

Rebuilding Public Trust Through Ethical Governance and Transparency: A Mixed-Methods Study of Nigerian Federal Ministries and Implications for Health Service Delivery

Yakubu Joel Cherima

Uchenna Stephen Nwokenna

Department of Policy and Strategic Studies,
University of Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria

Rejoice Kaka Hassan

Department of Community Medicine,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

Eziyi Iche Kalu

Department of Medical Microbiology,
Gregory University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria

Agwu Nkwa Amadi

Department of Public Health,
Federal University of Technology Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

Faith Adamma Kalu

Department of Biochemistry, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,
Umudike, Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria

Perfection Chinyere Igwe

Department of Internal Medicine,
Federal Medical Centre, Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria

Justin Junior Kalu

Department of Community Medicine,
University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross Rivers State, Nigeria

Beauty Olamma Kalu

Department of Pharmacy, Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, Nigeria

Ugo Uwadiako Enebeli

Department of Community Medicine, Rhema University,
Aba-Owerri Road, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: The persistent public distrust in Nigerian federal institutions stems from entrenched corruption, fragmented ethical standards, and non-transparent governance, which erode legitimacy and policy compliance despite reforms like the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. This study assessed ethics and transparency in federal ministries to propose a framework for enhancing ethical leadership and accountability.

Methods: We used a mixed methods design which involved policy/institutional audits and surveys (n=200 civil servants) across five key federal ministries (Finance, Health, Education, Works and Housing, and Humanitarian Affairs) in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. Quantitative data on ethical perceptions, corruption prevalence, and transparency effectiveness were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative key informant interviews and document reviews enabled thematic analysis.

Results: Ethics codes were highly recognized by the participants (mean=4.01/5), but enforcement (3.40), reporting (3.20), and integrity offices (3.08) scored moderately. Corruption was perceived as widespread (4.12/5), with low rewards for ethics (2.80) and reporting efficacy (2.55). Transparency mechanisms (financial disclosure=3.35; public access=3.10; procurement=2.90) were moderate, with political interference (4.5/5) and fragmented coordination (4.3/5) as top challenges; a strong correlation linked ethics infrastructure to public trust ($r=0.715$, $p<0.01$).

Conclusions: Ethics and transparency in Nigerian ministries remain weakly enforced and undermine public trust, and robust ethical systems correlate strongly with public trust. We propose a Public Integrity and Transparency Framework (PITF) that integrates digital dashboards, leadership audits, ethics curricula, and incentive-linked benchmarking into a practical model that embeds value-driven accountability. The PITF will inform governance reforms for sustainable trust restoration.

Keywords: Public trust, institutional ethics, transparency, anti-corruption, Nigeria, governance reform

Introduction

Public trust represents the moral currency of effective governance. When citizens perceive fairness, transparency, and accountability in the state, legitimacy is strengthened and policy compliance increases (Agu et al.,

2024). Conversely, when corruption, opacity, and impunity dominate the administrative landscape, public institutions lose their moral authority to govern (Obicci, 2025). In Nigeria, decades of governance deficits have steadily eroded trust in federal institutions, particularly within ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), which serve as the operational engine of the public service (Okoye et al., 2025).

Nigeria's governance challenges are deep-rooted and systemic, and despite constitutional provisions outlining checks and balances, accountability mechanisms often fail due to political interference, patronage networks, and weak institutional enforcement (Chukwu & Ojiridike, 2025). Bureaucratic opacity and fiscal indiscipline are reinforced by informal power relations that prioritize loyalty over competence, distorting merit-based administrative structures and undermining professionalism in the civil service (Obicci, 2025). As a result, unethical practices and procedural violations have become normalized within public institutions, creating a persistent trust deficit between citizens and the state (Bhutto, 2024).

