**MYKOLAS ROMERIS UNIVERSITY**

**FACULTY OF PUBLIC GOVERNANCE AND BUSINESS**

**MANAGEMENT AND POLITICAL SCIENCE INSTITUTE**

**AKIF MUSAYEV**

# THE IMPACTS OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP ON DIVERSE EMPLOYEES IN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION PROJECTS

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**Supervisor:**

**Prof. dr. Andrius Valickas**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## List of tables and figures.

## List of annexes.

# INTRODUCTION.

## Relevance of the topic.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) claiming social justice missions (Salamon & Anheier, 1992) face large gaps in the way their advocacy activism and projects do not align with internal diversity practices. The scholarship does acknowledge that diversity, inclusion, and identity politics affect organizational life (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Christensen, 2025), but workplace climate is still a function of leader behaviors and organizational norms that facilitate or hinder authentic participation (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). At some point organizational attempts to increase inclusivity have become performative, reinforcing rather than dismantling the categorizations they supposedly challenge (Cabantous et al., 2016). This tendency for CSOs to create mission versus practice misalignments erodes credibility and compromises employee retention and well-being (Williams et al., 2010).

Empirically, this intersection remains unexplored. Although organizational studies document discrimination facing queer workers and there exist theoretical underpinnings of inclusive leadership in separate measures (Badgett et al., 2007; Shore et al., 2011; Randel et al., 2018), there is no sufficient number of studies that investigated the ways in which inclusive leadership contours queer employees' belonging and productivity specifically within the CSO projects across Europe and partner countries.

## Research on the topic.

CSOs take a critical position in creating societal values, serving as spaces for advocacy, community mobilisation, and collective action on issues of social justice (Bahmani et al., 2012; Buonomo et al., 2020). Yet, despite their position as champions of social change, CSOs often face challenges in translating their stated values around inclusion and equity into the lived experiences of their own employees, particularly those from marginalized groups while they implement their projects. Therefore, this research examines how inclusive leadership impacts the productivity and well-being of diverse employees within projects, with a specific focus on queer workers in the CSO context across Europe and partner countries.

The question of how leadership shapes organizational inclusion has grown increasingly urgent as organizations grapple with advancing diversity initiatives and responding to calls for more equitable workplaces overall, even outside of projects. Yet scholarship today demonstrates that aspiration and practice are far from aligned. Scholars have argued that most literature on organization diversity has become performative, meaning economic outputs take precedence over substantive social responsibility which comes with its risk of reinforcing stereotypes and deepening divisions rather than bridging them between employee groups (Cabantous et al., 2016; Christensen, 2015). Approaches to

managing diversity in traditional ways often function as mechanisms constitutive of the very socio-demographic differences they apparently engage in, in that such categories are more often the result of organizational power relations than authentic pre-existing differences (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005). These limitations become particularly significant within the CSO context, where there is a more striking disconnection between organizational mission and internal practice.

In contrast, inclusive leadership differs from earlier models because it shifts the focus from personal leader qualities or transformational vision to deliberate, intentional creation of group dynamics. Whereas transformational leadership threatens to assimilate diverse employees into a collective focused on the leader's objectives (Randel et al., 2018) and empowering leadership maintains hierarchical distance despite its rhetoric of sharing power with employees (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). Inclusive leadership acts via a more complex dual mechanism. Following Randel et al. (2018), inclusive leadership is conceptualized as a collection of positive leader behaviors that facilitate the perception of group members' belongingness in the work group while maintaining their uniqueness within the group as they fully contribute to group processes and outcomes. Such a framework is rooted in two complementary psychological experiences that leaders foster: belongingness and value for uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011; Randel et al., 2018). Theoretically, the significance is in how those dimensions complement each other as leaders do not just integrate people into organizational structures, nor do they just celebrate surface-level diversity but instead they are intentional about structuring work processes and interpersonal dynamics in a way that allows for authentic participation and contribution. This approach directly addresses the call for scholarship by Shore et al. (2008) for the development of leadership perspectives that position inclusiveness as a framing concept rather than conceiving of diversity as a problem to be managed. For CSOs serving diverse populations and claiming social justice missions, the inclusive leadership model has particular resonance, because it highlights how such leader behaviors yield outcomes like psychological empowerment, identification with the work group, and decreased turnovers crucial for organizational effectiveness and employee retention in mission-driven settings (Randel et al., 2018).

Research has consistently documented that an organization's workplace climate significantly shapes the employment context of minority workers. In the case of sexual and gender minority employees in particular, having a workplace that demonstrably communicates support through policies such as formal anti-discrimination policies, inclusion of sexual orientation within diversity programmes, employee resource groups, and genuine opportunities for authentic participation is associated with higher job satisfaction, higher rates of identity disclosure, and increased commitment to the organization itself (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Ragins et al., 2007).

In contrast, hostile and unsupportive workplaces are defined by offensive language, social exclusion, and mistreatment directed particularly at gender and sexual minority employees (Badgett et al., 2007;

Herek, 2009). Beyond these immediate psychological effects minority workers frequently face job bias, thoughts that perpetuate stereotypes, and fear of stigmatization by association, all of which encourage the majority of queer employees to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity as a means of self-protection against any kind of persecution, thereby depriving them of their full ability to establish valid professional relationships and to become deeply invested in workplace contribution and involvement (Ragins, 2008).

Though this might be seen as the evidence based on queer workplace experiences, there remains an apparent glaring gap: the empirical studies about how queer employees perceive inclusivity and, more specifically, inclusion leadership in the CSOs, especially in European and partner countries setting. The literature on youth activism offers valuable information about the issues of queer individuals taking collective action as well as community-building and emphasizes that queer empowerment relies on the identity recognition, safe space, and peer support networks (Gamarel et al., 2014; Wagaman, 2016; Paceley, Keene, & Lough, 2015). These results highlight the pre-eminence of such concepts as identity affirmation and belonging that are uncharted territory in organizational research dedicated to CSOs.

Moreover, contemporary diversity research faces a challenge when addressing intersecting identities. Although intersectionality offers valuable theoretical knowledge, empirical research is often based on simplified groups of demographics, and does not consider the ways in which identities are practiced in relation to each other, leading to the conclusion that some scholars describe as an ignoring of intersectionality complexity (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Researchers have observed that it is quite difficult to resolve a multiplicity of identities without stabilizing them or reducing their complexity, which is a dilemma that norm-critical methods are trying to overcome (Holck & Muhr, 2017). To queer employees in CSOs, most of whom have several marginalized identities based on ethnicity, gender, disability, or other factors, the mentioned limitation is a critical learning deficiency in retrieving the full organizational experience of these employees.

This research is motivated by aforementioned intertwined gaps: the limited attention to inclusive leadership as a distinct framework; the sparse empirical focus on queer employees within CSO projects, especially in Europe and partner countries; and the need to understand how inclusive leadership behaviors shape queer employees' productivity in organizations that position themselves as advocates for social justice.

## The scientific novelty.

This research addresses a gap in the field of organizational studies because it focuses on the experience of queer workers in the context of CSO projects, a group whose experience of inclusion has been missing in the literature on existing empirical research (Smith, 2005). While extensive research

mentions discrimination and hostile workplace climates facing sexual and gender minorities (Badgett et al., 2007; Herek, 2009; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007) and separate bodies of work examine inclusive leadership and diversity management during projects, no studies have yet integrated these perspectives to examine how inclusive leadership specifically impacts queer employees' productivity in CSO environments or projects. This research is the first to bring together inclusive leadership theory (emphasizing both belongingness and valuing of uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011; Randel et al., 2018)) with queer employee experiences in the nonprofit sector to address a gap that grows increasingly significant given CSOs' positioning as advocates for social justice and project implementer in this regard yet their struggles to translate this mission into their internal practices (Williams et al., 2010).

Moreover, this research has methodological and theoretical contributions by not labelling queer employees as a category of diversity management issues to be considered but as actors with intersecting identities whose authentic participation and productivity depend on inclusive leadership practices. Instead of analysing diversity as an organizational issue that can be managed, this paper turns the prism to identify which behaviours of leadership and organizational circumstances help create real inclusion and productivity within projects. Also, the concept of inclusive leadership in the nonprofit sector remains comparatively unexposed, as research has mostly been conducted in for-profit institutions (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Smith-Ruig, 2017). This study creates context-related and employee-focused insights to challenge the performative discourse of diversity well-known in the organizational literature (Cabantous et al., 2016; Christensen, 2025) and to provide practical wisdom to CSO leaders that are determined to follow substantive and not aspirational inclusion.

## The object of the study.

The object of the study is the impact of inclusive leadership on queer employees' productivity working in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries.

## Research aim, objectives and question.

The research aimed to explore the relationship between inclusive leadership and queer employees' productivity in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries, exploring both positive and potential limiting factors. And the research objectives were identified as:

1. To observe the effect of inclusive leadership behaviors on queer people working in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries;
2. To examine the ways in which inclusive leadership practices facilitate effective participation and communication of queer employees within the team of CSO projects;

3. To evaluate which inclusive leadership strategies are most valued by queer employees for improving their productivity within CSO projects setting;
4. To examine in which ways leaders create safe spaces for queer employee members of the CSO projects.

Consequently, after establishing the research aim and objectives, the research question was defined as: *"In what ways can the impact of inclusive leadership be observed on queer employees' productivity in the projects within CSO across Europe and partner countries?"*

## The structure of the paper.

This research consists of five chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how leadership concepts have been defined and analysed. Also, through this chapter, the studies investigating the relationship between inclusive leadership and minority groups (queer employees particularly) in CSO project environments have been examined. The second chapter outlines the theoretical framework, the methodological approach and the research design. The third chapter presents the findings of the research, while the fourth chapter offers a discussion of the results in relation to the existing literature. The final chapter concludes the thesis by summarising the answers to the objectives of the research and proposing recommendations for future practice and research. This research includes 3 tables and 2 figures, draws upon 161 sources, and is presented across 77 pages excluding annexes.

# 1. THEORETICAL PART.

## 1.1. The structure of the section.

The following chapter presents a literature review on leadership, with a particular focus on the concept of inclusive leadership. It examines how both concepts have been studied and defined in the previous research and how inclusivity in CSOs have been evaluated. Furthermore, the review explores studies around the relation of inclusive leadership and employee productivity and motivation within projects to understand how leadership behaviours can shape minority employees' (queer employees in this context) attitude towards their work.

## 1.2. Different approaches to leadership.

Even though systemic review on leadership began in the 20th century, the concept itself has influenced human society for thousands of years, with leaders coordinating essential parts of communities to survive since early civilization (Liden et al., 2025). This historical importance has prompted so many scholars to define what leadership is and how it can be distinguished from management, leading to the emergence of existing theories and foundation in the field (Badura et al., 2021).

While defining the term "leadership" is hard, it is much harder to trace back the origins of "inclusive leadership" as an idea. One can distinguish the concept of "ethical" or "humanist" leadership which emerged during the Renaissance era. As history advanced into The Renaissance era, we began to see the roots of inclusivity and humanism in leadership emerging in the works of Erasmus. He was openly defying the cosmic power of churches and emphasizing how people in charge can prefer traditions over ethical leadership. To his mind, all leaders should be questioning their beliefs and behaviours to remain self-aware and considerate in their leadership (Sulkowski et al., 2024).

These ideas can be interpreted as the core setting for "successful leadership" concepts that were later explored with different approaches. For example, the behavioral approach proposes that the success of leaders depends on how they interact with their teams; in short, it depends on their behaviors rather than their innate skills or traits (Liden et al., 2025). Although the behavioral approach shifted attention towards leaders' actions, it struggled with theoretical clarity as it overlooked situational factors related to leadership and failed to capture the full range of leadership behaviours. Its limitations, along with inconsistent findings on links between leadership and outcomes, ultimately led to the development of contingency theory (Harrison, 2017).

Fiedler (1951, as cited in Childs, 2022), the first person who formulated the theory of contingency leadership, discussed that leadership qualities can not be put into a rigid framework because they

depend on some internal (e.g., knowledge and assets) and external (e.g., market trend changes and catastrophes) contingencies. He argued that there is neither an ideal leadership nor a leader; that proved effective in one context might not yield the same effectiveness when confronted with a different situation and a leader who has led successfully might not lead when faced with a different set of circumstances (Harrison, 2017). The main criticism that contingency theory receives is that there is not enough research analysing the influence of demographic features on leader and team member interaction (Shonhiwa, 2016).

While Fiedler's contingency theory highlights the importance of situational factors to determine leadership style, two new theories – transactional and transformational – theories were formulated by James MacGregor to further explore how leadership not only about adopting to situational factors but also engaging followers through different rational approaches (Burns, 1978).

Meanwhile, transactional leadership is based on exchange between leaders and followers, like a short-term contract where followers provide work and loyalty in return for payment and other resources, transformational leadership helps followers become more aware of their actual needs and their values which in this way this theory seeks to transform organizations and societies by creating new mindsets and cultural norms (Burns, 1978).

MacGregor's findings relate closely to the idea of inclusion, as it touches upon issues of realising needs and values, but it also reveals a gap in how these approaches address inclusion explicitly. While transformational leadership emphasizes value-driven ways of empowering followers, it can overlook the factor of diverse identities and power dynamics within the "followers group". In other words, transformational leadership is focused on the leader position's charisma, success, greatness, etc. more than the group's perception of belongingness or uniqueness which is essential for inclusiveness (Galvin, Waldman, & Balthazard, 2010).

At this point, the question of "how can we integrate the idea of inclusion into leadership?" emerges both in theory and practice. As in transformational leadership there is a risk of employees facing "a degree of assimilation of the members into the collective through the leader's ability to "diagnose, meet, and elevate the needs" of the members to align with those of the collective." (Randel et al., 2017, p. 192)

The empowering leadership model is also interesting to examine in this case, due to its "sharing" values. Empowering leadership is defined as "behaviors whereby power is shared with subordinates and that raise their level of intrinsic motivation" (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006, p. 1240). However, from the definition itself, one can identify the problematic notion of "subordinates", which makes this model patronizing in a way. This top-down approach weakens the inclusion element within the empowerment idea.

## 1.3. Inclusion and inclusive leadership.

Historically, the concept of inclusion has arisen as a response to issues of inequity in terms of access, representation, and participation. In the process, the concept has also continued to develop in terms of emphasis, from the simple process of inclusive representation to something more complex. In the modern definition, the process of inclusion is perceived to include individual psychological perspectives, as well as a set of conditions necessary for people to participate fully. The concept has also presented several challenges, from the celebration of individual uniqueness while sustaining collective norms to the creation of flexibility while sustaining cohesion.

Increasing diversity in workforces have challenged leaders to not only lead, but find a way to facilitate and manage differences at the workplace, while being context-sensitive to value and leverage the said differences and uniqueness (Roberson & Perry, 2022). The evolution of inclusiveness in the workplace starts from initiatives and programs (Harvey, 1999) that accepted underrepresented people into their networks (Ibarra, 1993), and this process has quickly turned into inclusiveness being a cultural understanding within organizations. Since increased diversity in the workplace brought complex issues of management (inequality and discrimination between workers) (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Mor Barak et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2012), leaders started to become more aware of the issue and initiated inclusive workplaces. Still after the 1990s we can observe the emergence of a new level of inclusion, not only from the values or policies of organizations, but from their people in all spheres (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002).

