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## Green Human Resource Management and Sustainable Performance in Public Organizations: A Systematic Review

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### Abstract

**Objective** – This review synthesizes empirical evidence on how GHRM shapes sustainable performance in public organizations, focusing on employee engagement and voluntary green behavior.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines, we screened 436 records retrieved through systematic database searches and citation chaining and included 133 studies published between 2012 and 2026. The evidence was synthesized thematically.

**Findings** – GHRM practices are consistently associated with stronger environmental and sustainable performance. However, the relationship is rarely direct: green work engagement and organizational commitment operate as the principal psychological bridges, whereas green transformational leadership and a supportive organizational culture amplify these effects. Bureaucratic formalism, weak incentives, and symbolic adoption in public organizations threaten to reduce GHRM to greenwashing.

**Implications** – GHRM functions less as an administrative framework than as a catalyst for voluntary pro-environmental behavior, provided that leadership and culture are aligned. Public managers should embed sustainability in recruitment, training, appraisal, and rewards, and future research should move beyond cross-sectional designs toward longitudinal and comparative studies.

**Keywords:** Employee Engagement, Green Human Resource Management, Public Organizations, Sustainable Performance, Voluntary Green Behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

The environmental crisis has moved from management scholarship's margins to its center, and human resource management has been drawn along with it. Over the last decade, green human resource management has evolved from a minor focus area to a thriving field of study, encompassing elements like recruitment, training, performance appraisal, benefits, and employee involvement aligned with an organization's environmental objectives, as noted by Renwick et al. in 2016. A substantial body of work links GHRM bundles to environmental performance, operational efficiency, and pro-environmental behavior across manufacturing, hospitality, education, and services (Paillé et al., 2014; Pellegrini et al., 2018; Hameed et al., 2020; Mehrajunnisa et al., 2022). The construct's appeal is easy to understand: it promises to translate abstract sustainability commitments into the everyday routines through which people are hired, trained, evaluated, and rewarded.

However, public organizations remain the field's conspicuous blind spot. Governments employ a large share of the world's formal workforce and set the regulatory tone for everyone else. However, private firms in industrializing economies dominate GHRM research (Renwick et al., 2016; Allegrini & Monteduro, 2023; Fatima et al., 2025). This imbalance is significant because the public sector is not simply a smaller version of the firm. Its incentive structures are rigid, its performance is judged politically as much as economically, and its management innovations are often ceremonial—a response to mandates rather than markets (Tsai et al., 2016; Rajiani, 2023). Whether GHRM can generate genuine behavioral change under these conditions or is it merely another layer of paperwork remains an open and consequential question (Nayera, 2026).

The second unresolved issue concerns the mechanism. Few scholars argue that green HR policies directly influence performance; the more interesting debate is about the psychological pathway through which they work. One line of evidence, grounded in the ability–motivation–opportunity framework, positions green work engagement as the central conduit: practices that build competence, motivation, and opportunity energize employees, and energized employees behave greener (Aboramadan, 2020; Ababneh, 2021; Sibhatu et al., 2025). Drawing on social exchange theory, a second line emphasizes commitment: employees read GHRM as a signal of organizational support and reciprocate with discretionary effort, including environmental citizenship behavior that no job description requires (Paillé et al., 2014; Alnajdawi et al., 2017; Ly, 2022; Yuan et al., 2023). Formal control systems struggle to produce outcomes such as conserving resources, prompting colleagues, and suggesting greener work methods, which is why employee engagement sits at the heart of the GHRM agenda (Kakar & Khan, 2022; Dwumah et al., 2025).

A third debate concerns the boundary conditions. Green transformational leadership, top management support, and an organizational culture prioritizing sustainability are consistently found to enhance the effects of GHRM, whereas their absence is linked to symbolic or short-lived implementation (Tran, 2023; Umair et al., 2024; Faezah et al., 2025; Utami et al., 2025; Faezah et al., 2025; Asfahani, 2025). Individual dispositions, such as green values and self-efficacy, add a further layer of contingency (Liu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Hasan & Hossain, 2025). However, the evidence on these moderators is scattered across sectors and countries, and it has not been consolidated for the public-sector context in which leadership authority and culture operate quite differently.