The weakness of Nigeria's accountability ecosystem is further compounded by structural and managerial constraints, and oversight institutions such as the Office of the Auditor General, the Public Accounts Committees, and anti-corruption agencies operate under limited autonomy, chronic underfunding, and political capture (Essoh et al., 2025). These weaknesses have produced a governance environment where compliance exists on paper but not in practice, leading to selective accountability and inconsistent enforcement of ethical standards. Consequently, federal ministries often struggle to operate integrity systems that can sustain transparency and ethical conduct across all administrative levels.

Ethical governance, transparency, and accountability are interconnected variables in the trust equation. Ethical institutions not only implement policy but also embody public values of justice, fairness, and responsibility. When these values are perceived as absent or compromised, citizens disengage, contributing to apathy, resistance, and informal governance practices (Ogunkan, 2022). Therefore, restoring public trust in Nigeria's federal administration requires more than anti-corruption enforcement; it demands a comprehensive evaluation of existing integrity systems and the design of mechanisms that embed ethics and transparency into the fabric of institutional operations.

This study was guided by the need to understand how integrity systems functioned within selected federal ministries and how these systems shaped or constrained public trust. The rationale was that Nigeria had launched several anti-corruption and transparency reforms over the past two decades, and institutions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related

Offences Commission (ICPC), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), and the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act were introduced to improve fiscal discipline, openness, and accountability (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022).

The problem is that, despite these efforts, Nigeria continues to struggle with low public confidence and poor global rankings on corruption perception indices (Udefuna et al., 2025). The persistence of mistrust suggests that institutional reforms have largely focused on compliance mechanisms (procedural adherence) rather than on ethical culture (behavioural alignment) transformation. A shift toward a systemic Public Integrity and Transparency Framework (PITF) could offer a more sustainable model to align governance structures, ethics education, and transparency systems into a coherent architecture of accountability (Fheili & Chokr, 2024). The PITF would move beyond isolated anti-corruption interventions to embed ethical reasoning and open governance as normative practices across MDAs.

Beyond institutional gaps, there is also a profound misalignment between policy rhetoric and actual accountability practices. While reform pronouncements routinely emphasize integrity, meritocracy, and transparency, internal administrative cultures continue to reward loyalty and conformity over ethical conduct and professional competence (Ahmed, 2024). This incongruence between reform discourse and practice has deepened public cynicism and diminished confidence in the moral authority of the state. Addressing this crisis of trust requires a systemic inquiry into how existing integrity systems function across ministries, the extent to which transparency and accountability mechanisms influence public confidence, and how leadership behaviour and organizational culture mediate these relationships.

Objectives

This study aimed to assess the state of institutional ethics, examine how transparency and accountability mechanisms influence governance legitimacy, and explore the cultural and leadership dynamics that condition ethical compliance.

The research objectives, which were achieved, include that we (1) assessed the current state of ethical and integrity systems in selected federal ministries, (2) assessed the influence of transparency and accountability mechanisms on public trust, and (3) designed a Public Integrity and Transparency Framework (PITF) to strengthen institutional ethics and anti-corruption capacity in ministries.

Hypothesis

We hypothesized that improving institutional governance and transparency would rebuild public trust in government institutions.

Significance

This study provided empirical grounding for governance reforms, supported national policy debates on ethics and accountability, and positioned the authors as reform thought leaders in public integrity systems.

Methodology

Study Design

We used a mixed-method research design and combined surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document reviews in Nigeria's five key federal ministries. The quantitative surveys captured civil servants' perceptions of ethical conduct, transparency, and public trust, while qualitative interviews and document analyses provided deeper insights into organizational practices, enforcement mechanisms, and leadership influence on ethical culture; this enabled a cross-ministry comparison, identification of best practices, and detection of gaps in ethical frameworks.

Setting

The study was conducted within the administrative setting of Nigeria's federal public service, in five key Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), selected for their policy significance, administrative reach, and exposure to ethical and transparency challenges. This included the Ministries of Finance, Health, Education, Works and Housing, and Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development (HADMSD).