According to Shore et al. (2011), a literal definition of inclusion in the workspace hasn't been defined even though there is an increasing tendency to study on this topic. This tendency may come from the globalized business world's direction in making "inclusion" the new buzzword or trend (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Therefore, a body of research has explored inclusive leadership to understand leadership approaches and behaviors (Roberson and Perry, 2022) and many scholars have tried to give a compelling definition to what inclusion in the workplace is and is not: Older research like Mor Barak and Cherin's (1998) definition frames inclusion as the extent of individuals' accessibility to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and the ability to influence decision-making processes.

Pelled, Ledford, and Mohrman (1999) describe inclusion as "the degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider by others in a work system" (p. 1014). Likewise, Tan (2019) defines it as "the intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse people with different identities are able to fully participate in all aspects of the work of an organization, including leadership positions and decision-making progress" (p. 31); Ferdman et al. (2010) describes inclusion as "collaborating in a way in which all parties can be engaged and subsumed, and yet, paradoxically, at the same time believe that they have not been compromised, hidden, or given up any part of themselves" (p. 14);

Shore et al. (2011) explains definition as “the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (p. 1265).

Roberson and Perry (2022), after analyzing 27 written answers from leaders, come to the conclusion that “in the demonstration of inclusive leadership, the results emphasize behaviors to recognize diversity, respond to individual needs and work styles, and actively listen to what team members voice” (p. 755). What makes their findings new and interesting is the point about leaders making time and effort to ensure participation of employees in decision making processes, though it can diverge from team norms.

Aforementioned attempts at defining “inclusion” showcase that this ambiguity creates a barrier to develop a one-size-fits-all inclusive leadership model to apply to all contexts, or to assess inclusivity in different organizations. Despite these attempts to define inclusion, the term itself remains fluid, changing its definition based on the research domain with its core elements, such as equity, respect, equality, culturally responsiveness and a sense of belonging which is the most noticed one in almost every domain (Sunkler, 2024). Thus, while inclusion consistently emphasizes belonging, equity and respect, its meaning remains context-dependent which in its own turn creates future challenges for researchers and even leaders. Unfortunately, although the existing literature examines the challenges associated with diverse teams and management of inclusion (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2014; DiTomaso & Hooijberg, 1996), there is a gap of addressing how these challenges can be overcome.

While acknowledging the fluidity and context-dependency of the definition of inclusive leadership, model from Randel et al. (2018) is taken as the main and most comprehensive version for this particular thesis, as it follows: “We conceptualize inclusive leadership as a set of positive leader behaviors that facilitate group members perceiving belongingness in the work group while maintaining their uniqueness within the group as they fully contribute to group processes and outcomes. We propose that leader pro-diversity beliefs, humility, and cognitive complexity increase the propensity of inclusive leader behaviors. We identify five categories of inclusive leadership behaviors that facilitate group members' perceptions of inclusion, which in turn lead to member work group identification, psychological empowerment, and behavioral outcomes (creativity, job performance, and reduced turnover) in the pursuit of group goals” (p. 190).

It is equally important to take into consideration their differentiation of definitions in the same paper, especially with Nembhard and Edmondson's (2006) characterization of inclusive leaders. From this comparison, we can easily see the overlooked nuances of inclusive leadership, while one definition emphasizes the leader’s effort to overcome differences (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), the other one is focused on fostering employee perception of belongingness and uniqueness (Randel et al., 2018).

This section, through different definitions and conceptualizations, shapes the possible comprehensive and multi-level model of inclusive leadership which brings about the nuances and elements of inclusive leadership at the forefront.

## 1.4. Nuances and elements of inclusive leadership.

A close analysis of the previous definitions show that having ongoing attempts at inclusivity is important, diversity and inclusion as ideas can be put in a box of strategic priority for increased profit (Groysberg & Connolly, 2013). Although some papers state that diverse workplaces are statistically more likely to profit more than less diverse ones (Hunt et al., 2015) according to Randel et al. (2018), recruiting, developing or promoting marginalized people as employees is not a guarantee for a fully realized innovation, performance or perspective from their side. In this regard, fostering an inclusive workplace as a core helps utilizing diverse team's talents and skills, as Deloitte (2018) notes that workplaces with inclusive culture are 2.3 times more likely to initiate innovation and 3.8 times more likely to retain employees.

Main elements within inclusive leadership are mostly conceptualized as a set of leader behaviours that produce two complementary psychological experiences for team members: 1. belongingness 2. value for uniqueness (Randel et al., 2018). These two dimensions in the framework captures how inclusive leaders both integrate individuals into the social layer of the general group and intentionally utilize diversity as a resource for the collective.

Within the belongingness dimension, Randel et al. (2018) identifies a small set of interrelated behaviours or acts that facilitates the inclusion. These are: 1. offering socio-emotional and task-focused support to group members; 2. ensuring that justice and equity are present in every team process; 3. creating meaningful opportunities for shared and inclusive decision-making. Here some important nuances come forth, e.g. unintentional cases of unfairness, or inequality. From these given cases, we can identify some solutions to prevent these outcomes: leaders should not only express respect for individuals, but proactively scan and correct routine practices not to disadvantage some members (for example, scheduling events in locations or at times that exclude people with caregiving responsibilities or mobility constraints). Although these solutions might be framed as logistical, they are crucial to ensure the belongingness and have direct consequences on the member perceptions of inclusion, as it relates closely to day-to-day practices.

These micro-behaviors are supplemented and preceded by a new theoretical emphasis that suggests the leader's moderating influence concerning the formal aspects of diversity and Human Resources (HR) practices is important. The specific degree of the leader's alignment with the formal organization's programs of diversity and inclusion could significantly influence the success of such practices and

programs, support and positive local contextualization and correction of practices found exclusionary serving to supplement and improve the work of the HR departments of the organizations, while a mixed response and a lack of alignment might weaken and shift the original outcomes and aims and even lead to the attainment of the opposite outcomes (Buengeler et al., 2018).

Other interventions, more precisely, previous academic recommendations to foster belongingness suggests to emphasize similarity of members with stigmatized identities to the non-stigmatized majority, for instance, attempts to demonstrate that employees with physical disabilities are not representative of stereotypes (Stone & Colella, 1996). Although their early organizational framing located the issue within broader settings - organizational, interpersonal, environmental - and although their synthesis remains influential for understanding underlying mechanisms and dynamics within the workplace, their approach can be critiqued from contemporary disability lenses. Disability scholars and activists argue that framing inclusion as validating or championing disabled persons by comparison to non-disabled norms, or by showcasing their "achievements" can be patronizing or objectifying (Burt, Anna & McCarty, Megan (2024); Grue, (2016) Schalk, (2021)). This is often labeled as "inspiration porn" where ordinary accomplishments are staged to create a sense of admiration from non-disabled observers, in this case other team workers.

The value for uniqueness aspect of inclusive leadership seeks to address the changing environment through a shift in the functions of the leaders. The leaders are not required to prove their worth through comparison but are encouraged to look for different contributions and ensure that the structures are not hindering team members from utilizing their uniqueness. Examples of such actions include seeking divergent opinions during decision-making meetings and ensuring that flexible participation structures are put into place (e.g., asynchronous submission channels and convenient meeting times and structures) (Randel et al., 2018).

While this research takes Randel et al. (2018) model as a base, there is also an argument to touch upon Korkmaz et al. (2022) conceptualizing inclusive leadership as the final note on the definition issues. Their research addresses the lack of integration in the conceptualization processes and they address the issue by developing a consolidated conceptualization of inclusive leadership based on the existing definitions and descriptions.

They identify four dimensions of inclusive leadership, which the initial two coincide with the model of Randel et al. (2018): fostering employee's uniqueness and strengthening belongingness within a team. These were obvious dimensions, as the previous definitions all mention them in one way or another. The other two dimensions are: "showing appreciation appeared to be a more complex dimension due to its dual targets: employee as well as team. Lastly, supporting organizational efforts comes forward as an important dimension which is about leader's acts targeting the organizational factors" (Korkmaz et al., 2022, p. 11)

Although “showing appreciation” as a term lacks specificity, as the nature of interpersonal relations is vague, the idea of it is framed with “recognition and acknowledgement of achievements, qualities as well as behaviors” (Korkmaz et al., 2022, p. 11). This dimension is also characterized by duality of targets, both individual and team level appreciation. Brimhall (2019) shows this example: “...leaders expressing appreciation for others’ contributions (i.e., leader engagement) may be seen as a positive work event that makes one feel valued in the work environment (i.e., climate for inclusion), which may encourage employees to speak up and share their ideas (i.e., climate for innovation), thereby influencing how one feels about his or her job (i.e., job satisfaction) and ultimately performance (i.e., quality of care)” (p. 729).

Last dimension - supporting organizational efforts is identified through leaders’ support towards diversity and inclusion initiatives can shape the effectiveness of organizational efforts (Buengeler et al., 2018). Therefore, inclusive leadership also requires demonstration of openness to organization change and actively “promoting the organization’s mission on inclusion” (Korkmaz et al., 2022, p. 6).

Overall, the current literature suggests a starting point of the following three assertions that could be used to construct a literature review argument: (1) inclusive leadership is a multifaceted construct that includes both belonging and uniqueness as separate but related aspects of inclusive leadership outcomes; (2) the specification of leadership behavior related to the maximization of justice and the facilitation of inclusive decision-making is a key way of demonstrating inclusive leadership behavior through action; and (3) approaches that place emphasis on individual examples of exceptional leaders to “disprove” a stereotype are problematic and counter-productive to inclusive leadership efforts that attempt to shift a normalizing framework of opportunity towards inclusive participation.

## 1.5. Effects of inclusive leadership.

A nuanced understanding of inclusive leadership involves more than just enumerating positive behavior, but rather requires an appraisal of the interaction between the practices of the leader, the forces of the context, the identities of the members, as well as the consequences that are involved. This section will move past the prescription stage and explore the complexity involved in inclusive leadership, the way it is conceptualized, the mechanisms involved in the impact of the leader's behavior upon the employees, as well as the trade-offs involved in its efforts.

In contrast to considering inclusion as a singular result, the following discussion considers inclusive practices as a complex process occurring at various levels of analysis, ranging from individual perceptions, groups, to organizational levels, while also noting that the same process, as initiated by the same leader, could produce varied outcomes based upon fit, as well as timing. The next section also

explores the challenges associated with the measurement of concepts, which form the basis of cumulative knowledge, noting challenges related to limited evidence.

There can be positive and negative sides of diversity and inclusiveness in the workspace, dependent on the outlook or perspective on the matter, e.g. some might argue it creates value-driven environment and adds richness through alternative perspectives, while others argue it adds another complex layer needing to be managed, challenges in group norms, etc. (Van Knippenberg et al., 2007). However, as mentioned earlier, the need for belonging and being valued for uniqueness are psychologically engrained in everyone's life, there is an argument for inclusive leadership having potential to be effective for homogeneous work groups as well (Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011).

Although a lot of papers mentioned in this section explore how inclusive leadership affects the work performance and creativeness, specifically, literature has gaps in unpacking how leaders can navigate creating an inclusive environment while maintaining core values and norms or how to shape the organizational values around inclusiveness to avoid risks of organizational norms being hindered.

The main fundamental benefit of inclusiveness can be initiated from leaders' facilitation which enables resource sharing and reciprocal exchange between workers (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). Leaders' providing resources to their employees also strengthens the emotional social exchange relationship between them that generates more initiation and willingness in employees' jobs (Blau, 1964, as cited in Tong Li & Tang, 2022). Which, once again, would be beneficial in homogenous environments as well to improve group work effectiveness.

According to the social exchange theory, when leaders provide material or nonmaterial resources to employees, they will form an emotional social exchange relationship with employees, which makes employees generate the willingness and take on action to give back to their leaders (Blau, 1964, as cited in Tong Li & Tang, 2022).

Yu and Frenkel (2013), support the idea that work group identification is positively related to creativity, because members who possess strong work group identification aspire to contribute to the group more. Other empirical studies show that being psychologically empowered enables higher levels of creativity in employees (Pan, et al., 2012; Sun, et al., 2012).

Aside from psychological empowerment, psychological safety also plays a great role in members' innovation and creativity in the workplace related to the degree of inclusive approach they receive. Psychological safety is defined as perceptions of the results of taking interpersonal risks in a specific context, for example a workplace (Edmondson, 1999). Although psychological safety as an idea can be applied to workers from any background or with any identity, for this particular thesis its relation to queerness, their safety, how they feel safer to express their ideas in inclusive spaces is focused upon.

Since some argue that empowered members of work groups are likely to be involved in their jobs and take initiative (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 2008), Randel et al. (2018) theorize that

empowerment as a result of being included in the social fabric of the workspace are likely to “engage in behaviors that reflect involvement and initiative, ultimately improving performance” (p. 198). Psychologically empowered workers also show more engagement in their suggestions, to improve activities and provide constructive criticism to work on the issues (Frazier & Fainshmidt, 2012; Raub & Robert, 2012). This creates a supportive environment where employees feel intellectually and emotionally committed to not only their work, but also the organization as a whole new level.

Engagement among employees hinges on complex and interconnected factors of positive Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) climate, organizational justice, and inclusive leadership. According to Gallup (2020), there is a huge decrease in turnover among engaged teams (they experience 59% less turnover). On top of that they are 21% more profitable. Companies like Adobe utilize DEI initiatives, to enhance stability in the teams and their creative, innovative approaches (Adobe, 2020).

With their openness values, inclusive leaders are likely to create space for employees to express their ideas and to be available and accessible to be their listeners, which enables individuals to freely generate and present their views without hesitation or rejection (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Other points have also been made about active communication and assistance by the inclusive leaders which make employees feel supported in the workspace (Javed et al., 2019), which makes observable differences in employees’ innovative behaviors (Clegg et al., 2002; Janssen, 2005).

Tong Li and Ningyu Tang (2022) identify the gap in previous research, as being focused only on individual level of productivity under inclusive leadership, and they delve more into multilevel influences of inclusive leadership on innovative performance. The difference in team level and individual level management through the inclusive leadership lens is - “despite that we mentioned inclusive leadership may positively affect individual innovative performance, these individuals, as team members, need to be encouraged to commit to the team and cooperate as a whole to improve the team’s innovative performance” (p. 3).

Team level contribution can also be boosted in relation with individual level perception of inclusiveness from the management, especially among younger generation, transparency, approachability, and support, boosts perceptions of fairness, especially among Generation Z (Kakada Eng & Phanasan Kohsuwan, 2025). Based on their findings about Generation Z favoring organizational justice, Kakada and Phanasan recommend “creating a positive diversity climate through policies and practices that prioritize equity and inclusion is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety among employees” (p. 222).

With younger workforce demanding more inclusive and safer workspaces (Tallo, 2020), leaders who are not embracing diversity tend to alienate this generation. “In a Tallo study of Gen Z respondents, 67 percent of respondents of working age claimed they had seen workplace discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation, and 44 percent said they had personally experienced it.

