

Understanding Inclusive Leadership and Employee Outcomes: A Systematic Literature Review of Relational Mechanisms and Gender Diversity Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

DOI: 10.32832/jmuika.v17i3.23848

Article history:

Received:

26 Mei 2026

Accepted:

19 Juni 2026

Available online:

05 Oktober 2026

Keywords:

Inclusive leadership, leader–employee relationships, gender diversity, employee outcomes, psychological safety.

ABSTRACT

Inclusive leadership has gained increasing attention as organizations seek leadership approaches that support diversity, strengthen workplace relationships, and improve employee outcomes. However, existing studies remain fragmented, as they employ diverse theoretical perspectives, examine different relational mechanisms (e.g., psychological safety, trust, and leader–member exchange), and rarely integrate gender considerations and employee outcomes within a unified framework. This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach following PRISMA guidelines. Articles were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using predefined search strategies. A total of 25 empirical studies published between 2016–2026 met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that inclusive leadership positively influences employee outcomes such as engagement, innovative behavior, well-being, performance, and employee voice. These relationships are primarily mediated through mechanisms including psychological safety, leader–member exchange, psychological empowerment, organizational identification, and affective commitment. Social Exchange Theory and LMX emerged as dominant theoretical perspectives. Gender was frequently treated as a contextual variable rather than a central analytical lens. The review reveals considerable conceptual and theoretical fragmentation, with studies often adopting isolated perspectives and single mediation pathways. Conclusion: This review provides an integrative understanding of inclusive leadership through a relational and gender-informed perspective and offers directions for future theoretical development.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations increasingly recognize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as important drivers of organizational effectiveness and sustainability. Gender diversity, in particular, is viewed not only as a social responsibility but also as a strategic advantage that can improve creativity, decision-making, and organizational performance (Roberson, 2019; Shore et al., 2011). As workplaces become more diverse, traditional leadership approaches are often considered insufficient to address the needs of employees from different backgrounds, especially women and other underrepresented groups. Consequently, inclusive leadership has gained growing attention in both research and practice. Inclusive leadership refers to leaders' openness, accessibility, and supportiveness in creating environments where employees feel respected, valued, and involved in organizational processes (Carmeli et al., 2010). Prior studies suggest that inclusive leadership can encourage employee participation, reduce bias, and improve positive outcomes such as engagement and employee voice (Qasim et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding how inclusive leadership operates within diverse workplaces has become an important topic in contemporary human resource management research.

The effectiveness of Inclusive Leadership in diverse organizations is closely related to the quality of relationships between leaders and employees. Previous studies highlight that leadership outcomes are shaped not only by leadership behaviors but also by relational dynamics such as trust, support, and mutual respect. One important framework is Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), which explains how high-quality leader-employee relationships can strengthen emotional and psychological connections (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In addition, psychological safety allows employees to express ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999), making it especially important in inclusive workplaces. These relational mechanisms are strongly associated with positive employee outcomes, including engagement, job satisfaction, performance, and well-being (Judge et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Prior research also suggests that supportive and inclusive leadership behaviors improve employees' emotional attachment and positive work attitudes (Breevaart et al., 2014). Therefore, understanding the interaction between leadership, workplace relationships, and employee outcomes is essential for explaining organizational effectiveness.

Gender diversity has become an important dimension of workplace diversity, particularly due to the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles. Women often face biases and stereotypes that limit career opportunities and organizational support (Heilman, 2012). In this context, Inclusive Leadership is especially relevant because it promotes fairness, openness, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, helping to reduce barriers faced by women (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Inclusive leadership also creates supportive environments where women feel valued as both employees and leaders, improving engagement and career development. Therefore, gender should be viewed not merely as a demographic variable, but as an important contextual lens in understanding leadership and organizational dynamics.

The literature on Inclusive Leadership and employee outcomes draws upon several theoretical perspectives to explain workplace dynamics. Social Exchange Theory explains that positive leadership behaviors foster reciprocal relationships between leaders and employees, leading to favorable attitudes and behaviors (Blau, 2017). Meanwhile, Social Identity Theory emphasizes the role of social group identification, including gender, in shaping workplace interactions (Reynolds et al., 2003). In addition, Leader-Member Exchange theory focuses on the quality of leader–employee relationships and their influence on employee outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Although these theories provide important insights, they are often applied separately, resulting in fragmented explanations of the pathway linking leadership, relational mechanisms, and employee outcomes. Therefore, a more integrative theoretical understanding is needed within the literature.

Despite the growing interest in Inclusive Leadership, several specific gaps remain in the literature. First, existing studies tend to examine the direct effects of inclusive leadership on employee outcomes; while providing limited synthesis of how relational mechanisms such as trust, psychological safety, and Leader-Member Exchange explain these effects (Randel et al., 2018). Second, although gender diversity is frequently mentioned, it is often treated as a demographic or control variable rather than as a central analytical lens, leaving women’s experiences as employees and leaders insufficiently examined (Shore et al., 2011). Third, prior studies investigate diverse employee outcomes, including engagement, performance, innovation, and well-being, but these outcomes are rarely integrated into a coherent framework. Finally, existing research relies on different theoretical perspectives, such as Social Exchange Theory, Social Identity Theory, and LMX theory, without adequately connecting them. These gaps suggest the need for a systematic literature review that synthesizes inclusive leadership research through relational, gender-informed, and outcome-based perspectives.

Unlike previous reviews that tend to examine inclusive leadership from a single perspective, this study offers a more integrated contribution by combining three analytical lenses: relational mechanisms, gender diversity, and employee outcomes. Specifically, this review does not only summarize the direct effects of inclusive leadership, but also explains how leader–employee relationships, such as trust, psychological safety, and Leader-Member Exchange, shape its influence on employee attitudes and behaviors. In addition, this study positions gender diversity, particularly women’s experiences as employees and leaders, as an important contextual lens rather than merely a demographic variable. By integrating these perspectives, this review develops a more comprehensive framework for understanding how inclusive leadership operates within diverse organizational settings.