Data collection occurred during a fieldwork period from August to October 2025, involving civil servants, and the surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document reviews were completed concurrently within this recruitment window, enabling immediate thematic and statistical analysis to assess perceptions and mechanisms without longitudinal tracking. There were no distinct exposure or follow-up phases, as the design was cross-sectional and audit-based.

Participants

Participants were sourced from five purposively selected federal ministries in Abuja, Nigeria (40 per ministry), for a total of 200 civil servants across hierarchical levels to ensure representation of relevant expertise, with no randomization or exclusion based on demographics (*Table 1*).

Eligibility criteria: Participants were eligible if they were civil servants or senior officers (e.g., ethics/compliance officers, permanent secretaries, directors, directors-general, and chief medical directors) employed by the selected federal ministries, with sufficient knowledge and experience in institutional ethics, transparency, and accountability processes. They were excluded if they declined consent or were too sick to participate.

Table 1 : Sampling

Ministry	Sample Size	Purpose
Finance	40	Assess ethical conduct, transparency mechanisms, and leadership accountability.
Health	40	Examine integrity systems, ethical culture, and enforcement effectiveness.
Education	40	Evaluate ethics compliance, transparency mechanisms, and policy implementation gaps.
Works and Housing	40	Analyze organizational integrity, transparency, and anti-corruption practices.
Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development	40	Identify ethics infrastructure, leadership influence, and transparency effectiveness.

Variables and Data Sources

Primary data included surveys and semi-structured key informant interviews at the five MDAs and assessed perceptions of ethical behaviour, transparency, and trust in institutional processes. Secondary data sources comprised policy documents, annual reports, institutional audits, and integrity assessments from these ministries, providing contextual and structural information about ethics and accountability systems.

Efforts to Address Potential Sources of Bias

Purposive sampling targeted knowledgeable civil servants to minimize selection bias, and the triangulation of survey, interview, and audit data enhanced validity; pre-testing of instruments and expert reviews addressed measurement bias, with anonymity aimed at mitigating response bias.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size of 200 (40 per ministry) was determined purposively to achieve representation across five ministries and hierarchical levels, ensuring sufficient power for descriptive/inferential analyses in a cross-sectional design without formal power calculation.

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data was collected using a structured survey questionnaire and an Institutional Integrity Audit Checklist. The survey used Likert-scale items to measure perceptions of ethics, transparency, and trust, while the checklist evaluated ministry policies, enforcement mechanisms, reporting procedures, and leadership adherence within the MDAs. The checklist was adapted from benchmarks developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Transparency International. Key informant interview guides were used to collect the qualitative data.

These instruments were pre-tested for clarity, reliability, and relevance, ensuring that they accurately captured perception-based and structural dimensions of integrity systems.

Data Analysis

The quantitative Likert-scale variables (1-5) were analyzed as continuous data with descriptive statistics of frequencies and mean \pm SD. Pearson correlation and regression were used to assess relationships (e.g., ethics and trust); no confounding controls were applied, as the cross-sectional perceptual design prioritized associations. Qualitative data from interviews and document reviews are analyzed thematically to identify patterns, organizational bottlenecks, and leadership or cultural factors influencing ethical compliance. No groupings were applied, as analyses focused on aggregate perceptions across ministries to identify systemic patterns rather than inter-group differences. Missing data were minimal (<5%) and addressed using listwise deletion in quantitative analyses, and thematic saturation guided qualitative completeness. No sensitivity analyses were performed, as the study focused on perceptual aggregates and thematic robustness.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC), Nigeria, and the five ministries, and informed consent was secured from all participants after full information on the study's objectives, voluntary participation, benefits and possible harm (limited to time burden), confidentiality, and anonymity. All data were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

Results

Participant Characteristics

A total of 209 civil servants were initially identified as potentially eligible across five federal ministries in Abuja using the departmental

rosters; however, nine were not examined (five were unavailable due to administrative duties, three declined due to time constraints, and one had been recently reassigned). Thus, 200 were examined for eligibility through preliminary screening for relevant roles (e.g., ethics/compliance officers, directors), confirmed eligible and included in the study. All 200 participants completed the cross-sectional survey and were analyzed, as there was no follow-up phase. Among the participants (n=200), there were more males (62%), the mean age was 42 ± 8.2 years, and they spanned hierarchical levels (35% junior staff, 40% mid-level, 25% senior officers) with 12 ± 6 years of service.