For Gen Z, diversity and inclusion go beyond issues of color and ethnicity. Gen Z embraces the right to freely express one's gender identity. They are more at ease with non-binary identities and gender fluidity, and they want their employers to share this comfort. In support of this, a staggering 88 percent of Gen Z poll participants felt companies must inquire about preferred gender pronouns" (Johns Hopkins University, 2024, para. 5).

Therefore an inclusive approach enables better and innovative members among the team, e.g. according to Google reports, their inclusive leadership training has boosted team performance and innovation (Google, 2021).

Taken as a whole, the literature examined in this section suggests that the impact of inclusive leadership is anything but linear, standardized, or straightforward, but rather the result of a complex dynamic of psychological, relationship, and structure-driven processes influencing the experience of work afforded to individuals. The influence of inclusive leadership exceeds the boundaries of fleeting support satisfaction. Inclusive leadership can impact the way in which people identify, the way in which resources flow, impact the perception of justice, as well as the creation of a climate where people feel confident enough to move toward each other in creative potential-enhancing ways.

The findings raise the possibility that a process of inclusiveness can serve as a trigger for greater levels of commitment, greater levels of engagement, and greater levels of generative collaboration, irrespective of whether the teams in question are diverse in composition, homogeneous, or somewhere in between. Notwithstanding the ongoing importance of inclusive leadership, the growing diversity of organizations, as well as the expectations of the next generation, means that the future relevance of inclusive leadership will also be impacted by the capacity of leaders to acknowledge the presence of complexity in their organizations, to synthesize diverse insights, and to act in line with this objective.

## 1.6. Civil society organizational setting.

To understand CSOs effectively, it is important to locate them within the larger context of non-governmental and non-profit organizations working towards social, economic, and workplace well-being. Despite the many terms that are applied to organizations within this space, they are all united by certain commonalities in terms of their dedication and goals, which automatically differentiate them from for-profit organizations. Because they are caught between their involvement in delivering services, advocacy, and engagement, many organizations within the civil society category find themselves operating within dual contexts: they need to promote their ideals on one front, while aligning themselves with certain structures on the other to live up to those ideals. This makes it important to define what constitutes a CSO to understand how they are dealing with issues related to inclusion, equality in workplaces, and employee support.

Given that organizational names within the non-profit sector are used interchangeably due to no specific single term being used to define the sector, there is a comprehensive understanding of CSOs as any organization operating independent from the state, with non-profit goals (Clayton et al., 2000). Existing literature commonly defines CSOs as: non-profit organizations (Tennant et al., 2006), the voluntary sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Pimthong, 2016). In this specific focus, CSO is labelled as the broad range of bodies including aforementioned, as well as, faith organizations, voluntary associations, advocacy bodies, social movement and identity-based organizations, campaigning groups and other NGOs (Williams et al., 2010).

Non-profit organizations are mostly distinguished from profit businesses in that they do not allocate their excess profits to their owners or shareholders, but instead, any profits earned are rechanneled to support its causes or missions for the benefit of society (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). As a result, CSOs are primarily concerned with maximizing their societal usefulness and generating additional societal value rather than making profits, per se (Bahmani et al., 2012; Buonomo et al., 2020).

Within the not-for-profit sector, helping others is part and parcel of the function or responsibility, making organizational citizenship behaviour (a concept interrelated with inclusion and work engagement) a central rather than peripheral phenomenon to work (Langdon et al., 2024). However, allowing for helping others to form part of one's core responsibility can still present opportunities for additional helping to take place above and beyond that core responsibility, and its nature in civil society contexts has remained relatively uninvestigated in terms of its degree and implications (Akhtar et al., 2017). This work not only manifests within the organization, but also reflects itself in the CSO activities or interventions to ensure equality, inclusion and diversity in other workplaces as well. The contemporary international research on the work and employment-related activities of CSOs showcases that inclusion and diversity topics are key points of intervention and a major priority for them (Williams et al., 2010).

Despite common research depicting the interventions of CSOs in workplaces within a concern for social justice, where improving efforts are directed at mitigating disadvantage and its resulting discriminatory practices in the workplace (Fine, 2005), other research has also identified rather more pragmatic concern to emerge in respect to securing employer support on many occasions where challenging organizational practices would otherwise promote equality more quickly (Williams et al., 2010). In its own turn raises questions about CSO interventions regarding inclusivity, and how it is practiced internally.

Many CSO interventions focus on the need for positive engagement between employees and employers to address inequality within work spaces. However, there is a general reluctance in recognizing and acknowledging the management faults or gaps from the CSO side due to power differences. General practice and direction of CSOs show that they fall more into consensual ways of

facilitating relationships from both sides. Williams et al. (2010), note: “A respondent from a CSO concerned with older workers asserted that it was not her organization’s approach to ‘‘name and shame’’ employers; rather the emphasis was placed on using the business case for employing a more diverse workforce. In private CSO officials are rather more willing to be critical of employers’ practices than they are in public” (p. 633).

Finally, as mentioned in the sections above regarding the need for inclusive leadership and management, recent sociological and economic shifts also bring new pressures for CSO managers to manage diversified workforces, as is also characteristic for managerial functions in other sectors. This situation also has implications for the development and deployment of effective leadership practices responsive to complexities entailed in nonprofit environments. (Rogozinska-Pawełczyk & Sudolska, 2024).

Drawing on this discussion, it becomes apparent how CSOs find themselves in a uniquely situated manner as organizations with missions, where their internal processes and external operations are interrelated. Although they are engaged in creating public benefits, they are expected to provide inclusive work environments, but on the other hand, they must work in ways that involve cooperation and persuasion in their external operations, which also imposes certain limitations on how they must question workplace inequalities. This section also points to how organizations find themselves in complex situations when they are attempting to live up to their ideal commitments on a day-to-day basis, especially when they are expected to handle managerial obligations in ways that are common to other organizations.

## 1.7. Inclusive leadership and CSOs.

This section examines leadership in CSO spaces, especially nonprofit organizations with a focus on how leaders shape workplace climate, foster employee engagement, and therefore affect the overall organizational effectiveness. Its aim is to synthesize relevant scholarship to clarify why particular leadership approaches matter in mission-driven contexts, to surface conceptual and empirical gaps, and to frame the questions that follow about how leadership can better support staff and organizational goals.

High turnover rates, reduced performance levels, and low management by the leaders pose significant threats to the nonprofit industry (Lee, 2016). This implies that nonprofit executives must act upon it, such as employing specific skills in managing their organization in a more effective manner (Allen et al., 2018; Nascimento et al., 2018). Since organizational turnover adversely affects the overall performance of the nonprofits (Lee, 2016), the process of exploring ways for decreasing such turnover by means of improving job satisfaction stands critical for the leaders.

Alongside such operational issues, nonprofit professionals also have to deal with the dynamics of workforce expectations and demographic trends. Literature suggest the importance of positive organizational environment in supporting nonprofit workers' job satisfaction (Brimhall et al., 2014; Glisson et al., 2008; Y.H.Huang et al., 2016), work-related attitudes and behavior (Brimhall et al., 2016; Glisson et al., 2008).

Within the framework outlined, considerable focus has been placed on the role of nonprofit organizational inclusion. Considerable literature exists on the impact of nonprofit leaders' influence on innovation, improvements in the quality, and the outcomes of services (Apekey et al., 2011; Cazzaniga & Fischer, 2015; Duarte et al., 2014; Kajamaa, 2015), but further research is needed related to how nonprofit leaders impact the improved outcomes of innovations in care and the increase in the quality of care in the nonprofit industry.

Early empirical research results highlight the pragmatic importance of inclusion. Non-profit executives realize the importance of building inclusive organizations in which people are treated in a respected and valued manner, but very little is known about the importance of inclusive organizational leaders in bringing about workplace inclusiveness (Brimhall, 2019).

Despite the recognition of these issues, much work is needed to understand the process by which leaders must effectively build an inclusive culture. While research exists on the positive outcomes of inclusive work environments, theoretical statements on the processes by which leaders might influence their subordinates in order to build a positive inclusive culture (Boekhorst, 2014; Randel et al., 2018).

Studies suggest that nonprofit leaders who engage other members in key organizational processes help create inclusive organizational climates related to innovations in the work environment, job satisfaction, and perceptions of organizational quality (Brimhall, 2019).

Learning Organization Theory (LOT) presents an important approach to interpret the process of inclusive climate at work. Learning work environments, according to the theory, encourage the sharing of ideas, individuality, and mistakes that contain opportunities for improvement rather than punishment (Gardiner & Whiting, 1997).

Trust is one of the pivotal mechanisms in the process. Feelings of inclusion are believed to influence the degree of trust held by members in the business (Downey et al., 2015), something that encourages the sharing of ideas for innovations (Sankowska, 2013).

These trust mechanisms are made possible by the efforts of the leaders. Those leaders who motivate members to exchange their views and explore different problem-solving techniques have been shown to influence the nonprofit sector's innovations (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Weng et al., 2015).

Such leadership requirements are more intricate because of the increase in the levels of diversity in the workforce in terms of generations and cultures. One major challenge for all organizational setups, including nonprofit organizations today, is how to ensure intergenerational collaboration (Becton et al.,

2014; Jones, 2016). The current younger generations also make up the larger populations in the workforce. These generations come with their own work culture expectations in terms of activism, work, and the use of technology. Such aspects seem to make it rather difficult for the nonprofit to ensure the meaningful engagement of the youth. This generation is even more diverse compared to the previous ones (Joshua-Gojer & Allen, 2016).

Under such circumstances, keeping the workers engaged and feeling appreciated becomes all the more relevant. Feeling appreciated by the workers may get misconstructed in the context of the nonprofit industry. Such might decrease the level of engagement (Hulkko-Nyman et al., 2012). Organizations seeking improvement in levels of commitment, engagement, and performance are challenged by the nonprofit industry. That's why the leaders in the nonprofit industry play a pivotal role in having positive outcomes in the workplace (Erdurmazli, 2019; Park et al., 2018). At this point, the relevance of inclusive leadership emerges.

Building inclusion must also involve the strengthening of social relations in nonprofit work. Nonprofits must depend on social capital in order for their leaders to effectively discharge their duties (King, 2004; Ronquillo et al., 2012). Nonprofits involve both paid staff members and volunteers. Ideally the nonprofit must involve active engagement from the different stakeholders. Nonprofit leaders must therefore ensure that they are readily available to the members. Active listening must also occur. There must also be opportunities for collaboration. Any nonprofit must ensure that its members enjoy a safe place for constructive expression (Shier & Handy, 2020).

Thus, the importance of the concept of shared decision-making manifests in inclusive leadership being very relevant for the nonprofit sector. Including different perspectives in decision-making processes is vital for the nonprofit mission of addressing various social issues for the better good. According to the arguments of Ngah et al. (2022), the current nonprofit leaders should make their work environment attractive by having committed managers who engage in the development process. Thus, the relevance of inclusive leadership in the nonprofit sector compared to other models like the transformational model of leadership in the nonprofit sector appears relevant (DeSimone & Roberts, 2023). There is very negligible literature in the current context related to the application of inclusive leadership in the nonprofit sector because the concept was mostly studied by for-profit institutions (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Smith-Ruig, 2017).

Despite its relevance, the topic of inclusive leadership in the nonprofit sector is comparatively unexposed. Since the nonprofit sector aims at spreading awareness for social causes and working for the betterment of the public, inclusive leadership might bring some benefits to the organizational members (Bey, 2022; Brass et al., 2018). Nonprofits are also good context arenas for evaluating the effect of inclusive leadership on proactivity in the workplace. Since the nonprofit sector delivers primary services in any community by adding strength to the social structures through active

engagement in the social process (Faulk et al., 2021), it becomes an ideal platform for bringing positive organization change (Fay et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2010).

This is because the nonprofit literature on the subject indicates that the research on nonprofit leaders has mainly been concerned with the area of governance and boards rather than personal leadership styles (Hailey, 2006). However, recent research attempts to redress the issue by examining topics like participative and instrumental leadership, work engagement in the Italian social cooperatives (Sarti, 2014), transformational leadership, organizational culture in the Indian NGOs (Shiva & Suar, 2012), transformational leadership and organizational innovation in the nonprofit organizations in the United States (US) (Jaskyte, 2004), servant leadership and organizational commitment in the for-profit and nonprofit organizations in Italy (Bobbio et al., 2012).

Despite the rising interest in the subject, the current literature does not provide enough empirical insight. Although there are various studies concerning leadership and employee attitudes and behaviors in the private sector, many researchers recommend the study of leadership in nonprofit leader-follower interactions (Hailey, 2006; Park et al., 2018; Rowlod & Rohman, 2009). The existing research concerning leadership styles and employee outcomes also, until today, leaves insufficient empirical insight into leader-follower consequences in nonprofit settings (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Cicero et al., 2007, 2010; Cicero & Pierro, 2007; Gatti et al., 2017; Quintana et al., 2015; Sarti, 2014). The knowledge concerning the impact of leadership on work-related outcomes in nonprofit organizations is also scarce (Park et al., 2018), implying the necessity for further empirical research about how leadership shapes employee's behavior and attitudes.

These shortcomings are especially important because of the problem of compensation and recognition in nonprofits. Employee compensation is typically not at the same level as in for-profit organizations and the government (Bittschi et al., 2015). This may make the employees feel unrecognized within the organization. This will automatically affect their engagement (Hulkko-Nyman et al., 2012). Organizations must make efforts to ensure the leaders play an important part in better workplace outcomes because nonprofits are striving for better commitment (Vecina et al., 2013), engagement and performance (Erdurmazli, 2019). Also prevalent in existing literature is the significance of values in leadership. Mitchell's (2015) work on the impact of values in the leadership of NGOs in the US revealed that leaders who personified commitment, professionalism, and diverse work strategies portrayed better values in terms of reputation for effectiveness.

Similar observations also existed in the European region. Benevene et al. (2018) concluded that positive incidents concerning ethical leadership influenced the intention to stay among effectively committed volunteers in Italy. Other research also supports the importance of transformational leadership. This leadership behavior was an influencing factor for effective organizational commitment in line with previous research in different cultures (Gillet & Vandenberghe, 2014; Walumbwa et al.,

2005). Such outcomes might be explained by the ability of the leaders to motivate subordinates beyond the latter's self-interest for the interests of the business (Bass & Avolio, 1997, as cited in Aboramadan et al., 2020), communicate vision/mission within the business in a way that boosts the subordinates's association with the business (Jackson et al., 2013), and the recognition of the values of the subordinates.

In sum, the literature clearly indicates that the topic of nonprofit organizational leadership is very important from the perspective of strategy but is still underdeveloped in terms of research. Moving the field forward means linking theoretical perspectives on nonprofit organizational leadership to observable practices.