Accordingly, this systematic literature review aims to synthesize existing research on Inclusive Leadership through five key questions: (1) how inclusive leadership has been conceptualized and operationalized in relation to leader–employee relationships; (2) what relational mechanisms, such as Leader-Member Exchange, trust, and psychological safety, are identified in the literature; (3) how inclusive leadership influences employee outcomes, including engagement, job satisfaction, and performance; (4) how gender, particularly women, is

positioned in inclusive leadership research; and (5) what theoretical perspectives are used to explain the relationship between inclusive leadership, workplace relationships, and employee outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize existing evidence on Inclusive Leadership, leader–employee relationships, and gender diversity in organizational settings. An SLR provides a structured and transparent process for identifying, evaluating, and integrating relevant studies to address specific research questions (Dinter et al., 2021; Lame, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable due to the fragmented nature of prior studies examining relational mechanisms such as Leader-Member Exchange, trust, and psychological safety, as well as their influence on employee outcomes. Furthermore, SLR helps identify patterns, inconsistencies, and research gaps across different theoretical and empirical contexts (Paul & Barari, 2022; Shaheen et al., 2023). Therefore, this method provides a rigorous foundation for developing a more integrated conceptual understanding.

To ensure methodological rigor, this review follows the PRISMA guidelines for systematic study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Albhirat et al., 2024). Relevant studies were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using a structured search strategy based on four main concept groups: inclusive leadership, leader–employee relational mechanisms, gender diversity, and employee outcomes. The main search string used was: (“inclusive leadership”) AND (“leader-member exchange” OR LMX OR trust OR “psychological safety” OR “leader–employee relationship” OR “workplace relationship”) AND (“gender diversity” OR women OR female OR “women’s leadership” OR “female leadership”) AND (“employee outcomes” OR “employee engagement” OR “job satisfaction” OR performance OR “employee voice” OR well-being OR “innovative behavior”). Boolean operators (“AND”, “OR”) and phrase searching were applied to combine and expand relevant keywords, while minor adjustments were made across databases to accommodate differences in indexing systems and search functionalities.

The inclusion criteria (see Table 1) were designed to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. This review focuses on peer-reviewed empirical articles published in English that examine Inclusive Leadership in relation to leader–employee relationships, gender diversity (particularly women), and employee outcomes. Studies were included if they investigated relational mechanisms such as Leader-Member Exchange, trust, or psychological safety, as well as their impact on outcomes such as engagement, job satisfaction, performance, or well-being. Conversely, studies that focused solely on unrelated leadership styles, lacked a relational or gender perspective, or did not address employee-level outcomes were excluded. In addition, only studies conducted within organizational or workplace settings were considered, ensuring alignment with the human resource management and organizational behavior context of this review.

Table 1. SLR Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Language	English	Other languages
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed articles	Conference proceedings, dissertation theses, book chapters, white papers, non-peer-reviewed articles
Date	2016-2026	2015 and below
Research Design	Empirical quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method studies	Purely theoretical papers or opinion pieces,
Study Topic	Studies examining inclusive leadership, leader–employee relationships (e.g., LMX, trust, psychological safety), gender diversity (women), and employee outcomes	Studies focusing on other leadership styles without inclusion perspective, or not examining relationships/gender/outcomes
Context	Studies conducted in organizational/workplace settings	Studies conducted outside organizational contexts (e.g., purely educational, clinical, or non-work settings)

Source: Research Data (Processed), 2026

The study selection process yielded 408 initial records, with 25 studies meeting all inclusion criteria for the final review (see Figure 1). A quality appraisal was conducted based on research objectives, design, sample adequacy, validity and reliability, analytical rigor, and relevance to the research questions (Jarden et al., 2018; Katrak et al., 2004; Tranfield et al., 2003). Furthermore, this study employed a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008) by coding key findings, grouping similar categories, and synthesizing higher-order themes related to Inclusive Leadership, relational mechanisms, gender dynamics, and employee outcomes.

