Legal and Ethical Issues in Human Resources Management: Investigating the Implications in Public Sector Performance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: January 17, 2026

The study investigates the legal and ethical issues in human resource management (HRM) and their implications for public sector performance in Nigeria. It seeks to determine how compliance with HRM legal frameworks and ethical practices influence employee motivation, job satisfaction, and overall organisational performance. Anchored on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the study argues that fair and lawful treatment of employees fosters reciprocal commitment and productivity. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from a population of 2,550 staff across selected public sector organisations in Lagos and Rivers States, with a sample size of 385 determined through Taro Yamane's formula. Analytical techniques included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and chi-square tests, performed using SPSS version 26. Findings revealed a significant positive relationship between HRM legal compliance and employee performance, while ethical HRM practices were shown to enhance motivation and job satisfaction. Moreover, organisational justice was found to mediate the relationship between legal/ethical compliance and performance outcomes, indicating that fairness and transparency serve as key drivers of public service effectiveness. The study concludes that weak enforcement, political interference, and lack of ethical accountability continue to hinder HRM efficiency in Nigeria's public sector. It recommends strengthening legal enforcement, institutionalising ethics training, digitalising HRM processes, and promoting fairness in decision-making to enhance performance and trust in public administration.

KEYWORDS: Legal compliance, Ethical HRM, Organisational justice, Employee motivation, Public sector performance

INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Management (HRM) has evolved as a critical function in contemporary public administration, focusing on aligning employee welfare with institutional objectives to promote efficiency and accountability. Within the Nigerian public sector, HRM practices are often challenged by numerous legal and ethical issues that influence organizational performance and service delivery (Adewale & Anthonia, 2021). Legal and ethical considerations in HRM encompass adherence to labour laws, equity in recruitment, fair disciplinary procedures, workplace discrimination, and confidentiality in employee relations (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). These issues are not only compliance-related but also reflect the moral standards that shape human interactions and trust within the public workforce.

The Nigerian public sector is governed by frameworks such as the Public Service Rules (2008), the Labour Act (2004), and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), which collectively prescribes the rights and obligations of employers and employees. However, persistent violations such as nepotism, gender discrimination, political interference, unethical recruitment practices, and workplace incivility among employees undermine these legal provisions and weaken institutional credibility (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020; Nwambuko *et al*, 2025). Furthermore, the absence of strict enforcement mechanisms has led to a culture of impunity, reducing employee morale and productivity. Additionally, the importance of having efficient and effective employee standardized training framework in public organizations cannot be overemphasized. Thus, the lack of a standardized framework for assessing the impact of employee

training on performance in public organizations affected the extent at which they employees perform their roles effectively and efficiently in Nigeria (Nwambuko & Yousuo, 2025). Ethical leadership and transparency are therefore essential for restoring professionalism and enhancing accountability in HRM practices (Ojo & Akinlabi, 2022). Addressing legal and ethical dilemmas in HRM is crucial for improving public sector performance in Nigeria. When HR managers uphold fairness, meritocracy, and compliance with statutory regulations, they contribute to employee satisfaction, trust, and commitment which are key determinants of effective public service delivery (Ezeani, 2019). Conversely, breaches of ethical norms or labour laws result in industrial conflicts, corruption, and inefficiencies. Hence, understanding the intersection of legal and ethical HRM issues and their implications for public sector performance is vital for reforming Nigeria's administrative systems and achieving good governance. This study therefore investigates how compliance with legal standards and adherence to ethical principles influence performance outcomes in Nigerian public sector organizations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The effectiveness of Human Resource Management (HRM) in the Nigerian public sector has been consistently undermined by pervasive legal and ethical challenges that erode institutional credibility and hinder performance. Despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks such as the *Labour Act* (2004), the *Public Service Rules* (2008), and the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999) cases of non-compliance, nepotism, favouritism, corruption, and unethical administrative behaviour remain widespread (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020). These unethical practices compromise fairness in recruitment, promotion, discipline, and remuneration, thereby discouraging meritocracy and reducing employee morale and organizational productivity (Adewale & Anthonia, 2021).

Furthermore, the weak enforcement of labour laws and ethical codes within the public sector has created a culture of impunity, and promote workplace incivility atmosphere where violations of employee rights often go unpunished. The consequence of this is the decline in employee job satisfaction, limiting their ability in the public sector to meet growing public expectations and developmental needs (Nwambuko, 2025). HR managers are sometimes pressured by political interests, leading to biased decisions that disregard the principles of justice, equality, and transparency (Ojo & Akinlabi, 2022). This situation has not only diminished public confidence in the civil service but also negatively affected the efficiency and accountability of public institutions.

