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Inclusive Leadership Through the Eyes of Women Leaders in the Energy Sector

MASTER THESIS

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Abstract

While research in the diversity and leadership literature has examined the concept of inclusive leadership, the integration of inclusive leadership practices by atypical leaders has received limited attention. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the positioning of women leaders in a traditionally male-dominated sector. Atypical leaders, having possibly previously experienced marginalization, possess unique experiences and perceptions that shape their approach to leadership. Therefore, this research investigates the context surrounding who is practicing inclusive leadership. Through a deductive thematic analysis with eight women leaders in a traditionally male-dominated sector, this study examined how these leaders define and relate to inclusive leadership with their own practices. The findings underscore the critical role of organizational support and highlight the interconnectedness between individual, workgroup, and organizational levels. The results emphasize the importance of formalizing accountability mechanisms, which enhance leaders' ability to foster inclusion at all levels of leadership. Based on these insights, the study discusses potential limitations and offers recommendations for future research, theoretical development, and practical application in the field of inclusive leadership.

Keywords: *Inclusive leadership, Women Leaders, Inclusion, Diversity*

Preface

In front of you lies the thesis '*Inclusive Leadership Through the Eyes of Women Leaders in the Energy Sector',* this thesis has been written to fulfill the graduation requirements of my Master's degree Business Administration, with a specialization in Gender Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at the Nijmegen School of Management.

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge that this thesis is the result of the efforts of amazing and inspiring people who have supported me every step of the way. A huge thank you to my supervisor, Yvonne Benschop, for guiding me through this process and giving me such valuable feedback.
Second, I would like to thank all my respondents who kindly volunteered their time and shared their insights. As one of my respondents said '*Real queens fix each other's crowns',* that really sums up this thesis journey, a beautiful collaboration among women that I'll cherish forever. Furthermore. 'It takes a village to write a thesis', so thank you to my peer students, my fellow Gemmies, for all the support (meals) during these months. I couldn't have done it without you.
Special thanks to my sisters, Maaike and Fleur, for their constructive feedback and for putting up with my endless ranting. Thanks to my boyfriend for supporting me all the way through, and to my lovely roommates for reminding me there's life outside of my thesis by occasionally dragging me out of my room.

Thank you all so much, I appreciate all of you for spending your time and energy to help me finish my thesis.

I hope you enjoy reading this research.

Kim van Oosterom

Nijmegen, June 17, 2024

Content

Chapter 1: Introduction

Inclusive leadership is crucial for modern organizations, fostering diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the globalized business environment (Shore et al., 2018). Leaders are increasingly challenged to lead across differences, valuing and leveraging them for organizational success (Roberson & Perry, 2022). Social exclusion and economic inequality persist in workplaces (Mor Barak, 2005; Mor Barak et al., 2001), and inclusion is vital for sustained competitive advantage and employee well-being (Roberson, 2006). Programs and initiatives grounded in DEI policies aim to remove barriers that prevent employees from utilizing their skills and experiences (Ferdman, 2014). Leadership is central to the success of these initiatives, influencing the adoption and execution of DEI policies and shaping organizational culture. Inclusive leadership, inclusive climate, and inclusive practices are key to involving diverse individuals and providing opportunities for all organizational members to reach their full potential (Shore et al., 2011). Inclusive leadership promotes a common identity within the group, inviting and appreciating diverse perspectives (Randel et al., 2018). This leadership style interacts with employees beyond avoiding bias and discrimination, retaining diverse talents (Simons et al., 2015).

Despite growing awareness of the importance of inclusive leadership, research on who provides it is limited (Thompson & Matkin, 2020). This thesis explores the experiences of women leaders in a traditionally male-dominated sector. Gendered practices and cultures are common in these environments, shaping how women practice leadership. Women leaders may face marginalization or discrimination throughout their careers, constructing their realities. Samdanis and Özbligin (2020) suggest that atypical leaders, such as women in male-dominated sectors, may struggle with being innovators from the margins or feel pressured to conform to dominant norms (Garcia et al., 2009; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Yoder, 1991).

This study aims to explore how women leaders in a male-dominated sector position themselves concerning inclusive leadership. The central question is, *'How do women leaders in a male-dominated sector position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership?'* To answer this question, a qualitative study will be conducted, interviewing eight women leaders within a Dutch company in the Energy sector.

By conducting a thematic analysis of responses from eight women leaders in a Dutch energy company, which is a male-dominated sector, this research aims to uncover their perceptions of inclusive leadership and how they embody it in their leadership styles. This qualitative approach moves beyond traditional academic definitions to examine inclusive leadership through the lived experiences of these leaders, capturing the richness of their natural language and interpretations. Understanding these perspectives is crucial as gendered activities and cultures often overshadow D&I initiatives in such sectors. The insights gained can guide organizations in developing more effective strategies to promote D&I. This research can inform leadership development programs, policymaking, and the creation of organizational cultures

that value diversity. Additionally, the study highlights the benefits of inclusive leadership, contributing to broader efforts to foster equitable and inclusive workplaces.

1.1 Outline of the thesis

The outline of this thesis is as follows: after this introduction, the theoretical framework will follow in the second chapter. This chapter provides the relevant literature on inclusive leadership. Chapter 3, the methodology section, consists of a detailed description of the research design, methods used for data collection, and data analysis. In this chapter, there is also an elaboration of the research ethics and the limitations of this research. Next in chapter four, the results will be represented. Finally, chapter five provides a conclusion and a discussion, accompanied by practical recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant existing literature on inclusive leadership, women leaders, and identified levels of inclusive leadership.

Leaders today face the challenge of guiding increasingly diverse workforces and finding ways to value and leverage differences for organizational benefit (Roberson & Perry, 2022). Organizations are therefore reconfiguring their structures and systems to maximize workforce diversity, removing obstacles to full employee participation and contribution (Roberson, 2006). Initiatives that merely increase workforce diversity without fostering true organizational change are insufficient (Thomas & Ely, 1996). Simply increasing diversity does not ensure the retention, promotion, or full engagement of individuals from diverse groups in influential positions (Cook & Glass, 2014). Leaders play a crucial role in creating inclusive environments due to their direct influence on employee experiences (Ferdman 2014). Senior leaders set strategies and design inclusive policies, while lower-level leaders must translate these policies into action (Nishii et al., 2018). Middle managers, in particular, are essential in implementing organizational strategies that promote inclusion in everyday experiences (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). For organizations to foster an inclusive environment, inclusion must be embedded in values, policies, and practices at all levels (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002). Leaders must communicate and enact these values in their daily tasks, ensuring that inclusion is practiced throughout the organization.

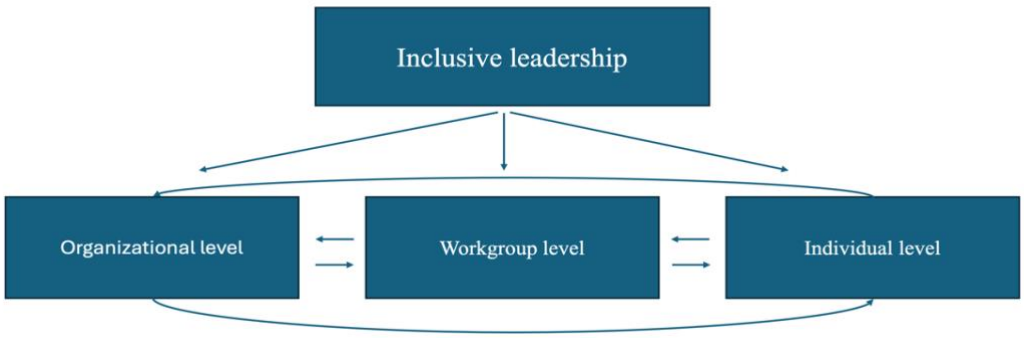
Inclusion has been defined as the degree to which employees feel they are esteemed members of their workgroup, meeting their needs for belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). This definition emphasizes that inclusive processes, inclusive leadership, and inclusive climate are crucial for positive organizational outcomes. However, this definition misses the importance of different identities Ferdman's (2017) broad definition of inclusion is consistent with the addition of a diversity perspective: 'In inclusive organizations and societies, people of all identities and many styles can be themselves fully

while also contributing to the larger collective, as valued as full member'. In inclusive environments, individuals of all backgrounds, not just members of historically powerful identity groups, are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in decision-making (Nishii, 2013). A leader in a diverse and inclusive organization should model comfort with diversity, alter rules for acceptable behaviors to ensure with application, create opportunities for dialogue, and demonstrate an interest in learning (Cottrill et al., 2014). It is important to consider different social categories in the organization and their effect on experiences. Shore et al. (2018) suggest that leaders should implement 'management prevention orientation', as a part of inclusive leadership, including compliance practices and policies, recruitment of protected social categories, management of harassment and discrimination claims, and diversity training. These measures help prevent exclusion and promote organizational safety and security.