## 1.8. Queer identities and safety in workplaces.

Recent years have seen an increased awareness about the complex factors of diversity, inclusion, and identity politics in the context of organizations and projects. However, there still exist challenges in the literature regarding the relationship between multiple identities, power, and organizational factors. The literature regarding queer employees and European CSO contexts remains relatively underdeveloped in spite of the significance of such entities in terms of democratic activism. Even in spite of the significance of this issue and the various body of literature in relation to this topic in terms of discrimination in the workplace and the shortcomings in current approaches towards diversity in the workplace organization, there has been little consideration in this context of the demands and requirements of queer staff. The current study aims to fill this gap in the context of prevailing debates in this matter.

However, one of the regular criticisms in the diversity-management literature draws attention to the performative nature of organizational actions when social responsibilities are overarched by economic outcomes (Cabantous et al., 2016). This emerges as there may be the reinforcement of stereotypes and further division among different groups of employees through this approach and hence may end up concealing the underlying identity and power dynamics (Christensen, 2018). This indicates that diversity management may be utilized as a tool through which the social-demographic differentiations are constructed in accordance with organizational power relations and not necessarily based on inherent variations in social-demographic factors (Janssens & Zanoni, 2005).

It has been noted in literature that traditional methods are not able to handle intersectional realities in particular because intersectionality involves categories that are meant to be interrogated by critical approaches (Pullen et al., 2016). The difficulty arises in recognising multiple identities without solidifying or oversimplifying them. This brings forth questions regarding how multiple identities are to be recognised in research and in what ways reduction can be prevented. Holck and Muhr (2017)

have discussed the use of norm criticism in being aware of risks in solidifying differences and recognising the utility in recognising different experiences. Despite the universal recognition in theory of the significance of intersectionality, research often depicts simplified demographics. Consequently, diversity research tends not to consider the complexity of identities in operation, leading researchers including Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) to describe this body of research in particular as being generally oblivious towards the existence of intersectionality. The process of identifications being accumulative or codependent would not be represented through observations based upon only one social identity each time.

Meanwhile, other scholars stress the potential benefit of aspirational talk in the context of organizations. Diversity statements function much like the aspirational language evident in studies on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), whereby ideals of a desired future are articulated despite less-than-adequate current practices (Christensen et al., 2013). Such talk can constitute an opening for different organizational identities because the discourse per se creates people's roles and social realities (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014; Cabantous et al., 2016). This is reminiscent of Butler's argument that discourse is one of the essential ways in which gender performativity works.

Attention to identity and inclusion matters across civil society too. Concerns about the voluntary and nonprofit sectors partly stem from broader democratic challenges in coping with increasing diversity related to gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality. Yet, studies of these organizations often miss explicit attention to sexuality and ethnicity (Smith, 2005). This limited focus feeds into a larger gap regarding queer employees in CSOs, a gap that is especially pronounced in Europe, where such research is relatively scarce.

Meanwhile, scholarship on youth activism gives ample insight into how queer people develop forms of collective action and community. Queer youth are engaged in a range of activities, from NGO-driven campaigns to cultural production and online mobilization (Driver 2007; Murphy 2017). Self-identification is the core of the empowerment process for queer youth, enabled through access to safe spaces and peer networks (Gamarel et al., 2014; Wagaman, 2016). Their community practices often transcend the division between online and offline life (Thomson et al., 2021). Joining Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex+ (LGBTQI+) groups enables them to receive social support, reinforce identity, contribute to general community goals, and establish belongingness (Paceley, Keene, & Lough, 2015). The findings together emphasize that identity affirmation and strong ties with the community will mean a great deal regarding how queer employees experience themselves within organizational settings that so far have not been studied in depth. Research on workplace climate further reveals how high the stakes are for inclusion. In the US, many LGBTQI+ employees lack legal protections against discrimination, and the climate is shaped by wider institutional attitudes, laws, and social norms (Holman et al., 2019). Hostile environments show up as insulting remarks,

exclusion, and even physical harassment, with multiple studies documenting disturbing levels of abuse directed at gender and sexual minorities (Badgett et al., 2007; Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007; Herek, 2009; Velez et al., 2013). Consistently, the research suggests that discrimination is a common experience in workplaces (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

On the other hand, those that are seen to be supportive of queer workers appear to create stronger job satisfaction and intentions to disclose one's sexual identity (Button, 2001; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). This would include things like anti-discrimination policies, sexual orientation in diversity efforts, resource groups, or allowing same-sex partners access to employer-arranged social events.

Workplace stereotyping equally carries considerable importance in the context of sexual minorities. The theory of implicit inversion proposes that gay men and lesbians are perceived as infringers of regular gender stereotypes, and this underlies gay/lesbian stigma (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Goffman, 1963). The concealable character of sexual orientation often causes those individuals not expressing this orientation in the workplace in order to prevent stigma (Ragins, 2008). Other straight workers may exclude queer workers from social interactions in the anticipation of being subjected to courtesy stigma. Heterosexism expresses negative attitudes towards those people with homosexual orientations (Deitch, Butz, & Brief, 2004). The science of labour economics also investigates discrimination through the analysis of wage rates in the labour market by extending Becker's theory (1971, as cited in Shore et al., 2008) specifying that the wage-depressive orientation conducts discrimination towards minority groups. Evidence indicates that most gay workers tend to select those jobs that allow them to be open in regard to sexual identity regardless of reduced compensation or jobs in female-type or male-type professions (Ellis & Riggle, 1995).

However, most of the research in the organizational literature that pertains to sexual orientation explores ideas of heterosexism and discrimination. Despite the significance of this type of research, there seems to be the need to conduct research that aims towards inclusiveness from a different perspective altogether (Shore et al., 2008). This assumes particular relevance in consideration of the fact that there seems to be little research done regarding queer employees in the context of CSOs and no research done regarding the issue of inclusiveness.

The literature studied has highlighted several contradictions that exist in current research in the field of diversity. Diversity management tends to be performative, entrenching the same categories named in criticism and marginalising research interests in identity and power. The methodology of intersectionality can illuminate matters but tend to essentialise in hasty attempts at operationalising research. The discourse of aspiration can open up possibilities in alternative identities in discourse but not necessarily in practice. Queer experiences in research are essential in noting supportive contexts, identities, and inclusive cultures, yet research in organization Studies has remained confined in studying discrimination faced by queer staff and not the inclusions in the context of the organization.

This concern in particular has remained unexplored in European contexts in terms of employees in companies/CSO. The significance of research being conducted from the perspective of inclusiveness in this context arises from this concern.

# 2. METHODOLOGICAL PART.

## 2.1. The structure of the section.

This chapter presents an overview of the methodological design implemented in this research, organized according to the sequence provided by Mykolas Romeris University (2024). Therefore, the chapter starts with the theoretical model and it proceeds with restating the research aim and objectives. Following this, the chapter will cover research design which includes the research approach, the research instrument, data collection, data analyses, sampling, selection of respondents and research ethics (Figure 1).


*Figure 1:* Methodology chapter structure

## 2.2. Theoretical framework.

This research is grounded in the theoretical framework of inclusive leadership generated by Randel et al. (2018), which posits that individual differences in pro-diversity beliefs, humility, and cognitive complexity influence how leaders exhibit inclusive behaviours. These behaviours, in turn, strengthen employees' perception of inclusion which then fosters their work group identification and psychological empowerment. All this process ultimately leads to employee behavioral outcomes, such as creativity, job performance and reduced turnover.

Vis-à-vis this research, queer employees can work with different managers possessing either hostile or supportive approaches in the CSO context. Randel's theory helps to explain how the patterns of inclusive leadership can impact queer employees' productivity. For instance, member work group identification and psychological empowerment of minorities (queer people in this context) can boost their job performance, creativity and reduce turnover.

This theory guided us through the formulation of the interview questions and helped to get the most out of the interviews. The operationalization of the theoretical framework is presented in Figure 2 (research instrument section).

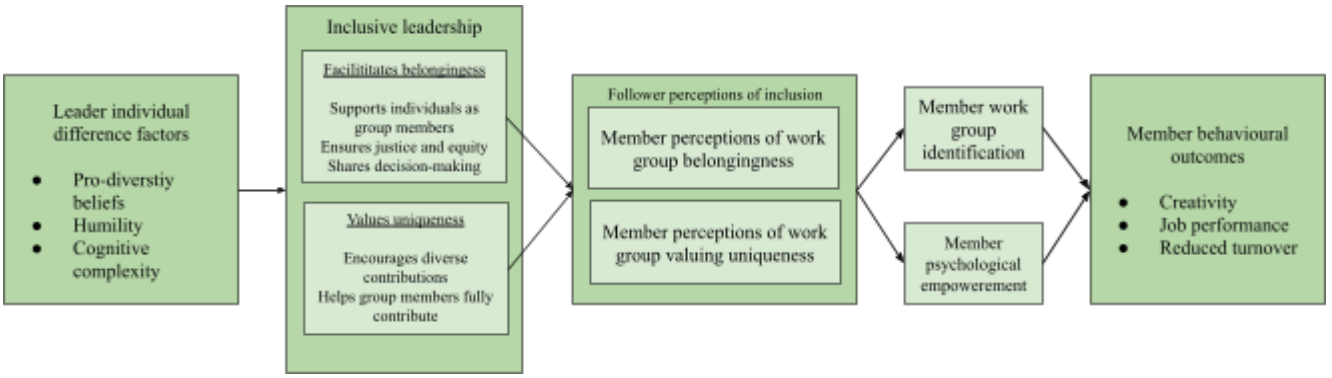


*Figure 2:* Theoretical framework
Cited from Randel et al. (2018)

## 2.3. The research aim and objectives.

The research aimed to explore the relationship between inclusive leadership and queer employees' productivity in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries, exploring both positive and potential limiting factors. And the research objectives were identified as:

1. To observe the effect of inclusive leadership behaviors on queer people working in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries;
2. To examine the ways in which inclusive leadership practices facilitate effective participation and communication of queer employees within the team of CSO projects;
3. To evaluate which inclusive leadership strategies are most valued by queer employees for improving their productivity within CSO projects setting;
4. To examine in which ways leaders create safe spaces for queer employee members of the CSO projects.

## 2.4. The research design.

This research adopts a phenomenological design to investigate the relationship between inclusive leadership and productivity of queer people. The choice of a phenomenological design is justified by the aim of the study to investigate queer employees' lived experiences of inclusive leadership and productivity. As Neubauer et al. (2019) explain, phenomenology "seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it" (p. 91). This directly aligns with the objectives of the research which aims to capture how queer employees perceive the impacts of inclusive leadership on their productivity.

Considering the nature and needs of the research to collect insights from different queer employees working in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries, conducting semi-interviews came off as a sensible choice to collect data. As its nature, this design helps to unfold the respondents' experiences, understandings and perspectives around a particular topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Additionally, a pilot interview was conducted before the main data collection to test the interview guide and refine the interview questions. This preliminary step was important for ensuring that the interviews would generate in-depth responses from participants (Malmqvist et al., 2019). The insights gained from this pilot phase strengthened the overall research design.

When it comes to the interviews, the respondents were provided with the interview questions in advance to allow sufficient time for reflection and preparation, thereby enhancing the depth of their responses during the semi-structured interviews. Since the topic was sensitive, the respondents had the right to decline answering any interview questions if those questions evoke distressing emotions or recall experiences of discrimination (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Moreover, additional narrative questions are often included to elicit much deeper insights from respondents and some clarifications were provided whenever respondents had difficulty understanding the questions (Robinson, 2023). In this way, they could fully engage with the interview. Furthermore, probing strategies, such as leaving a silence, encouragement and clarification prompts, were used to motivate respondents to reflect more deeply on their responses (Gorden, 1987, as cited in Robinson, 2023).

### 2.4.1. The research approach.

Mykolas Romeris University (2024) proposes that choosing the research strategy is deeply intertwined with the nature of the work, the subject, the objective and the research question. In this regard:

1. The research question attempted to explore the ways in which inclusive leadership impacts queer employees' productivity during projects who work in the civil society sector and therefore required qualitative data that could be analysed by using thematic analyses.
2. Queer employees in CSOs often work in contexts where experiences are nuanced, identity-sensitive and shaped by the organizational culture (Della Torre & Pereira, 2024). Therefore, the research strategy that relied on participant-centered data collection methods were assumed to be capable of getting richer insights into the impact of inclusive leadership (Fish & Russell, 2018).

3. The author's connection with CSOs across Europe and partner countries, as well as the willingness of queer employees to take part in semi-structured interviews, made qualitative research both feasible and appropriate.

In conclusion, the qualitative research was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive leadership influences queer employees in CSO projects.

### 2.4.2. The research instrument.

The grand-tour questions were formulated before delving into the main open-ended questions (questions 1-3). This part aimed to explore more about the organizational context and assess respondent's familiarity with their workplace. These questions ensured that the work environment was appropriately considered during data analysis and each respondent had valid experience to take part in the interview. After this part, the respondents were asked the main body questions, beginning with one focused on identifying the actions leaders take to promote diversity and inclusion within projects. The question and its follow-up (question 4 and 4.1) were crafted to explore participants' perception of belongingness and how it is experienced within their organizations. The next questions (question 5 and 5.1) were set to learn how respondents' unique qualities are valued and how leadership behaviors influence their comfort level to express their unique perspectives during projects. Furthermore, the next couple of questions (question 6, 6.1 and 6.2) intended to identify what leadership behaviours encourage respondents to contribute their diverse perspectives to projects and find out a correlation between these behaviours and respondents' productivity. Following that, the effects of recognition and appreciation on respondents' productivity was examined with next questions (question 7, 7.1 and 7.2) as well as the ways in which leaders make a space for different voices during meetings (question 8, 8.1 and 8.2). The final questions (question 9, 9.1 and 10) were prepared to give space for respondents to give their recommendations for leaders and insights not previously addressed during the interview.

*Table 1:* The operationalization of the theoretical framework

| Variable | Theoretical concept | Interview question |
|---|---|---|
| Belongingness | • Supports individuals as group members<br>• Ensures justice and equity<br>• Shares decision-making | 4.What actions (policies, language, behaviours) do leaders take to promote diversity and inclusion within the projects? In your experience |

| *Table 1:* The operationalization of the theoretical framework | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Variable** | **Theoretical concept** | **Interview question** |
| | | as a queer person, which of these actions felt most impactful?<br>4.1. How would you describe the ways your leaders include or acknowledge diverse queer identities in your team's daily interactions within projects? How do these interactions change as the project evolves?<br><br>7. What are the typical ways leaders in your organization express appreciation, and which do you find most meaningful?<br>7.1. How has recognition or appreciation from leaders influenced your motivation and productivity? Please share a specific story, if possible.<br>7.2. Can you please share times when this recognition has led you to take extra tasks or go above and beyond project requirements? |
| Uniqueness | • Encourages diverse contributions<br>• Helps group members to fully contribute | 5.How comfortable do you feel expressing unique ideas or approaches as a queer person during project phases<br>, and what role does leadership play in fostering this comfort?<br>5.1. Can you describe a time when leadership behaviours made you feel safe or unsafe to express those ideas?<br><br>6.What kinds of leadership behaviours create a safe space |

| *Table 1:* The operationalization of the theoretical framework | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Variable** | **Theoretical concept** | **Interview question** |
| | | for you to bring your whole self to projects?<br>6.1. Can you describe the situation where feeling included or excluded shaped how you approached your work?<br>6.2. How did that experience influence your work pace, ability to meet deadlines, or quality of your output?<br><br>8. How do leaders in your team create space for different voices and perspectives during meetings?<br>8.1. Have you ever felt your queer identity limited your participation? If so, how did leadership actions affect your focus, motivation or willingness to innovate on projects?<br>8.2. How were these addressed, and what was the impact on your productivity? |

### 2.4.3. Data collection.

The data collection phase started with the first semi-structured interview on 6th October 2025 and ended with the tenth interview on 6th November 2025. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. Nine interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams platform, meanwhile one interview took place in a café setting per participant's request. Online interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams, whereas the in-person interview was recorded using the Voice Memos application. Prior to data collection, two pilot studies were conducted separate from the main sample to verify the apps and their features operated correctly when recording and exporting audio files. These pilot studies confirmed that both Microsoft Teams and Voice Memos functioned reliably in recording and exporting audio files, and therefore no changes were deemed necessary.