In addition, inadequate awareness and training on ethical HRM practices have further deepened the problem. Many HR officers lack the professional competence to interpret and apply legal and ethical guidelines effectively, leading to unintentional breaches and administrative inefficiencies (Ezeani, 2019). Consequently, employee grievances, low motivation, industrial conflicts, and poor service delivery persist in the Nigerian public sector.

Despite the critical nature of these issues, empirical research examining the combined influence of legal and ethical HRM practices on public sector performance in Nigeria remains limited. This gap in knowledge makes it difficult for policymakers and administrators to design effective interventions aimed at strengthening compliance and ethical standards. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the legal and ethical issues confronting HRM in the Nigerian public sector and assess their implications for employee performance and overall organizational effectiveness.

Based on the above, the main objective of this study is to examine the legal and ethical issues in Human Resource Management (HRM) and their implications for public sector performance in Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to: assess the influence of compliance with HRM legal frameworks on employee performance in Nigerian public sector organizations; examine the impact of ethical HRM practices on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance; and identify major legal and ethical challenges affecting effective HRM implementation in the Nigerian public sector. To achieve these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: how does compliance with HRM legal frameworks influence employee performance in Nigerian public sector organizations? What is the impact of ethical HRM practices on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and overall performance in the Nigerian public service? And what are the major legal and ethical challenges affecting effective HRM implementation in Nigeria's public sector? Finally, in line with the stated objectives and research questions, the study is guided by the following alternate hypotheses: compliance with HRM legal frameworks has no significant relationship with employee performance in Nigerian public sector organizations; ethical HRM practices have no significant effect on employee motivation and job satisfaction; and organisational justice does not mediate the relationship between ethical/legal HRM practices and public sector performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is thematically done to capture the themes which define the subject matter of the study.

Influence of Compliance with HRM Legal Frameworks on Employee Performance in Nigerian Public Sector Organizations

Compliance with legal frameworks in human resource management (HRM) is widely recognised as a core determinant of employee behaviour, motivation and organisational performance. Scholars argue that clear legal protections and consistent enforcement create predictable work environments that foster trust, reduce perceived injustice, and enhance employees' commitment and productivity (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). In the Nigerian context, statutory instruments such as the Labour Act (2004), the Public Service Rules (2008) and constitutional guarantees theoretically provide the scaffolding for fair employment practices; when these instruments are applied consistently they signal organisational legitimacy and encourage higher employee performance (Public Service Rules, 2008; Labour Act, 2004).

Empirical studies in Nigeria link poor compliance with HRM laws to several negative workplace outcomes. Non-observance of recruitment rules, arbitrary disciplinary actions and irregular payment of entitlements have been associated with low morale, absenteeism and reduced discretionary effort among public servants (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020). Where HRM legal frameworks are weakly enforced, employees frequently perceive management decisions as biased or politically motivated, which undermines organisational justice and weakens intrinsic motivation (Adewale & Anthonia, 2021). Such perceptions are particularly damaging in public organisations where employees' expectations of procedural fairness strongly influence satisfaction and job performance (Ezeani, 2019).

Research also highlights the mediation role of perceived organisational justice between compliance and performance. When procedural and distributive fairness both guaranteed by HR law are respected, employees report higher job satisfaction and organisational citizenship behaviours, which translate into improved service delivery (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Ojo & Akinlabi, 2022). Conversely, legal non-compliance fuels grievance incidence and litigation, diverting managerial attention and public resources away from core service functions (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020).

Several studies emphasise capacity and enforcement as limiting factors. Even where laws exist, ineffective enforcement mechanisms, limited HR professional capacity, and political interference hinder the translation of legal prescriptions into practice (Ezeani, 2019; Adewale & Anthonia, 2021). Consequently, policy prescriptions often stress strengthening institutional enforcement, building HR managerial competencies, and insulating HR decisions from external political pressures to realise the performance benefits of legal compliance (Ojo & Akinlabi, 2022).

In sum, the literature converges on the view that compliance with HRM legal frameworks enhances employee performance primarily through improved perceptions of fairness, security and organisational legitimacy. However, in Nigeria the positive effects are frequently attenuated by weak enforcement, limited HR capacity and politicisation of HR decisions—factors that must be addressed to harness the full performance gains of legal compliance.