Despite extensive research on inclusion, the role of leadership, particularly atypical leaders, is often overlooked. Leadership positions are inherently powerful, and pathways to these positions can vary significantly based on social identity (Robison & Kerr, 2009; Tatli et al., 2017). Women leaders in male-dominated sectors face significant obstacles due to gendered practices and cultures (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2001; O'Brien et al., 2023). Their experiences of marginalization shape their leadership practices, potentially making them more committed to inclusion, fairness, and equity (Adams & Funk, 2012). However, not every woman is an advocate for gender equality. Gender diversity scholars claim that women executives are more likely to champion diversity, equity, and social responsibility. Nevertheless, this could also be explained by the earlier mentioned marginalization women have experienced throughout their careers, not because of 'feminine' traits or attributes. Roberson and Perry (2022) highlight the importance of reducing status differences and encouraging member participation in decision-making as core to inclusive leadership. In diverse contexts, access to these experiences varies based on social identities (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2013). Dominant groups shape norms and reinforce identity shape norms and reinforce identity-based role expectations, while those who deviate face sanctions (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Neutral leaders perpetuate these structures by demanding assimilation from non-dominant identities (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Atypical leaders, therefore, face pressure to comply with existing practices to gain acceptance (Samdanis & Ozbilgin, 2020).

Inclusive leadership requires acknowledging power dynamics and individual differences, making it an adaptive process where leaders flexibly enact necessary behaviors in specific contexts (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Korkmaz et al. (2022) provide a multi-level conceptualization of inclusive leadership, identifying key dimensions about insufficiently addressing diversity. Thus, this research integrates their framework with Nishii and Leroy's (2022) approach for a more comprehensive view. Both frameworks identify an individual-level, workgroup-level, and organizational-level of inclusive leadership. Which are interconnected and influence perceptions as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Inclusive Leadership Levels



2.1 Individual-level of inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership at the individual-level promotes followers' experiences of inclusion by focusing on the vertical relationship between the leader and followers. Proactive leadership behaviors facilitate followers' sense of belonging, uniqueness, autonomy, and competence.

The first category identified by Korkmaz et al. (2022) is 'supporting employees as individuals'. This includes giving attention, offering guidance, being available, and providing emotional support. However, these behaviors lean more towards general leadership rather than inclusive leadership, without a diversity perspective. By incorporating 'investing in developing high-quality, trusting relationships with followers' (Nishii & Leroy, 2022), a diversity perspective is added. High-quality relationships, characterized by mutual respect and trust, signal acceptance and confer high status to employees, fostering empowerment and psychological safety (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This aligns with Korkmaz et al. 's (2022) behaviors, as high trusting relationships encourage employees to apply their unique strengths, enhancing engagement and well-being (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Additionally, supporting employees should focus on establishing a confidential support system for reporting incidents of discrimination or harassment (Shore et al., 2018).

The second category is 'promoting diversity', where inclusive leaders recognize employees' differences (Bradley, 2020), value unique characteristics (Randel et al., 2018), and help employees contribute (Derven, 2016). These behaviors counter simplistic stereotypes. Leaders who learn about followers' individuating information and make it visible interrupt stereotype-based interactions as (Van Dijk et al., 2017). Leaders' awareness of their stereotype-based assumptions is crucial. Publicly acknowledging minority members' expertise reduces perceived risks to voicing (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

The third category is 'empowering employees', which involves collaborating with employees in decision-making (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), encouraging involvement in organizational

practices (Randel et al., 2018), and promoting idea-sharing (Mir et al., 2021). Nishii and Leroy (2022) term this 'authorizing voice', where workgroup members feel safe to voice their perspectives, knowing these will inform decisions and shape norms (Pelled et al., 1999). Inclusive behaviors must go beyond the dominant majority, actively inviting input from marginalized members and understanding their identity-related experiences (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Leaders should be role models in listening to and affirming voiced perspectives and understanding the identity-related experiences shaping insights. In the case of women leaders, it is easier to identify the perspectives of other women. (Cha et al., 2019; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). To counteract this tunnel vision, leaders need to actively invite input from minoritized workgroup members and be role models in listening to and affirming to voiced perspectives. Furthermore, leaders should try to understand the identity-related experiences that have shaped those insights (Nishii & Leroy, 2022)).

Finally, 'contributing to employee learning and development' involves leaders being open to employees' developmental needs (Rayner, 2009), helping advance career prospects (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), providing feedback (Chen et al., 2020), and guiding through mistakes (Qi et al., 2019). Contributing to employee learning and development should also be focused on to prevent exclusive behavior (Shore et al., 2018). Inclusive leaders should implement programs for bias awareness and communicate the company's policies on harassment, discrimination, and inclusion.

2.2 Workgroup-level of inclusive leadership

Nishii and Leroy (2022) argue that individual and workgroup-levels of inclusive leadership are interconnected, as individual practices affect group dynamics. Research on workgroup-level inclusive leadership is limited, but leaders significantly influence group processes and performance. Inclusive leadership addresses a group's task and person-oriented needs during the transition and action phase (Marks et al., 2001). The transition phase involves planning, setting norms, defining goals, and sensemaking (Morgeson et al., 2010). The action phase focuses on monitoring performance and encouraging reflection for continuous improvement. Inclusive leadership must address diversity, mitigating negative group processes and catalyzing positive ones, tailored to a diverse group's circumstances (Homan et al., 2020).

The first category identified is 'ensuring equity' (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Leaders achieve this by showing moral behavior (Rayner, 2009), making unbiased judgments (Kelan, 2020), distributing rewards fairly, and ensuring fair representation (Saxena et al., 2019). Nishii and Leroy (2022) suggest developing team charters to secure equity. Chartering involves identifying members' strengths and work styles, agreeing on roles and responsibilities, and addressing how the team will surface diverse perspectives and make decisions. Inclusive leadership necessitates fairness in allocating roles and access to opportunities (Nishii, 2013). It also arranges interlocking roles to increase interdependence among group members, motivating personalized perceptions (Rudman, 1998). Leaders can facilitate

discussions about the situational contingencies that might alter decision-making processes, preventing possible exclusive behavior. This prevents members from misinterpreting reduced influence in decision-making as evidence of a lack of inclusion, attributing different leader-initiated interaction patterns to strategic reasons (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

The second category is 'building relationships', requiring leaders to foster positive relationships within the team. Behaviors include supporting team members (Randel et al., 2018), fostering relationships (Xiaotao et al., 2018), enabling respectful interaction within the team (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2020), building connections (Gotsis & Grimani, 2017), and making members feel they belong (Sugiyama et al., 2016). Nishii and Leroy (2022) introduce the co-creation of superordinate workgroup identities and developing cross-boundary connections. Co-creating superordinate workgroup identities acknowledges that historically marginalized group members have difficulty fully identifying with a shared workgroup identity. Leaders develop shared norms and values through interactions (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Inclusive leaders question and unpack dominant narratives, allowing people to understand their origins and share counternarratives (Routenberg et al., 2013). By presenting and inviting counternarratives, leaders offer safety and validation for group members whose experiences are reflected in these counternarratives rather than in dominant ones. Leaders can challenge employees to offer alternative perspectives and explanations for why people might hold them (Routenberg et al., 2013). Investing in developing cross-boundary connections focuses on social integration, essential for helping workgroups bridge diversity without negating individual distinctiveness and inherent value (Brewer, 1991). Inclusive leadership prioritizes building strong, personalized relationships within the workgroup to optimize conflict avoidance and engage in information elaboration. (Mor Barak, 2017; Nishii, 2013). Since processing individuating information takes more cognitive resources than relying on stereotype-based thinking, it is important for leaders to proactively provide time and space for workgroup members to discover individuating information(Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