Transcriptions were generated using the automatic transcription feature in Microsoft Teams and Voice Memos. Following this, all interviews were reviewed iteratively and any transcription errors were corrected to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were stored in Google Documents and assigned pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.

### 2.4.4. Data analysis.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the transcripts, each participant got the transcript to approve that they do not want to change or leave out anything and only seven of the respondents replied to approve their transcripts. Birt et al. (2016) argue that member checking can be challenging because participants may become unwilling to continue their involvement in the research, particularly when the subject matter is quite sensitive. However, the original interview data were retained in the analysis based on the original informed consent, as participants had consented to having their interview analysed before having the interview.

During the data analysis, inductive thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data thoroughly. This approach was selected because it was well-suited to exploratory research on this topic which allowed the codes to be developed from scratch (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By the end of the coding process, five themes were formulated from scratch by using inductive thematic analysis.

### 2.4.5. Sampling.

This research employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The researcher's background in gender equality advocacy and civil society work provided already existing professional networks within LGBTQI+ advocacy and CSOs across Europe.

In the first stage, the researcher identified initial participants from established professional networks who met the selection criteria. In this way, the purposive sampling techniques have been used and the researcher acknowledges that being a part of this community as well as having the networking came with both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, the researcher was seen as "one of us" and for that reason the respondents could be more authentic during the interview which enabled them to give more honest answers. On the other hand, the researcher could unconsciously inherit overly sympathy while interacting with the respondents (Holmes, 2020).

In the second stage, the respondents who participated were asked to recommend other queer employees who might be eligible to take part in this research. This chain sampling, known as snowball sampling in qualitative research (Hair et al., 2020, as cited in Ting et al., 2025), continued until these

potential respondents were contacted to verify if they can fulfil the selection criteria and in the end, the target sample size (N=10) was reached.

As a result, this research adopted purposive sampling to select initial participants, then transitioned to snowball sampling which proved effective for geographically dispersed queer employees across multiple countries (Ting et al., 2025).

### 2.4.6. Selection of respondents.

The following set of criteria was formulated based on the research aim, objective and question that shaped the whole research:

1. The respondent must identify themselves as a queer person.
2. The respondent must currently work as an employee in a CSO setting.
3. The respondent must have at least six months of work experience in a CSO setting
4. The respondent must currently work in any country of Europe and partner countries.

The first criteria was chosen because the research specifically examines how inclusive leadership affects queer employees' productivity. Only individuals who identify themselves as queer can provide authentic insights into this phenomenon by real experience. Since the research focuses on understanding inclusive leadership particularly in CSO projects, respondents must have first-hand experience working in this organizational context. Hence, the second criteria was selected. When it comes to the third criteria, it was assumed that six months would provide enough time to understand the leadership in the workplace and how it affects their productivity. The last criteria was set to maintain a focused geographic scope for the research.

*Table 2.* Respondent summary

| Respondent | Role | Time as an employee in CSOs setting | Country |
|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent 1 | Employee | 2 years | Azerbaijan |
| Respondent 2 | Employee | 1.2 year | France |
| Respondent 3 | Employee | 4 years | Slovenia |
| Respondent 4 | Employee | 3 years | Türkiye |
| Respondent 5 | Employee | 3 years | Slovenia |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent 6 | Employee | 1 year | Azerbaijan |
| Respondent 7 | Employee | 5.5 years | Belgium |
| Respondent 8 | Employee | 1 year | Azerbaijan |
| Respondent 9 | Employee | 2.5 years | Germany |
| Respondent 10 | Employee | 2.5 year | Belgium |

### 2.4.7. Research ethics.

All respondents were sent a consent form via email explaining the research topic, the purpose of research, researcher's identity, the supervisor, the university and how the findings will be used. The consent form explained that the interview participation would take approximately 45-60 minutes. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all questions were answered to their satisfaction. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from all respondents by having them sign the consent form, which explicitly confirmed their voluntary agreement to participate. The consent form explicitly stated that participants could refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

All data was handled with strict confidentiality. Interview data including the respondents' names and job positions was anonymized prior to analyses and presentation. Therefore, the respondents were assigned pseudonyms in the thesis. Audio and video recordings were used solely for transcription and analysis purposes. All audio files were deleted upon completion of the research.

# 3. FINDINGS.

## 3.1. The structure of the section.

Our research involved semi-structured interviews with 10 queer employees from CSOs. Data found throughout the interviews was analysed using thematic coding to identify recurring themes. After using inductive coding to derive the themes from the transcripts, five themes emerged:

*Table 3.* Themes summary

| Theme name | How many times it was mentioned (across all interviews) | How many participants mentioned it |
|---|---|---|
| Authentic recognition of queer employees | 28 | 9 |
| Importance of structural empowerment | 30 | 10 |
| Identity safety and belonging | 22 | 10 |
| Work quality and motivation | 34 | 10 |
| All roads lead to intersectionality | 85 | 6 |

## 3.2. Authentic recognition of queer employees

Recognition in the organizations turned out to happen in different ways. People experienced recognition through one-on-one conversations with their managers, written feedback during evaluations, public recognition in team meetings, and special celebration events.

One-on-one recognition was the most common type. For instance, Participant 3 talked about their manager's reactions: *"The thing about my boss is that when they really like what you do and what you make, they get a full body reaction. They just can't contain themselves… They would speak with their body and they would want to talk to you about it for so long."*. Such interactions helped Participant 3 recognise and appreciate the full extent of their achievement, including projects like sign language workshops.

In contrast, Participant 10 also experienced recognition through multiple channels such as one-on-one conversations, written feedback during evaluations, and public recognition during weekly team meetings where achievements were celebrated. Yet what stood out most was not the variety of forms but their sincerity. Participant 10 reflected: *"I think for me the most meaningful form of appreciation is really again when my perspectives are acknowledged and valued and when managers, leaders explicitly recognize that and how these contributions are the unique and necessary goes to the project and not only again as a box to tick for inclusion that is just on paper, then that feels really, really validating."*

Meanwhile, Participant 2 experienced recognition in a notably different way. Rather than explicit acknowledgement of their identity or individual contributions, recognition occurred through inclusive decision-making: "*When they tell me that my idea was good and that's usually feedback like that when it's incorporated, when I see that my decision was taken into account. That's very special!"* For Participant 2, recognition was implicit and identity-neutral, not because queer identity was invalidated, but because the organization functioned on consensus-based, collective principles that valued everyone's ideas regardless of their background.

Participant 7 talked about the importance of investing time: *"Often leaders don't have the time and just taking that 10 minutes a week to catch up really helps one-on-one. And that really makes you feel I don't work for my boss. I work for an organization that's really clear for me, but the boss is still bossing around and so it does make a difference if I feel appreciated and included in that leadership position."* They also valued personalized gestures, particularly remarking on the impact of end-of-year reflections:*"At the end of the year, the director draws and writes accounts for everyone and that feels really nice. When she sends an e-mail, it feels a lot less personal. But that feels really nice and that just makes you feel good about your role."* Similarly, Participant 3's manager invested time , but showed it through detailed, specific feedback rather than generic praise. After every project, Participant 3's manager *"would tell me all of the things I've done"* across different initiatives, helping them see patterns in their accomplishments. This contrasted with the experience of Participant 1, whose manager offered praise primarily to prevent resignation: "*My manager kind of gave me some praises and she just complimented me to kind of manipulate and motivate me for the next month. But in reality, I kind of also understood that that was not sincere enough."* For them, time spent in recognition was strategic rather than genuine which was offered at moments of crisis rather than as consistent acknowledgement of contribution.

Recognition sometimes occurred through physical gestures or group celebrations, and these embodied practices revealed much about Participant 3 noted, "*"They would take us for celebratory dinners after a very successful, huge project… or we would have like a coworkers strength building, team building day."* These activities created moments of collective joy and the feeling of belongingness. Participant 4

described more informal expressions of appreciation: *"Sometimes if they give permission, we love to hug each other."*

Unusually, formal ceremonies could produce unexpected experiences. Participant 5 recounted receiving a certificate at an appreciation event for their project. When offered one personally, they requested, *"can you give it to the organization, please?"* For Participant 5, collective rather than individual recognition mattered more and it shows that some individuals find authentic recognition through contribution to the team rather than having their personal spotlight.

Participant 10 explained that real appreciation meant managers would *"explicitly recognize my efforts and how these contributions are unique and necessary to the project and not only again as a box to tick for inclusion that is just on paper, then that feels really, really validating."* The repeated emphasis on avoiding tokenistic "box-ticking" suggests that participants could really distinguish genuine appreciation from performative gestures. Participant 1 felt deeper demotivation after receiving much insincere appreciation: "*"After some time you also get burned out and lose all of your productivity because you don't take appreciation seriously. Because it's not sincere enough and you know that there is a certain motive behind it. And that's why after six or seven months, I actually even wanted to drop out of work."*

Acknowledging others' work was not equally easy for all participants, and this variation itself became a site of learning and growth. Participant 5 shared, *"I am the person that I don't need this. I can get easily annoyed if you compliment me on my work."* For participant 5, receiving recognition was uncomfortable because they possessed a critical, self-oriented orientation toward their work. Yet Participant 5 came to understand this as a limitation: "*But I needed to learn to give to others, and I didn't know how to do it. That was a long process that I can say, you know, bravo, you did it well."* This learning process reveals that authentic recognition also requires managers and colleagues to understand individual differences. Not everyone responds to the same forms of appreciation in the same way. This is distinct from Participant 3 or Participant 10, who thrived on explicit acknowledgement.

Genuine recognition fostered psychological safety and enabled employees to take greater risks and engage more deeply with projects they do. Participant 3 described, *"They would come in and open things up, 'No, you can do this.' And that actually made me not only work more, but I got more involved in what we were doing. I became less afraid to ask questions or admit when I didn't understand something, because they made me feel safe. They'd constantly say, 'Hey, if you don't understand, please tell us.' And whenever I did speak up about something you didn't get, they'd always respond with, 'Thank you for asking'."*

Similarly, Participant 10 experienced how autonomy plus recognition created a virtuous cycle. They described being *"given the opportunity to design the entire program which included both the thematic*

*approach and the framing and the theoretical framework of the event and in that time I was encouraged to be as radical as I wanted."* When their work was later recognised, it boosted both motivation and sense of belonging: *"That kind of trust and appreciation boosted my motivation and sense of belonging. And feel that I'm doing the right thing and there is space for me to do what I think is necessary."* In this case, the manager gave autonomy first, then recognised what was accomplished, creating trust and motivation in the end.

This contrasted sharply with Participant 1's experience, where manipulation turns out to disguise as recognition. Participant 1 recalled their manager saying, *"You have to stick with us. There are some exciting projects coming up, and we believe that only you can do it. We believe in your vision, blah blah blah."* Yet Participant 1 understood this not as genuine encouragement but as a retention strategy: *"But in reality, I kind of also understood that that was not sincere enough."* Where Participant 3 and Participant 10 felt safe and empowered, Participant 1 felt trapped and manipulated.

Participant 7 offered a vivid metaphor capturing the power of authentic recognition: "*You're like a bird and when you get appreciation, your feathers kind of glow a bit and they are quite big, if that makes sense. And otherwise we're just kind of like a wet duck, but not in a good way… it's a well oiled machine when you get appreciation and it's a greasy machine when you don't get appreciation."*

Participant 10 summarized the difference between being valued for authentic contributions and being used as a symbol: "*... not only again as a box to tick for inclusion that is just on paper."* However, Participant 1 experienced their queer identity being used as a symbol. The same manager who publicly asked them to share their queer experience – *"Can you give some more queer experience here?"* – also demanded they hide it in other contexts. Participant 1 recalled: "*I felt like this is a circus and I'm a clown queer person here entertaining them because they are international guests."* But, when Participant 1 attended events with right-wing government officials, the same manager who had asked them to showcase their queerness now demanded them to conceal themselves: *"…in one of the events I had to send a picture for the registration and in the picture I even had a necklace and she would make it a problem and say that it's better to take out the necklace. And she would always mask these things by saying, 'Oh, I am just worried about your safety.'"* Participant 1 also added: *"Knowing the personality of the leaders, I knew that this was not merely my safety, but more of the organization's safety, that she doesn't want the organization to look like a queer friendly place."* Participant 1 was let to be open in terms of their queer identity or was suppressed depending not on their value as an employee but on the organization's political calculations. Participant 1 also recalled their manager's vision: "*...she has a dream of opening a queer bar in the capital city… if our project does great, we will get the trust of the government."* But instead of moving forward, things went backward: *"not only we did not open a queer club or a drag bar. We kind of just restricted everything about queerness in the workplace."*

This juxtaposition of the promises and what actually happened destroyed their trust entirely as Participant 1 reflected: "*When you compare those promises to what actually happened, you kind of lose your trust… This also affects your productivity and your motivation, because you don't actually believe in the people that you're working for and you are over it. You're just doing it for the money."* Participant 1 described the core problem: *"They never respected the queer identities because it was just a symbol of diversity."*

Authentic recognition was demonstrated not only through explicit praise but through how leaders engaged with employee ideas and suggestions. Participant 7 explained how they felt these dynamics in their organization: *"For me, taking my suggestions into consideration and how they communicate whether they go with my suggestion or not with me is quite important. So, if you take the solution just make sure you acknowledge that this is my solution."*

To sum up, authentic recognition and tokenistic recognition look completely different. Real recognition is specific, consistent, and calibrated to what individual people actually need. When organizations do this well, employees feel genuinely valued and more engaged. But when recognition is used strategically, it can backfire. The importance of authentic recognition reveals itself especially when it shapes whether queer employees actually believe they belong and are valued in the organization, or whether they see themselves as tools that prove the organization is inclusive enough.