Impact of Ethical HRM Practices on Employee Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Overall Organisational Performance

Ethical Human Resource Management (HRM) practices form the foundation of trust, fairness, and integrity within organisations, influencing employee motivation, job satisfaction, and overall performance. Ethical HRM involves implementing policies and decisions guided by transparency, justice, respect for individual rights, and moral responsibility (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). According to Ojo and Akinlabi (2022), ethical HRM fosters a work environment where employees feel valued and respected, which enhances intrinsic motivation and commitment. When employees perceive their organisation as ethical, they are more likely to exhibit loyalty and go beyond their formal job roles, improving both individual and organisational performance outcomes.

Studies have consistently shown a positive correlation between ethical HRM practices and job satisfaction. Adewale and Anthonia (2021) found that fairness in recruitment, promotion, and reward systems increases employees' sense of belonging and satisfaction, which in turn boosts productivity. Ethical HRM also reduces workplace conflicts and fosters psychological safety, allowing employees to express ideas without fear of victimisation (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020). In the Nigerian public sector, however, ethical challenges such as nepotism, favouritism, and political interference often undermine these benefits, leading to demotivation, absenteeism, and low productivity (Ezeani, 2019).

From a performance perspective, ethical HRM serves as a strategic tool for organisational sustainability. By promoting equity and accountability, ethical practices strengthen employee engagement and trust in leadership, thereby improving efficiency and service quality (Ojo & Akinlabi, 2022). Research further indicates that organisations with strong ethical climates enjoy lower turnover rates, improved teamwork, and higher public credibility (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Conversely, unethical behaviours—such as bias in decision-making, exploitation, and violation of employee rights—erode morale and create a culture of resentment that diminishes organisational performance (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020).

In the Nigerian public service, the integration of ethical HRM principles remains an essential condition for reform and effective governance. Adewale and Anthonia (2021) argue that sustained adherence to ethical codes, combined with accountability mechanisms, can bridge the gap between administrative intent and performance outcomes. Therefore, strengthening ethical HRM practices is not merely a moral imperative but a practical strategy for achieving motivation, job satisfaction, and superior organisational performance in the public sector.

Major Legal and Ethical Challenges Affecting Effective HRM Implementation in the Nigerian Public Sector

Human Resource Management (HRM) in the Nigerian public sector operates within a complex environment shaped by legal, ethical, political, and institutional factors. Despite the existence of robust legal frameworks such as the *Labour Act* (2004), the *Public Service Rules* (2008), and the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999), the effective implementation of HRM practices continues to face significant challenges. One of the foremost legal issues is weak enforcement of existing labour and administrative laws, which often results in inconsistent application of HR policies across government institutions (Ezeani, 2019). Inadequate regulatory oversight enables violations such as arbitrary dismissals, unequal treatment, and non-compliance with due process in recruitment and promotion (Adewale & Anthonia, 2021).

Ethical challenges are equally pervasive, with nepotism, favouritism, bribery, and political interference being recurring problems in HRM operations. Okeke and Anazodo (2020) note that these unethical practices distort merit-based recruitment, undermine transparency, and weaken employee morale. As a result, competent individuals are often overlooked in favour of candidates with political or personal connections, leading to inefficiency and reduced public trust. Ojo and Akinlabi (2022) further argue that such ethical lapses have entrenched mediocrity in public service delivery and created a culture of impunity where accountability is minimal.

Another major challenge is the low level of HR professionalism and limited capacity among HR officers in interpreting and applying legal and ethical provisions effectively (Ezeani, 2019). Many HR personnel lack up-to-date knowledge of evolving labour standards, workplace ethics, and modern administrative reforms, which hinders compliance and strategic HRM implementation. Furthermore, overlapping laws and bureaucratic bottlenecks make HRM processes cumbersome, slowing decision-making and promoting corruption (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Institutional weaknesses also exacerbate these challenges. Poor monitoring systems, inadequate disciplinary mechanisms, and lack of ethical leadership contribute to an environment where legal violations and unethical conduct persist unchecked (Ojo & Akinlabi, 2022). Consequently, employee dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and poor performance remain widespread in the public service.