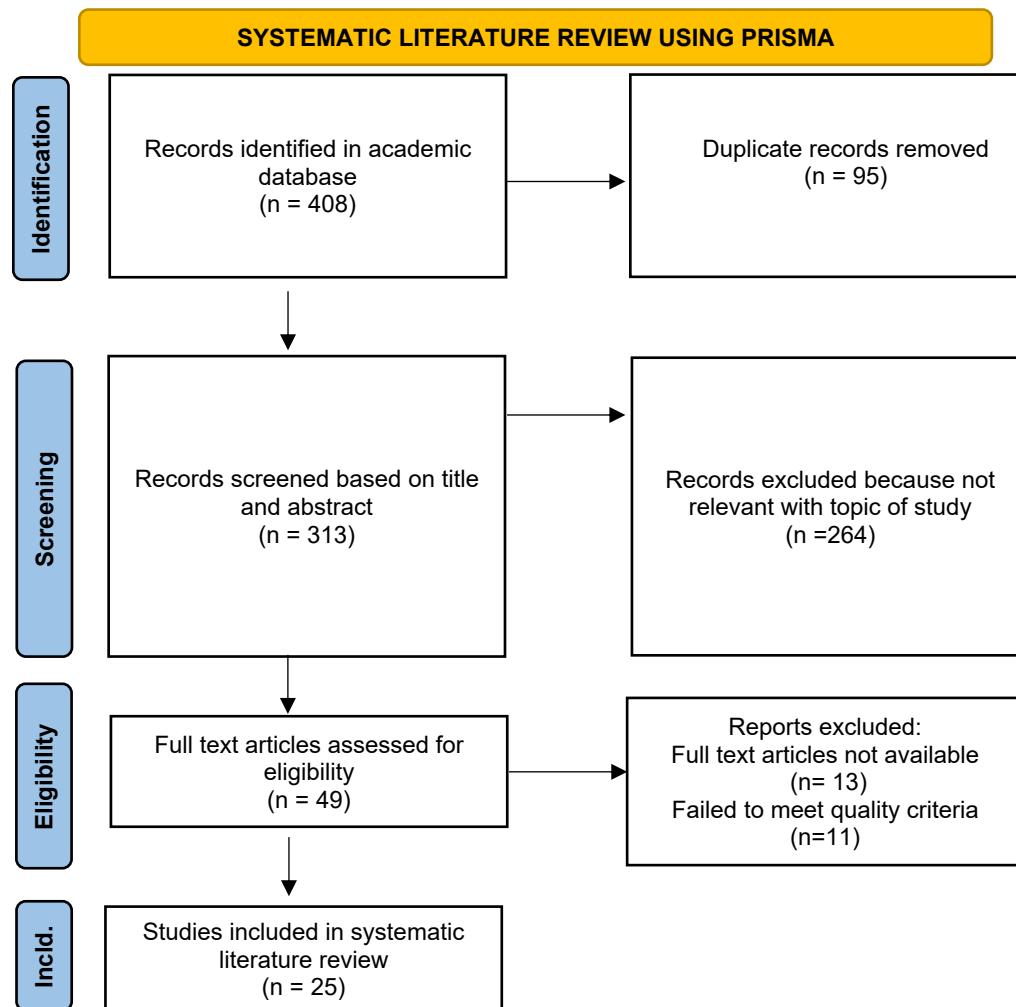


Figure 1. Prisma Flowchart

Source: Research Data (Processed), 2026

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

To provide an overview of the literature included in this review, Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the selected studies. The table presents information on the authors and publication year, sample characteristics, theoretical foundations, and variables examined in each study. This information serves as a basis for understanding the diversity of research contexts and conceptual approaches within the inclusive leadership literature before proceeding to the thematic analysis.

Table 2. Study Characteristics

Author & Year	Sample	Theory	Variables
Çetinkaya & Yeşilada (2022)	508 employees (Female: 51.38%, Male: 48.62%) from tourism, textile, and banking sectors in Turkey.	Social Exchange Theory, Leader-Member Exchange	Independent: Inclusive Leadership Mediator: Psychological Empowerment Moderator: Leader-Member Exchange Dependent: Innovative Work Behaviours
Li et al. (2025)	105 independent samples (N = 39,948)	Self-Determination Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediators: Psychological safety, psychological empowerment, Perceived inclusion, Organizational identification, Leader-member exchange Moderators: Gender Inequality Index, Proportion of women Dependent: Task performance, Organizational citizenship behavior, Innovative behavior, Creativity, Voice, Turnover intention
Wang et al. (2025)	Total participants: 206 Gender: Male (116, 65.9%), Female (60, 34.1%)	Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Social Identity Theory, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory	Independent: Inclusive Leadership Mediator: Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Organizational Identification (OI) Dependent: Job Performance
Fatoki (2024)	198 males, 222 females, total 420	Social Exchange Theory (SET)	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Psychological safety, Affective commitment Dependent: Employee voice
Qasim et al. (2022)	409 nurses (Male: 179, Female: 230)	Social Learning Theory, Social Exchange Theory	Independent: Inclusive Leadership Mediator: Psychological Safety, Psychological Engagement Dependent: Helping Behaviors
Li & Tang (2022)	356 employees from 90 teams	Social Exchange Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Psychological safety Dependent: Individual innovative performance, Team innovative performance
Javed et al. (2019)	390 participants, 60.3% male, 39.7% female, from IT and cargo sectors in UK and Canada	Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Social Exchange Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Psychological empowerment Dependent: Innovative work behavior

Author & Year	Sample	Theory	Variables
Wang & Shi (2021)	303 employees from China; 186 male, 117 female	Social Information Processing Theory, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Social Identity Theory	Independent: Inclusive Leadership Mediator: Psychological Safety, Leadership Identification Moderator: Leader-Member Exchange Dependent: Pro-Social Rule Breaking
Zeng et al. (2020)	205 pairs of employees and supervisors	Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Information Processing Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Psychological safety, thriving at work Dependent: Taking-charge behavior
Meng & Neill (2021)	512 female employees	Inclusive Leadership and Relational Leadership Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediators: Organizational diversity climate, Participative leadership, Empowerment Dependent: Career growth opportunities
Shafaei et al. (2024)	226 full-time employees, 54% female	Social Identity Theory, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, Victim Precipitation Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Psychological safety, Self-esteem Moderator: Embeddedness Dependent: Workplace bullying
Rosari et al. (2025)	413 employees, 52% female, 48% male	Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Cognitive Learning Theory	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Thriving at work Moderator: Workaholism Dependent: Workplace happiness
Emhemed & Khadem (2026)	Quarterly data from 1998Q1 to 2024Q4, including women's participation in leadership	Gender and Sustainability Theories	Dependent: Environmental Sustainability (ES) Independent: Female Participation in Leadership (FP), Financial Development (FD), Trade Openness (TD), Economic Growth (EG)
Ashikali et al. (2021)	293 team members from 45 teams in Dutch public organizations (gender not mentioned)	Representative bureaucracy theory, Optimal distinctiveness theory, and social identity theory	Independent: Team ethnic-cultural diversity Dependent: Inclusive climate Moderator: Inclusive leadership
Liu et al. (2024)	342 full-time employees, 42.7% male, 57.3% female	Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Vigor Moderator: Supervisor developmental feedback Dependent: Workplace well-being

