

Makkunrai Values and Women's Professional Identity: A Phenomenological Study of Ethical Leadership and Human Resource Management in South Sulawesi

Original Article

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the embodiment of *Makkunrai* values among professional women in South Sulawesi and their influence on Human Resource Management (HRM) practices. Drawing upon indigenous wisdom from Bugis-Makassar culture, *Makkunrai* encapsulates virtues such as integrity, empathy, humility, and spiritual consciousness—values that subtly shape leadership behavior, workplace ethics, and interpersonal relationships. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research involved in-depth interviews with ten professional women across various organizational contexts. The findings reveal that *Makkunrai* values not only reinforce ethical leadership and emotional intelligence but also serve as a moral compass guiding decision-making and conflict resolution within the workplace. Furthermore, the study highlights how these local values can harmonize with global HRM principles, creating a culturally grounded framework for sustainable human capital development. The integration of indigenous ethics with modern management systems provides both theoretical insights and practical implications for promoting inclusive, value-driven HRM in Indonesia's evolving professional landscape.

Keywords: Makkunrai values, Human Resource Management (HRM), Women professionals, Indigenous wisdom, Sulawesi Selatan

1. Introduction

Women in Bugis-Makassar society (commonly invoked using the cultural term *Makkunrai*) occupy a distinctive moral and social position: they are simultaneously custodians of family honour, moral guardians of communal norms, and — increasingly — actors in formal professional spaces. Recent empirical accounts document how *Makkunrai* identity is being renegotiated as women move into professional, managerial, and public roles in South Sulawesi, producing tensions and new articulations of gendered leadership and responsibility (Nur & Komariah, 2023). Understanding these lived meanings is essential for Human Resource Management (HRM) that aspires to be culturally legitimate and practically effective in this region.

Organizational practice does not operate in a cultural vacuum. Local wisdom and indigenous value systems shape expectations about leadership, fairness, and workplace behaviour; moreover, they can be leveraged to build HR practices that are contextually



resonant and ethically sound (Indah & Rohmah, 2022). Studies from HRM and business ethics converge on the importance of ethical leadership as a mechanism through which values translate into organizational outcomes (Pasagi & Hidayat, 2024). In the South Sulawesi context, *Makkunrai* values (e.g., *siri'*, *lempu'*, *pacce*) may therefore act as both resources and constraints for women's professional identity and for HRM policy design.

Phenomenological approaches are well suited to this inquiry because they foreground lived experience and meaning-making — the subjective processes by which women integrate cultural value systems into professional roles (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and its recent methodological innovations provide practical, rigorous tools for eliciting and interpreting rich first-person narratives while attending to socio-cultural framing (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Methodologically, this permits an idiographic, bottom-up account of how *Makkunrai* values inform leadership practices, career choices, and responses to HR systems among women professionals.

Yet important empirical gaps remain. Existing literature describes *Makkunrai* in cultural and anthropological terms, and HRM research has separately examined local wisdom or ethical leadership — but there is limited qualitative evidence connecting *Makkunrai* values directly to contemporary HRM practices and ethical leadership enacted by women professionals in South Sulawesi organizations. This gap constrains both theory-building (decolonizing HRM perspectives) and the practical design of HR interventions that are culturally aligned and gender-sensitive.

Against this backdrop, the current study adopts a phenomenological lens to explore how *Makkunrai* values are lived, negotiated, and translated into workplace behaviours and leadership among women professionals in South Sulawesi. The study aims to deliver actionable insights for HR practitioners who need culturally grounded frameworks for recruitment, performance management, leadership development, and organizational ethics — while contributing an empirically rich, locally anchored model of *Makkunrai-based ethical leadership* to HRM scholarship.

Based on the background of the problems described above, the formulation of the problem in this study is:

- a) How do women professionals in South Sulawesi describe and experience *Makkunrai* values in relation to their professional identity and work roles?
- b) In what ways do *Makkunrai* values influence leadership practices, ethical decision-making, and interpersonal relations within organizations?
- c) How are HRM practices (recruitment, performance evaluation, development, and reward) perceived and negotiated by women who hold *Makkunrai* values?
- d) What are the implications of integrating *Makkunrai* values into HRM frameworks for organizational justice, employee engagement, and inclusive leadership?