In summary, the literature reveals that the key legal and ethical challenges affecting effective HRM in the Nigerian public sector include weak enforcement of labour laws, political interference, corruption, limited HR capacity, and poor institutional accountability. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening compliance mechanisms, promoting ethical leadership, and institutionalising meritocracy to achieve sustainable administrative performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the Social Exchange Theory (SET), propounded by Blau (1964). The theory provides a foundational framework for understanding human behaviour in organisational contexts, particularly within employment relationships. The theory posits that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process where individuals seek to maximise rewards and minimise costs in their interactions. According to Blau, relationships—whether personal or professional are maintained when the perceived benefits outweigh the associated costs. Within the workplace, this translates into a reciprocal relationship between the organisation and its employees - when employees perceive fair treatment, respect, and support, they are more likely to reciprocate with loyalty, commitment, and improved performance (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

FIGURE 1: Conceptual Model Based on Social Exchange Theory

The causal flow of the conceptual model illustrating the application of SET in this study: *Independent Variables* (Legal Compliance in HRM and Ethical HRM Practices); *Mediating Variable* (Organisational Justice - Fairness, Transparency, Equity); and *Dependent Variables* (Employee Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Public Sector Performance) shows compliance with HRM legal frameworks and ethical HRM practices → strengthen organisational justice → enhance employee motivation and satisfaction → improve public sector performance. In this model, organisational justice serves as the key mechanism through which lawful and ethical HRM practices translate into improved performance outcomes, validating the reciprocity principle of the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). SET has been widely adopted in organisational research to explain employee attitudes and behaviours such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, motivation, and performance (Colquitt, 2001; Guest, 2017). The theory underscores that workplace exchanges are not purely economic but also social, involving intangible elements like trust, justice, recognition, and ethical treatment.

The Social Exchange Theory provides a suitable framework for understanding the dynamics between HRM compliance, ethical behaviour, and employee outcomes in the public sector for several reasons:

a) *Reciprocity and Trust:* SET explains that compliance with HRM legal and ethical standards builds trust between employees and management. Trust, in turn, enhances employee morale and performance (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

b) *Perceived Fairness:* The theory supports the notion that perceived fairness in HRM policies such as equitable promotion, lawful recruitment, and transparent disciplinary processes leads to employee satisfaction and commitment (Colquitt, 2001).

c) *Mutual Obligation*: When organisations adhere to laws and ethical codes, employees feel morally obliged to reciprocate through increased productivity, diligence, and loyalty. This reciprocity

sustains a positive organisational culture conducive to performance improvement (Guest, 2017).

d) *Reduction of Ethical Conflict*: SET also clarifies how unethical HRM practices create imbalance in the exchange relationship, causing psychological withdrawal and organisational inefficiency. Employees respond negatively when they perceive the exchange to be exploitative or unjust.

Therefore, SET not only explains the psychological mechanisms that link HRM practices to performance but also provides the conceptual logic for how fairness, legality, and ethics promote organisational effectiveness in Nigeria's public institutions.

Application of Social Exchange Theory to the Study
This study applies the principles of Social Exchange Theory to explain how legal and ethical issues in HRM influence employee motivation, satisfaction, and overall public sector performance**.** In the context of Nigerian public sector organisations, employees enter an exchange relationship with their employer (the government) through HRM systems that are expected to be legally compliant, ethically grounded, and justly implemented.

When HRM practices are lawful, transparent, and fair, employees perceive the organisation as honouring its part of the social contract. In return, they reciprocate through positive work behaviours, including increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and higher commitment to public service delivery (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Conversely, when HRM practices are characterised by nepotism, political interference, unfair promotion, or disregard for employment laws**,** employees perceive inequity and withdraw their commitment, leading to low morale, poor performance, and increased corruption (Okoli & Akpan, 2019).

Under SET, such exchanges rely heavily on perceived organisational justice**,** which acts as the mediating variable between HRM practices and performance. When employees perceive that recruitment, appraisal, and reward processes are guided by fairness and ethics, they are likely to develop a

strong sense of obligation and trust toward the organisation (Colquitt, 2001). This sense of justice and trust motivates employees to contribute to the organisation's success, even in the face of limited resources or bureaucratic challenges.

Furthermore, the application of Social Exchange Theory provided a robust interpretive lens for understanding the reciprocal relationship between employees and their organisations. The study demonstrated that when public institutions uphold legal and ethical HRM standards ensuring fairness, transparency, and respect for rights employees respond positively through higher motivation, stronger organisational identification, and improved performance. This aligns with Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), who argue that reciprocal trust and fairness are the foundation of productive employment relationships. The study thus extends SET's application to the Nigerian public sector, showing that ethical and lawful HRM practices are not only moral imperatives but also strategic enablers of performance and service excellence.