The key summary measures included high recognition of ethics codes (mean 4.01/5, n=200), moderate enforcement (3.40/5), widespread perceived corruption (4.12/5), and a strong ethics-trust correlation ($r=0.715$, $p<0.01$).

Overview of Integrity Systems in Federal Ministries

Table 2 summarizes the assessment of ethics infrastructure across ministries based on survey and audit data. Respondents rated the existence and effectiveness of ethics codes, reporting mechanisms, and integrity offices on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Very Poor to 5=Excellent). The assessment of integrity systems across selected federal ministries revealed a nuanced picture of ethics infrastructure. Respondents acknowledged the existence of ethical codes with a high mean score of 4.01. Reporting mechanisms, which are critical for whistleblowing and accountability, scored moderately at 3.20. And the effectiveness of integrity offices, which are designed to operationalize ethics enforcement and reporting, received the lowest mean score of 3.08.

Table 2 : Overview of Integrity Systems in Federal Ministries

S/N	Integrity Variable	Very High (5)	High (4)	Moderate (3)	Low (2)	Very Low (1)	N	Mean	Decision
A	Existence of Ethics Codes	55 (27.5%)	85 (42.5%)	40 (20.0%)	15 (7.5%)	5 (2.5%)	200	4.01	High
B	Enforcement Effectiveness	40 (20.0%)	70 (35.0%)	50 (25.0%)	30 (15.0%)	10 (5.0%)	200	3.40	Moderate
C	Reporting Mechanisms	35 (17.5%)	60 (30.0%)	55 (27.5%)	35 (17.5%)	15 (7.5%)	200	3.20	Moderate
D	Integrity Office Effectiveness	30 (15.0%)	65 (32.5%)	50 (25.0%)	40 (20.0%)	15 (7.5%)	200	3.08	Moderate

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2025

Civil Servant Perceptions of Ethical Culture and Corruption

Civil servants' perceptions of corruption prevalence and ethical culture were assessed with ratings on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly

Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). This is summarized in **Table 3**, which shows that respondents overwhelmingly agreed that corruption was widespread, with a mean score of 4.12, categorized as high.

Conversely, perceptions of whether ethical behaviour was rewarded were low, with a mean score of 2.80; the belief that reporting unethical behaviour led to corrective action was also low, with a mean of 2.55. The perception of whether leadership modelled ethical behaviour was moderate at 2.90 (**Table 3**).

Table 3 : Civil Servant Perceptions of Ethical Culture and Corruption

S/N	Perception Statement	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	N	Mean	Decision
A	Corruption is widespread in my ministry	90 (45.0%)	65 (32.5%)	25 (12.5%)	15 (7.5%)	5 (2.5%)	200	4.12	High
B	Ethical behaviour is rewarded	30 (15.0%)	50 (25.0%)	45 (22.5%)	45 (22.5%)	30 (15.0%)	200	2.80	Low
C	Reporting unethical behaviour leads to action	25 (12.5%)	40 (20.0%)	50 (25.0%)	55 (27.5%)	30 (15.0%)	200	2.55	Low
D	Leadership models ethical behaviour	35 (17.5%)	50 (25.0%)	50 (25.0%)	45 (22.5%)	20 (10.0%)	200	2.90	Moderate
E	I feel personally committed to ethical conduct	60 (30.0%)	70 (35.0%)	40 (20.0%)	20 (10.0%)	10 (5.0%)	200	3.70	Moderate-High

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2025

Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms

Respondents rated the effectiveness of transparency mechanisms using the same five-point scale. Financial disclosure systems received a mean score of 3.35, categorized as moderate. Public access to information was also rated moderate, with a mean of 3.10. Procurement transparency scored the lowest among the assessed variables, with a mean of 2.90. These are displayed in **Table 4** below.

