CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES: A GENDER BASED EMPIRICAL STUDY

Mohd. Ayub Shah[1*,] Mudasir Ahmad Tass[2,]

[1*]Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal, Srinagar, India   https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2632-8674
[2]Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal, Srinagar, India https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5633-1130

***Corresponding author:** Mohd. Ayub Shah*
[*]Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal, Srinagar, India   https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2632-8674

Abstract
Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, particularly in organizational settings. This paper explores the influence of gender on the conflict management styles adopted by managers within organizations. Drawing on Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) and existing literature, the study investigates the conflict handling behaviors of male and female managers in select banking organizations. The results indicate that while both male and female managers prefer integrating conflict management style, they differ in their preferences for avoiding and compromising styles. Female managers exhibit a higher preference for avoiding conflict, possibly influenced by cultural factors and underrepresentation in managerial roles. The findings underscore the importance of fostering conflict management skills among employees to promote teamwork, trust, and innovation within organizations. Future research should delve into the sources of conflict and consider the influence of personality and culture on conflict handling behaviors.

Key words: Conflict, Conflict Management Style, Gender, leadership styles, Job Satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION
Conflict is an inevitable aspect of our existence. It is encountered by individuals in their personal and professional interactions, within social groupings and institutions. The term conflict refers to the underlying or overt disagreement between two or more parties. (Rahim, 2023) argues that conflict as an "interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities." It may also be described as a process that starts when one party realies that the other party has hindered or is threatening to hinder some of their concerns (Thomas, 1992). Conflicts generally arise due to divergent views, needs, wants, goals or values. Conflict inside an organisation can have a widespread influence by highlighting areas of concern, prompting a search for resolutions and enhancements that can result in significant modifications to key components of the organisation (Pondy, 1992).

Conflict is a common event in the workplace, and workers need conflict management abilities to operate effectively at all levels in an organisation (Brewer et al., 2002). Managers allocate a substantial amount of their time to dealing with disagreements, and the outcome of conflicts is greatly impacted by the way they are managed. Efficiently handled conflict can also enhance the quality of decision-making in organisations (Amason, 1996). The efficacy of individual employees, teams, and entire organizations is contingent upon their adeptness in managing interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Tjosvold, 1998). Researches indicate that a major time is being spent by the managers in dealing with conflict (Pondy, 1992) (Pulhamus, 1991).With the increase in number of women joining workforce every year the focus

of research has shifted towards the influence of gender on the conflict handling behavior of the employees. Researchers have differing opinions regarding the impact of gender on the selection of conflict management styles within organizational settings. Several scholars have contended that the empirical literature consistently supports the notion that, when present, gender differences in conflict style mostly manifest as men engaging in higher levels of competition (Kenneth et al., 2008) while others like (Sutschek, 2002) reported that experience of the managers has a stronger influence than gender on the conflict resolution and their effectiveness in work places.

The current study aims at finding out the influence of gender on the choice of conflict management style by managers. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Determine the managerial style employed by managers in the specified organisations
- Analyze the differences in conflict management style between female and male managers

Literature Review

The review of literature in the study mainly focuses on the gender and its influence on the choice of Conflict Management Styles for management of interpersonal conflict in organizations. The outcome of conflict depends on how it has been managed both low and high levels of conflict can adversely impact the performance of an organization. The objective of Conflict management is to stimulate functional conflicts and minimize dysfunctional conflicts within an organization. Extensive Researches have been conducted on how to manage conflicts effectively in an organizational setting. (Follett et al., 1942) suggested three main ways to handle interpersonal conflict. They are "Domination", "Compromise" and "Integration". Here domination refers to the conflict handling strategy when one party uses power and authority to win. On the other hand, Compromise refers to the conflict handling strategy in which the parties involved in the conflict arrive at a compromise by making some sacrifice in order to settle the dispute. Integration, according to Follet, is an ideal way of handling conflicts because it leads to a win-win situation for all the concerned parties.

The conceptual framework of (Blake & Mouton, 1964) divided the approaches to resolving interpersonal conflicts into five categories: forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and problem-solving. Thomas later made modifications to this model. Based on a person's orientation in two dimensions—the importance of resolving one's own interests and the other party's concerns—the five conflict handling styles have been identified (Thomas, 1976). These conflict response modes are Competing, Accommodating, Collaborating, Sharing and Avoiding. Winning one's own concerns at the expense of another is the focus of the *competitive* orientation or response mode. *Collaborating* emphasizes on satisfying the apprehensions of all the parties and is both assertive and cooperative. The collaborative approach of dealing with conflicts helps to build trust and efficiency among the members of group and teams. It leads to a mutually beneficial outcome for all parties concerned, but necessitates a substantial investment in terms of time and effort. Avoiding communicates carelessness, disengagement, indifference, denial, or apathy for the problems of either side. It lacks both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Another orientation, *Compromising*, involves the act of sharing or bargaining, and it falls in the middle in terms of both assertiveness and cooperativeness. It demonstrates an inclination towards achieving only portion of the desired outcomes, where both parties make concessions in order to gain something in return.