The implication of adopting the Social Exchange Theory in this study is that HRM effectiveness in the Nigerian public sector depends on the quality of the exchange relationship between the government (as employer) and employees (as service providers). Legal and ethical compliance by public sector management represents the "input" side of the exchange, while employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance represent the "output." If the exchange is equitable and fair, the relationship remains strong, leading to improved organisational outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive survey research design to gather quantitative and limited qualitative evidence about legal and ethical HRM practices and their effects on employee outcomes and organisational performance in Nigerian public sector organisations (Creswell, 2014). The design facilitates generalisation to the target population and supports hypothesis testing through statistical analysis. The target population comprises 2,550 employees drawn from selected public sector organisations in two purposively chosen states: Lagos State (1,500 employees) and Rivers State (1,050 employees). These states were selected to provide geographic and administrative diversity (coastal commercial hub and oil-producing region), improving the applicability of findings across differing public administration contexts. Sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for an unknown population proportion with 95% confidence and 5% precision:

$n = N / (1 + N * e^2)$ where $N = 2550$, $e = 0.05$

Step-by-step arithmetic: $e^2 = 0.05 \times 0.05 = 0.0025$; $N \times e^2 = 2550 \times 0.0025 = 6.375$; $1 + N \times e^2 = 1 + 6.375 = 7.375$; and $n = 2550 \div 7.375 = 345.7627118644 \rightarrow$ round up to **346**.

To allow for non-response and incomplete questionnaires, a 10% contingency is added. Therefore, adjusted sample size = $346 \div (1 - 0.10) = 346 \div 0.90 = 384.444... \rightarrow$ round up **to** 385. Thus the final sample size for data collection is 385 respondents.

For the sampling technique, a multi-stage sampling approach is used as revealed in the table below:

Table 1: Multi-stage Sampling Approach

Stage	Activity	Outcome	
1	Selection of states and organisations (purposive)	Lagos and Rivers states selected to capture variation in public-sector settings and administration.	
2	Proportionate allocation to states	Lagos share = 1,500 ÷ 2,550 = 0.588235294 Lagos sample = 0.5882352941 × 385 = 226.47 → 226 respondents.	Rivers share = 1,050 ÷ 2,550 = 0.4117647059. Rivers sample = 0.4117647059 × 385 = 158.53 → 159 respondents.
		Total	226 + 159 = 385
3.	Within-organisation selection (stratified + simple random)	Within each selected organisation the sample is stratified by department/grade (to ensure representation of cadres) and respondents are chosen using simple random sampling from each stratum proportional to size.	

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

This design minimises selection bias and ensures representative coverage of occupational grades and units (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Furthermore, for sources and methods of data collection; the study made use of both primary and secondary data. The primary data were sourced via structured questionnaires administered face-to-face and electronically. The questionnaire has sections for - demographic and employment information, compliance with HRM legal frameworks, ethical HRM practices, perceived organisational justice, employee motivation and job satisfaction, and self-reported performance indicators and observable proxies (absenteeism, promptness, OCB items). The structured questionnaire is a 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) instrument adapted from validated instruments in prior HRM and organisational justice research (Colquitt, 2001; Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

The Secondary data sourced from Policy documents (Labour Act 2004; Public Service Rules), organisational HR records (where accessible), and relevant literature.

Additionally, for measurement and operationalisation of Variables, the *Independent variables - compliance with HRM legal frameworks* (index items: adherence to recruitment rules, timeliness of remuneration, due process in discipline); and *ethical HRM practices* (index items: transparency, non-discrimination, confidentiality, ethical leadership); *Mediator variable - Perceived organisational justice* (Colquitt's dimensions: distributive, procedural, interactional, informational); *Dependent variables - Employee motivation, job satisfaction, and employee performance* (self-report scales plus available organisational proxies such as absence rates and documented performance appraisals); and *Control / moderator variables* - Political interference (perception scale), enforcement capacity (existence of HR audit/disciplinary mechanisms), demographic variables (age, gender, tenure, grade). All multi-item constructs will be averaged to create composite scores after assessing scale reliability.