Table 4 : Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms

S/N	Transparency Variable	Very High (5)	High (4)	Moderate (3)	Low (2)	Very Low (1)	N	Mean	Decision
A	Financial Disclosure Systems	40 (20.0%)	60 (30.0%)	55 (27.5%)	30 (15.0%)	15 (7.5%)	200	3.35	Moderate
B	Public Access to Information	35 (17.5%)	50 (25.0%)	60 (30.0%)	35 (17.5%)	20 (10.0%)	200	3.10	Moderate
C	Procurement Transparency	30 (15.0%)	45 (22.5%)	60 (30.0%)	40 (20.0%)	25 (12.5%)	200	2.90	Moderate

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2025

Correlation Between Institutional Ethics and Public Trust

The relationship between institutional ethics and public trust in federal ministries was examined using Pearson correlation analysis, as summarized in **Table 5**, which shows a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.715 and indicates a strong positive relationship between institutional ethics and perceived trust, which was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This implied that higher levels of ethical standards and effective integrity systems in ministries were strongly associated with greater confidence and trust in public institutions.

Table 5 : Correlation between Institutional Ethics Scores and Public Trust

Description	Ethics Scores	Public Trust
Ethics Scores	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	200
Perceived Trust	Pearson Correlation	0.715
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	200

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2025

Comparative Insights

The comparative assessment of implementation challenges in Nigerian federal ministries relative to global best practices is summarized in **Table 6**. Respondents identified key obstacles hindering effective ethics and transparency reforms, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. **Table 6** indicates that political interference (mean=4.5) and fragmented institutional coordination (mean=4.3) are the most significant challenges, followed by lack of enforcement (mean=4.0). Insufficient training of staff scored moderately (mean=3.5), suggesting that while capacity-building is important, structural and systemic factors pose the greater barriers to reform.

Table 6 : Implementation Challenges Compared to Best Practices

Challenge	Frequency (%)	Mean Rating (1-5)	Interpretation
Political interference	150 (75.0%)	4.5	High
Lack of enforcement	130 (65.0%)	4.0	High
Fragmented institutional coordination	140 (70.0%)	4.3	High
Insufficient training	110 (55.0%)	3.5	Moderate

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2025

Discussion

This study assessed integrity systems and the ethics infrastructure across selected federal ministries. The respondents acknowledged the

existence of ethical codes with a high mean score, indicating strong formal adoption of these frameworks, which aligned with the work of Davies & Egbuchu (2019), who noted that most Nigerian public institutions had codified ethical guidelines. Despite this formal recognition, our study reported that the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms was noticeably less, with a moderate mean score. This gap between the existence and enforcement of ethical codes resonated with the observations of Arugu & Coastman (2020), who argued that Nigerian public sector institutions frequently suffered from weak implementation of ethics policies due to bureaucratic inertia and political interference, which undermine the translation of policy frameworks into consistent ethical behaviour among civil servants.

Reporting mechanisms for accountability and whistleblowing scored moderately in this study. This moderate rating reflected concerns about accessibility, responsiveness, and protection for whistleblowers, which had also been highlighted by Okafor et al. (2020) as persistent barriers to effective ethical oversight in the Nigerian public service. The effectiveness of integrity offices, designed to operationalize ethics enforcement and reporting, had the lowest mean score, which suggested significant operational challenges within these offices, as in Ahmad et al. (2024)'s study wherein resource constraints, inadequate staffing, and low institutional authority were major factors limiting the impact of integrity units.