The third category is 'sharing decision-making', where inclusive leaders provide reasoning for practices (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), consult with workers (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), and include others in decisions (Ahmed et al., 2020). This aligns with the advocating for diversity mindsets, as described by Nishii and Leroy (2022). Leaders play a critical role in advocating for diversity mindsets to motivate group members to resist the natural tendency to prefer similarity and push away distinctiveness and instead maintain an open mind when interacting with others (Roberson & Perry, 2022). Shared diversity mindsets make it less likely for social categorization processes to inhibit the elaboration of diverse task-relevant information because they provide the motivation needed to engage in accurate stereotypes. Advocacy for diversity mindsets involves sharing the leader's own understanding of how the group's diversity is important (Leroy et al., 2015). Leaders strengthen the sharedness of diversity mindsets by guiding their groups through information elaboration experiences, actively inviting diverse input and participating in its integration, and role modeling it themselves (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

2.3 Organizational-level of inclusive leadership

At the organizational-level, inclusion involves how the workforce's demographic composition is reflected in core decision-making and social networks, and how power, resources, and opportunities are distributed to fully optimize the potential of diverse human capital resources (Mor Barak, 2017; Nishi & Leroy, 2022).

The first category Korkmaz et al. (2022) identified is being open to organizational change. Inclusive leaders should promote change (Mansoor et al., 2021), pay attention to new opportunities (Choi et al., 2017), focus on organizational development (Caron et al., 2019), and understand and engage with resistance(Gotsis & Grimani, 2017). While these behaviors could be part of general leadership, they need to explicitly be investigated within the context of D&I.

The second category identified is 'promoting the organizational mission on inclusion' (Korkmaz et al., 2022). This involves creating an inclusive environment where everyone is heard (Derven, 2016), communicating how inclusion is related to the mission and vision, facilitating a diverse workforce and inclusion (Norman et al., 2018), explaining how organizational practices and inclusion are aligned (Luu, 2021), and promoting participative management mechanisms (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Nishii and Leroy (2022) add to this by emphasizing the articulation and design of an organization's inclusion strategy, which connects the individual and workgroup levels with the organizational level. Employee resource groups or affinity groups can be valuable if they are explicitly designed to offer opportunities for meaningful interactions and outcome dependence among employees across roles, levels, and other organizational boundaries (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Furthermore, Nishii and Leroy (2022) identify another Inclusive behavior, namely formalizing accountability. Formalizing accountability is the means to prevent policy-practice decoupling by strengthening motivational significance for implementation among leaders throughout levels of the organization. Motivational significance depends on whether practice implementers perceive the espoused policies to be well-suited for the attainment of shared goals and how vigilantly the policies are monitored (Nishii et al., 2018). The more formalized the practices and the greater the accountability for practice implementation, the more likely it is for managers to enact practices as intended. Finally, senior leaders facilitate effective practice implementation by articulating the informal leadership behaviors that are needed to support practices (Nishii et al., 2018).

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, the research strategy of this thesis is explained. Research strategy entails a coherent set of assumptions regarding philosophical principles that are used, the methods of data collection, and data analysis (Bleijenberg et al., 2022).

3.1 Research Design

A research paradigm can be defined as a fundamental image of the subject matter within science, outlining what should be studied, what questions should be asked, and how they should be interpreted (Groenland & Dana, 2019). This study employs a deductive qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism posits that reality is socially constructed and knowledge is co-created through interaction between the researcher and respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It emphasizes that understanding and knowledge of the world are constructed through experiences and reflection (Honebein, 1996). Constructivism supports a subjectivist epistemology and ontology, where multiple interpretations of reality coexist and are actively constructed (Evers & de Boer, 2012).

In this context, inclusive leadership is seen as a concept co-constructed by the perceptions of the leaders. Eight women leaders in a male-dominated sector are interviewed, this thesis recognizes that context shapes perceptions and leadership behaviors. Qualitative research is used to analyze how respondents perceive inclusive leadership, allowing for an in-depth understanding of opinions and underlying thoughts (Vennix, 2019). This approach helps understand how individuals perceive inclusive leadership in an organizational context (Rynes and Gyphart, 2004; Bryman, 2016). A deductive approach is chosen as existing literature on inclusive leadership theories is already developed. This thesis investigates how these theories apply to the experiences of women leaders in male-dominated companies. Deductive thematic analysis is used to identify themes and patterns of behavior. The research question is: *'How do women leaders in a male-dominated sector position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership?'*

3.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential to understand how philosophical assumptions affect this study. It involves self-awareness of the researcher's role and how this influences the research process and outcomes. The researcher acknowledges that both they and the subject mutually affect each other throughout the process(Symon & Cassell, 2012). Research is interpretive and influenced by the researcher's assumptions, values, and experiences (Nadin & Cassell, 2006; Symon & Cassell, 2012). This study, taking a deductive approach, is influenced by the researcher's knowledge of inclusive leadership from literature and their interest in the subject. Additionally, the researcher's personal relationships and knowledge about the company can shape data interpretation and potentially lead to false assumptions about inclusiveness. Finally, the researcher's precious internship and work positions influence their

definition of leadership, affecting data interpretation. These critical thoughts and prior assumptions are considered throughout the study.

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection method for this study is individual semi-structured interviews, meaning one person is interviewed at time. Interviewing is a widely used method to gather information on topics like leadership and values (Symon & Cassell, 2012). This approach is chosen to hear in-depth personal stories, aligning with the constructivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews allow for following up on important angles from participants and addressing questions essential for the research aim (Leavy, 2015). These interviews include both open-ended and theoretically driven questions, balancing participant experiences with existing constructs (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was conducted either in person or via Microsoft Teams. Topics covered included personal drivers for DEI implementation, background information on their current position, the role of diversity and inclusion, their definition of inclusive leadership, and their own leadership experiences. An interview guide, based on the theoretical framework, is illustrated in Appendix Two

3.4 Respondents

This research focuses on women in leadership positions within various organizational contexts in a Dutch Energy company. Research participants are selected based on their leadership position, which is a necessary condition to be able to answer the questions. Participation is voluntary and all signed up to be interviewed, after being informed with a message in the Lead network that the company created two years ago. The Lead network consists of around 35 women in senior positions, from which 8 women volunteered to be part of this research. All respondents have Dutch or Belgian nationality and are Dutch speaking. Most participants are employed between two and seven years in the company, with one respondent standing out with an employment of 37 years. All participants are of working age, with two respondents younger than 35 and none older than retirement age in the Netherlands. The participants are from different departments and have a span of control between 8 and 2000 employees, which in some cases are direct reports, but most of the time there is a layer(s) of middle managers in between. A large part of their job is managing their team, by carrying out HR tasks, such as training and development, coaching, having regular conversations one-on-one or in a team environment, and supporting relationships within the team.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis primarily relies on deductive reasoning, using the theoretical framework as foundation. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One significant advantage of thematic analysis is the flexibility in using multiple levels of coding, which helps develop themes extensively and uncover rich data (Symon & Cassell, 2012).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology, the first step was familiarization with the data. The researcher immersed themselves in the interview transcripts through multiple readings to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. Next, a codebook was developed based on the theoretical framework and research question, as shown in Appendix 3. Predefined codes were derived from existing literature on inclusive leadership, and categorized into three themes:

Individual-level: At the individual-level, the focus of inclusive leadership is the vertical relationship between the leader and the individual followers, in particular leaders' proactive behaviors to facilitate followers' experiences of belonging, uniqueness, autonomy, and competence (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

Workgroup-level: Inclusive-leadership at the workgroup level entails behaviors that mitigate negative group processes as well as those that catalyze positive ones, with the relative importance of each being informed by the circumstances faced by a diverse workgroup (Homan et al., 2020).