Finally, Data will be analysed using SPSS v26 for structural equation modelling. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) is used to present respondent characteristics and item-level responses. For Inferential statistics, *Pearson correlation* is used to examine bivariate relationships between legal compliance, ethical HRM, justice perceptions, motivation, satisfaction and performance; *Multiple regression analysis* is used to test the predictive effect of legal compliance and ethical HRM on performance outcomes while controlling for demographics; *Mediation analysis* (Baron & Kenny approach and bootstrap indirect effects, or SEM) is used to test whether organisational justice mediates the effect of legal/ethical HRM on motivation, satisfaction and performance; *Moderation tests* (interaction terms or multi-group SEM) is used to examine whether political interference or enforcement capacity weakens/strengthens the observed relationships; and *Chi-square tests* is used for associations involving categorical variables where appropriate. All multi-item constructs were averaged to create composite scores after assessing scale reliability.

Ethical approval is obtained from a relevant institutional review body based on the following key ethical measures - voluntary participation and informed consent; anonymity and confidentiality of respondents; no personal identifiers will be reported; secure storage of data and use solely for academic purposes; and right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION
Descriptive statistical Analysis

The data collected from 385 respondents across selected public sector organisations in Lagos and Rivers States is presented, analysed, and interpreted in this study. The analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the demographic and response data, while inferential statistics tested the study's hypotheses.

Table 2: Response Rate

Distributed Questionnaires	Returned	Valid	Response Rate (%)
385	360	350	90.9

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

The above table 2 shows that a response rate of **90.9%** is considered adequate for analysis and generalisation (Saunders et al., 2019).

Table 3: Demographic Distribution

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	190	54.3
	Female	160	45.7
Age	21–30	75	21.4
	31–40	120	34.3
	41–50	90	25.7
	51 and above	65	18.6
Educational Level	B.Sc/HND	180	51.4
	M.Sc/PhD	110	31.4
	Others	60	17.2
Work Experience	1–5 years	80	22.9
	6–10 years	150	42.9
	11–15 years	70	20.0
	Above 15 years	50	14.2

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

Table 3 reveals the demographic distribution. It shows that the majority of respondents are well-educated and have more than five years of experience, indicating that they are sufficiently knowledgeable about HRM practices within their organizations.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis of Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Compliance with HRM Legal Frameworks	350	3.89	0.76	High
Ethical HRM Practices	350	3.75	0.81	High
Organisational Justice	350	3.65	0.88	Moderate–High
Employee Motivation	350	3.72	0.79	High
Job Satisfaction	350	3.81	0.74	High
Employee Performance	350	3.68	0.77	Moderate–High

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

The mean scores in the above table show that compliance with HRM laws and ethical practices are perceived as moderately high, implying that most organisations have formal HRM frameworks but implementation remains partial.

Inferential Statistical Analysis **- Test of Hypothesis**

Hypothesis One: **H$_{01}$ -** Compliance with HRM legal frameworks has no significant relationship with employee performance in Nigerian public sector organisations.

Test	Value	Df	Sig. (p-value)	Decision
Pearson Correlation (r)	0.428	348	0.000	Reject H$_{01}$

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

A positive and significant correlation ($r = 0.428$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that higher compliance with HRM legal frameworks is associated with better employee performance.

Hypothesis Two: **H$_{02}$ -** Ethical HRM practices have no significant effect on employee motivation and job satisfaction.

Model Summary (Multiple Regression)

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error
1	0.561	0.315	0.312	0.492

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

ANOVA Table

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	25.812	2	12.906	29.214	0.000
Residual	56.285	347	0.162		
Total	82.097	349			

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

Coefficients Table

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	1.212	0.145		8.36	0.000
Ethical HRM Practices	0.483	0.071	0.463	6.82	0.000
Organisational Justice	0.275	0.067	0.228	4.10	0.000

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

The above tables reveal that ethical HRM practices and organisational justice jointly explain 31.5% of the variance in employee motivation and job satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.315$, $p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis Three: H$_{03}$ - Organisational justice does not mediate the relationship between ethical/legal HRM practices and public sector performance.

Mediation Test
Sobel/Bootstrap Mediation Result

Path	Effect	SE	Z	p-value
Legal Compliance → Organisational Justice → Performance	0.112	0.037	3.03	0.002
Ethical HRM → Organisational Justice → Performance	0.097	0.031	3.13	0.001

The above result reveals that organisational justice partially mediates the relationship between both legal compliance and ethical HRM practices with performance outcomes, suggesting that fair treatment enhances the positive effects of HRM compliance on performance.