Author & Year	Sample	Theory	Variables
Lutervelt et al. (2025)	1,132 high school teachers, 44.5% male, 55.5% female	Social Role Theory	Independent Variables: Gender, Seniority Mediator Variable: Inclusive Leadership Dependent Variables: Employee Engagement in Change-Oriented, Task-Oriented, Relation-Oriented Leadership Activities
Shah et al. (2022)	264 samples, 44% female, 56% male	Justice Theory, Social Identity Theory, Organizational Inducement Model	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Perceived insider status Moderator: Distributive justice Dependent: Employee withdrawal behaviour
Qi et al. (2019)	61.10% female	Organizational Support Theory, Social Exchange Theory	Independent Variable: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Perceived organizational support (POS) Dependent Variable: Employee innovative behavior Control Variables: Gender, Age, Education, Tenure
Ly (2024)	282 public workers; 52.8% male, 47.2% female	Social Exchange Theory (SET)	Independent: Inclusive Leadership (IL) Mediator: Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC) Dependent: Employee Work Engagement (EWE)
Javeed et al. (2026)	298 firms (150 UK, 148 Saudi Arabia), 18 male, 14 female executives	Upper Echelons Theory, Role Congruity Theory, Brand Equity Theory, Stakeholder Theory	Independent Variables: Leadership gender diversity, Leader gender Mediator Variables: Marketing investment, Communication style Moderator Variables: Institutional context Dependent Variable: Brand equity resilience
Ye et al. (2018)	202 full-time employees in China; 35.6% male, 64.4% female	Affective Events Theory (AET), Social Role Theory (SRT)	Independent: Inclusive leadership Mediator: Employees' positive mood Moderator: Employees' gender Dependent: Employees' learning from errors Control: Age, Organizational tenure, educational background, Job function

Author & Year	Sample	Theory	Variables
Egitim (2024)	107 Japan University studen, 47 female, 60 male	Human Perception Theory	Independent Variable: Nine-week action learning program Mediator Variable: Mixed-methods approach Moderator Variable: Cultural and social context of Japan (association of leadership with masculinity) Dependent Variable: Change in students' perceptions of leadership and gender equality
Purwaningtias & Purba (2025)	193 employees	Role Theory, Social Information Processing Theory	Independent: Inclusive Leadership Dependent: Pro-Social Rule Breaking Moderator: Gender
Fang et al. (2019)	351 enterprise employees from Zhejiang; Gender: 177 male, 174 female	Inclusive Leadership Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, Psychological Empowerment Theory	Independent Variable: Inclusive Leadership Mediator: Psychological Capital Dependent Variable: Innovative Behavior (Innovation Outcomes, Innovative Thinking)
Cevik et al. (2023)	377 teachers (140 female, 237 male)	Social Identity Theory	Independent Variable: School principals' inclusive leadership behaviors Dependent Variable: Teachers' organizational cynicism levels Moderator Variables: Gender, Age

Source: Research Data (Processed), 2026

Table 2 presents the characteristics of the 25 studies included in this systematic literature review. Overall, the selected studies show considerable variation in sample size, organizational context, theoretical foundation, and research variables. Most studies examine inclusive leadership in relation to employee-level outcomes, such as innovative work behavior, job performance, employee voice, workplace well-being, helping behavior, and career development. The table also shows that inclusive leadership is commonly linked to outcomes through mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety, psychological empowerment, leader–member exchange, organizational identification, affective commitment, and perceived organizational support. In terms of theory, Social Exchange Theory and Leader–Member Exchange Theory appear frequently, although several studies also apply Social Identity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and other perspectives. Overall, Table 2 indicates that inclusive leadership research is broad and growing, but still diverse in terms of mechanisms, outcomes, and theoretical approaches.

Following the descriptive overview of the selected studies, Table 3 presents the thematic findings derived from the synthesis process. The table groups the reviewed studies into several major pathways based on the dominant theories, key mediating mechanisms, and main employee outcomes identified in the literature. This thematic classification helps clarify how inclusive leadership operates through different relational and psychological processes before

influencing employee attitudes and behaviors.

Table 3. Thematic Findings

Theme	Dominant Theory	Key Mediators	Main Employee Outcomes
Psychological Safety Pathway	Social Exchange Theory (SET), Social Learning Theory	Psychological Safety	Employee Voice, Helping Behavior, Innovative Performance, Taking-Charge Behavior
Leader–Member Exchange Pathway	Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, SET	LMX	Job Performance, Innovative Work Behavior
Empowerment-Based Pathway	Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Cognitive Evaluation Theory	Psychological Empowerment	Innovative Work Behavior, Career Growth, Creativity
Organizational Attachment Pathway	SET, Organizational Support Theory	Affective Commitment, Organizational Identification, Perceived Organizational Support	Work Engagement, Job Performance, Employee Voice, Innovative Behavior
Positive Psychological Resource Pathway	SDT, Self-Efficacy Theory	Thriving at Work, Psychological Capital, Vigor	Workplace Happiness, Well-being, Innovative Behavior
Gender and Diversity Pathway	Social Identity Theory, Social Role Theory, Gender-Inclusive Theory	Diversity Climate, Participative Leadership, Empowerment	Career Growth Opportunities, Leadership Participation, Learning from Errors

Source: Research Data (Processed), 2026

Table 3 summarizes the main thematic patterns identified across the reviewed studies. The findings show that inclusive leadership influences employee outcomes through several relational and psychological mechanisms rather than through direct effects alone. Psychological safety appears as the most dominant pathway, followed by leader–member exchange, psychological empowerment, organizational identification, affective commitment, perceived organizational support, and thriving at work. These mechanisms are linked to diverse outcomes, including employee engagement, innovative behavior, job performance, employee voice, workplace well-being, helping behavior, and career growth. Overall, the table indicates that inclusive leadership functions as a relational process that strengthens employee attitudes and behaviors through trust, safety, empowerment, and supportive workplace relationships.

To provide an overview of the development of inclusive leadership research over time, Figure 2 presents the distribution of publications included in this review across the period 2016–2026. Examining publication trends helps identify the growth of scholarly interest in the topic and offers insights into the evolution of research attention toward inclusive leadership, workplace

relationships, gender diversity, and employee outcomes.