Organizational-level: This involves behaviors that ensure the demographic composition of an organization's workforce is reflected in core decision-making and social networks, and distribution of power resources, and opportunities such that the organization can fully optimize the potential inherent in its diverse human capital resources (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

Using the codebook, the researcher systematically applied the predefined codes to the data by carefully reading each transcript and marking relevant sections. This deductive approach allowed the researcher to test the presence and relevance of the predefined themes within the data. The researcher remained open to new themes or patterns emerging from the data, adding any relevant new codes to the codebook. This iterative process ensures that the codebook is comprehensive and reflective of the data. Special attention was given to categories expected from the literature but not mentioned in the empirical data. Once initial coding was completed, the codes were organized into broader themes, encompassing both predefined categories and new insights. These themes are reviewed and refined for clarity and distinction. Each theme was defined in detail, supported by representative quotes to illustrate relevance. The refined themes were then analyzed concerning the theoretical framework and research questions, focusing on how the data supports the literature on inclusive leadership and the extent to which women leaders practice inclusive leadership.

3.6 Research Limitations

First of all, the voluntariness of the research could be a possible limitation of the research. Participants decided whether they wanted to be interviewed about the topic of inclusive leadership. Therefore, it might be the case that all respondents have an interest or affinity with the topic, which could lead to a possible bias in results. Results might be different when other women leaders were involved, who are not familiar with the topic or have a personal value to the topic of diversity and inclusion. Secondly, is important to keep in mind that there are possible drawbacks of online interviewing, compared to face-to-face interviews, such as the lack of non-verbal communication, ethical problems, or feeling uncomfortable while being filmed (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Therefore, it is important that the researcher is aware of these possible drawbacks and tries to make the participants as comfortable as possible. The organization has a 40/40/20 hybrid working regulation; therefore, the participants are familiar with having meetings and conversations via Microsoft Teams. Another possible limitation of the research could be participants responding with socially desirable answers during the interviews. The questions also contain the subjects of diversity and inclusion; therefore the participants can feel as though some answers are desired or socially correct. Furthermore, the participants and researcher are all Dutch-speaking, for that reason, the interviews were conducted in the Dutch language. Within the constructivist paradigm, multiple realities co-exist and are socially constructed. This research is conducted in English, meaning that staying true to the participants' language is significantly influenced by the researchers' interpretation.

3.6 Research Ethics

Research ethics govern the behavior concerning the right of research participants (Wells, 1994: 284). In this study, ethical principles were strictly followed to protect participants' rights.

All respondents participated voluntarily. Personal information confidentiality and respondent anonymity were maintained. Participants were informed about anonymity options and secure information storage before the interviews. The Ethics Assessment Committee Law and Management implemented a secure data management system (Radboud University- RIS for students, 2024), used to store interview transcripts. Participants could withdraw from the research at any time. Recording permissions were obtained through informed consent. After the interviews, participants were reminded of the results' usage and results were shared with them

The researcher followed the Academy of Management Code of Ethics, which emphasizes Responsibility, Integrity, and Respect for People's Rights and Dignity (AOM- Code of Ethics, 2023). Transparency was maintained regarding the use and truthfulness, ensuring data representation was honest and reflective of participants' experiences, and keeping promises about anonymity and data usage. The researcher respected participants' dignity and worth, considering cultural, individual and role differences, while being aware of personal biases to ensure justices and fairness.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter provides an overview of the results from the data analysis. The first section starts with an analysis of the concepts of inclusive leadership the respondents. Followed by a comparison of inclusive leadership behaviors identified in the data on the organizational, workgroup, and individual level.

4.1 Inclusive leadership definition

The respondents did not reach a consensus on the definition of inclusive leadership. None were familiar with the term 'inclusive leadership' and found it challenging to define. Given the freedom to describe inclusive leadership, respondents linked the term to their leadership roles, providing meanings from their positions. Two types of answers emerged: one focused on the relationship between the leader and the individual employee, and the other focused mostly on the term 'equality'.

The perspective emphasizing the individual-level, highlighted the importance of facilitating a safe environment where employees can voice opinions and showcase unique talents, ensuring everyone is heard, having a personal interest in team members, and fostering a culture where everyone feels valued and can express ideas. These themes align with Shore et al.'s (2011) definition of inclusion, which focuses on allowing employees to be unique and fostering a safe environment. The second perspective centered on equality, focuses on treating people equally despite different backgrounds and colors, for example, Daphne stated *'What do I see as inclusive leadership? Everybody getting equal opportunities regardless of your background or your about life beliefs or however you want it yes and as far as I'm concerned it's mainly about having multiple profiles on your team that's where I would want to go much more towards inclusiveness regardless of all the other personal attributes'.* This viewpoint suggests a desire for diverse team compositions in terms of interests, talents, and experiences, rather than focusing on diversity dimensions. This perspective has similarities with the concept of 'color-blindness' described by Marvasti and McKinney (2011), where not seeing differences can perpetuate inequalities by ignoring the need for social change. Nishii and Leroy (2022) also argue that leader neutrality is not inclusive and reinforces societal inequality in the workforce. These respondents conflated equality with inclusion, misunderstanding that inclusive leadership requires acknowledging and addressing unique needs rather than treating everyone the same.

Another interesting perspective was given by Fleur: *'To me inclusive leadership means that everybody can be heard. I see inclusive leadership more as horizontal leadership than vertical leadership. All views matter, and then it just so happens to be that one person finally has to make a decision. It also means that as a leader you have an active role to make sure everybody contributes - there are always people who are a little more present and others who are a little less present and as a leader, I need to ensure everybody has a place at the discussion table. And then, last but not least inclusive leadership also means that you yourself need to invite feedback, so if there is feedback for me or if I am asked to do*

something or not do something even though you are hierarchically the final person in charge, that should also be possible, so there is kind of equality in inclusiveness that maybe hierarchy doesn't always show you'. In this definition of inclusive leadership, both types of answers are represented. First, Fleur mentions that it is important that everybody can be heard, which refers to the category of 'empowering employees' or 'promoting diversity' when it is in fact about a diverse set of people who are being heard. The respondent also reflects on her position by seeing herself as part of the team but with the responsibility of the total. However, seeing everyone as equal and not taking into account social categories and power differences is neglecting the purpose of inclusive leadership. In the middle part, she mentions '*there are always people who are a little more present and others who are a little less present and as a leader I need to ensure everybody has a place at the discussion table'*, the part where people are less present can be interpreted in multiple ways, some people are discriminated and therefore in this context are less likely to have a seat around the table. In the other interpretation, it means personality-wise, people tend to be quieter, this is what the respondent meant. Nonetheless, being less present is also a co-construction between the leader in her perspective and the employee(s) she is referring to.

Interestingly, none of the respondents mentioned the organizational level of inclusive leadership in their definitions. This omission suggests either a lack of awareness or a belief that it is not essential to inclusive leadership. Although there is no shared definition of inclusive leadership, there are some similarities when the respondents talk about examples of inclusive leadership behavior. The respondents use terms like consideration, being involved, caring, setting boundaries, being open-minded, motivating employees, supporting employees, facilitating a long work relationship, and creating a safe environment. Some of these terms are also representative of the literature on leadership by women, for example, 'caring' is one of the stereotypical terms that are mentioned under femininity.

4.2 Personal drivers for DEI

All respondents were women leaders who co-construct a reality with their employees. In the constructivist paradigm, it is essential to identify their leadership influences, experiences shaping their leadership, and reasons for implementing or not implementing DEI in their positions. When asked about personal meanings of diversity and inclusion, respondents provided varied answers. Most were aware of their position as women in society, having experienced gender-based differences throughout their lives. Two respondents highlighted their awareness of age in their roles, creating an intersectional position. Bella shared an experience of age and gender discrimination during her job application process, where a senior male colleague's recommendation highlighted her youthful appearance rather than her skills. Similarly, Elise mentioned an unwritten rule that leadership positions were reserved for those over 35, but she pursued her goals despite this bias, believing in advocating for oneself regardless of bias.