Chi-Square Test for Association

Variable	χ^2	Df	Sig.	Decision
Legal Compliance × Employee Satisfaction	32.458	12	0.001	Significant
Ethical HRM × Performance Level	28.316	10	0.002	Significant

Source: Field Survey Report, 2026

The Chi-square results confirm significant associations between HRM compliance/ethics and employee outcomes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study discusses the empirical findings of the study within the context of the research objectives, theoretical framework, and previous scholarly literature. The discussion focuses on how compliance with human resource management (HRM) legal frameworks and ethical HRM practices influence employee motivation, job satisfaction, and overall organisational performance in Nigerian public sector organisations. It also analyses the mediating role of organisational justice in these relationships, drawing on the principles of Social Exchange Theory (SET)

In respect of the *Influence of Compliance with HRM Legal Frameworks on Employee Performance, t*he findings revealed a positive and significant relationship between compliance with HRM legal frameworks and employee performance ($r = 0.428$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that public sector organisations that adhere to HR laws and regulations, such as the *Labour Act (2004)* and *Public Service Rules (2021)*, experience higher levels of employee productivity, efficiency, and service delivery. This finding aligns with Adewale and Anthonia (2021)**,** who observed that strict compliance with HRM legal standards reduces workplace disputes, promotes fairness, and ensures due process in recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary actions. When employees perceive that administrative procedures are guided by clear legal principles rather than arbitrary decisions, they exhibit stronger commitment and dedication to organisational goals (Okeke & Anazodo, 2020).

From a theoretical standpoint, the results support the Social Exchange Theory, which posits that when employees perceive fair treatment from their organisation, they feel an obligation to reciprocate through improved work performance (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Compliance with HRM legal frameworks demonstrates institutional respect for employee rights, which builds trust and positive reciprocity. However, the study also observed that while compliance exists in many public organisations, enforcement remains inconsistent. Bureaucratic bottlenecks, weak monitoring, and political interference still hinder full implementation, especially in recruitment and promotion decisions. These results echo Ezeani (2019)**,** who noted that Nigerian civil service laws are comprehensive but poorly enforced, allowing room for administrative discretion that sometimes undermines equity and meritocracy.

Also, regarding *the Impact of Ethical HRM Practices on Employee Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Organisational Performance,* the regression results showed that ethical HRM practices have a strong and significant positive effect on employee motivation and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.483$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that transparency, fairness, accountability, and respect for human dignity within HRM processes enhance employee morale and satisfaction. The findings are consistent with Ojo and Akinlabi (2022)**,** who found that employees in ethically managed organisations display higher levels of organisational commitment and reduced turnover intention. Ethical HRM behaviour creates a climate of trust and psychological safety, allowing employees to express their ideas freely and work with confidence (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). When employees perceive that management upholds ethical principles such as equal opportunity, non-discrimination, and merit-based recognition, they are more likely to align personal goals with organisational objectives.

Furthermore, the relationship between ethics and performance is not only moral but strategic. As Guest (2017) argues, ethical HRM reinforces the psychological contract between employers and employees, ensuring that mutual expectations are fulfilled. In this study, the higher mean

scores for ethical HRM practices and motivation (3.75 and 3.72 respectively) demonstrate that employees recognise fairness and moral consistency as critical determinants of their productivity and engagement. Nonetheless, the study uncovered ethical challenges such as nepotism, political patronage, and partiality in recruitment and promotion, especially in ministries and parastatals. These practices often demoralise competent employees, consistent with Okeke and Anazodo's (2020) observation that unethical HRM practices in Nigeria contribute to inefficiency and low morale in the public service.

Additionally, the mediation analysis revealed that organisational justice partially mediates the relationship between legal/ethical HRM practices and employee performance (p < 0.05). This means that fairness in decision-making processes, equitable reward systems, and respectful interpersonal communication enhance the positive effects of HRM compliance on performance. This finding is congruent with Colquitt's (2001) conceptualisation of organisational justice, which emphasises procedural, distributive, and interactional fairness as drivers of employee satisfaction and performance. In essence, compliance with HRM laws and ethical practices must translate into fair and transparent treatment in day-to-day administration to achieve lasting performance improvements. Within the Nigerian public sector, justice serves as a crucial bridge between policy and performance. Employees may acknowledge the existence of HRM rules, but unless these are implemented with impartiality, perceptions of injustice will persist. This result reinforces Cropanzano et al. (2007), who argue that perceived organisational justice acts as the "psychological mechanism" through which HRM practices affect employee outcomes.