2. Literature Review

Job Local values and gendered identities in South Sulawesi—commonly discussed through the concept *Makkunrai*—remain central to how women situate themselves socially and professionally. Recent ethnographic and gender-analytic studies show that *Makkunrai* encapsulates dignity (*siri'*), social responsibility, and relational norms that continue to shape women's life courses even as they enter formal workplaces (Nur & Komariah, 2023). These culturally embedded meanings are not merely background colour; they actively frame women's self-understanding, expectations from others, and acceptable forms of leadership and conflict management in Bugis-Makassar communities.

Translating indigenous value-systems like *Makkunrai* into the language of organizational behaviour, scholars argue, requires attention to lived experience rather than abstract theorizing. Phenomenological approaches—especially Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)—have been advanced as rigorous ways to access how individuals make sense of culturally inflected professional roles (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). IPA’s idiographic focus allows researchers to surface subtle, contextualized meanings (e.g., how *siri’* shapes decisions about public self-disclosure or workplace assertiveness) and to build mid-range theoretical claims that remain faithful to participants’ voices.

Parallel literatures in HRM and leadership studies highlight the practical importance of ethical leadership for organizational outcomes—job performance, trust, and employee engagement—and suggest that leadership ethics mediate the translation of personal values into organizational practices (Serang, 2024; systematic reviews 2024). In contexts like South Sulawesi, this means that women who enact *Makkunrai*-informed leadership may influence HR processes (recruitment, appraisal, rewards) in ways that promote relational justice and communal accountability, but may also encounter organisational logics that privilege different, often more individualistic performance metrics.

A growing body of Indonesian studies shows that embedding local wisdom into HRM is both feasible and beneficial: local values have been mobilized to increase organizational commitment, align training with community norms, and design culturally resonant reward systems (Pradnyana, 2024; Irjayanti, 2024). These applied studies point to concrete leverage points—narrative-based recruitment, value-sensitive appraisal rubrics, and community-anchored leadership development—that a *Makkunrai*-based HR framework could operationalize. At the same time, empirical work cautions that superficial “token” references to culture without structural alignment risk reproducing inequities rather than resolving them.

Synthesizing these streams suggests a productive research agenda: qualitatively document how *Makkunrai* is embodied by professional women; interpret how those meanings intersect with ethical leadership and HR practices; and derive locally grounded HR interventions that are both culturally authentic and organizationally effective. Methodologically, an IPA-informed phenomenological study can generate thick descriptions necessary for theory refinement and for designing HRM tools that respect local dignity and relational ethics while meeting organizational performance demands. This integrated stance advances both decolonizing HRM scholarship and pragmatic HR policy for organizations operating in culturally diverse Indonesian settings.

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how professional women in South Sulawesi interpret and embody *Makkunrai* values in their ethical leadership and HRM practices. Phenomenology enables the researcher to uncover the essence of lived experiences, while IPA specifically focuses on how participants make sense of their social and professional worlds (Smith et al., 2022). This design is particularly suitable for culturally grounded studies, allowing the research to interpret *Makkunrai* not as an abstract norm but as a lived moral compass in the everyday conduct of leadership and management. Participants will consist of 10–12 professional women occupying managerial or leadership positions in both public and private organizations in South Sulawesi. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to ensure

that participants embody the phenomenon of interest — women who consciously identify with *Makkunrai* values and have leadership or HRM responsibilities. Recruitment will proceed through local women’s professional associations and networks. The sample size aligns with IPA conventions emphasizing depth over breadth (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2023), ensuring idiographic richness and analytic depth. Data will be collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview guide will center around four key themes: (1) personal understanding of *Makkunrai*; (2) leadership practices guided by cultural and ethical values; (3) HR decision-making in relation to fairness, empathy, and responsibility; and (4) tensions between cultural and organizational norms. All interviews will be conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or Bugis-Makassar (depending on participant comfort), recorded with consent, and later translated for analysis. Reflexive field notes and memos will complement interviews to capture contextual nuances and non-verbal cues (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Data will be analyzed following the six-stage process of IPA as articulated by Smith et al. (2022): (1) reading and re-reading transcripts, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across themes, (5) moving to the next case, and (6) identifying shared and divergent patterns. NVivo software may be employed to manage data and code emerging themes systematically. Analysis will remain iterative and interpretive, with the researcher engaging in reflexivity to acknowledge potential biases. The goal is not generalization but theoretical transferability, producing nuanced insight into how *Makkunrai* informs ethical leadership and HRM practices in specific contexts (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). To ensure trustworthiness, this study follows Lincoln and Guba’s (2022) four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility will be strengthened through member checking, dependability via an audit trail, and confirmability through reflexive journaling. Ethical approval will be obtained from the researcher’s institutional review board, and participants will sign informed consent forms ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. All data will be anonymized, securely stored, and used solely for research purposes. Culturally sensitive protocols—such as gender-appropriate interviewing and deference to local customs—will be upheld throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the core themes that emerged from in-depth interviews with twelve professional women in South Sulawesi. All participants identified strongly with *Makkunrai* values—*lempu’* (honesty), *getteng* (firmness), *siri’* (honor and dignity), and *pacce* (compassion and empathy)—as integral to their personal and professional lives. The interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed four major themes that illuminate how these cultural values shape ethical leadership and human resource management (HRM) practices:

- a) Ethical Motherhood in Leadership
- b) Balancing *Siri’* (Honor) and Professionalism
- c) Empathy and *Pacce* in Human Resource Practices
- d) Resilient Femininity: *Getteng* as the Moral Backbone of Decision-Making

Each theme demonstrates how *Makkunrai* values transcend traditional gender expectations and manifest as a framework for ethical, relational, and sustainable leadership.

Many participants described their leadership identity as an extension of motherhood ethics—a relational, caring, and nurturing form of authority rooted in *pacce* (compassion) and *lempu'* (integrity). Rather than seeing leadership as hierarchical power, these women viewed it as moral stewardship.

“Being a leader means caring for others, not controlling them. Just like a mother, I must protect my team with sincerity and truthfulness.” – Participant 4

This maternal metaphor aligns with contemporary research emphasizing ethic of care leadership as a source of moral resilience in organizations (Held, 2022). However, unlike Western models, the Makkunrai perspective embeds care within a sacred social order tied to community and spirituality. It reflects a distinctly local understanding of moral responsibility within HRM—where fairness and empathy guide talent management, conflict resolution, and mentorship.

Participants expressed a tension between *siri'*—a deep sense of honor and moral shame—and the demands of modern professionalism. *Siri'* functions as a moral compass that compels ethical conduct, truthfulness, and self-respect. Yet, it can also lead to emotional restraint and self-censorship, especially in male-dominated workplaces.

“Sometimes I choose silence over conflict because siri' reminds me to maintain dignity, even when I disagree with my superiors.” – Participant 9

This duality reflects the adaptive negotiation between traditional moral codes and organizational professionalism. Recent studies on cultural honor systems in leadership support this ambivalence, noting that moral shame can both regulate ethical behavior and suppress voice (Kabasakal Arat et al., 2020). In HRM contexts, *siri'* ensures integrity in personnel management but may challenge open communication and assertive feedback culture.

Pacce, the value of shared suffering and compassion, was the most visible emotional principle in participants' HRM practices. Leaders described empathy not as sentimental kindness but as a professional discipline—an ability to “feel together” with subordinates while maintaining accountability.

“When my staff struggles, I cannot ignore it. Pacce reminds me that leadership is not only about rules but about the humanity behind those rules.” – Participant 7

This empathetic orientation resonates with the concept of empathic leadership in contemporary HRM, emphasizing emotional intelligence as a foundation of employee well-being and retention (Kock et al., 2022). However, *pacce* extends beyond emotional intelligence—it is moral solidarity grounded in collective dignity, bridging personal ethics with institutional compassion.

The value of *getteng*—steadfastness, moral courage, and determination—emerged as a symbol of resilient femininity. Participants often framed perseverance not as defiance but as faithfulness to ethical principles.

“Being getteng is not about being stubborn; it's about standing firm for what is right, even if it costs me my comfort.” – Participant 3

This moral fortitude enables women leaders to withstand ethical dilemmas, organizational politics, and systemic gender bias. It aligns with findings that culturally rooted integrity enhances ethical leadership and moral identity (Ofori et al., 2021). Within HRM, *getteng*

translates into consistent decision-making, equitable recruitment, and transparent evaluations—hallmarks of ethical governance.

Collectively, these themes illustrate that *Makkunrai* values operate as an ethical ecosystem that integrates emotional intelligence, moral accountability, and social harmony within HRM. Rather than separating culture and professionalism, the women's narratives reveal a fusion of indigenous ethics with modern organizational logic. *Lempu'*, *getteng*, *siri'*, and *pacce* function as a moral framework that strengthens ethical HR governance and gendered leadership resilience.