Taken together, these three gaps motivate this review. Research on GHRM is scattered across institutions such as government agencies, public universities, state-owned enterprises, and public hospitals, and this research is infrequently synthesized in its own right (Allegrini & Monteduro, 2023). Second, a mechanism gap remains: the relative weight of engagement- and commitment-based pathways and the conditions under which each dominates remain unclear. Studies from a limited

range of developing economies in Asia and the Middle East primarily inform the GHRM model, raising questions about its generalizability (Kimeu et al., 2025; Shaikh et al., 2025). This review aims to achieve four objectives: (1) to map the current state of GHRM research in public organizations; (2) to synthesize the findings on the psychological factors—such as green work engagement and organizational commitment—that link GHRM to sustainable performance and environmentally friendly behavior; (3) to investigate the influence of leadership and organizational culture on these relationships; and (4) to identify the methodological and contextual limitations of the existing research and use them to inform future research and policy initiatives. In doing so, the review offers public managers a realistic account of what GHRM can and cannot deliver and offers researchers a structured map of where the field should go next.

## METHODS

This systematic literature review was conducted in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses protocol. The guiding question—how GHRM enhances sustainable performance in public organizations, with a specific focus on employee engagement and voluntary behavior—was broken down into five targeted search statements combining the core construct (GHRM) with outcome terms (sustainable performance, environmental performance, pro-environmental behavior, and organizational citizenship behavior for the environment), mechanism terms (employee engagement, green work engagement, and commitment), and context terms (public organization, public sector, and government). Decomposing a broad question into multiple queries reduces the risk of missing studies that use niche terminology while maintaining the manageability of each result set.

A large scholarly discovery platform was searched, indexing over 270 million records, with the search restricted to journal articles published between 2015 and 2026, while foundational works outside this timeframe were included through citation chaining. The initial searches returned 384 candidate papers. Backward citation chaining (inspecting the reference lists of core papers) and forward chaining (tracing newer papers that cite them) added 52 records for a pool of 436. After relevance ranking and screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts against the criteria summarized in Table 1, 133 studies were judged to be highly relevant and retained for synthesis. The corpus spans 2012 to 2026, with most articles published from 2020 onward.

**Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

| Criterion        | Inclusion                                                                                                                                       | Exclusion                                                                            |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Publication type | Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and book chapters with identifiable empirical or conceptual contributions to the literature | Editorials, news items, and records without metadata retrievability                  |
| Focus            | GHRM practices linked to sustainable/environmental performance, engagement, or voluntary green behavior                                         | Green marketing, green finance, or environmental management without an HRM component |
| Context          | All sectors, with public-sector and public-service studies flagged for focused analysis                                                         | Studies with no organizational setting (e.g., consumer behavior)                     |

|                     |                                   |                                                                                 |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Period and language | 2012–2026; English and Indonesian | Records outside the period unless foundational (admitted via citation chaining) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*Source: Authors' review protocol, 2026 manuscripts*

Each included study was coded for research design, sample and sector, national context, mediating and moderating variables, analytic method, and principal findings. The thematic synthesis involved comparing and consolidating codes into themes, including the GHRM-performance relationship, psychological mechanisms, leadership and cultural contingencies, public-sector implementation dynamics, and emerging digital extensions. Because the primary studies are heterogeneous in design and measurement, we deliberately favored narrative-thematic synthesis over meta-analytic pooling and reported patterns of agreement and divergence rather than aggregate effect sizes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile of the Evidence Base

Table 2 summarizes the 133 studies. Quantitative survey research dominates: approximately 100 studies test hypotheses on primary data, and approximately 85 of them rely on structural equation modeling, most frequently PLS-SEM; a further 48 records are systematic, narrative, or content-based reviews. Higher education and public universities form the single largest empirical setting (approximately 45 studies), followed by manufacturing (approximately 30) and core government or public-service organizations (approximately 25), with hospitality, healthcare, banking, and telecommunications making up the remainder. The field is geographically concentrated, with Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Vietnam, and several Middle Eastern and African economies providing the majority of samples, whereas mature public administrations in Europe and North America are largely absent, as noted by Kimeu et al. (2025) and Shaikh et al. (2025). Green work engagement is the most frequently modeled mediator (approximately 60 studies), followed by environmental citizenship behavior (approximately 25) and organizational or environmental commitment (approximately 15). On the moderation side, green transformational leadership or leadership style appears in approximately 40 studies and organizational culture or green psychological climate in approximately 15.