Some respondents focused on their roles as mothers or grandmothers, desiring a future without barriers for women in leadership. One respondent broadened this perspective by acknowledging her children's mixed ethnicity and her husband's experiences with discrimination. These experiences motivated her to advocate beyond gender dimensions in the business environment. However, not all respondents shared this perspective or had personal drivers for DEI. Daphne, for example, did not see much relevance in the topic of diversity and inclusion, especially regarding gender. She mentioned, '*I think when we look at diversity we very often look at men and women… And I don't think that's necessary, at least not within our organization, let's keep it within our organization for a moment, because I think that we, we women, so to speak, often cause ourselves to be disadvantaged on the labor market, and by that I mean that when we do start having children we often take a step back. And I think that's just a lack and I myself, I have a son, have almost always worked full-time, but with flexible working hours and then you see that there is quite a lot possible, but you have to do something for it, because the men who suddenly have to do so much, so that's why I, I'm not so much in favor of diversity between men and women'.* Daphne's response suggests a gender-blind approach, not recognizing the existing inequalities and differences in experiences between genders. This perspective can inadvertently reinforce inequality by ignoring the need for social change.

Another respondent, Fleur, shared her experience of facing the 'glass ceiling' at the executive level. She initially believed she could achieve as much as anyone else until she encountered an unspoken connection among men that operated more on a code of conduct than on capability or potential. This intangible ceiling highlighted the presence of affinity bias, where people prefer to interact and hire those with similar perspectives (Heidari et al., 2023). Fleur's experiences motivated her participation in this study and her belief in women supporting each other, reflecting a positive aspect of affinity bias

All respondents acknowledged their privileges, such as Dutch ethnicity, education, or wealth, which provided them opportunities. Despite these privileges, they faced gender-specific challenges in their careers, driving their focus on gender in DEI efforts. This gendered focus on DEI suggests that their experiences as women in male-dominated environments significantly influence their leadership practices and priorities. The respondents' varied experiences and perspectives on diversity and inclusion reflect a complex interplay of gender, age, ethnicity, and personal motivations. While some respondents exhibited a strong gender focus in their DEI efforts, others demonstrated a broader intersectional awareness. Given the information above, it can be concluded that the respondents overall have a very gendered focus on DEI, this is what drives them and most possibly this is also where their focus lies in fostering diversity and inclusion in their role (Samdanis & Ozbilgin, 2020).

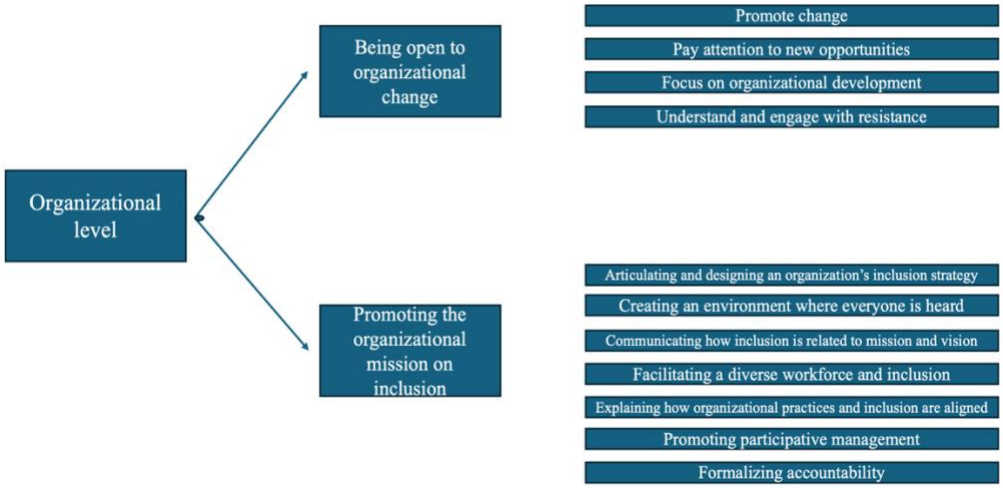
4.3 Inclusive leadership practices

The researcher also specifically asked questions regarding the leadership of the women leaders during the interviews. In the interview, the researcher described specific situations, which enabled the respondents to describe how they would react in this situation, sometimes respondents highlighted their practices by focusing on earlier experiences. This part is divided into three parts, based on the conceptualization of inclusive leadership used in the theoretical framework, organizational level, workgroup level, and individual level.

4.3.1 Organizational-level

The organizational-level of inclusive leadership involves leaders promoting and supporting the organization's DEI strategy and communicating its importance to employees (Korkmaz et al., 2022). This includes formulating the mission, vision, and implementation of inclusion (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Notably, no respondents mentioned the organizational-level in their definitions, possibly because it has been less studied (Mor Barak, 2017). Figure 2 highlights the categories and leadership behaviors for this theme.

Figure 2: Inclusive Leadership: Organizational Level



4.3.1.1 Being open to organizational change

Respondents were asked if they believe they influence the development of inclusion in the company, focusing on how they contribute to an inclusive environment at a strategic level. Respondents without a personal driver for DEI did not acknowledge their potential role in fostering inclusion and were mainly focused on optimizing productivity through diversity. Conversely respondents who were personally committed to DEI were more open to organizational change towards an inclusive environment. They expressed appreciation for the company's transition to a network organization, an organization with

employee resource groups, which provided greater insights into the needs and experiences of diverse employees.

Hannah, in her role focused on hospitality, highlighted her proactive efforts to ensure comfort and inclusivity for everyone.

Hannah: '*Certainly, yes, sure. Many things eventually come to us, because often, for example, we had someone this week who is blind, and you know, the elevator needs to be adapted, or things like that. So, we say, 'Guys, have you thought about this? Have you thought about that?' But now, you know, we are setting up a few things with the D&I department over the coming period. I've discussed to just hear what challenges they are facing. If I don't understand it, we might get investment proposals that I could possibly dismiss by saying, bluntly, 'Is it worth the cost for just one blind person? Look at how much it costs us.' You can easily think like that, but I believe that you sometimes really need to understand and grasp things, also me, to see the necessity and importance of it and to bring such things to the board. We need to make that investment because it fits within certain areas. So, yes, absolutely'.*

Hannah's narrative illustrated her commitment to promoting change by addressing inequalities in the company's hospitality processes. Her approach aligns with the goals of the organization, engaging with resistance related to costs and other considerations. Her focus on new opportunities for developing and implementing DEI goals exemplified her openness to organizational development.

4.3.1.2 Promoting organizational mission on inclusion

The respondents exhibit varied perspectives on their responsibility and role in promoting the organizational mission of inclusion. Two respondents did not consider diversity and inclusion at a strategic level. This variance highlights the need for a unified understanding of inclusion among leaders. Hannah mentioned that the organization recently evolved into a network organization, facilitating discussions among individuals from diverse dimensions. These groups, known as employee resource groups or affinity groups (Welbourne et al., 2017), consist of individuals sharing common demographics (McGrath & Sparks, 2005). Such groups often eliminate hierarchy to reduce power disparities, enabling open discussions without fear of repercussions (McGrath & Sparks, 2005; Van Aken et al., 1994).

Respondents actively involved in organizational development combined behaviors identified by Gotsis and Grimani (2016) and (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). They communicated how inclusion aligns with the mission and vision articulated by the organization. For example, Anne emphasized the strategic importance of inclusion.

Anne: The people bit is in the strategic objectives anyway, mainly than the fact that you uh 'Happy employee makes happy customers. That is something that I hope that, and certainly within the company has yet to be demonstrated, it is simply a fact, that is also scientifically proven. So, you know

that that the investment you make in your internal or with your internal colleagues, yes, pays back to your customers and adds to how your customer relationships are further built and expanded, that's a given. So in that sense it is included in the strategy, only you do have to make sure that you take the one phrase that is there or the two phrases that are there, that you also do make sure that you consider those important and convert them into objectives plus is it then a business unit or is it a department or is it team. You do need to make sure that you just implement it in everything and that everyone within the organization knows very well that diversity and inclusion, yes that also rolls up into your organization's objectives.

Anne's quote demonstrated the recognition of the importance of inclusion for business outcomes. She also highlights the necessity of formalizing accountability to ensure leaders implement inclusion effectively, aligning with Nishii and Leroy's (2022) findings. This formalization strengthens the motivational significance for leaders to prioritize inclusion. This is something that is missed by most respondents, as many mention to not feel encouraged by the company or don't have any specific task to promote inclusion in their role. In her interview, Elise mentioned that there is only so much time in a workweek and even though she would be glad to implement and translate to others it sometimes is difficult to reflect on something besides operational, and sometimes tactical tasks. Thus, the organization should formalize accountability for inclusion more as a function in the tasks of someone in a leadership position.