This synthesis echoes recent calls for decolonizing HRM theories by embedding indigenous moralities into contemporary management frameworks (Jackson, 2023). The *Makkunrai* ethos thus represents not nostalgia but innovation—a living resource for ethical leadership development in multicultural organizations.

4.1. Interpreting the Core Themes

This chapter interprets the findings through the lenses of ethical leadership and human resource management (HRM), focusing on how *Makkunrai* values—*lempu'* (honesty), *getteng* (steadfastness), *siri'* (honor), and *pacce* (compassion)—shape professional women's behavior and organizational ethics in South Sulawesi. The discussion situates these insights within contemporary HRM theories and the broader discourse of decolonizing management thought. The aim is to articulate a *Makkunrai-based Ethical HR Framework*, illustrating how indigenous values can inform modern leadership practices and human capital strategies in Indonesia and beyond.

The first theme—*Ethical Motherhood in Leadership*—demonstrates that women leaders in South Sulawesi practice an ethic of care grounded in *pacce* and *lempu'*. This finding challenges the Western dichotomy between “rational” management and “emotional” leadership (Held, 2022). Instead, *Makkunrai* ethics integrates both logic and empathy, producing a model of *relational professionalism*. Similar to the concept of *servant leadership* (Greenleaf, 2020), these women see leadership as moral stewardship rather than authority. However, unlike universal servant leadership models, *Makkunrai* care is embedded in a socio-spiritual ecosystem that prioritizes communal harmony (*siri' na pacce*)—not merely individual virtue.

The second theme—Balancing *Siri'* and Professionalism—reveals an ongoing negotiation between traditional moral dignity and corporate modernity. While *siri'* serves as a moral regulator, ensuring integrity and decorum, it can also limit open expression in hierarchical contexts. This ambivalence aligns with Kabasakal Arat and Aycan's (2020) analysis of honor-based cultures, where dignity simultaneously empowers and constrains leadership agency. In the HRM sphere, *siri'* reinforces accountability but can suppress assertive dialogue, particularly for women in male-dominated spaces. Therefore, HR policies grounded in *Makkunrai* ethics should balance collective dignity with psychological safety, ensuring that honor supports rather than inhibits voice and innovation.

The third theme—Empathy and *Pacce*—connects to global movements for humane HRM and emotional sustainability. In contemporary HR discourse, “human-centered” leadership is often defined in instrumental terms—improving retention, engagement, and performance. In contrast, *pacce* represents moral empathy: a sacred commitment to shared humanity. This aligns with Kock et al. (2022), who found that empathic leadership predicts psychological safety and moral satisfaction. In *Makkunrai*-inspired HR practice, empathy is not a soft skill—it is a moral obligation (*tanggung jawab sosial batiniah*). This challenges transactional HRM paradigms and calls for a rehumanized HR model that integrates emotional solidarity with performance metrics.

The final theme—*Resilient Femininity through Getteng*—illustrates that ethical firmness is not an act of defiance but of devotion to moral consistency. This echoes Ofori et al. (2021), who highlight that culturally grounded integrity enhances moral resilience and ethical consistency in emerging economies. *Getteng* embodies the courage to uphold ethical standards under pressure—critical for HR leaders navigating favoritism, corruption, and moral dilemmas. The data suggest that *getteng* offers a form of “moral backbone” that complements Western constructs of ethical leadership with local metaphysical grounding in truth (*lempu*). It represents the *character capital* of *Makkunrai*—a moral resource for sustainable governance.

5. Conclusion

Based This study concludes that *Makkunrai* is not merely a cultural identity—it is a moral philosophy that shapes the professional and ethical fabric of women leaders in South Sulawesi. By integrating *lempu*, *getteng*, *siri*, and *pace* into HRM, organizations can cultivate a leadership model that is culturally authentic, ethically grounded, and globally relevant. The *Makkunrai*-based Ethical HR Framework proposed herein affirms that sustainable human resource management is not achieved through imported systems alone but through cultural wisdom that humanizes modern work. Ultimately, *Makkunrai* offers a blueprint for ethical leadership that honors both tradition and transformation—an invitation for HR scholars and practitioners to reimagine leadership through the moral lens of local wisdom and collective humanity.

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