction, and social duty (Usmani, 2024), yet empirical validation of these links in organisational settings is limited. The main challenge is to determine how the ethical mandates of IWE – particularly requirements for justice, fairness, and ethical conduct – are translated into verifiable human resource strategies that effectively manage and promote multi-ethnic and multinational diversity.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this concept paper is to establish a methodological framework for investigating the interaction between Islamic Work Ethics and employee diversity management. This will be accomplished by: (1) defining and conceptualising the core tenets of IWE from a human resource management perspective, with emphasis on justice, akhlaq, and the societal purpose of labour; (2) analysing the theoretical congruence between IWE principles and contemporary diversity management frameworks, drawing on recent empirical evidence; (3) developing an integrated conceptual model that explains the mechanisms through which IWE influences diversity outcomes; and (4) proposing a methodology for future empirical research to assess the practical implementation and impact of IWE-aligned values on key employee diversity outcomes, such as gender balance, multinational representation, organisational identification, and employee voice behaviour.

Literature Review

Work Ethics: General and Islamic Context

The term ethics originates from the Greek ethos, which denotes character and moral principles (Aflah et al., 2021). Work ethics are defined as the rules of conduct that monitor behaviour and ensure adherence to institutional values. In the Islamic tradition, Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) comprise a set of moral principles rooted in Islamic values, practices, and beliefs, distinguishing right from wrong based on the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah (Nasution & Rafiki, 2020). Unlike Protestant work ethics or other religion-based work ethics, IWE provides detailed rules governing all aspects of daily life for its adherents, integrating social, economic, and religious needs (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008; Ali, 2005). This framework requires that ethics be a positive, disciplined expression of moral principles in all areas of human life (Ibrahim & Kamri, 2013).

Core Principles of Islamic Work Ethics

IWE is systematically integrated into the Islamic moral structure, which comprises Aqidah (faith), Ibadah (worship), and Akhlaq (character). Recent research identifies five essential characteristics of IWE: righteousness, trustworthiness, honesty and diligence; devotion; conviction; social duty; and equality and diversity (Usmani, 2024; Rawwas et al., 2018). These characteristics transcend conventional motivation theory by inspiring employees in both worldly life and the afterlife. The critical attributes of IWE relevant to organisational diversity management include:

Goal Orientation: IWE emphasises the ethical goals of the work process rather than outcomes alone, highlighting the sanctification of work and the pursuit of sacred meaning in professional tasks (Walker et al., 2008; Carroll et al., 2014).

Justice and Equality: Justice and generosity are essential for fostering a welfare society, requiring fair and equitable treatment of all employees regardless of background. This principle explicitly includes equality and diversity as core values (Usmani, 2024), reflecting the exemplary morals of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Ibrahim & Kamri, 2013; Nasution & Rafiki, 2020).

Professional and Ethical Conduct: IWE requires that ethical principles be fully integrated into daily business operations and decision-making, guiding the professional management of a

diverse workforce. This includes promoting loyalty, honesty, integrity, responsibility, fairness, respect, hard work, dedication, punctuality, and the fulfilment of obligations (Rawwas et al., 2018; Nauman et al., 2023).

Ali and Al-Owaihian (2020) conceptualise IWE as a holistic framework that integrates personal morality with organisational responsibilities. Yousef (2001) demonstrates that IWE positively correlates with job satisfaction and organisational commitment, motivating employees to uphold ethical behaviour. More recent studies extend these findings by showing that IWE enhances organisational identification and prosocial voice behaviour (Akhmadi et al., 2023), reduces workplace deviance (Imam et al., 2024), and promotes organisational citizenship behaviour across multiple generations (Pasaribu et al., 2023). Furthermore, IWE has been shown to positively influence employee voice behaviour through the mediating role of felt obligation for constructive change, particularly in diverse organisational settings (Irshad et al., 2024).

Employee Diversity: Contemporary Perspectives

Employee diversity encompasses demographic, cognitive, cultural, and experiential differences among individuals in the workplace. Cox (2001) argues that multicultural organisations must intentionally design systems to capture the benefits of workforce heterogeneity. Roberson (2006) clarifies that diversity and inclusion are complementary but distinct constructs, while Luu et al. (2019) emphasise that diversity initiatives foster employee work engagement. Recent meta-analytical evidence confirms that diversity and inclusion initiatives significantly enhance organisational performance by improving innovation, decision-making, employee engagement, and financial outcomes (Okatta et al., 2024; Eden et al., 2024; Kasih & Ruslaini, 2024). Organisations that prioritise diversity are better positioned to attract top talent, strengthen their brand reputation, and achieve competitive advantages in global markets (Diversio, 2024).