In addition, (Rahim, 2017) created a two-dimensional model of the five conflict handling styles based on two dimensions: *concern for others* and *concern for oneself*, viz., integrating (Problem Solving), Obliging (Smoothing), Compromising (Sharing), Dominating (Forcing), and Avoiding (Withdrawing). Integrating (Problem Solving) refers to the conflict handling style where parties concerned jointly work to confront the issue for a win- win outcome. Obliging (Smoothing) refers to giving in and is generally

used in case of trivial or unimportant issues. Compromising (Sharing) should be preferred used when the parties involved in the conflict are about equal in power and collaboration is not possible. Dominating (Forcing) is recommended when the issue involved is very important and unpopular decisions need to be taken, and Avoiding (Withdrawing) should be employed when the issue is trivial in nature and the emotions are running high as depicted in Figure 1.
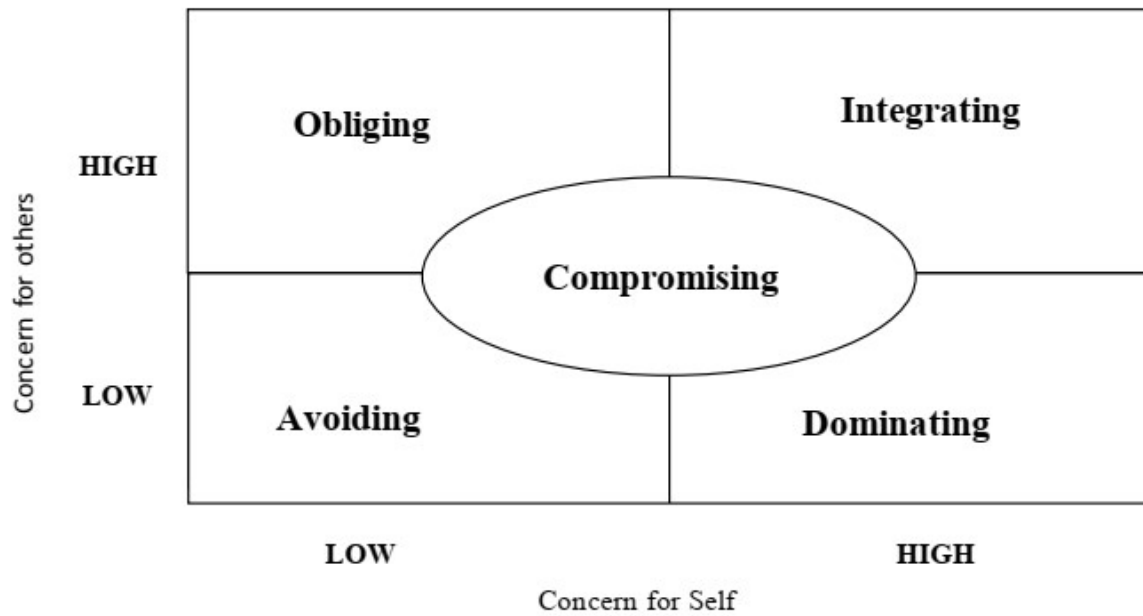
*Figure 1 The five styles of handling interpersonal conflict. Source: adopted from **(Rahim & Magner, 1995)***

Besides reviewing literature about the conflict handling modes, literature was also reviewed with the objective of identifying the effects of gender on the conflict handling style of managers. Studies on gender and conflict management style have not presented a consistent picture of the influence of gender on the conflict handling behavior of managers. A number of researchers have observed that men managers exhibit a higher propensity for employing aggressive and competitive approaches compared to their female counterparts (Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Ilesanmi, 2017; Lay, 1994; Sorenson et al., 1995). (Brewer et al., 2002; Portello & Long, 1994) have also reported that males adopt a dominating style and females prefer avoiding conflict handling style. (Omole, 2004) found that male managers prefer competitive styles and female managers prefer compromising conflict resolution style. This view was further substantiated by (Holt & DeVore, 2005), who came to the assumption that males incline to show complex degrees of competition, while females tend to express higher levels of compromise as a conflict management strategy. Contrary to expectations, certain researchers discovered that gender, in general, had minimal correlation with the choice for conflict-management styles (Antonioni, 1998). Some studies have indicated that female managers tend to demonstrate an authoritarian style, while men managers generally choose a democratic style (Abasilim et al., 2019; Babajide, 2000). The review of literature clearly indicates that the studies conducted on the conflict management style of the participants in an organizational setting, on the basis of their gender have yielded conflicting results. Hence there is a need to study the influence of gender on the conflict handling behaviors of managers in an organization.