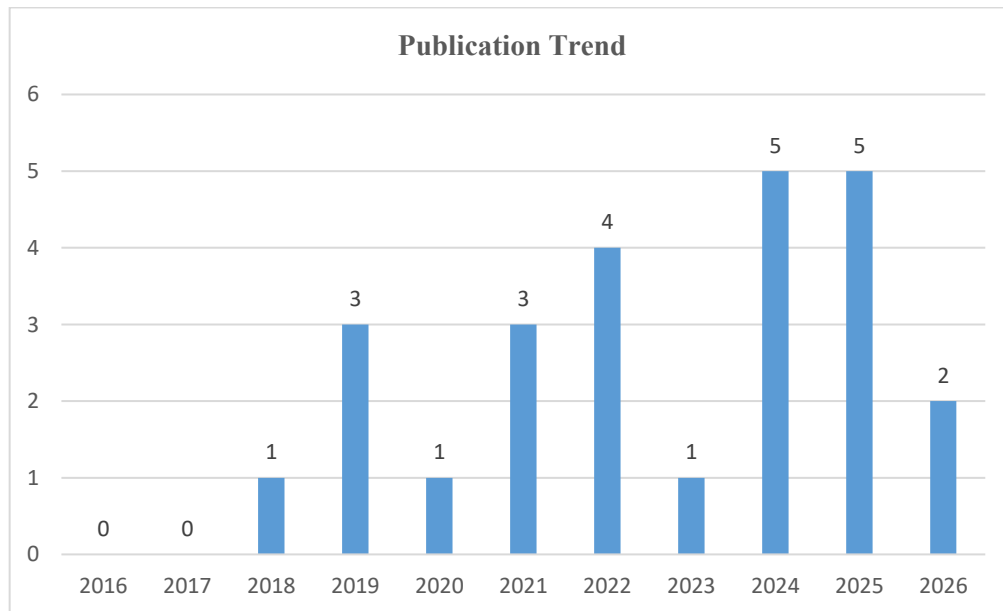


Figure 2. Publication Trend

Source: Research Data (Processed), 2026

Figure 2 illustrates the publication trend of studies related to inclusive leadership and associated constructs over the period 2016–2026. The findings indicate a gradual increase in scholarly attention over time, although the growth pattern appears uneven. No studies were identified in 2016 and 2017, while publication activity began to emerge in 2018 with one study, followed by a notable increase in 2019. Despite minor fluctuations in subsequent years, the number of publications generally continued to rise, reaching a peak in 2024 and 2025 with five studies each. This upward trend suggests increasing academic interest in understanding inclusive leadership and its implications for workplace relationships and employee outcomes. The growing number of studies in recent years may reflect broader organizational concerns regarding diversity, inclusion, and gender-related issues in contemporary workplaces. However, the fluctuations observed across years also indicate that the literature is still evolving and may remain fragmented in terms of theoretical development and research focus.

To understand the theoretical foundations of the reviewed studies, Figure 3 summarizes the theories used to explain inclusive leadership, workplace relationships, gender diversity, and employee outcomes. This overview is important for identifying which theoretical perspectives dominate the literature and whether existing studies have developed an integrated explanation of how inclusive leadership influences employees through relational mechanisms.