**Table 2. Composition of the reviewed studies (n = 133)**

| Dimension       | Dominant categories                                                                          | Approximate share                      |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Research design | Quantitative surveys with SEM/PLS-SEM; systematic or narrative reviews                       | 100 empirical; 48 review-type records  |
| Sector          | Higher education; manufacturing; government and public services; hospitality and health care | 45; 30; 25; mixed                      |
| Geography       | South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa: limited                               | Majority of developing-economy samples |

|                     |                                                                                                                                            |                       |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
|                     | coverage of developed economies                                                                                                            |                       |
| Mediators examined  | Green work engagement; environmental citizenship behavior; organizational/environmental commitment                                         | ≈60; ≈25; ≈15 studies |
| Moderators examined | Green transformational leadership and leadership style; culture and green psychological climate; individual green values and self-efficacy | ≈40; ≈15; ≈10 studies |

*Source: Authors' synthesis of the review corpus, 2026*

### **GHRM and sustainable performance: A consistent but indirect relationship**

Across settings, the first-order finding is remarkably stable: bundles of green recruitment, training, appraisal, and rewards are positively associated with environmental and broader sustainable performance (Paillé et al., 2014; Gill et al., 2021; Chowdhury et al., 2023; Kimeu et al., 2025). Public-sector studies echo the pattern. Adoption of GHRM in Indonesian state-owned banks predicts sustainable organizational performance (Yakup et al., 2025); in Indonesian public services, it improves performance partly through green service innovation (Astuti et al., 2023); in Malaysian public agencies, environmental knowledge strengthens the GHRM–performance link (Achim et al., 2024); and among Cambodian civil servants, GHRM fosters eco-friendly behavior through organizational commitment (Ly, 2022). Yet the same literature cautions against reading these associations as direct effects. Several studies find weak or non-significant direct paths from GHRM to behavior once mediators enter the model (Hasan & Hossain, 2025), and public-sector work in particular suggests that policies without psychological uptake produce little change (Rajiani, 2023). The reasonable conclusion is that GHRM matters, but almost entirely through the people-side mechanisms it activates – a conclusion with direct implications for how public organizations should sequence implementation.

### **Green work engagement as a psychological bridge**

The single most replicated mechanism in the corpus is GWE. Studies grounded in the AMO framework repeatedly show that GHRM builds the ability, motivation, and opportunity that make engagement possible, and that engagement in turn carries the effect of GHRM onto green behavior and performance in higher education (Aboramadan, 2020; Larik et al., 2024), manufacturing (Sibhatu et al., 2025; Ishaque et al., 2025), energy and services (Suryani et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025), and the hospitality industry (Hasan & Hossain, 2025). Ababneh (2021) added a useful nuance: engagement interacts with personality attributes, meaning that identical practices unevenly energize employees. The commitment-based pathway complements rather than competes with this account. Consistent with social exchange theory, employees who perceive GHRS reciprocate with commitment and citizenship behavior (Alnajdawi et al., 2017; Aboramadan & Karatepe, 2021; Aboramadan et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2024; Sarwar & Shahzad, 2024), and environmental commitment mediates GHRM effects in samples from China to the Gulf (Yuan et al., 2023; Alherimi

et al., 2024). The mediating evidence is equally consistent for voluntary behavior, specifically organizational citizenship behavior for the environment (Kakar & Khan, 2022; Jankelová et al., 2024; Dwumah et al., 2025), and it extends to public workplaces, where eco-helping and eco-civic engagement have long been observed to depend on discretionary motivation rather than mandate (Tsai et al., 2016; Danilwan et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2024). Taken together, these strands suggest a division of labor: engagement explains the energizing effect of in-role and extra-role green efforts, while commitment explains its persistence.

### **Leadership and culture as boundary conditions**

If mediation research answers how GHRM works, moderation research answers when. Green transformational leadership is the most frequently supported amplifier: it strengthens the translation of GHRM into engagement and eco-behavior in universities (Umair et al., 2024), industrial firms (Asfahani, 2025), and agriculture (Tran, 2023), and top management support plays a comparable catalytic role (Faezah et al., 2025). Organizational culture and green psychological climate operate similarly, turning formal policy into shared expectation (Liu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Suryani et al., 2025). The moderation story, however, is not unanimous. Utami et al. (2025) found that leadership alignment does not always add explanatory power once HRM and culture are in place, and value-based moderators, such as individual green values, produce mixed results across samples (Liu et al., 2020; Hameed et al., 2020; Kaur & Gupta, 2025). The most plausible reading of this divergence is contextual: where cultural support is already strong, leadership adds little at the margin, whereas in indifferent or resistant settings – a common description of bureaucratic environments – visible leadership commitment becomes the decisive signal (Jankelová et al., 2024). This implies that appointing credible environmental champions may matter more than perfecting policy documents for public organizations.