## 3.3. Importance of structural empowerment

Participation and having a say in the organization was described as a central value across most workplaces. Participant 2 explained the importance: "*The big value is making sure everyone has a say and everyone participates. That's really important and also trying to have a horizontal structure… So that's like a big aspect of everyone being equal and everyone can contribute. That's really important."* Participant 10 described a similar environment: *"During meetings, there is a strong effort to make space for different voices and perspectives… Everyone is really encouraged to contribute ideas and there is openness to hearing different viewpoints."* Participant 10 also noted that *"overall leadership… is quite intentional about creating a participatory environment. Where everyone's input is valued."*

This commitment to participation showed up in practical ways. Participant 2 explained their meeting structure: *"When we have a big meeting, we split in very little groups and exchange in people or three to four people. And then we go back to the main group and bring those ideas and then we go back in little groups like it's very working very well."* This structure made sure that many people got a chance to speak rather than a few dominating. Participant 2 also noted they didn't need permission to participate: "*I don't ask for their permission because the way we work is horizontal… I have the flexibility to organize how I want. I also have the flexibility to lead my work how I want and… I give*

*that freedom as well to my teammates because I trust them."* This trust-based approach extended to practical matters. Participant 2 shared: "*We trust each other, and we have a lot of flexibility as well… I can bring initiatives as well… I want to bring those initiatives because they trust me to do the work."*

Listening without judgment was a key part of how organizations made space for participation during team meetings and decision making as Participant 4 described their team's approach: *"Well, there are some disagreements… But we take notes and we listen to each other and I think the most important part is listening. Not just hearing, listening to each other. We listen, we don't judge, we take notes and we try to understand each other's point of views… because we have different backgrounds, we have different opinions."* Participant 4 emphasized that this created safety: "*We listen to each other. And we value the difference. We value different opinions and we want to create a safer environment for everybody."* Participant 9 also talked about listening as a practice: *"They try to hear everyone talking… when there are some different cases… they try to hear everyone's opinion before making a decision."*

Some organizations created specific spaces and practices to make sure people could speak and be heard. Participant 7 talked about their team meetings: *"...we always start by a check-in about how we're doing and we have a question of the week. So the question of the week might be like what's your favorite yogurt as much as it might be like how do you feel about your gender or whatever? And then we close by celebrating, like personal celebration and work achievements."* They also added these practices enabled people to be authentic: "*...if you're feeling down you can say it. And so it's not a secret you're feeling down and so you can be yourself in the workplace. And for me, that's quite important as a queer person for inclusion."*

When organizations supported queer voices specifically, people described this as important. Participant 3 talked about how their workplace handled queer topics: *"When we talk about transness and queerness, they prefer to sit back and listen… And when the topic shifts to us as trans people – how we live, how we feel – they would say, 'This is your space to talk about your experience. If you find it relevant, go ahead. I'm not gonna say anything, because it is not my place. I'll just listen and see how you connect it to what we're discussing."* Participant 3 noted that queer ideas were constantly welcomed: "*Anything regarding queerness, it just went. Any idea you had, it was welcomed… There was always support. I didn't feel any discomfort regarding that."* This contrasted with organizations where queer people's perspectives faced barriers. Participant 6 experienced exclusion: *"Once, I got left out of a project working on 'inclusive' project materials because they said my queer perspectives were 'too political.' I feel pretty shut out, so I just did my tasks with almost no personal input."*

People valued being asked about their ideas and having those ideas taken seriously: Participant 5 described good leadership: "*I think that the most important thing is… when you have the coordinator of the project, they are very open to listening to your ideas."* Participant 5 also described how their

organization worked: *"They give us a structure and a space, so we can express our feelings and problems we have with the organization. And they try to listen, and they try to accommodate in the best way possible. Of course, they can't change everything they have to, but they can try to change some of the ways we usually work."* Participation 5 also recalled the time when their idea was actually implemented: "*I proposed a workshop where we would make jewelry out of bones… We were not sure whether this idea would be accepted or not. Because it could seem kind of problematic, but then it was accepted and around 25 people showed up for this workshop because they found it interesting."* This stood in sharp contrast to Participant 8's experience of dismissal: "*...I suggested a concept… and the manager brushed me off saying that I was being too emotional which I needed to be more radical. Ever since I kept second-guessing myself before sharing my ideas."*

The difference between these experiences reveal how leadership shapes participation. Participation 8 described what enabled them to speak: "*When leaders take time to ask why I made certain design choices and show genuine interest rather than judgment, I feel more confident to bring my authentic self. Simple gestures like active listening or constructive feedback definitely help build trust. I don't need special treatment. I just need a space where different perspectives are respected and not silently dismissed."* Participant 8 also recalled a moment when their idea was actually heard. "*Even though I suggested a rather unconventional design idea… they actually listened and used it. It made me feel that there's still some room for new perspectives here and this little fraction indeed made me feel seen."*

Participation sometimes can face some limitations based on context and structural limits. Participant 1 explained that context: "*A lot of times the ideas that I would come up with were not suitable for the context, they were not quite implementable, if that makes sense… in our case there were a lot of restrictions. So my ideas were more on the abroad side. So a lot of times when I came up with ideas, they were saying that I don't understand the context and restrictions that we're working within."* Even in organizations where participation was quite encouraged, power dynamics can affect it so easily. Participant 3 reflected on this tension: "*"Because this is the person who's in charge of your finances and in charge of whether or not you'll be able to pay rent. They have so much power over you. The power imbalance is so crazy and you want to get along with them… if you want to have a good job."*

Participant 10 described that their leaders try to foster equal participation: "*...in project planning, there is a conscious effort to include participants and speakers who represent diverse intersections of gender identity, race, disability, class and geography as well."* However, not all organizations created genuine space for participation. Participant 8 explained how limited participation was created: *"Meetings in our team are structured and led by the same few people. I didn't see any encouragement for open discussion and only those that align with leadership perspectives actually matter for them."* Participant

6 observed the same pattern: "*There's no real effort to make space space for people. The same few people run the meetings, and there's nothing to help quieter or marginalized folks speak up."*

When organizations dismissed concerns about participation, it created harm. But when organizations took time to listen to concerns about participation, it could make a big difference. Participant 2 described what happened when they spoke up: *"There was a lack of recognition because I tried to bring stuff up and they wouldn't directly tell me, "no, we won't do that." I told them that it's really not working for me and I don't see my place here. I don't understand what is asked from me and how I can move inside that decision making space. So they took the time to talk with me individually and asked me all about my feelings since I arrived and how we could work together better."* This responsiveness made all the difference: "*...having a meeting in person with that person, with your leaders made you feel more motivated and productive because I was really losing motivation… And after that it was much better, much easier to contribute and do my role."*

Participation 10 talked about what real participation meant beyond just having people in the room: *"Inclusion is not only about representation, but it's also about redistributing power, so it would mean like asking who gets to make decisions, whose perspectives shape the narrative, and whose labour and emotional energy sustains the team. So for queer employees, especially those with intersecting structure, structural oppressions, feeling included also means that leadership needs to be accountable and self-reflective… it's important to see them willing to unlearn and to share the space and to transform the structures and not just simply the language… this practice shouldn't be just a side goal within singular projects… but a guiding principle that informs everything of how we work and not just what we produce as workers."*

Some organizations didn't explicitly acknowledge queer identity but still created space for participation through inclusive principles. Participant 2 explained: *"There's no direct policy or anything. However, because we have our big vision is to make everyone participate, make everyone fight against the exclusion of anyone… we are not excluded directly… but it's not directly acknowledged."* Participant 6 articulated what they needed from leaders: *"I need leaders who admit they don't know everything, who are willing to listen and learn without judgment. Safe spaces come from leaders who don't just pay lip service but actually stand up for queer rights, even if it makes things uncomfortable or complicated."*

To sum up, when leaders actually implemented ideas, listened without judgement, and responded to feedback about participation, queer employees felt valued and engaged. However, where participation remained surface-level, where queer employees' perspectives were labeled problematic, or where the same few voices dominated, people withdrew.

## 3.4. Identity safety and belonging

The most basic thing that allowed people to bring their whole selves to work was when leaders didn't censor or criticise how they presented their identity. Participant 3 explained what this felt like: *"I think if the leader doesn't censor the way you speak about your identity, it makes so much difference… they don't criticize the way you present your gender or the way you your body language is, but they just let you be. They don't breathe down your neck, constantly checking in or correcting you… But they just like to let you come in, they listen to you and they take your word for it and they treat you as a human being."* Participant 10 described what this freedom meant: *"...just the fact that you are allowed to exist without over-explaining your identity or you having to minimize your politics. That's very important. So I would say that it's maybe about creating room for complexity rather than just acceptance."*

For Participant 3, having a queer leader amplified this effect: *"...when you have someone who's so inclusive, it's even better for someone who is queer like you to be your boss, your leader. It's a world different experience because I don't have to censor myself."* Participant 3 described the relief: *"When I realised that my employee is a trans person, I felt that I don't have to hide any parts of me or I don't even have to think about how I present myself or how I speak about myself. I said to myself that it's fine. It's very chill."*

In contrast, some people worked in places where they had to hide parts of themselves. Participant 9 described how this worked in their previous jobs: *"In my previous jobs, I was always limiting myself with my own ideas. Also I wouldn't bring many different ideas to the table which would have a risk to be outed to them. I was avoiding any part that could be seen feminine."* Participant 9 also explained why they didn't tell their colleagues about their identity: *"because the people who I consider the problematic people, they have very limited ideas about me as a person. They see me only in my work persona, so if they would know me much more, they would keep passive aggression towards me, but they still don't know me."*

Some organizations actively demanded queer people hide themselves. Participant 1 described being told not to look queer people: *"you're going here and we're really advising you to act straight because the general audience of this training will be really straight people and you will not be safe."* Participant 1 also talked about being asked to remove signs of their queerness from workplace: *"I had a like a teacup which I had a queer sticker on it and she would criticize me for having that and ask me to rip out the sticker because maybe other people would tell on us to the police or the government that we have a queer worker in the organization… She will make a lot of other problems like having like queer pins in my personal work drawer and she will say that this shouldn't belong here because what if they search in the office and they find these?"*

In other places, the issue was not active suppression but silence. Participant 6 described working in an organization that talked about but did not really include queer people: *"I realised pretty fast that being*

*queer here isn't something people are super comfortable with. I found myself kind of keeping that part of me low-key just to avoid judgement. When people talk about 'diversity,' it mostly means gender equality in a very binary, traditional way. And the moment anything about queer people comes up, the whole room goes quiet or someone makes a little joke that reminds you you're not really included in the conversation."* Participant 8 described how this silence is worked: *"In daily interaction, nobody really acknowledges anything queer. It's like the topic just doesn't exist in the organization. People never talk about inclusion or identity, and anything that doesn't fit the "normal" vibe is quietly ignored. Honestly, that kind of silence can even feel more isolating than some directly criticizing you. It makes you feel like you have to hide anything that's different about you."*

When people had to hide their identity, they learned to separate themselves from their work. As Participant 8 explained: *"Unfortunately, none of this ever got addressed. There isn't really any open space in the organization to talk about diversity or anything related to identity. So I kind of ended up separating who I am from the 'professional' version of me just to avoid conflict. It keeps things running smoothly, I guess, but it also makes me feel less emotionally connected to the work I'm doing."* Participant 1 described what happened to their work when trust broke: *"You kind of lose your trust after some time. And this also affects your productivity and your motivation, because you don't actually believe in the people that you're working for and you are over it. You're just doing it for the money. Maybe that's like the only, I think for me, that was the only motivation at the time that I was a young student and I needed money and that's why I just kept going, kept going."* Participant 1 also talked about learning to separate their queer identity from work but explained that this shouldn't be necessary for everyone: "*I kind of learned to separate my queer identity. I'm in general my personal identity from the workplace, and that helped a lot. But I don't think that you have to come up with that solution… You don't have to separate your queer identity. You don't have to kind of restrict yourself in the workplace to just be more comfortable and give yourself a peace of mind."*

In organizations where people could be themselves, different things helped create that safety. Participant 3 talked about the power of a queer workplace: *"It's definitely a huge thing that we're all queer and that we all have similar experiences, especially with all of us being AFAB (assigned female at birth) and so we were trans AFAB people and so we lived our lives in safety within the organization."* When people worked in organizations that valued their identity and perspective, they felt included in their work. Participant 10 said: *"when my perspective and it's again about both my academic grounding and my lived experience are valued and when they are seen as an asset for producing high quality work, then I feel truly included and appreciated and it makes a difference."* Participant 10 also talked about what happened when they worked in places that treated queer identity as something to manage: *"...in the international development and humanitarian sector, my queer identity was definitely treated as something different or to handle with care or even to hide. And that is*

*what definitely limited my participation. It made me feel less motivated. It made me feel disconnected… it was emotionally draining and that's also another reason why I left."*

Some organizations created belonging through structured practices. Participant 5 described their weekly meetings: *"We have meetings every Monday where we talk about how we're feeling. The first part of the agenda is always a check-in – how are you feeling, what's going on, what problems you're facing. We try to keep things very open."* Participant 4 talked about how their organization created safety by defining what they didn't want first: *"They wanted to write down what a safe space looks like for us, and we said that this workplace shouldn't be homophobic, veganphobic etc. We even shared our personal struggles and they were taken into account by management."* Some organizations created belonging through shared meals and time together. Participant 2 said: *"We do a lot of shared lunches. I think that's also important to do and it just gives more trust and more confidence in each other to be able to work and fight together."*

Having a leader who understands queer people's lives made a difference. Participant 1 remembered a time when their manager acknowledged the realities of being queer: *"When I was in Berlin for a training, I kind of asked my manager because she was aware that I was in a like long distance relationship with my partner and I asked her if I can stay one more day in Berlin to see him, she would allow me. And she will always say that she understands me because she knows that even in Azerbaijan, you don't have enough chances to live fully with your partner."*

When people felt included and part of their teams, it affected their performance positively. Participant 7 said: *"When I feel included, I feel more friendly towards work and wanting to work, whereas if I feel excluded and I feel quite the opposite, I feel like then I can't be bothered so much. It's like one is an accelerator and the other one is a brake."* In organizations where people could be themselves, they were also willing to take risks and make mistakes. Participant 10 explained: *"So it's okay to make mistakes and it's really good to be asking for feedback… so it makes it safe. It feels safe for me to make mistakes and ask for feedback… So that makes me feel safe and expresses these ideas like I know sometimes I bring to the table ideas that might be too radical for institutional spaces and it's good to be able to express these ideas in these spaces."*

In organizations where people were learning about queer issues, we could see progress happen over time. Participant 2 described how their partner organizations changed: *"They would make posts that were in a way like trans exclusionary, especially excluding non-binary people. I remember last year it was a bit weird and felt very excluded, but throughout the time we've worked with these organizations… they started learning and they started educating themselves and they started listening to us."*

However, the ability to be oneself sometimes varies by context. Participant 3 described this when asked if they ever felt exclusion in the workplace because of their gender: *"When it comes to my*

*gender, absolutely no. I don't think that ever. But maybe there were times where I would talk about my sexuality. But again, like in this organization, no. But the thing is, we would work with a lot of other queer organizations. That's what I would feel sometimes left out because not all of them would be trans."* While Participant 1 explained how context itself might limit what people could do: *"...this is probably not a lot of like leadership issues, but more of the context issue that a lot of times the ideas that I would come up with were not suitable for the context. They were not quite implementable… because you will see like you would follow and see a lot of gender equality NGOs abroad and they are quite comfortable within their scope… But in our case there were a lot of restrictions… a lot of times when I came up with ideas, they were telling me that I need to understand the context and restrictions that we're working within."*

To sum up, when leaders let queer people exist as they are, when organizations treat queer identity as a strength, and when there are regular practices that build trust, people feel included and work better. When there's silence around queerness, when people are told to act straight, when perspectives are seen as "too political", employees separate their personal selves from their professional roles just to survive at work. Thus, people who feel safe take risks and stay engaged, while people who compartmentalise end up disconnected from work and just working for the paycheck.