To facilitate diversity and inclusion, most respondents focused on the recruitment process. Two respondents emphasized merit-based recruitment, thinking this is fair, but literature indicated that the idea of meritocracies has been delegitimized (Cavendish, 1982; Cockburn, 1983; Kanter, 1977). Therefore, these respondents are not actively working on a diverse workforce.

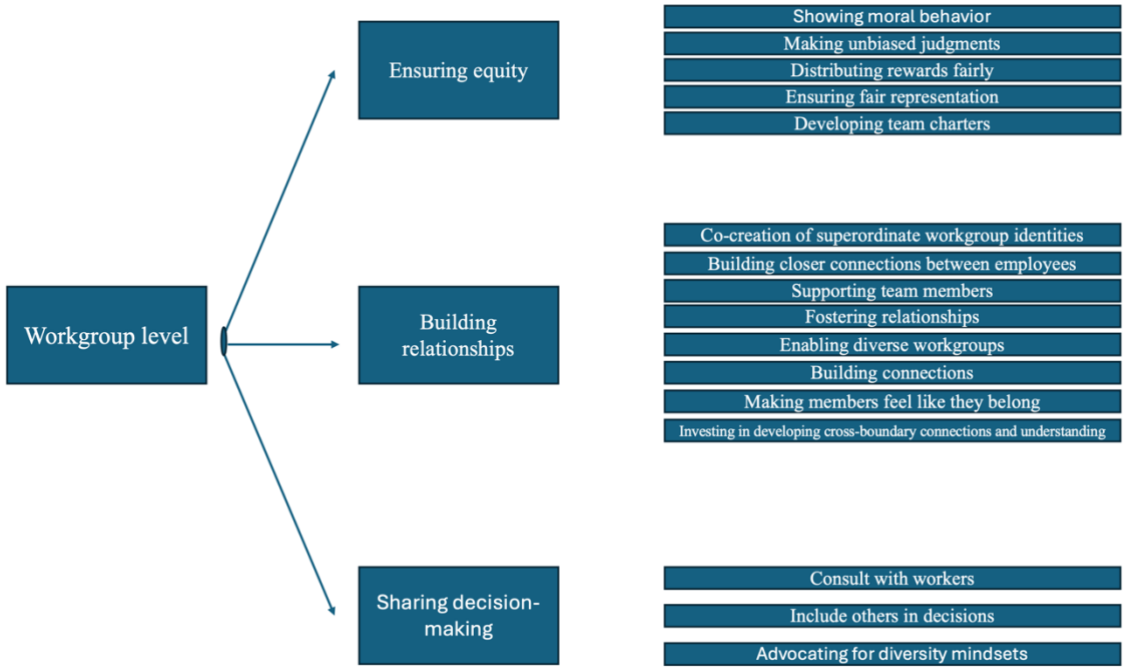
Daphne mentioned a preference for women over men when candidates have similar qualifications but did not fully consider the broader impact of diversity; *'If a man and a woman have the same eligibility for a job, then the woman is first'*. This approach reflects a limited focus on gender diversity and overlooks other diversity dimensions. Women in influential positions often legitimize the contribution of other women, reducing gender stereotypes and biases, and enhancing the influence and legitimacy of women (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). In this example, this is not the case.

Some respondents were unaware of the specifics of the organization's DEI policy. One respondent admitted to not noticing any impact of the DEI policy in her role and not actively seeking DEI topics. This lack of engagement indicated a gap in understanding and commitment to DEI among members. A lack of consensus among respondents regarding their role in promoting organizational inclusion is found. While some actively engage with strategic inclusion efforts, others do not see it as part of their responsibility. This underscores the need for cleared communication and formalization of DEI policies to ensure all leaders understand and fulfill their roles in fostering an inclusive environment.

4.3.2 Workgroup-level

Based on the definition of inclusion by Shore et al. (2011) the workgroup-level focuses on creating belongingness in the team, this is done by 'ensuring equity', 'building relationships', and 'sharing decision-making'. Nishii and Leroy (2022) build on this by recognizing the importance of proactively shaping the workgroup understanding of diversity and establishing shared mental maps, norms, and social connections that enable them to effectively leverage their diversity for knowledge creation while also minimizing intergroup tensions and reacting to group processes once they have been activated. Figure 3 highlights the categories and leadership behaviors for this theme.

Figure 2: Inclusive Leadership: Workgroup Level



4.3.2.1 Ensuring Equity

Multiple respondents emphasized the importance of equality within their teams. For instance, Daphne mentioned, '*Giving everyone equal opportunities regardless of your background or about life beliefs'*, while Anne highlighted setting up processes objectively, regardless of background, studies, gender, religion, and other factors. However, this perception reinforces existing inequalities based on social categories. Equality, as described by the respondents, often overlooks the unequal starting points of individuals from different backgrounds. This perception aligns with a common misconception in diversity literature that equates equality with fairness, which is not necessarily accurate.

Two respondents emphasized the need for self-reflection to prevent biases and ensure equity in their workgroups. Bella stated, '*In my position as a manager I try to remain very aware of what kind of people*

are in my team so what kind of people do I assume are in there people of different backgrounds, backgrounds, colors, I don't know what, that there is just diversity and that I don't discriminate or that I try to remain myself a kind of testing for assumptions or false assumptions, that kind of thing, because we are all humans, we all do that, it's just about awareness and daring to look at yourself critically'. This highlights the importance of self-awareness in making unbiased judgments and promoting an inclusive environment. Respondents focused on understanding the backgrounds and unique contributions of their team members.

The importance of team chartering was highlighted as a method for leaders to increase interdependence among group members and motivate personalized perceptions. The organization has implemented tools such as management drives, which focus on deep-level diversity by allowing team members to identify with a color. This creates an understanding of each team member's added value and avoids misinterpretations of decision-making processes as exclusionary (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Grace explained the practical application of management drives: '*Yes, yes, or also from gosh look, sometimes people learn something more about themselves through such a test, so one is always very focused and the other perhaps less so, but it also gives a certain common language through those colors, so that you can also say, for example, where we have another team session this week and that we also know from each other that most of them are quite result-oriented, but that one is more focused on that, has a more important drive to do things together, while another much prefers to work alone, and then it is good to know from each other that oh for you that is very important, oh you find that more difficult, well then sometimes you can indicate better how you place a certain remark or if you find something difficult, for example, that you can give each other feedback more easily, like,' oh well, this is a very blue remark', you know, then everybody knows immediately what is meant and that is in a less threatening way, so that is how we use it, yes, in a broader sense, and it is not that we discuss it in every meeting, but every so often we try to do some exercises, just literally, sometimes in very different orders'.* According to Nishii and Leroy (2022) team chartering fosters inclusion as everyone is aware of each other's roles and understands why some are included in decision-making and some are not.

4.3.2.2 Building relationships

Multiple respondents emphasized the diversity within their teams highlighting responsibility for individuals across various diversity dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, and age. Gender, in particular, stood out, possibly due to the affinitive bias, where individuals tend to empathize with those who resemble themselves (Heidari et al., 2023). Other dimensions like sexuality, religion, and disability were not mentioned, potentially due to privacy laws in the counties where the company operates (Kirton & Greene 2021),

Building relationships within diverse teams presents unique challenges for leaders. Some respondents equated leader neutrality with fairness, despite differences in social categories. However, this approach

can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. All respondents agreed on the importance of making employees feel valued and building closer connections, which is fundamental to any leadership role. The focus should be on fostering diverse relationships and facilitating respectful interactions within a diverse team.

Hannah emphasized the significance of giving marginalized groups a platform to voice counternarratives against dominant norms. She acknowledged that accommodating the needs of a small, marginalized group does not require significant sacrifices from the dominant group. Hannah imitates discussions that encourage the dominant group to empathize with others by relating to their experiences. By giving voice to counternarratives, she creates a safer environment for employees to be themselves and challenge assumptions about what is normal or best (Routenberg et al., 2013).