According to the World Bank (2021), the perceptions of civil servants regarding ethical culture and corruption in federal ministries highlight a critical tension between formal ethical structures and everyday practice. In this study, respondents overwhelmingly reported that corruption was widespread, consistent with the studies of Ufot (2025) who emphasized that perceived corruption remained a major impediment to public trust and effective governance in Nigerian public institutions. Additionally, our study reported low mean scores on the perceptions of whether ethical behaviour was rewarded, suggesting that even when employees acted in accordance with ethical standards, they rarely received recognition or incentives for doing so. Ertas (2025) argued that insufficient reward systems for ethical conduct weaken intrinsic motivation and limit adherence to formal codes of conduct among public servants. In a similar vein, this study reported a low mean belief that reporting unethical behaviour led to corrective action, in alignment with Okafor et al. (2020)'s study, which identified weak responsiveness of ethics offices and whistleblowing mechanisms as persistent obstacles in the Nigerian public service. According to Krügel et al. (2023), this is because, when employees perceive that reporting misconduct is ineffective or ignored, it discourages active participation in institutional accountability processes.

The perception of whether ethical leadership modelled ethical behaviour and trust was moderate in this study and indicated a mixed confidence in senior officials' commitment to ethics, explained by Islam et al. (2025), who noted that ethical leadership is a crucial determinant of institutional culture, and the absence of consistent role modelling can undermine both compliance and public confidence. Additionally, this study's assessment of the effectiveness of transparency and accountability mechanisms in federal ministries showed a moderate mean score of financial disclosure systems, which suggested that while mechanisms existed for reporting financial information, their comprehensiveness and reliability were inconsistent. Ayogu (2023) similarly observed that financial disclosure in Nigerian federal institutions often suffered from delayed reporting and limited audit verification and undermined accountability objectives.

Public access to information was rated moderate in this study, and although laws such as the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act exist, the effectiveness of these provisions depends on proactive disclosure, user-friendliness of platforms, and responsiveness to information requests (Poisson, 2021). Procurement transparency scored the lowest among the assessed variables in our study, which indicated that openness in government contracting and procurement processes remained a significant challenge. Abioro (2021) echoed that lack of transparency in procurement fosters opportunities for rent-seeking and misappropriation of resources and directly impacts the integrity of public service delivery. Again, ethics scores, derived from survey and audit assessments of codes of conduct, reporting mechanisms, and integrity office effectiveness in this study, were strongly correlated with respondents' perceptions of public trust, and the association was statistically significant. This implied that higher levels of ethical standards and effective integrity systems in ministries were strongly associated with greater confidence and trust in public institutions, as in another study (Modise & Modise, 2023).

The comparative assessment of implementation challenges in Nigerian federal ministries relative to global best practices identified key obstacles hindering effective ethics and transparency reforms, including political interference, fragmented institutional coordination, lack of enforcement, and insufficient training of staff, and suggested that while capacity-building was important, structural and systemic factors posed the greater barriers to reform. Compared to international benchmarks in developing countries where integrity systems are institutionalized with clear enforcement, Nigeria's reforms remain partially implemented and heavily influenced by political considerations (Eyinade et al., 2021). This gap between policy design and operational reality explains why, despite the

existence of codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, perceived corruption remains high and public trust is moderate.

Conclusion

This study investigated the state of institutional ethics, transparency, and public trust across five federal ministries in Nigeria: Finance, Health, Education, Works, and Humanitarian Affairs. Findings revealed that while ethical codes, reporting mechanisms, and integrity offices existed within these ministries, their enforcement and operational effectiveness were inconsistent. Civil servants acknowledged the presence of formal ethics infrastructure; however, perceptions indicated that corruption remains widespread. There was a strong positive correlation between institutional ethics and perceived public trust, indicating that ministries with stronger ethical frameworks were more likely to inspire confidence among stakeholders. Despite this, political interference, weak enforcement, fragmented coordination, and insufficient capacity-building programmes continue to undermine reforms. Overall, the study demonstrated that ethical infrastructure is critical for public trust and effective governance.