The field of diversity management has developed significantly, moving from compliance-focused approaches to comprehensive strategies that emphasise diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (Shore et al. 2018). Current best practices in 2024 include using technology and artificial intelligence for unbiased recruitment and performance evaluation, providing inclusive leadership training for managers, conducting regular diversity audits, establishing employee resource groups, and setting transparent diversity goals with accountability mechanisms (Chen, 2023; Seppälä, & Małecka, 2024; Drage, & Mackereth).

Linking IWE and Diversity Management

While research directly linking IWE to diversity management remains limited, existing literature indicates significant areas of convergence. Recent empirical evidence shows that IWE promotes interfaith understanding and respect for different religious perspectives, fostering inclusive environments where employees feel comfortable expressing voice behaviours (Irshad et al., 2024). In Muslim-majority countries, where Islamic values shape national policies and cultural norms, the integration of religious values into professional life influences employee satisfaction, corporate governance, economic performance, and social harmony (Aman-Ullah & Mehmood, 2022; Romi et al., 2020; Badar et al., 2023; Aziz et al., 2022; Chupradit et al., 2022). Cross-cultural research reveals that religiosity and IWE significantly affect work behaviours, with the strength of these effects moderated by whether

individuals operate in Muslim-majority or non-majority cultural contexts (Al-Samdi et al., 2021; Linando et al., 2023).

Mousa (2021) found that diversity management practices increase workplace happiness among academic staff, indicating that fairness-based systems support positive employee outcomes. Parboteeah et al. (2020) argue that ethical climates directly shape organisational performance, implying that ethics-driven frameworks such as IWE can strengthen diversity outcomes by promoting equity, respect, and moral conduct. The sanctification of work – viewing professional tasks as spiritual endeavours – has been identified as a moderating factor that enhances the relationship between IWE and employees' felt obligation for constructive change, thereby improving voice behaviour (Irshad et al., 2024). Recent bibliometric analysis identifies workforce diversity as a factor affecting employee performance, with IWE-informed organisations better positioned to generate diverse pools of knowledge that boost competitiveness (Oshin et al., 2023; Alam et al., 2024).

Research Gaps

Despite growing interest in IWE research, several critical gaps remain. First, although studies demonstrate positive associations between IWE and various organisational outcomes, the specific mechanisms by which IWE influences diversity management practices require further clarification. Second, empirical research validating the theoretical links between IWE principles – particularly equality and diversity as explicit values – and measurable diversity outcomes is limited. Third, contextual factors such as organisational culture, leadership commitment, and industry characteristics that may moderate the IWE-diversity relationship remain underexplored. Finally, comparative studies examining IWE implementation across different Muslim-majority regions and organisational sectors are needed to enhance generalisability. This conceptual paper addresses these gaps by proposing an integrated framework and methodology for future empirical investigation.

Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Foundations

The proposed conceptual framework integrates three theoretical perspectives: Social Exchange Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Ethical Climate Theory. Social Exchange Theory posits that IWE principles such as justice, fairness, and respect provide psychological rewards for employees, fostering reciprocal behaviours including organisational citizenship and voice behaviour (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When employees perceive that their organisation upholds Islamic ethical principles – including equality and diversity – they are more likely to contribute positively to organisational outcomes. Social Identity Theory suggests that employees who identify with organisations embodying IWE values experience stronger organisational identification, which mediates the relationship between IWE and prosocial behaviours (Akhmadi et al., 2023; Teresi et al., 2019). Ethical Climate Theory argues that the moral atmosphere created by IWE implementation shapes employee perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, particularly regarding fairness and inclusion (Parboteeah et al., 2020).

Integrated Conceptual Model

The integrated conceptual model consists of four main components: IWE dimensions, mediating mechanisms, diversity management practices, and organisational outcomes. The model suggests that five core IWE dimensions – justice and equality, akhlaq (ethical

character), devotion and conviction, sanctification of work, and social responsibility – influence diversity management practices through three key mediating mechanisms: organisational identification, felt obligation for constructive change, and perceived organisational justice.

IWE Dimensions: Justice and equality involve fair treatment, equitable resource distribution, and explicit valuing of diversity (Usmani, 2024). Akhlaq refers to ethical character demonstrated through honesty, integrity, and moral conduct. Devotion and conviction reflect employees' spiritual commitment to ethical principles. Sanctification of work entails viewing professional activities as spiritually meaningful endeavours (Walker et al., 2008). Social responsibility highlights duties towards community welfare and collective well-being.