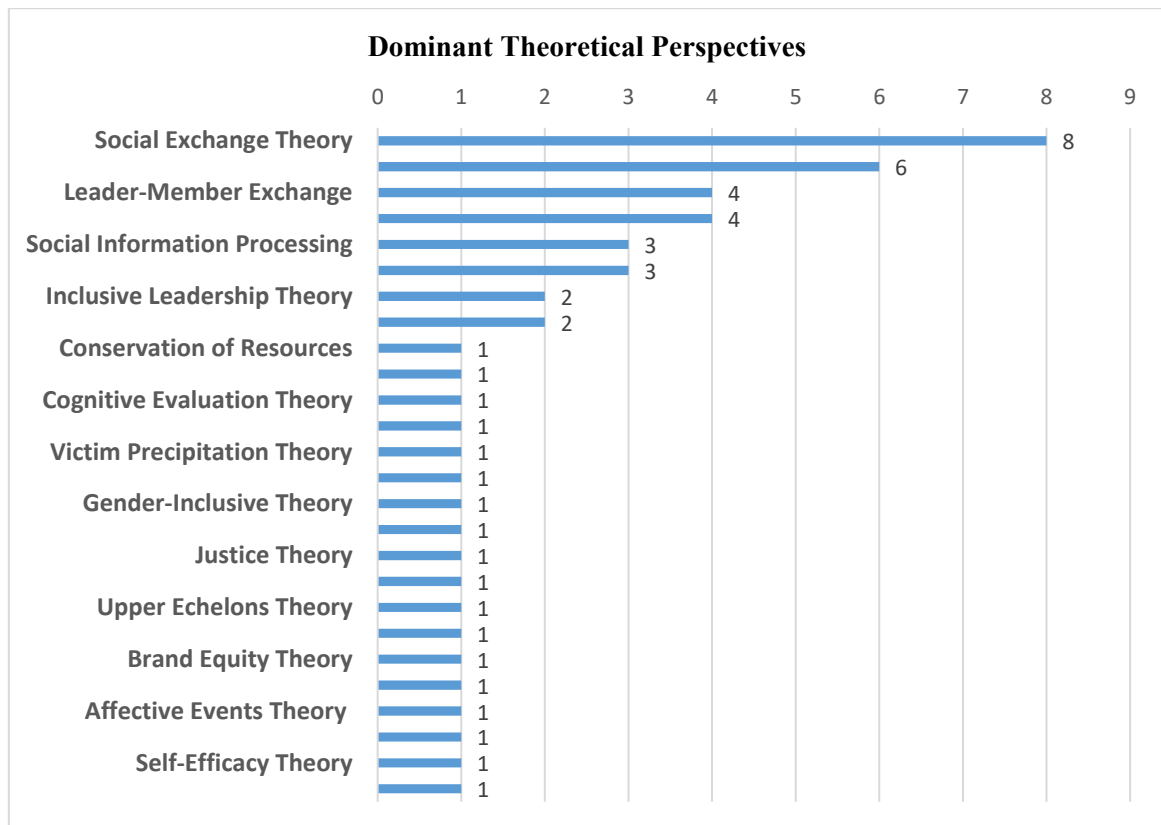


Figure 3. Dominant Theoretical Perspectives

Source: Research Data (Processed), 2026

Figure 3 presents the dominant theoretical perspectives employed in the reviewed studies on inclusive leadership, workplace relationships, gender diversity, and employee outcomes. The findings indicate that Social Exchange Theory is the most frequently adopted theoretical lens, appearing in eight studies, followed by Leader-Member Exchange with six studies. This dominance suggests that prior research largely explains the effects of inclusive leadership through reciprocal relationships and exchange processes between leaders and employees. In particular, these theories emphasize that inclusive leadership behaviors create positive interpersonal relationships that encourage employees to reciprocate through favorable attitudes and behaviors. Other perspectives, such as Social Information Processing Theory and Inclusive Leadership Theory, appear less frequently, while several theories, including Conservation of Resources Theory, Justice Theory, Affective Events Theory, and Gender-Inclusive Theory, are used only in isolated studies. This pattern indicates that although the literature draws from multiple theoretical perspectives, theoretical development remains concentrated around a limited set of dominant frameworks. Such concentration may constrain conceptual advancement and contribute to theoretical fragmentation, as existing studies often apply theories independently rather than integrating multiple perspectives to explain the pathway linking leadership, relational mechanisms, and employee outcomes.

Conceptualization and Operationalization of Inclusive Leadership in Leader–Employee Relationships. The reviewed studies demonstrate that Inclusive Leadership is predominantly conceptualized as a relational leadership approach characterized by openness, accessibility, supportiveness, and the recognition of employees’ uniqueness. However, despite this general conceptual agreement, the operationalization of inclusive leadership varies considerably across studies, reflecting an ongoing lack of conceptual consolidation within the literature. Some studies primarily frame inclusive leadership as a mechanism for fostering psychological inclusion and interpersonal safety (Fatoki, 2024; Zeng et al., 2020), whereas others emphasize empowerment, participative interaction, and organizational support (Javed et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2019). This variation suggests that inclusive leadership is often operationalized according to the specific employee outcome under investigation rather than through a universally accepted conceptual structure. Consequently, the construct remains theoretically flexible but empirically fragmented, as studies tend to prioritize different dimensions of inclusion depending on contextual and disciplinary interests.

A closer examination of the literature further reveals that leader–employee relationships constitute the central mechanism through which inclusive leadership is interpreted and measured. Nevertheless, the relational dimensions emphasized across studies differ substantially. Several studies operationalize inclusive leadership through high-quality interpersonal exchanges, particularly via Leader-Member Exchange and relational trust (Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022; Wang et al., 2025), while others conceptualize it as a leadership process that creates psychological and emotional resources for employees, such as psychological empowerment, positive mood, and thriving at work (Ye et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2020). Interestingly, studies focusing on innovative behavior tend to emphasize empowerment-oriented dimensions, whereas studies examining workplace well-being and engagement more frequently operationalize inclusive leadership through emotional support and relational belongingness. This pattern indicates that the operationalization of inclusive leadership is strongly shaped by the theoretical assumptions underlying each study, resulting in inconsistencies regarding what relational elements are considered most essential within inclusive leader–employee interactions.

The findings also indicate that the literature remains dominated by employee-centered interpretations of inclusive leadership, with relatively limited attention given to reciprocal or dynamic relational processes. Most studies conceptualize employees as passive recipients of inclusive leadership behaviors rather than active participants in constructing inclusive relationships. Although studies such as Meng & Neill (2021) and Javeed et al. (2026) begin to position inclusion within broader gender and leadership structures, the majority of empirical works still operationalize inclusive leadership at the individual leader level rather than as a multidimensional organizational phenomenon. Furthermore, many studies rely heavily on cross-sectional self-report measures, potentially oversimplifying the relational complexity of inclusive leadership practices. As a result, current conceptualizations often explain how leaders influence employees, but provide less understanding of how relational reciprocity, organizational culture, and gender dynamics collectively shape inclusive leadership processes.

This limitation suggests the need for more integrative and relationally dynamic conceptual models capable of capturing inclusive leadership beyond leader-driven behavioral frameworks.

Relational Mechanisms Underlying Inclusive Leadership. The findings of this review indicate that the influence of inclusive leadership on workplace outcomes rarely occurs through direct pathways; rather, it operates through a range of relational mechanisms that shape the quality of leader–employee interactions. Across the reviewed studies, psychological safety emerged as the most frequently examined mechanism, suggesting that scholars predominantly view inclusive leadership as a process that creates safe interpersonal environments for employees. Studies by Qasim et al. (2022), Li & Tang (2022), Zeng et al. (2020), and Fatoki (2024) consistently found that inclusive leadership enhances employees' willingness to engage, contribute ideas, and demonstrate positive behaviors by fostering perceptions of interpersonal safety. However, the dominance of psychological safety also reveals a theoretical concentration within the literature. While psychological safety provides an effective explanation for how inclusive leaders reduce interpersonal risks, excessive reliance on this mechanism may narrow the understanding of broader relational processes. This pattern suggests that the literature may implicitly assume that inclusive leadership functions primarily through emotional reassurance, potentially overlooking other forms of leader–employee exchanges.