### **The public-sector problem: formalism, incentives, and the risk of greenwashing**

The public-sector subset of the corpus tells a more cautionary story than the aggregate statistics suggest. Allegrini and Monteduro (2023) note how little is actually known about GHRM in government, and the primary studies that do exist highlight distinctive frictions. Rajiani (2023) shows that pro-environmental participation among Indonesian public servants is constrained by bureaucratic culture; Nayera (2026) documents, in Ugandan public institutions, a persistent gap between adopted green policies and operational practice; and review evidence warns that without engagement and cultural support, GHRM decays into symbolic compliance – greenwashing by administrative means (Kimeu et al., 2025; Fatima et al., 2025). Incentive design is part of the explanation: public reward systems rarely recognize environmental effort, so voluntary behavior must be sustained by intrinsic and normative motivation, which is precisely what engagement- and commitment-building practices target (Tsai et al., 2016; Ly, 2022; Kamil et al., 2024). Interestingly, the evidence also suggests genuine opportunity: public employees' prosocial motivation is a natural substrate for environmental citizenship, and where GHRM connects green goals to public service values, effects comparable to or stronger than private-sector benchmarks emerge (Yu et al., 2024; Yakup et al., 2025). The problem, in short, is not that GHRM cannot work in government; it is that its working conditions – leadership credibility, cultural alignment, and non-monetary recognition – are harder to arrange there.

### Critical assessment and research agenda

Three weaknesses limit the confidence that can be placed in this otherwise consistent literature. The first is design: the corpus is overwhelmingly cross-sectional and survey-based, so causal language outruns causal evidence, and the durability of GHRM effects is essentially unknown (Suryani et al., 2025; Utami et al., 2025). The second is measurement: GHRM scales vary considerably across studies, self-reports dominate, and common-method variance is rarely ruled out, which complicates comparison and inflates observed associations (Paillé et al., 2014; Carballo-Penela, 2022). The third is context: the concentration of samples in a few developing economies leaves open whether the standard model travels to mature administrations with different regulatory pressure and labor institutions (Renwick et al., 2016; Kimeu et al., 2025). Emerging work on digital tools and artificial intelligence in green HRM – personalized green nudges, digitally supported service innovation – points to a promising extension but remains largely conceptual (Astuti et al., 2023; Istanti et al., 2025). Table 3 translates these observations into a forward agenda ordered by priority.

**Table 3. Research agenda derived from the review**

| Gap                                      | Suggested direction                                                                                                                             | Design                     | Priority |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------|
| Longitudinal evidence                    | Track engagement and voluntary behavior for two to three years after GHRM adoption to establish temporal ordering and decay                     | Panel / longitudinal       | High     |
| Geographic and sectoral generalizability | Comparative studies across developed and developing public administrations, and across public sub-sectors (health, education, local government) | Cross-national comparative | High     |
| Symbolic adoption and greenwashing       | Examine the distance between written green policy and enacted practice in bureaucratic settings                                                 | Qualitative case studies   | High     |
| Measurement fragmentation                | Develop and validate a GHRM instrument suited to public-sector role structures                                                                  | Scale development          | Medium   |
| External regulatory pressure             | Model regulation and institutional pressure as moderators of GHRM effectiveness                                                                 | Multi-level survey         | Medium   |
| Digitalization and AI                    | Test digitally delivered green nudges and e-HRM support for engagement                                                                          | Field / quasi-experiment   | Medium   |

*Source: Authors' synthesis of the review corpus, 2026*

### CONCLUSION

This review set out to establish what 133 studies collectively say about GHRM and sustainable performance in public organizations. The answer is threefold. First, GHRM reliably predicts environmental and sustainable performance, but almost never directly: green work engagement and organizational commitment are the bridges over which policy travels to behavior, and voluntary

environmental citizenship is the outcome that most clearly distinguishes successful implementation from paper compliance. Second, effectiveness is conditional. Green transformational leadership, top management support, and a sustainability-minded culture repeatedly amplify GHRM effects, and their absence – the default condition in many bureaucracies – is the most credible explanation for symbolic adoption and greenwashing. Third, the evidence base itself is uneven: cross-sectional surveys from a narrow set of developing economies dominate, measurement is fragmented, and longitudinal confirmation is missing, so the field's confident tone should be read with corresponding caution.

For public managers and policymakers, the practical message is one of sequencing. Writing green competencies into recruitment, training, appraisal, and recognition matters, but investment should begin with the conditions that let those practices bite: credible leadership commitment, non-monetary recognition of environmental effort, and integration of sustainability indicators into existing performance systems rather than parallel paperwork. For researchers, the priorities are longitudinal designs that test whether engagement effects persist, comparative work across administrative traditions, standardized public-sector measurement, and honest attention to the gap between adopted policy and enacted practice. This review is itself limited by the composition of the underlying literature – its geographic skew, its reliance on self-reported data, and the inclusion of several sources whose metadata quality varies – and by the narrative character of the synthesis, which trades statistical aggregation for interpretive breadth. Within those limits, the conclusion stands: in the public sector, GHRM succeeds where it stops being a document and becomes a shared expectation.

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