Mediating Mechanisms: Organisational identification is the extent to which employees define themselves by their organisational membership, which IWE enhances by fostering value alignment (Akhmadi et al., 2023). Felt obligation for constructive change captures employees' sense of responsibility to improve organisational practices, which IWE promotes through its emphasis on continuous improvement and social duty (Irshad et al., 2024). Perceived organisational justice reflects employees' assessments of fairness in organisational processes, distributions, and interpersonal treatment, which IWE directly reinforces through justice imperatives.

Diversity Management Practices: These include inclusive recruitment and selection, equitable performance management, diversity training and education, employee resource groups, work-life balance accommodations, and transparent diversity metrics and accountability systems.

Organisational Outcomes: Improved diversity outcomes include increased representation across demographic categories, enhanced employee voice behaviour and participation, higher organisational citizenship behaviour, reduced workplace deviance, greater organisational commitment, improved job satisfaction, increased innovation and creativity, and stronger financial performance.

Moderating Factors

The model recognises several moderating factors that may strengthen or weaken the relationships between IWE and diversity outcomes. Leadership commitment to both IWE principles and diversity initiatives is crucial for effective implementation. Organisational culture – whether it genuinely embraces religious values or treats them superficially – moderates the authenticity and effectiveness of IWE integration. Industry characteristics, including competitive pressures, regulatory environments, and workforce composition, influence the feasibility and impact of IWE-based diversity practices. Regional and cultural context, particularly the extent to which the broader societal environment supports Islamic values and diversity, affects employee receptivity to IWE-informed initiatives. Finally, generational differences may moderate responses to IWE and diversity practices, as research shows varying effects across Generation Y and Generation Z (Pasaribu et al., 2023).

Proposed Methodology*Research Design*

This conceptual paper proposes a three-phase mixed-methods research design for future empirical validation. Phase 1 involves qualitative exploration through document analysis and semi-structured interviews to map how organisations articulate and operationalise IWE principles in diversity management. Phase 2 entails quantitative measurement using validated instruments to assess relationships between IWE dimensions, mediating mechanisms, diversity practices, and organisational outcomes. Phase 3 comprises comparative case study analysis to examine contextual variations in IWE-diversity linkages across different organisational settings.

Phase 1: Qualitative Exploration

Document Analysis: Systematic content analysis of organisational documents, including annual reports, sustainability reports, corporate social responsibility statements, HR policy manuals, diversity and inclusion policies, employee handbooks, and public communications from target organisations (e.g., Qaiwan Group, Dana Gas). The analysis will use deductive coding based on the conceptual framework, mapping explicit and implicit references to IWE principles and diversity practices. Academic and industry reports will provide contextual understanding of local employment commitments, integration of international expertise, gender balance policies, merit-based progression systems, and multinational representation.

Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews with key informants, including senior executives, HR managers, diversity officers, and employees from diverse backgrounds. Interview protocols will explore perceptions of IWE principles, experiences with diversity practices, mechanisms linking IWE to inclusion, facilitators and barriers to IWE-based diversity management, and specific examples of IWE manifestation in workplace decisions. Thematic analysis will identify patterns, contradictions, and contextual factors shaping IWE-diversity relationships.

Phase 2: Quantitative Measurement

Survey Instrument Development: A comprehensive questionnaire will incorporate validated scales for IWE dimensions (adapted from Ali, 1988; Ibrahim & Kamri, 2013), organisational identification (based on Akhmadi et al., 2023), felt obligation for constructive change (adapted from Irshad et al., 2024), perceived organisational justice (using established justice scales), diversity climate (employing validated diversity climate measures), employee voice behaviour (using prosocial voice scales), organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB scales), and diversity outcomes (demographic representation and inclusion perceptions).

Sampling Strategy: Multi-stage sampling will target employees across organisational levels, functions, and demographic categories within energy and infrastructure sector organisations in the KRI. The minimum sample size will be determined through power analysis to detect medium effect sizes with adequate statistical power. Data analysis will employ structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the proposed conceptual model, examining direct, indirect (mediated), and moderated relationships. Confirmatory factor analysis will validate measurement models, and path analysis will test hypothesised relationships between constructs.