## 3.5. Work quality and motivation.

When people felt included at work, it changed everything about how they worked and how much they cared about what they were doing. Participant 3 described the difference: *"...whenever I felt included, whenever I felt like there was a space and I could do things and say things… I felt good about myself. I felt good about everyone… I felt really great, I was motivated to do the work, I was eager to do more work and I was so happy to put in the extra work."* Participant 4 similarly noted: *"So if I feel included and if I feel understood, it positively affects my performance. Yes, because I've been in places that I didn't feel included. It can be just the job that I work or some other collective. But finally I found and I created some places I felt included and I aimed to reach people and also make them feel included because I know how important this is."*

Participant 10 explained the connection between inclusion and work quality: *"...when leadership is genuinely inclusive, like again, not tokenistic and not like as a box to tick, but meaning really they value different identities and create also psychological safety and make space for people's individual working styles… that makes my performance improve significantly."* Participant 3 talked about how not being understood as a queer person affected their ability to work: *"...when I worked somewhere else, anywhere else that wasn't queer or that didn't want to have anything to do with queer, I had to hide my identity and I hated showing up to work. I worked less. I did so little work just because I felt*

*repressed and I felt like I couldn't do anything… When I can't be myself and be as I am, I'm not going to interact with people, I'm not going to even bother to do anything. I'll feel bad and useless, and I'll be doing as little as possible."*

Participant 5 described how the atmosphere shaped their productivity: *"I felt more comfortable usually when there were more queer people or something, or it was just a more open atmosphere, I was more productive. If I look back I did enjoy it more, and I did more for that. For some other projects, I do the bare minimum. I do stuff one hour before the deadline."* Participant 7 talked about how inclusion affected the quality of work: *"When I feel excluded, I'll just do the minimum. So I'll still get things done on time but their quality may not be as good. I think it influences the quality more than the quantity."*

When people felt rejection, the loss of motivation became even more acute. Participant 5 explained: *"I wouldn't say I felt unsafe, but I said it would be a waste of time to even express, because I know that they wouldn't understand."* Participant 1 talked about how feeling disrespected affected their commitment to entire projects: *"...from the point that we had the problem and the like discussion about the necklace, I kind of got really discouraged that I don't want to do this. Like if this is the conversation we're having now, even before the event, I really don't want to deal with work anymore."* This discouragement led to withdrawal: *"And as a queer person, I never actually put my whole self as a creative voice in those projects. I just kind of did whatever and tried to like, sail through, I guess just make it go away for me and just make it happen. And I don't want to deal with this project anymore because I just don't feel or see myself in that type of project."*

When people couldn't get the respect in terms of their queerness, work became just about getting a paycheck. Participant 1 described losing all motivation: *"...me not getting enough respect in that regard or me being excluded in some stuff because I'm queer or excluded from some events, or asked to restrict my self-expression or clothing or anything. In its own way, it kind of broke my trust and when I don't have trust in anything, I kind of don't have the motivation to do anything for that because that is no longer my value."* Participant 1 had entered their organization believing in its mission: "*When I at least came into the organization, I was believing in their values and I was really trusting them and I was believing that this is an organization that I can do good with."* But over time: *"slowly you kind of lose every hope and trust and belief in that system or organization. And so you don't have the motivation to do anything."*

In contrast, Participant 5 showed how commitment worked when it was reciprocal. Asked how they worked differently depending on the context, Participant 5 explained: *"I will do whatever is needed and I feel if it's important, not for me personally, but for society, organization. I will do more and I will spend more time on that. If I feel that it's a waste of time, I will do the bare minimum."* When they didn't feel included, Participant 5 would *"do the bare minimum and then I left."* Yet when they

believed in the work, they invested fully. Participant 9 described how relationships with management shaped behaviour: *"If I like the management… I feel that I'm also putting them in a bad situation if I don't show up to work. Thus, I don't do that much. Sometimes you feel like you're just taking your job personally and you're trying to do your best because you're also like you have something in common with your management."* By contrast, when management wasn't trusted: *"I wouldn't mind and I can just write and tell a doctor to give me a sick note for a week, two weeks. I can fabricate stuff to not go to work."*

Recognition and being seen for one's work made a big difference in motivation. Participant 8 described what happened when they were recognised: *"...the lead designer highlighted one of my design ideas during a company presentation. It wasn't a big deal to anyone else, but it really meant a lot to me. For the first time, I actually felt seen, and it made me want to keep experimenting with creative ideas without overthinking everything. Honestly, this really kept me motivated and excited about my work for two weeks."* Yet when they weren't recognized, the energy shifted: *"I still got my tasks on time, but I did them with way less enthusiasm.When I don't feel seen or heard, I just end up working on autopilot, and I was just doing what needed to be done."*

Participant 6 compared these experiences directly: "*When I'm excluded, I slow down and lose passion and it definitely feels emotionally exhausting. I still get things done but without the usual spark or extra care. When I feel included and respected, I'm way more invested and can even push myself to do extra work or come up with something new."* Participant 6 also talked about what happened when they did important work but didn't get recognised: *"There was this one time I spent a lot of energy handling a super sensitive situation with some conservative partners, and no one acknowledged my effort publicly or privately. That really affected my motivation in a bad way."*

Trust and responsibility also energized people. Participant 10 talked about how being trusted with responsibility affected their work: *"...when I am entrusted with more responsibility, and especially because I know it's because my work is valued, that gives me more energy rather than giving me stress… It feels like my perspective and expertise are genuinely appreciated, which motivates me to do more and ensure everything is quality-wise completed with care."* Participant 10 emphasized how their queer perspectives needed to be valued, not just tolerated: *"...when leaders show openness to being challenged or corrected, that normalizes difference and curiosity… comfort doesn't just mean being allowed to speak, but it's also feeling that my queer lens is valued and not treated as niche or secondarily important and when leaders are willing to integrate this perspective into programming or let me integrate this perspective into programming that validates my lived experience and that makes me feel like my experience enriches the work we do."*

Participant 1 also talked about how fake appreciation didn't help: *"the appreciation is not sincere enough and you know that there is a certain motive behind it. And that's why after six or seven months,*

*I actually even wanted to drop out of work. And I said that I really cannot take it anymore. I think this is not a good fit for me."*

To sum up, when queer employees feel genuinely included and respected for who they are, they invest fully in their work, take more tasks, and go beyond what's required. But when they're excluded, invisible, or forced to hide, they do bare minimum.

## 3.6. All roads lead to intersectionality.

Understanding queerness at work couldn't be separated from understanding other parts of people's identities. Participant 3 talked about how difficult it was to focus only on queerness when they had other important identities: *"It's so hard to word it because asking specifically for queerness and this is a queer theme. So it's like different voices, different perspectives. It's a bit hard to think because it would have been easier if we talked about disability. If that was the focus, because that was like for me a significantly different experience, like talking to you as a trans person versus talking to you as a deaf person."* Participant 3 described feeling differently about discussing different parts of their identity: *"I would feel some hesitation or discomfort if I wanted to talk about disability in my workplace, but not about queerness."*

organizations that understood intersectionality recognized that queerness was not one single experience. Participant 10 explained: *"They do acknowledge diverse queer identities by making space for self definition in the first place. So it's not that people are asked to fit a single narrative of what queerness means. And in team meetings and project discussions, there is awareness that LGBTQI+ isn't one experience and also there is space for what I do consider as queerness rather than just being simply LGBTQI+ and and that means also recognising that it's about a collection of overlapping realities and identities that are shaped by culture, education, class, race, disability, and many other important factors."*

Participant 4 talked about the importance of intersectional approach in the workplace: *"If you call yourself a leader, you should constantly read and learn. You should gain knowledge about different topics that's outside of your field, for example immigrant rights, neurodivergent rights and so on. I don't mean that all leaders should know all of the topics, but they definitely should be receptive to those topics and approaches."* Participant 4 also described their own experience with not being understood in multiple ways: *"I felt like they don't understand me, they don't get my call. So I'm familiar with such feelings and since as a neurodivergent person, it has always been hard for me to get understood. Because they do feminist activism, but they just don't include me or they do vegan activism and they just don't understand the struggles."*

Participant 3 also described how organizations learned to understand intersectionality over time: *"Throughout the time we worked with my organization so much to the point where they started learning and they started educating themselves and they started listening to us."* Some organizations worked specifically on intersectionality, Participant 3 talked about how their organization started supporting disability work even though it wasn't their main scope: *"I guess the newest thing that happened was that they fully supported me and actually realized my idea of creating a work group that would be specialized in disability and working on inclusion for disabled people."*

When organizations don't understand intersectionality, they can't be so inclusive. Participant 5 talked about disability access in their organization: *"This is the main topic right now, but also for any other people with disabilities, because, sadly, we are not very inclusive as a space, because we do not afford space without stairs."* On the other hand, the same organization tried to adapt to some other different needs. Participant 4 talked about how neurodivergent people were supported in the workplace: *"I think it's inclusive in a way, for example, neurodivergent people, you don't have to work nine-to-five. You need to be in the office, usually, 4 hours a day, and otherwise, you can work whenever. So that's kind of friendly to neurodivergent people, because I, for example, can not sit for hours. It's impossible. So I usually go home and then work from home. So, the point is that I do what I need to do and I can do it in my own way. And I think that's an important thing for the workplace to have."*

Participant 10 talked about how adapting to different needs made work better: *"When processes are adapted to everyone's needs, rather than solely focusing on outputs and deliverables, I feel safer and more supported and therefore then I feel more focused and productive. And in those situations, when that happens, I can work at a steady pace. I can meet deadlines comfortably and maintain high quality because I don't have to use extra energy masking or overcompensating and I can just simply focus on what I do."* Participant 10 mentioned one specific way leaders could understand different queer experiences particularly for trans people: *"I also appreciate personally when leaders encourage flexibility. For instance, understanding that for some trans people travel logistics or documentation can be more complex or also taking time off when you know we seek gender affirming care."*

Participant 10 also explained how intersectionality affected productivity: *"And productivity, you know, especially for queer employees, doesn't just come from pressure or achieving deliverables alone. And as well, it doesn't have to, you know, shift all the burden of queer people to wear people to educate others, but it has to again, has to be a sense of safety, of a sense of care, recognition and trust."*

Participant 2 expressed how organizations could include intersectional perspectives in how they work: *"It's about how the space is organized and how the inclusion of different voices and experiences is taken into account in the structure and the meetings. The way we use different decision making or conversation methods, these different methods create a complement to the work culture of trust and comfort with each other and I think that's really important."*

When people's intersectional identities were not acknowledged, the impact was immediate and deep.. Participant 3 described what happened when they tried to bring up something important regarding their disability and felt shut down: *"And whenever I would talk about disability, I would feel suddenly lonely. I was talking about trying to be heard and trying to do something for this ability. But I felt like it was pushed to the side. They were telling me that that's not our common goal. But at the same time, they were saying that I can do things like the support group or whatever. It was just very weird. But in those times I felt so closed off and I felt like they don't understand, they're not trying to understand me. I felt unseen and I felt like I didn't belong there and so I would also like some days where I would work from home because I just didn't want to face them in the office because I just felt bad and I did less work and like."*

To sum up, if organizations only focus on queerness without recognising disability, neurodivergence and other intersecting identities, inclusion will always fall short of queer employees. When organizations actually adopted their processes to support people's overlapping identities, people felt safer and worked better. But when they were expected to fit the same mold, queer employees felt invisible and less motivated.

# 4. DISCUSSION.

## 4.1. The structure of the section.

This chapter presents a synthesis of the key findings of the study and discusses their significance in the context of CSO leadership and inclusivity. Building upon the analytical chapter, it interprets the results, evaluates their implications for theory and leadership practice, identifies research limitations, and provides recommendations for future research and project leadership in CSOs. The research problem addressed in this study was - "exploring in what ways can the impact of inclusive leadership be observed on queer employees' productivity in the projects within CSOs across Europe and partner countries?" While inclusion has been widely researched, especially in recent years, queer inclusion has not been in the focus, especially in the CSO sector. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between inclusive leadership and queer employees' productivity in CSO projects.

Initial objective findings describe a correlation between inclusive leadership behavior and queer workers' overall engagement, safety, and emotional well-being. The second objective findings show that inclusive leadership supports participation through a process of rethinking interaction and communication patterns enabling inclusion of queer voices. The third objective findings include the fact that the productivity of queer employees by trust, perception of organizational justice or fairness. Fourth objective findings indicate that managers provide a safe space through a balance of inclusive structures, practices, empowering queer employees to enable them to bring their "whole self" to work.

This chapter begins with an integrated summary of interpretation of findings and then moves into a detailed discussion within the existing literature to connect and compare results. It also addresses study's implications for both research and practice and concludes with the limitations and recommendations for future research.

## 4.2. Discussion.

In this research, the impacts of inclusive leadership on queer employees' productivity within CSO context across Europe and partner countries were investigated. The findings of this study were drawn from interviews with 10 queer employees from CSO projects. The data were coded and analyzed using a thematic approach, producing insights that directly aligned with the study's three research questions. Our findings reveal how inclusive leadership practices transform the work experiences, engagement levels, and productivity of queer employees positively. The findings of this research work indicate that inclusive leadership is far from being a bundle of separate practices. Instead, inclusive leadership is a holistic way of enabling the comprehensive integration of queer workers into the organizational

settings, along with maintaining their true identities. This kind of integration is made possible through the capacity of leaders to recognize the meaningful contributions made by queer workers, to develop appropriate participation structure, to provide the emotional safety of worker's identity expression, and to be sensitive to the multiple and intersecting identities of employees. When this happens, the workers develop a sense of psychological empowerment, motivation, improved quality of work, and organizational loyalty.

The findings support the core claim of Randel et al. (2018) that the inclusive leader - according to their leadership model - should include both feeling of belongingness and value for uniqueness. Interview respondents like participant 3 and participant 10, described the psychological outcome that this model predicts: "...leadership behaviors that facilitate group members' perceptions of inclusion, which in turn lead to member work group identification, psychological empowerment, and behavioral outcomes (creativity, job performance, and reduced turnover) in the pursuit of group goals" (p. 190).

Korkmaz et al.'s (2022) claim to have "showing appreciation" as a separate dimension or layer is also supported by the respondents' answers. However it is also refined, taking into consideration that the original source material recognizes that the nature of appreciation is vague, making it harder to evaluate, this study gathered some keywords, defining the "correct way" of showing appreciation – it needs to be sincere, calibrated, relational. The difference between genuine acknowledgement and performative recognition (observable in participant 1's answers) shows that appreciation can be evaluated with the intention behind it and the consistency. This nuance suggests that measurement of the appreciation dimension should include the sincerity and the follow-throughs, not frequency or volume of appreciation.