Hannah: 'Sure, you can keep doing that and you can say all sorts of things, but what is really going on? It turns out that we have a lot of people from Asia in the organization who use the toilet in a different way. Now, you can do two things: you can say 'just adapt,' or you can say 'imagine ending up in a country, we would be complaining already if we all had to go to France and there's just a hole in the ground. Imagine if you had to do that every day, try to empathize with that.' Can't we come up with something different? Of course, you get the counter-argument, 'do we have to think of everything?' No, we don't have to think of everything', but you could come up with a different solution for certain departments'.

Hannah's strategy of promoting counternarratives allows the dominant group to understand and accommodate the needs of marginalized members, fostering inclusivity and respect. This approach exemplifies how leaders can facilitate diverse relationships and create an inclusive environment by addressing the unique needs of all team members.

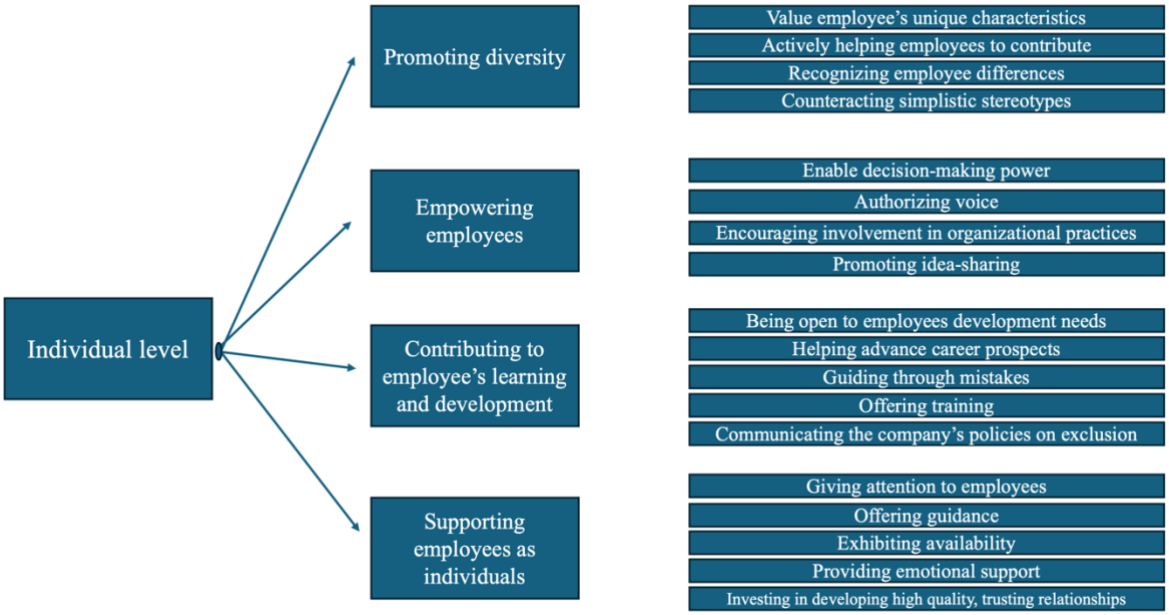
4.3.2.3 Sharing decision-making

Most of the respondents mentioned in their definition of inclusive leadership how important it is that everyone is heard in an organization. In the interviews, they emphasized doing this by also actively inviting everyone to voice their opinion in the group, even when someone does not say something immediately, the respondents do feel like it is their job to hear everyone. The respondents didn't acknowledge the importance of advocating for diversity mindsets for sharing decision-making. Especially when wanting to obtain positive business outcomes from diversity, leaders must strive to receive diverse input and allow respondents to participate in its integration. Two respondents actively try to strive for 'one way, many voices', acknowledging that there is diversity in their team, deep-level as well as surface-level and that when these voices unite this leads to an effective team. Nevertheless, one can question if, in a diverse team, one way with many voices can be achieved. While respondents are keen on ensuring that everyone is heard, there is a need to emphasize the importance of advocating for diversity mindsets to maximize the benefits of shared decision-making in diverse teams.

4.3.3 Individual-level

Questions aimed to see what the respondents did in situations that are relevant to inclusive leadership were focused on how they enable employees to be themselves, how they create a safe environment, how they respond to accomplishments, how their employees are involved in decision-making processes, and how they contribute to the learning and development of their employees. Figure 4 highlights the categories and leadership behaviors for this theme.

Figure 4: Inclusive Leadership: Individual Level



4.3.3.1 Supporting employee well-being

Most respondents acknowledged the value of talking one-on-one with employees to facilitate a space where employees can talk about personal experiences and share personal information that influences their perceptions. Bella highlighted the importance of these conversations but felt the company should offer more support to leaders on how to conduct them, suggesting training or workshops: *"But it's indeed also that you, therefore, I think that awareness is so important, and you don't have to expect people to always get it right, but I think that awareness and practicing it would already help a lot. And that's something I do miss at the company, for example. I think there could be a bit more guidance on how to have those concrete one-on-one conversations about D&I with people. For instance, I, in my role as a manager, with someone on my team, how to have tools for how to initiate that conversation? And what are some best practices in that? And how can the company further support you in empowering your message and also empowering someone else to be able to and want to talk about it safely? That is something the company could definitely do more of, I think."*

The lack of support could be linked to the absence of formalized accountability for D&I at the organizational level of inclusive leadership. Without proper guidance, leaders might struggle to handle

conversations about D&I, leading to inadequate prevention management, as identified by Shore et al. (2018). It's crucial for employees to know where to go for discussions about microaggressions, discrimination, or microinequities, and for leaders to understand how to address these issues effectively.

4.3.3.2 Promoting diversity

In this category, the behaviors that were mentioned in the interviews focused on recognizing that employees need different treatment due to their unique characteristics or experiences. Respondents often highlighted the value of this awareness for productivity and innovation, knowing that allowing employees to be themselves leads to better results. Bella emphasized the importance of engaging in conversations with employees to understand their backgrounds and experiences. She stated, '*I believe it is more effective if you really engage in conversations with the people you work with frequently. So, it is a topic at the company, but the way I am mainly involved with it is by trying to remain very aware of who is in my team in my role as a manager. So, what kind of people am I hiring? Are there people with different backgrounds, colors, whatever – it doesn't matter – just that there is diversity? And that I am not discriminating or that I try to continuously check myself for assumptions or incorrect assumptions, things like that.*

She further explained, '*Because we are all human, we all do that. It is really about that awareness and daring to be critical of yourself. Yes, because I am really aware that not everyone has had the same opportunities and that, as a result, people's starting points are not equal. So I try, in conversations, to find out what personal experiences are, for example with discrimination or other issues. Yes, you have to consciously keep in mind your own wrong assumptions, and that is quite difficult.*

Bella's approach aligns with literature suggesting that leaders' awareness of their stereotype-based assumptions is crucial (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). Other respondents also mentioned biases or false assumptions. Nishii and Leroy (2022) suggest that acknowledging minority members' expertise reduces the perceived risks of voicing. Bella's focus on different experiences shaping her employees and investing time in those less represented in the context influences team dynamics positively.

4.3.3.3 Empowering Employees

In the definitions of inclusive leadership, multiple respondents mentioned that it is important for everyone to be heard and that it is the leader's role to ensure everyone contributes. However, none of the respondents specifically focused on the role of D&I in this context. Nevertheless, in certain scenario's the respondents focused on authorizing voice to minority groups. Hannah provided an example,'*: I think we have most things covered, but I have to say, for example, when I look at people with disabilities within the organization, to be very honest, we didn't have that many of them, right? So now we do, and that really helps. It sounds silly, but it really helps enormously in raising awareness. You think, "Gee, how annoying that someone," well, of course everyone has standard disability things, but having conversations like the one with someone in a wheelchair who said, "Yeah, I could never get*

anything from the espresso bar myself because I couldn't reach the fixed card machine," you really think, "Ridiculous, why didn't we do something about that?" You know, that awareness is really starting to grow.

Hannah illustrates that engaging in conversations is crucial for generating new ideas to accommodate individuals from diverse backgrounds. Such dialogues foster awareness and significantly improve the experiences of marginalized groups. These groups often internalize the risks associated with negative stereotypes regarding their competence and face perceptions of deviance from their role expectations. (Cha et al., 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2022; Heilman, 2012). Therefore, proactive measures and inclusive conversations are essential for fostering an equitable environment.