The overall findings are consistent with multiple empirical studies within and beyond Nigeria. Anazodo et al. (2012) found that adherence to civil service regulations improved employee satisfaction and public trust. Similarly, Ojo (2018) reported that ethical decision-making within HR departments reduced absenteeism and disciplinary cases. Outside Nigeria, Kaufman (2015) and Berman et al. (2020) confirmed that ethical HRM systems in public institutions across the United States and the UK improve accountability and performance, validating the cross-contextual relevance of the study's findings. However, the study diverges from Ibrahim and Ismail (2021), who argued that HRM legal compliance in developing countries often produces minimal performance gains due to entrenched bureaucratic cultures. The present study demonstrates that, despite challenges, Nigerian public servants still respond positively to compliance and ethical conduct, suggesting a strong desire for fairness and meritocracy in the public sector workforce.

Finally, the results substantiate the Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a robust framework for explaining how legal and ethical HRM practices shape employee behaviour. By adhering to lawful and ethical standards, public organisations fulfil their side of the social contract, motivating employees to reciprocate through loyalty, diligence, and performance (Blau, 1964). The partial mediation of organisational justice further supports Colquitt's (2001) model, implying that fair treatment amplifies the motivational impact of HRM compliance. Thus, fairness operates as both a psychological and structural variable that sustains high performance in the public sector.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the study concludes that:

a) *Legal compliance and ethical HRM practices are indispensable to sustainable public service performance:* Where HRM processes follow due process, respect for labour laws, and ethical codes, public servants demonstrate higher motivation, satisfaction, and output.

b) *Organisational justice acts as a bridge between policy and performance:* Without fairness in implementation, even the best HRM policies lose credibility and impact.

c) *Weak institutional enforcement and ethical lapses undermine HRM efficiency:* Despite existing frameworks like the *Public Service Rules (2021)* and *Labour Act (2004)*, inconsistent enforcement, favouritism, and political interference continue to erode meritocracy.

d) *Ethical HRM is both a compliance requirement and a moral obligation:.* It embodies transparency, accountability, and impartiality, all of which are essential for building employee trust and public confidence in government institutions.

Thus, effective HRM in Nigeria's public sector requires a deliberate balance **between** legal compliance, ethical integrity, and organisational fairness — the three pillars that underpin sustainable administrative performance.

POLICY AND MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance HRM effectiveness in the Nigerian public sector, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. *Strengthen Enforcement of HRM Legal Frameworks:* Government should ensure strict implementation of existing HRM laws and regulations through periodic audits, compliance reviews, and sanctions for violations. The *Federal Civil Service Commission* and *Office of the Head of Service* should enhance oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency in recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary actions.

ii. *Institutionalise Ethics Training and Accountability Mechanisms*: Regular ethics education should be integrated into HRM processes across all ministries and agencies. This will foster moral awareness and reduce unethical behaviours such as nepotism, favouritism, and bribery. Establishing ethics committees can enhance accountability and moral discipline in personnel management.

iii. *Promote Organisational Justice:* Public organisations should prioritise fairness in decision-making, performance appraisal, and compensation. Merit-based promotion and equitable reward systems should replace politically motivated appointments. Fair treatment fosters positive perceptions that translate into higher motivation and productivity.

iv. *Digitalise HRM Processes:* Automation of HRM functions such as recruitment, attendance tracking, and appraisal can reduce human discretion and corruption. Digital systems ensure transparency, documentation, and objective evaluation of performance, thereby promoting both legal compliance and ethical accountability.

v. *Enhance Legal Awareness and Capacity Building:* HR officers and managers should receive periodic training on employment laws, the *Public Service Rules*, and labour regulations. Legal literacy will ensure that HR decisions are guided by proper interpretation of statutes and ethical principles, reducing litigation and industrial disputes.

vi. *Depoliticise HRM Practices:* Government must insulate HRM operations from political interference. A culture of meritocracy should be institutionalised through independent HRM boards and transparent selection processes. This will restore confidence in public service management and encourage high-performing employees to remain committed.

vii. *Periodic Review of HRM Policies*: Regular review of HRM laws and ethical codes will ensure alignment with emerging global standards and best practices. Continuous improvement of HRM systems will sustain performance-driven reforms and accountability in the Nigerian public service.

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