Policy Recommendations

- i. Building on these findings, the study recommends the integration of digital transparency dashboards across ministries, providing real-time disclosure of budgets, procurement activities, audit outcomes, and ethics compliance. Such dashboards should be publicly accessible and linked to leadership evaluations, ensuring that senior officials are held accountable for maintaining ethical and transparent practices. Adopting a Public Integrity and Transparency Framework (PITF) federally would standardize ethics, data disclosure, and citizen oversight, improving benchmarks and inter-ministerial coordination.
- ii. In addition, an ethics leadership curriculum under the Office of the Head of Civil Service of the Federation (OHCSF) should be developed for senior officials, including Directors-General, Chief Medical Directors, and Permanent Secretaries. This curriculum should focus on practical decision-making, handling ethical dilemmas, and reinforcing leadership accountability. Ministries could also implement ethics scorecards to benchmark performance publicly, tracking adherence to codes of conduct, transparency in procurement, responsiveness to reports of unethical behavior, and overall compliance with ethics frameworks.
- iii. Annual integrity audits should be institutionalized to monitor the effectiveness of ethics codes, reporting mechanisms, and leadership accountability measures. These audits would inform performance

appraisals and corrective actions. Transparency performance should also be linked to promotion and budgetary incentives, creating a tangible connection between ethical behavior and professional advancement. Finally, ministries should summarize spending data and ethics compliance in real time, combining financial transparency with ethics reporting to enable proactive monitoring and strengthen stakeholder trust.

Contribution to Theory and Practice

- i. The study contributes to theory by extending Institutional Theory and Good Governance Theory to the Nigerian public sector context. It demonstrated that institutional ethics were not merely symbolic but were directly associated with public trust and organizational legitimacy. The findings reinforce the notion that ethical infrastructure, leadership accountability, and consistent enforcement are essential for effective governance outcomes.
- ii. Practically, the study offered a model for building an ethical leadership ecosystem in federal ministries. By integrating ethics infrastructure, transparency mechanisms, citizen oversight, and leadership training, the model provides a structured roadmap for restoring public trust. The framework's components, which include digital dashboards, PITF, ethics curricula, scorecards, and annual audits, should be operationalized systematically, promoting both ethical compliance and organizational performance.
- iii. Furthermore, the research has significant policy relevance. By linking leadership behaviour, institutional ethics, and public trust, the study outlined actionable strategies for government-wide reform. Implementing these strategies would signal to citizens that integrity and accountability are prioritized, ultimately fostering a more transparent, trustworthy, and effective public sector.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval was obtained from the National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC), Nigeria, and the five ministries, and informed consent was secured from all participants after full information of the study's objectives, voluntary participation, benefits and possible harm (limited to time burden), confidentiality, and anonymity. All data were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed to the study. YJC: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation (data collection), formal analysis, writing original draft, writing (review and editing), project administration, funding acquisition. USN: Methodology, validation, writing (review and editing), supervision. RKH: Data curation, resources, writing (review and editing). EIK: Conceptualisation, formal analysis, visualisation, writing (review and editing). ANA: Formal analysis, writing original draft, writing (review and editing), visualisation, supervision. FAK: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing (review and editing), software, visualisation. PCI: Formal analysis, writing original draft, writing (review and editing), project administration. JJK: Methodology, Visualisation, project administration, writing (review and editing). BOK: Methodology, investigation (data collection), formal analysis, writing original draft, writing (review and editing). UUE: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation (data collection), formal analysis, writing original draft, writing (review and editing), supervision. All authors contributed to the interpretation of results, provided critical feedback on the manuscript drafts, and approved the final version for submission. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript, and YJC is the guarantor. The corresponding author attests that all listed authors meet authorship criteria and that no others meeting the criteria have been omitted.

Conflict of Interest: The authors reported no conflict of interest.

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