Beyond psychological safety, several studies highlight alternative relational pathways that operate through social and psychological resource exchange. For instance, Çetinkaya & Yeşilada (2022) and Javed et al. (2019) identified psychological empowerment as a key explanatory mechanism linking inclusive leadership with innovative work behavior, whereas Wang et al. (2025) emphasized the role of Leader-Member Exchange and organizational identification in improving job performance. Similarly, Ly (2024) found that affective organizational commitment partially explains the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement, while Qi et al. (2019) demonstrated the mediating role of perceived organizational support. These findings suggest that inclusive leadership does not operate through a single relational process but activates multiple forms of social and emotional resources. Importantly, these mechanisms differ in their underlying assumptions; empowerment emphasizes employee autonomy, organizational commitment reflects emotional attachment, and LMX focuses on exchange quality. Consequently, the diversity of mechanisms indicates conceptual richness but simultaneously raises concerns regarding theoretical fragmentation.

A more critical observation concerns the tendency of prior studies to examine relational mechanisms independently rather than as interconnected processes. Most studies adopt a single-mediator perspective, thereby simplifying the complex dynamics through which inclusive leadership influences employee behavior. Although some studies have begun to incorporate sequential or multiple mechanisms, such as Fatoki (2024), who examined psychological safety and affective commitment simultaneously, these efforts remain relatively limited. This fragmented approach may obscure the possibility that relational mechanisms operate

cumulatively rather than separately. For example, inclusive leadership may first establish trust and psychological safety, which subsequently strengthen empowerment, identification, or organizational commitment before shaping employee outcomes. Therefore, current evidence suggests the need for more integrated models capable of explaining how multiple relational mechanisms interact and reinforce one another within leader–employee relationships. Such an approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of the relational architecture underlying inclusive leadership.

Linking Inclusive Leadership to Employee Outcomes through Relational Mechanisms.

The reviewed studies consistently indicate that inclusive leadership positively contributes to a broad range of employee outcomes; however, the relationship rarely appears as a simple direct effect. Instead, employee outcomes are largely shaped through relational and psychological mechanisms that explain how leadership behaviors are translated into workplace attitudes and behaviors. Across the studies, outcomes associated with inclusive leadership can be broadly categorized into attitudinal outcomes (e.g., engagement, commitment, well-being), behavioral outcomes (e.g., helping behavior, voice, innovative behavior, taking-charge behavior), and performance-related outcomes. For instance, Ly (2024) found that inclusive leadership enhances employee work engagement through affective organizational commitment, while Liu et al. (2024) demonstrated its effect on workplace well-being through vigor. Similarly, Wang et al. (2025) reported that inclusive leadership improves job performance through leader–member exchange and organizational identification. These findings suggest that employee outcomes emerge not merely from leadership presence itself, but from the quality of social and relational experiences fostered by inclusive leaders.

Nevertheless, the mechanisms connecting inclusive leadership and employee outcomes vary considerably across studies, indicating that leadership effects may be contextually contingent rather than universally consistent. Studies focusing on innovative and proactive outcomes frequently emphasize empowerment-related pathways. Javed et al. (2019), Fang et al. (2019) and Çetinkaya & Yeşilada (2022) found that psychological empowerment serves as an important mechanism explaining innovative work behavior. In contrast, studies examining prosocial and engagement-related outcomes tend to rely more heavily on psychological safety and social exchange processes. Qasim et al. (2022) found that helping behavior is shaped through psychological safety and engagement, while Fatoki (2024) demonstrated serial effects involving psychological safety and affective commitment on employee voice. These differences imply that relational mechanisms may not function equally across outcome categories. Mechanisms that facilitate innovation may differ substantially from those that strengthen emotional attachment or organizational participation, suggesting that outcome-specific pathways deserve greater theoretical attention.

A critical issue emerging from the literature is the tendency to assume linear and isolated causal pathways between inclusive leadership and outcomes. Most studies examine one mediator and one outcome, which may oversimplify the multidimensional nature of leader–employee relationships. Although Li et al. (2025) incorporated multiple mediating mechanisms, including

psychological empowerment, perceived inclusion, organizational identification, psychological safety, and LMX, the literature as whole remains dominated by segmented models. Such approaches provide valuable but partial explanations, as employee outcomes may result from interacting relational processes rather than independent mechanisms. For example, psychological safety may foster stronger organizational identification, which subsequently strengthens engagement or performance outcomes. Therefore, future theoretical development should move beyond isolated mediation models toward more integrated frameworks capable of explaining how multiple relational mechanisms collectively shape employee outcomes under inclusive leadership conditions.

Gender Perspectives in Inclusive Leadership Research. The findings reveal that although gender diversity is frequently acknowledged in Inclusive Leadership research, gender is often positioned only as a contextual or control variable rather than a central analytical lens. Most studies include gender merely as demographic information without examining how inclusive leadership may differently influence women and men in workplace relationships. This creates a paradox within the literature, as inclusive leadership is fundamentally rooted in inclusion and diversity principles, yet gender-related mechanisms remain underexplored. Studies such as Qi et al. (2019), Qasim et al. (2022), and Wang et al. (2025) incorporated gender distributions in their samples but did not explicitly analyze gendered relational dynamics. Consequently, many studies implicitly assume that inclusive leadership operates similarly across employee groups, overlooking potential differences in workplace experiences and leadership perceptions related to gender identity.

Nevertheless, several studies indicate that gender may shape both the processes and outcomes of inclusive leadership. Meng & Neill (2021) found that inclusive leadership supports women's career growth through empowerment, participative leadership, and diversity climate, while Ye et al. (2018) and Cevik et al. (2023) reported stronger leadership effects among female employees. These findings suggest that women may experience distinct relational and psychological benefits from inclusive leadership. However, women are still predominantly positioned as recipients rather than leaders shaping inclusive environments themselves. Although studies such as Luttervelt et al. (2025) and Javeed et al. (2026) began to explore female leadership and gender diversity at broader organizational levels, this perspective remains limited. Therefore, current research underutilizes gender as a theoretical lens, highlighting the need for more gender-sensitive and women-centered perspectives in future studies.