4.3.3.4 Contributing to Employee learning and development

The basic leadership behaviors within this category were mentioned by all respondents, including addressing developmental needs, advancing career prospects, providing feedback, and guiding employees through mistakes. Most of these actions were implemented through career advancement training, such as leadership programs, or discussions about development and career goals. Respondents highlighted that the company encourages feedback, focusing not only on results but also on behavior. Feedback on behavior is provided in a manner that considers the individual's feelings and the impact of their behavior on others' experiences. Furthermore, most respondents mentioned the development of the company's D&I game. This game is designed to help employees navigate situations involving discrimination, microaggressions, and wage disparities for the same roles. It equips them with the knowledge of how to respond when they experience or observe such behaviors. Hannah provided a detailed example: *'I am genuinely committed to this. At our company, we have a D&I game, which we conduct three times a year. It's a game involving cards and scenarios played in groups, focusing on various situations that occur within an organization. For example, it could involve one person receiving a higher salary increase than their colleague, and how this issue should be resolved. This game addresses scenarios beyond just gender issues, including cases where someone is rebuked by their supervisor in front of others. By discussing these scenarios, we ask questions like, "Have you experienced this?" and "How would you handle it?" Our management team participates in these sessions, both as facilitators and active participants, encouraging open dialogue among employee's.'*

This approach ensures that employees are well-prepared to handle D&I issues, fostering a more inclusive and equitable work environment. The emphasis on feedback, combined with practical tools like the D&I game, reflects the company's commitment to developing its employees and promoting a culture of inclusivity.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter provides a conclusion to this research by answering the research question: *'How do women leaders in a male-dominated sector position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership?'* The findings that were presented in the result section will be used to come to a coherent conclusion, followed by an elaboration on the contribution to theory and directions for future research. After this, there is a discussion of the limitations of this study, the contribution to theory, practical limitations, and recommendations for future research

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the results, the research question *'How do women leaders in a male-dominated sector position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership?'* be answered as follows

Although many respondents had personal drivers for implementing DEI in their leadership, thereby providing inclusive leadership that considers the effects of marginalization on employees' experiences and perceptions, this was not consistently implemented at all levels. The most significant gap was found at the organizational level, where most women leaders did not acknowledge this as part of inclusive leadership while defining the term. The absence of formalized accountability for inclusion across all levels of the organization results in leaders not taking responsibility, lacking registered time, or being unaware of the DEI goals of the organization. Without effective communication and translation of these goals throughout the company, leaders who do not have personal drivers for D&I can avoid implementing them in their leadership. Inclusive leadership is essential for fostering D&I. The findings suggest that these women leaders in male-dominated sectors position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership based on their personal experiences with discrimination and marginalization. Their leadership practices are shaped by a desire to create inclusive environments that address gender disparities and support diverse perspectives. To foster truly inclusive leadership, organizations must address these misconceptions and promote a comprehensive view of inclusion that encompasses individual, workgroup, and organizational levels (Samdanis & Ozbilgin, 2020).

In conclusion, the interviewed women leaders. position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership primarily by leveraging their personal drivers and experiences with marginalization to foster inclusivity. However, their efforts and the extent to which they implement inclusive leadership vary across different organizational levels. Their effectiveness is limited by the lack of formalized organizational support and accountability. To enhance inclusive leadership organizations, need to provide comprehensive support systems that align with the DEI goals of the company and ensure consistent implementation.

5.2 Discussion

This study sets out to explore how women leaders in a traditionally male-dominated sector position themselves in terms of inclusive leadership. Through a deductive thematic analysis of interviews with eight women leaders, several key insights have emerged, revealing both the strengths and limitations of current inclusive leadership practices.

The findings indicate that some women leaders are often driven by personal experiences of marginalization, which significantly influences their commitment to DEI. These leaders emphasize empathy and support, often focusing on creating a better environment for women and, to a lesser extent, other diversity dimensions. This approach aligns with the broader literature on inclusive leadership, which highlights the importance of leaders using their experiences to foster an inclusive environment (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Despite these personal drivers, the study identified a substantial gap at the organizational level. Some respondents did not recognize the necessity of integrating inclusive leadership practices across all levels of the organization. This connects to a critical shortfall in formalizing accountability for DEI initiatives, as identified by Nishii and Leroy (2022). As a result, the interconnectedness of the levels provides an incomplete implementation of inclusive leadership at all levels.

5.2.1 Contribution to theory

This research gained insights into the perceptions of leaders regarding inclusive leadership. Although there are already some studies on the perspectives of employees regarding inclusive leadership (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011) and leaders' perceptions regarding inclusive leadership (Roberson & Perry, 2022). This study shines a light on perceptions of women leaders, which is important because these women leaders have a big impact on the experiences of employees. Besides that, these women leaders are active in a sector that was previously male-dominated, therefore creating insights into an underrepresented group in a company that can influence employees. Having more insights into what leaders perceive as inclusive leadership and how their leadership aligns with this construct, allows us to fill the gap in existing literature. Furthermore, this research contributes to the theory of inclusive behavior by giving insights into the levels of inclusive leadership levels identified as overarching in literature, namely the individual level, the workgroup level, and the organizational level and giving examples of how women leaders act in these levels.

5.2.2 Limitations

There are several limitations to consider when interpreting the results of this study. Firstly, the voluntary nature of participation might have introduced bias, as respondents who chose to be interviewed may have a particular interest or affinity with the topic of inclusive leadership. This could lead to results that differ from those obtained from women leaders less familiar with or personally invested in D&I. In the

interviews, the researcher specifically asked about the meaning of D&I for the women leaders, therefore getting an insight about in what way this influences the reasoning to practice inclusive leadership behavior. Social desirability bias is another limitation, although anonymity was guaranteed to mitigate this. The use of an initial theoretical template for coding might have restricted data interpretation. The researcher's assumptions and biases also impact the study, as the results are co-constructed through mutual knowledge exchange with respondents. The researcher's prior knowledge about the company and personal connections could have influenced interpretations. The background of the researcher, including age, field of study, and student status, might have made the interviewer less comfortable, leading to asking less critical questions and increased compliance. However, the interview guide ensured that essential questions were addressed.

5.2.3 Practical recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to enhance inclusive leadership, especially for leaders in a traditionally male-dominated sectors. First, ensuring robust organizational support for inclusion is crucial. This involves formalizing accountability as suggested by Nishii and Leroy (2022). Clear communication of inclusion goals, coupled regular monitoring and reporting, will help embed inclusion into the organizational culture. Training and development programs are essential to equip leaders with skills to foster an inclusive environment. These programs should cover unconscious bias, cultural competence, and inclusive leadership practices; ensuring leaders are prepared to promote and sustain inclusivity. Employee resource groups allow minorities in the organization to give valuable insights into how to foster inclusion. Holding leaders accountable for implementing inclusive practices is essential. Performance reviews should specifically evaluate leaders on their efforts and outcomes related to inclusive leadership. By implementing these recommendations, organizations can create a more inclusive environment that not only supports women leaders, but also benefits all employees. These practical steps will help organizations move towards a culture of inclusivity, where diversity is valued and leveraged for organizational success.

5.2.5 Future research

This study has provided valuable insights into the integration of inclusive leadership by women in traditionally male-dominated sectors. However, several areas for future research could further deepen our understanding and enhance the practice of inclusive leadership. Firstly, expanding the research to include diverse groups beyond women, such as ethnic minorities, religious individuals, LGBTQI+ individuals, and people with disabilities, can offer a more comprehensive view of inclusive leadership. Exploring how various marginalized groups navigate and influence leadership roles in different organizational contexts will enrich our understanding of inclusivity. Furthermore, investigating the perspectives and experiences of employees under inclusive leadership can offer deeper insights into its impact on team dynamics and organizational culture. Qualitative studies involving interviews and focus

groups with employees can reveal how inclusive leadership influences their daily work experiences, motivation, and sense of belonging. This employee-centric approach will help in understanding the practical implications of inclusive leadership. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of inclusive leadership. This will not only advance academic knowledge but also provide practical guidance for organizations striving to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

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