Phase 3: Comparative Case Studies

Case Selection: Purposive sampling of 3-5 organisations varying in size, ownership structure (private vs. public), industry sub-sector, and stated commitment to IWE and diversity. Each case study will involve comprehensive data collection through interviews, observations, document analysis, and quantitative surveys. Cross-case analysis will identify patterns and variations in IWE implementation, diversity practices, contextual enablers and constraints, and outcome achievement. This triangulation approach will enhance validity and provide rich insights into the practical manifestation of theoretical relationships.

Discussion and Implications*Theoretical Contributions*

This conceptual framework makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on IWE and diversity management. First, it explicitly positions equality and diversity as core IWE values rather than incidental outcomes, aligning with recent characterisations of IWE (Usmani, 2024). Second, it identifies specific mediating mechanisms – organisational identification, felt obligation for constructive change, and perceived organisational justice – through which IWE influences diversity outcomes, addressing a gap in the existing literature. Third, the framework integrates insights from multiple theoretical traditions (social exchange, social identity, and ethical climate theories) to provide a comprehensive understanding of IWE-diversity linkages. Fourth, it acknowledges and incorporates moderating factors that contextualise the effectiveness of IWE-based diversity management. Finally, the framework extends diversity management theory by incorporating religion-based ethics as a legitimate and potentially powerful foundation for inclusion practices, particularly in Muslim-majority organisational contexts.

Practical Implications

For organisations operating in Muslim-majority regions, the framework offers practical guidance for developing culturally aligned diversity strategies. Organisations can use IWE principles as an authentic foundation for diversity initiatives, rather than adopting Western DEIB frameworks that may lack cultural relevance. Specific recommendations include: (1) clearly articulating connections between IWE values and diversity goals in organisational communications and policies; (2) training leaders and managers on IWE principles and their implications for inclusive leadership; (3) designing recruitment, selection, and promotion processes that reflect IWE commitments to justice and equality; (4) creating mechanisms for employee voice that align with IWE's emphasis on constructive change and social responsibility; (5) establishing accountability systems that monitor both IWE adherence and diversity outcomes; (6) fostering work environments that support the sanctification of work and accommodate diverse religious practices; and (7) developing employee resource groups that strengthen organisational identification among diverse employees.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, the framework suggests that government agencies and industry regulators in Muslim-majority countries should consider IWE principles when developing diversity and employment equity legislation and guidelines. Educational institutions preparing future business leaders should incorporate IWE and its relationship to diversity management into their curricula. Professional associations can develop certification programmes or best practice guidelines for IWE-based diversity management. International organisations and

multinational corporations operating in Muslim-majority regions should adapt their global diversity strategies to align with local religious and ethical contexts, recognising IWE as a legitimate framework for inclusion rather than a barrier to be overcome.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has examined the intersection of Islamic Work Ethics and employee diversity management, proposing an integrated framework that clarifies theoretical linkages and mediating mechanisms. Drawing on recent empirical research demonstrating IWE's positive influence of Islamic Work Ethics on organisational identification, employee voice behaviour, prosocial conduct, and citizenship behaviour, the paper positions IWE as a values-driven approach to fostering workplace inclusion, justice, and well-being. The proposed framework identifies five core IWE dimensions, three key mediating mechanisms, and multiple moderating factors that shape the effectiveness of IWE-based diversity practices.

The conceptual model and proposed three-phase methodology provide a roadmap for future empirical research to validate theoretical propositions and generate actionable insights for practitioners. By conducting document analysis, interviews, surveys, and comparative case studies, researchers can examine how IWE principles are operationalised in organisational contexts, assess the strength of relationships between IWE dimensions and diversity outcomes, identify contextual factors that moderate these relationships, and develop evidence-based recommendations for IWE-informed diversity management.

For organisations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and other Muslim-majority contexts, embedding IWE principles in diversity strategies offers a culturally authentic approach to enhancing fairness, transparency, employee trust, and an inclusive culture. By aligning corporate policies with justice, equality, and akhlaq, firms may strengthen employee identification, promote voice behaviour, reduce workplace deviance, and create environments where diversity is not merely tolerated but actively valued. However, empirical validation is essential to determine how consistently these principles are applied in practice and how they influence measurable outcomes such as gender representation, multinational integration, skill development, and cross-cultural teamwork.

As organisations worldwide face increasing workforce heterogeneity and demands for authentic inclusion, understanding the role of religion-based ethics in diversity management becomes increasingly important. This paper contributes to this understanding by demonstrating that IWE provides not only a moral imperative but also a practical framework for building diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. Future research should continue to explore these connections empirically, examine variations across different contexts, and develop implementation strategies that harness the full potential of IWE principles to advance organisational diversity and performance.

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