Dominant Theoretical Perspectives and Theoretical Fragmentation. The findings of this review indicate that research on Inclusive Leadership is heavily dominated by a limited number of theoretical perspectives, particularly Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. Studies such as Ly (2024), Javed et al. (2019), Qasim et al. (2022), and Qi et al. (2019) mainly relied on SET to explain how inclusive leadership fosters reciprocal employee responses through trust, support, and commitment. Similarly, Wang et al. (2025) and

Çetinkaya & Yeşilada (2022) emphasized the role of high-quality leader–employee exchanges in shaping employee outcomes. These findings suggest that prior research largely conceptualizes inclusive leadership as a relationship-based exchange process. Although these perspectives provide strong explanatory value, their repeated use reflects theoretical convergence within the literature.

Despite the dominance of exchange-based theories, several studies adopted alternative perspectives to explain specific mechanisms and contexts. Zeng et al. (2020) and Rosari et al. (2025) applied Self-Determination Theory, while Wang & Shi (2021) and Cevik et al. (2023) used Social Identity Theory to explain diversity and identity-related processes. However, these theories are often applied separately, resulting in fragmented explanations of how leadership, relationships, and employee outcomes interact. Most studies rely on single-theory approaches, limiting a comprehensive understanding of inclusive leadership's multidimensional nature. Therefore, future research should adopt more integrative theoretical frameworks that combine exchange, identity, motivational, and gender-related perspectives to better explain inclusive leadership processes across diverse organizational contexts.

Theoretical and Practical Implications. From a theoretical perspective, this review contributes to the inclusive leadership literature by demonstrating that the effects of inclusive leadership are better understood through relational and multilevel mechanisms rather than direct linear relationships. Across the reviewed studies, outcomes such as engagement, innovative behavior, workplace well-being, job performance, and employee voice consistently emerged through mediating processes including psychological safety, psychological empowerment, organizational identification, affective commitment, leader–member exchange, and perceived organizational support. However, the findings also reveal substantial theoretical fragmentation, as prior studies largely relied on isolated perspectives such as Social Exchange Theory, LMX theory, or Social Identity Theory. The synthesis suggests that no single theoretical framework sufficiently explains the pathway linking leadership, relationships, gender, and employee outcomes. Therefore, this review extends existing knowledge by proposing a more integrated understanding in which inclusive leadership functions through interacting relational, psychological, and contextual mechanisms rather than through independent causal pathways.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that organizations should not treat inclusive leadership merely as a leadership style but as a relational practice embedded within everyday leader–employee interactions. The reviewed studies suggest that inclusive leadership enhances employee outcomes when leaders actively create trust, empowerment, psychological safety, and a sense of belonging (Fatoki, 2024; Ly, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Furthermore, evidence from studies focusing on women and diversity contexts (Meng & Neill, 2021; Ye et al., 2018) indicates that inclusive leadership can support career growth opportunities and strengthen employee participation, particularly among underrepresented groups. Consequently, organizations should invest in leadership development initiatives that promote inclusive communication, participative decision-making, and relationship-building capabilities. Such

practices may help organizations create more inclusive workplaces while simultaneously improving employee engagement, well-being, and performance outcomes.

Limitations of the Review. Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this review. First, this study included only peer-reviewed articles published in English and retrieved from selected academic databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Although this approach ensured methodological quality and relevance, it may have excluded potentially valuable studies published in other languages or indexed in alternative databases. In addition, restricting the review to published journal articles may introduce publication bias, as studies reporting significant findings are generally more likely to be published than those reporting non-significant or contradictory results. Consequently, the findings presented in this review may not fully capture the breadth of evidence regarding inclusive leadership and workplace relationships.

Second, considerable heterogeneity was observed across the reviewed studies in terms of research contexts, theoretical perspectives, operationalization of inclusive leadership, and outcome variables. The included studies were conducted across different industries, countries, and organizational settings while employing diverse mediators and moderators, ranging from psychological safety and empowerment to leader–member exchange and organizational identification. Such variation enriches the literature but simultaneously limits the comparability and generalizability of findings. Moreover, the dominance of cross-sectional quantitative studies restricts the ability to draw conclusions regarding causality and dynamic relational processes over time. Therefore, the conclusions of this review should be interpreted with consideration of these contextual and methodological differences

Future Research Directions. Future research should move beyond fragmented and single-path explanations of inclusive leadership by adopting more integrative and longitudinal approaches. The findings of this review suggest that most studies examine isolated mediators and rely heavily on cross-sectional designs, limiting understanding of how relational mechanisms evolve over time. Future studies could investigate more complex relationships involving multiple mediators and moderators simultaneously, particularly by integrating relational, psychological, and contextual mechanisms. Furthermore, although gender diversity is frequently acknowledged, women are often treated as demographic variables rather than central analytical lenses. Greater attention should therefore be given to women-centered perspectives, female leadership experiences, and gender-specific relational processes across different organizational and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural and comparative studies may also provide deeper insights into how inclusive leadership functions under varying institutional and societal conditions, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and theoretically integrated understanding of inclusive leadership.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

This systematic literature review examined the relationship between inclusive leadership, workplace relationships, gender diversity, and employee outcomes by synthesizing evidence from 25 empirical studies. The findings show that inclusive leadership contributes to positive employee outcomes, including engagement, innovative behavior, job performance, workplace well-being, and employee voice. However, these effects are largely explained through relational mechanisms such as psychological safety, leader–member exchange, psychological empowerment, affective commitment, organizational identification, and perceived organizational support. The review also reveals that gender diversity is often treated as a demographic or contextual variable rather than as a central analytical lens.

Theoretically, this study extends inclusive leadership literature by integrating exchange-based, identity-based, and gender-based perspectives into a more comprehensive framework. This integration helps explain how inclusive leadership operates through relational mechanisms while also considering gender diversity in organizational settings. Practically, the findings suggest that organizations should develop inclusive leadership competencies that focus on building psychological safety, empowerment, trust, and supportive leader–employee relationships. Such competencies are important for strengthening employee engagement, well-being, innovation, and participation, particularly in increasingly diverse workplaces.

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