Methodology and Research Design
The current study was conducted using Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory- II (ROCI-II) for

assessing the conflict handling behavior of the male and female managers in select organizations (Rahim & Afzalur, 1983). The instrument measures five specific conflict handling modes: i) Integrating Style ii) Obliging Style iii) Dominating Style iv) Avoiding Style and V) Compromising Style. ROCCI-II is an extensively used instrument for conflict handling style assessment and consists of three similar questionnaires, one for superiors, one for peers and the other for subordinates. But only one form has been used for the current study. This has been done on the basis of the feedback received during the pilot study. Most of the volunteers recommended that only one set of questionnaires be used for the study because using three sets of the questionnaire makes the process time consuming and boring and many a times the respondents hesitate to fill same questionnaire thrice. The use of only one set of ROCI-II has also been supported by (Friedman et al., 2000), who argue that the magnitude of difference of using three forms of ROCI-II measuring the conflict handling behavior with subordinates, peers or supervisors is statistically significant but small in absolute terms. They also argue that it is very hard to get the subjects to answer the same question three times.

In the current study questionnaires were administered to the representative sample of 300 Managers of banking organizations, for exploring the effects of gender on the conflict management style of managers. The sample has been randomly selected from the population of managers in banks. During the study 300 questionnaires were distributed in the select organizations out of which only 230 questions were returned. Out of the 230 returned questionnaires only 203 questionnaires were found fit for analysis i.e., the usage rate of questionnaires was 67% (Approx).

Results

The acquired data was evaluated with respect to the specified objectives of the study, and the findings are shown in Table 'I' and Table 'II' below:

Table 1 Respondents Conflict Handling Style (N=203)

Conflict Style	Mean	SD	Rank
Integrating	4.28	0.47	1
Obliging	3.42	0.74	4
Avoiding	3.48	0.76	3
Compromising	3.68	0.58	2
Dominating	2.44	0.82	5

The data presented in the table indicates that the respondents had a definite preference for certain conflict handling techniques. The most preferred conflict handling style among the respondents is the Integrating Style, followed by the Compromising, Avoiding, Obliging and Dominating Styles. In fact, the dominating Style is the least preferred style of conflict management by the respondents.

Table 2 Conflict Handling Style of male and female managers (N=203)

		Gender						
		Male N=119	Female N= 84		Rank			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Male	Female	t-value	Sig.
Integrating	4.30	0.42	4.18	0.66	1	1	1.31	0.190
Obliging	3.36	0.74	3.75	0.60	4	4	2.76	0.000
Avoiding	3.38	0.75	4.03	0.61	3	2	4.58	0.000
Compromising	3.64	0.58	3.92	0.52	2	3	2.58	0.001

Dominating	2.45	0.86	2.38	0.61	5	5	0.49	0.620

The table above indicates the most preferred and least preferred style of conflict handling by male and female respondents is same. The style of conflict handling most preferred by the male and female managers is 'Integrating' and their least preferred style is 'Dominating'. However, the preference of the male and female respondents differs in 'Avoiding' and 'Compromising' styles.

Conflict being a part of our lives, its constructive management is vital for promoting excellence within organizational settings. The current study clearly reveals that individual managers do exhibit preference for certain styles of conflict management. The study has indicated that most preferred style of managing conflict managers is "Integrating" and the least preferred style is "Dominating". The study also tries to identify the conflict handling behavior of the respondent managers on the basis of their gender and clearly reveals that though the most and the least preferred style of male and female managers is similar but they differ in their preference for the "Avoiding" and "Compromising" styles. The female managers exhibit higher preference for the "Avoiding" style, while as their male counterparts show a higher preference for "Compromising style"

Conclusion

The finding and the results of the current study are consistent with the majority of studies conducted to identify the preferred conflict handling style of employees in organizational settings and the influence of gender. The current study clearly indicates that the Managers do exhibit preference for certain styles of conflict management and Gender does influence their conflict handling behavior. The female managers exhibit a higher preference for "Avoiding" style than the male managers. This could be attributed to the influence culture and lack of adequate representation of females at managerial level. Since the outcome of conflict generally depends on its management, organizations should initiate appropriate measures to develop the conflict management skills of their employees. Constructive management of conflict will not only help in promoting an environment of team work and trust, but will also foster a culture of innovation and change management within the organization. Future studies need to carried out to explore sources of conflict within the organizational settings and the influence of personality and culture on the conflict handling behavior of the employee.

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