Another interesting nuance is about the consistency of manager's behavior with organization's mission and requirements regarding diversity and inclusion, as mentioned by Buengeler et al. (2018). Participant 1's experience with alternating personalities, "performing queer" for a certain set of people and hiding identity for others aligns with the risks that Buengeler et al. (2018) identifies, such as breach of trust. Tokenism and "broken organizational promises" about acceptance and inclusion can result in disengagement and lower work commitment.

The descriptions of space for discussions (participant 5's experience with introducing new ideas), small-group formats, rotating facilitation align strongly with Randel et al. (2018) and Mor Barak and Cherin's (1998) arguments about structural access (to information, resources, decision making) enabling more inclusive nature and environment.

Importantly, findings about the structural design of meetings, interactions between team members, leader micro-behaviors, and other daily interactions further prove the gap identified by Tong Li and Tang (2022). Their emphasis on looking at inclusion on a multi-level way to see the effects is

repeatedly used by the participants. In other words, participants focused on the fact that inclusion is produced with structure, but also relational enactment.

Participants' narratives about their identity and psychological safety coincide with Edmondson's (1999) model showing that in open, non-judgemental workplaces, which is facilitated by the leaders, workers tend to take more interpersonal risks and showcase creativity. However, in the case of participant 1, hiding queer indicators (stickers, accessories), removing and minimising one's self, we can see the clear distinction of a different type of leadership, a model where the leader's effort to overcome differences are emphasised (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Although much of the inclusivity literature treats "queerness" as a separate identity category, almost all of the participants mentioned the importance of intersectionality - a concept showing the complexity of one's identity and experiences. This resonates with early criticism of inclusive literature, such as Stone and Colella's (1996) organizational lens and critiques of disability scholars i.e Burt, Anna and McCarty, Megan (2024); Grue (2016) Schalk (2021). This shows that single-axis approaches to inclusion will eventually miss important points and it will face more barriers with time. Therefore, the inclusion practices need to be sensitive to multiple, overlapping experiences and needs to create space for flexibility, understanding, and adjusting.

However, analyzing the literature on queerness and intersectionality and comparing it with the respondents' answers, there are some contradicting ideas. Taken especially from Pullen et al. (2016) claims that intersectionality can partly create struggles or barriers for inclusion because it relies on categorization. In this specific context, leaders need to be aware of the shortcomings of intersectional approach, i.e. addressing multiple and diverse identities, while stabilising and categorizing them, as Holck and Muhr (2017) identifies this - norm-critical approach. The majority of respondents, however, showed their want or positive outlook for intersectional approach, indicating that although it may have negative outcomes, in practice it works.

Findings also illustrate tensions that are specific to the CSO sphere, such as political constraints, dependency on institutions, especially funding bodies. Based on participant 1's answers the sector's public role and commitment and political demands can create conflicts. As Williams et al. (2010) showcase that some CSOs avoid addressing structural inclusion problems in other workplaces, due to the fact that they do not want to "name and shame" the leaders, some other CSOs generate instrumental, tokenist inclusion (or sometimes suppression, e.g. hiding queerness, minimizing identities) on an organizational level rather than address structural problems. The result is a credibility and trust gap between "highly esteemed" organizations with inclusion mission and actual, internal practice - a core paradox for CSOs trying to balance both at the same time.

The study also identified political aspects for queer inclusion, especially in politically constrained contexts, which has not been explored in the existing literature yet, unraveling a new layer for inclusivity.

## 4.3. Limitations.

Several limitations should not be ruled out despite the fact that this study attempted to obtain reliable insights into the correlation between inclusive leadership and queer employees' productivity in the CSO context. Firstly, only ten people could be found from six countries to conduct the semi-structured interviews which limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to other European and partner countries.

The second limitation of this study is its reliance on semi-structured interviews alone. Although semi-structured interviews are a strong tool for researchers to move beyond surface-level responses and uncover deeper insights through careful analyses of both verbal and non-verbal cues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019), different authors could likely interpret these data differently (Diefenbach, 2009).

Since the topic of this research was quite sensitive, there was a possibility that participants felt less authentic when it came to answering the questions during the interview because of the "insider/outsider" status of the researcher (Roberts, 2014). While this barrier was likely mitigated with the initial participants who had a pre-existing relationship with the researcher, it may have been more prevalent among those recruited via snowball sampling. To address this potential barrier, a consent contract was introduced prior to data collection and confidentiality as well as a safe environment were explicitly stated at the beginning of each interview.

Moreover, the richness of qualitative data depends highly on the interviewer's ability to elicit detailed narratives. Being an early-stage researcher, there might have been missed opportunities to probe deeper into specific topics when they emerged during the interviews, potentially rendering the data less dense than what an experienced interviewer may achieve. While supervision was used to ensure rigor of the study, the follow-up questions could have been more exhaustive.

## 4.4. Future research.

If researchers want a better understanding of the effects of inclusive leadership on queer employees in the CSO context across Europe and partner countries, it is crucial to reach out to those people working in this specific context. Future research could investigate other European and partner countries to elicit more insights from this topic, as well as any other country. Such research could contribute to deeper and different patterns upon this topic.

The second recommendation for future research was using mixed-methods or quantitative designs to validate and generalize the themes identified in this qualitative study. This approach could help confirm whether the patterns and insights identified here are generalisable across the CSOs in Europe and partner countries.

# CONCLUSIONS.

Linking the answers to research objectives, the first objective was to observe the effect of inclusive leadership behaviors on queer people working in CSOs projects across Europe and partner countries. The findings suggest that inclusive leadership behaviors can have strong relations with work-related attitudes, psychology of employees and relationships within the workspace. When leaders acted authentically with them through positive, consistent recognition and when they created safe spaces for identities, there was a positive outcome. Workers' motivation, creativity and emotional investment were higher. On the contrary, inconsistent leader attitudes, non-safe spaces, such as asking workers to "perform" queerness or hide their identity had a negative effect on general trust, justice perception and emotional participation.

The second objective was to examine the ways in which inclusive leadership practices facilitate effective participation and communication of queer employees within the team of CSOs projects. The interview results reveal that practices of inclusive leadership make a significant impact on mode, tempo, and scope of participation of queer individuals during projects. If participation structures were superficial, purposefully muted voices were observed, which affected the overall communication levels and attitudes of queer members of the group - less input, less innovation, feared participation, etc.

The third objective was to evaluate which inclusive leadership strategies are most valued by queer employees for improving their productivity within CSOs projects setting. Across the interviews, queer workers identified the following strategies to improve their productivity:

1. Genuine, personalized acknowledgement and feedback

   They appreciated being led by a manager who offered them personalized, significant appreciation for their work. They regarded this appreciation, along with keeping promises, as a motivating tool that enhanced relational trust and brought about employee initiative, hence improved productivity.

2. Structural empowerment through participatory decision-making

   Approaches that amplified the power of employee voice, through collaborative planning activities, meetings, and leadership response to ideas, for example were felt to facilitate quality work. The activities were linked to enhanced problem-solving, creativity, and ownership of tasks.

3. Identity safety and flexible accommodations

Those leaders who provided protection and supported free expression of identity, and made adjustments for accessibility, flexibility all appeared to facilitate concentration and better work quality. The sense of safe feeling and being accepted was a liberating mental and emotional state for the respondents.

Last and fourth objective was to examine in which ways leaders create safe spaces for queer employee members of the CSO project. The findings imply that extending emotional support and sustaining a safe space for queer employees are positive practices among organizations that bring trust, due to the fact that workers monitor their identity less and feel less self-conscious. Safety was improved by the presence of inclusive norms introduced from the organizational level. These can include open, non-judgmental discussions, communication guidelines, reduced dominance or hierarchy, awareness of intersectional needs.

When it comes to the research question, this study answers the research question by highlighting inclusive leadership effects on the productivity of queer employees through three interrelated mechanisms: authentic recognition, structural empowerment, and identity safety. These mechanisms altogether foster environments where queer employees feel valued, heard, and free to express their identities, which in turn enables higher engagement, creativity, and commitment to project outcomes. This research also finds out that superficial or performative inclusion is harmful to productivity and ultimately shows that inclusivity must be both relationally genuine and structurally anchored. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that inclusive leadership is an ethical but also a practical imperative which directly shapes the capacity of queer employees to contribute fully and sustainably to CSO projects across Europe and partner countries.

# PROPOSALS.

Based on the discussion on findings and existing literature, following practical implications are identified for CSO managements and leaders to cultivate more inclusive workspaces.

Firstly, moving beyond “giving praise” checklists to actual, sincere and specific praise and appreciation to strengthen employee commitment and willingness is both important and beneficial for the organization. This ensures long-term, loyal team members, especially in the nonprofit sphere, where funding constraints and employee turnovers are frequent.

Secondly, redesigning meeting and decision making architectures can create space for different and unique voices to be heard, driving organizational change and individual innovativeness. Increasing distributed voice can adopt creative ideas and initiatives from workers.

Third and most importantly, creating a safe space for queer employees to bring their whole selves work is crucial, as psychological safety is mostly the basis of any type of desired outcome, such as good performance, high motivation and good quality team environment. Cultivating safe psychological space based on everyone’s needs also increases the perception of fairness in other workers’ minds (especially among the younger generation) (Eng & Kohsuwan, 2025).

Fourth, creating trust systems with ensuring internal practices align with the external advocacy and “promises” is also important for CSOs, and this can be done by audits to ensure the consistency of organizations’ claims. Donors or partners can be briefed about staff safety and diversity to showcase that employees and their individuality are valued.

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, adopting intersectional policies can operationalize accessibility and flexibility for queer employees who also happen to belong to other marginalized groups, such as neurodivergent staff, persons with disabilities, ethnic/racial minorities, etc.

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# ABSTRACT.

Civil society organizations are known for their advocacy and their role against social injustice in Europe and partner countries. However, the question of how quintessential these organizations and their projects are in terms of inclusion, particularly when it comes to queer employees, has not been touched upon which posits this research as one of its kind integrating inclusive leadership theory with queer employees' experience in CSO context. Thus, this theory aims to find out the relationship between inclusive leadership and queer employees' productivity in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries, aiming to explore both positive and potential limiting factors. Building on this, the research question was set: In what ways can the impact of inclusive leadership be observed on queer employees' productivity in the projects within CSO across Europe and partner countries? To answer the research question, four objectives were established: (1) to observe the effect of inclusive leadership behaviors on queer people working in CSO projects across Europe and partner countries; (2) to examine the ways in which inclusive leadership practices facilitate effective participation and communication of queer employees within the team of CSO projects; (3) to evaluate which inclusive leadership strategies are most valued by queer employees for improving their productivity within CSO projects setting; (4) To examine in which ways leaders create safe spaces for queer employee members of the CSO projects.

In this research, semi-structured interviews have been used to deep dive into the phenomena that were set to explore. Analyses of the interviews demonstrated that there is a direct correlation between inclusive leadership behaviors and queer employees' productivity. The findings indicate that inclusive leadership strongly influences how actively queer employees participate in projects, with superficial inclusion leading to reduced engagement, productivity, and communication. Moreover, the findings reveal that four inclusive leadership strategies were valued by queer employees: (1) genuine, personalized acknowledgement and feedback; (2) structural empowerment through participatory decision-making; (3) identity safety and flexible accommodations. The findings also suggest that when leaders offer emotional support and when organizations establish inclusive norms such as non-judgmental discussions, communication guidelines, reduced dominance and awareness of intersectional needs, queer team members feel more accepted and worry less about monitoring their identity.

**The key words:** Inclusive leadership, queer employees, inclusion, civil society organizations, productivity

# Santrauka.

Pilietinės visuomenės organizacijos (toliau PVO) yra žinomos dėl savo palaikymo ir vaidmens kovojant su socialine neteisybe Europos ir partnerių šalyse. Tačiau nebuvo nagrinėta, kiek šios organizacijos ir jų projektai yra esminiai įtraukties požiūriu, ypač kalbant apie queer darbuotojus. Dėl to šis tyrimas tampa išskirtinis ir unikalus, integruojantis įtraukiosios lyderystės teoriją su queer darbuotojų patirtimis PVO kontekste. Ši teorija siekia nustatyti santykius tarp įtraukiosios lyderystės ir queer darbuotojų produktyvumo PVO projektuose Europos ir partnerių šalyse, siekiant ištirti tiek teigiamus, tiek galimus ribojančius veiksnius. Remiantis tuo, suformuluotas tyrimo klausimas: kokiais būdais galima stebėti įtraukiosios lyderystės poveikį queer darbuotojų produktyvumui PVO projektų veikloje Europos ir partnerių šalyse? Siekdami atsakyti į tyrimo klausimą, buvo nustatyti keturi uždaviniai: (1) Stebėti įtraukiosios lyderystės elgsenos poveikį queer asmenims, dirbantiems PVO projektuose Europos ir partnerių šalyse. (2) Išnagrinėti, kokiais būdais įtraukiosios lyderystės praktikos skatina efektyvų queer darbuotojų dalyvavimą ir komunikaciją PVO projektų komandose. (3) Įvertinti, kurios įtraukiosios lyderystės strategijos yra labiausiai vertinamos queer darbuotojų jų produktyvumui gerinti PVO projektų aplinkoje. (4) Išnagrinėti, kokiais būdais lyderiai kuria saugias erdves queer darbuotojų nariams PVO projektuose.
Šiame tyrime buvo naudojami pusiau struktūruoti interviu, siekiant giliau ištirti (arba analizuoti) nustatytus reiškinius. Interviu analizė parodė, kad egzistuoja tiesioginė koreliacija tarp įtraukiosios lyderystės elgsenos ir queer darbuotojų produktyvumo. Rezultatai rodo, kad įtraukioji lyderystė stipriai įtakoja, kaip aktyviai queer darbuotojai dalyvauja projektuose, o paviršutiniška įtrauktis lemia mažesnį įsitraukimą, produktyvumą ir komunikaciją. Be to, tyrimo rezultatai atskleidžia, kad queer darbuotojai vertino šias keturias įtraukiosios lyderystės strategijas: (1) Nuoširdus, individualizuotas pripažinimas ir grįžtamasis ryšys; (2) Struktūrinis įgalinimas per dalyvaujamąjį sprendimų priėmimą; (3) Identiteto saugumas ir lanksčios pritaikymo galimybės. Rezultatai taip pat rodo, kad queer komandos nariai jaučiasi labiau priimti ir mažiau galvoja apie tai, kaip juos vertina kiti, kai vadovai suteikia emocinę pagalbą, o organizacijoje įsigali priėmimo taisyklės, tokios kaip: kalbėjimasis be išankstinio neigiamo vertinimo, aiškios bendravimo gairės, sumažintas viršenybės demonstravimas ir supratimas apie skirtingus bei sudėtingus asmeninius poreikius.

**Raktažodžiai:** įtraukioji lyderystė, queer darbuotojai, įtrauktis, pilietinės visuomenės organizacijos, produktyvumas