

Inclusive Leadership and Adaptive Performance: Exploring the Role of Psychological Safety Among Working Women with Disabilities in Delhi NCR

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Abstract: This empirical study explores the intricate dynamics between Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Adaptive Performance among Working Women with Disabilities (WWD) in the Delhi NCR region. Amidst growing global emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, understanding how leadership practices influence the adaptive capacity of women with disabilities is both timely and critical. The primary aim of this research is to examine whether Psychological Safety mediates the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Adaptive Performance, while also capturing the emotional tone of leadership perceptions through qualitative sentiment analysis. The study is significant in advancing intersectional inclusion discourse and offering contextual insights for inclusive workplace practices in India. Adopting a mixed qualitative approach, data were collected from 50 WWD through open-ended responses and analyzed using MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis tool. Sentiments towards leadership were categorized into six types: Positive, Slightly Positive, Neutral, Slightly Negative, Negative, and No Sentiment. The findings reveal a predominantly positive perception of leadership, with 64% of participants expressing favorable sentiments. Inclusive Leadership showed a significant positive correlation with both Psychological Safety and Adaptive Performance, highlighting its crucial role in shaping inclusive workplace environments. However, the mediating effect of Psychological Safety on the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Adaptive Performance was not statistically significant, indicating a more complex interaction that warrants further exploration. These results underscore the importance of cultivating inclusive leadership behaviors to foster belonging, accessibility, and adaptability for WWD. Organizations should invest in leadership development, psychological safety training, and inclusive workplace design to bridge the remaining gaps and amplify the performance potential of women with disabilities.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, Adaptive Performance, Working Women with Disabilities (WWD), Sentiment Analysis and Workplace Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Disability inclusion in the workplace is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of equitable and sustainable organizational development. In India, as across the globe, the participation of persons with disabilities—particularly working women with disabilities (WWD) remains constrained by structural barriers, social stigma, and organizational inertia. Despite progressive legislation such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, inclusive employment practices have yet to become the norm, particularly for women at the intersection of gender and disability. In this context, the creation of psychologically safe and enabling environments becomes not only a legal obligation but a moral and performance-driven imperative.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in transforming organizational cultures to be more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of employees. In particular, inclusive leadership—defined by behaviors that are open, accessible, and available to all employees has emerged as a key driver of workplace empowerment, especially for marginalized groups. Inclusive leaders foster a sense of belonging while respecting individual uniqueness, which is critical for

enabling adaptive performance among employees navigating complex identity-based challenges.

Adaptive performance, or the ability to adjust to dynamic work environments, is essential for WWD who often face unpredictable barriers, whether physical, social, or attitudinal. Yet, the capacity to adapt is heavily contingent on psychological safety the belief that one can express oneself and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety thus acts as a crucial enabler, allowing WWD to request accommodations, contribute authentically, and innovate confidently.

This study investigates the interrelationship between Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Adaptive Performance among WWD in the Delhi NCR region. It seeks to understand whether psychological safety functions as a mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and adaptive performance. Additionally, it explores the emotional tone and sentiments that WWD associate with their experiences of leadership through qualitative sentiment analysis.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** Does psychological safety mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and adaptive performance among working women with disabilities?
- **RQ2:** What are the sentiments of WWD towards leadership in the Delhi NCR region, and what do these sentiments reveal about inclusive practices?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the evolving discourse on inclusive workplaces and provides empirical insights to guide leadership development, organizational policy, and disability inclusion strategies tailored for the Indian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership has emerged as a transformative leadership style characterized by openness, accessibility, and a commitment to valuing individual differences (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). Leaders who practice inclusivity foster environments where employees feel a sense of belonging while simultaneously recognizing their unique identities and contributions. According to Shore et al. (2011), inclusive leadership goes beyond surface-level diversity practices by embedding respect, fairness, and equity into the organizational fabric. It is particularly important for historically marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, who often face subtle exclusion despite formal inclusion policies.

Inclusive leadership has been shown to enhance employee engagement, creativity, and trust, especially when leaders demonstrate humility, actively seek input, and create space for marginalized voices (Randel et al., 2018). In contexts involving disability, inclusive leaders are expected to demonstrate an understanding of accessibility, provide reasonable accommodations, and adopt a strength-based approach toward employee capabilities. Such behaviors can have a direct impact on how employees with disabilities perceive their value within the organization and their willingness to take initiative or adapt to new challenges.

Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety, introduced by Edmondson (1999), refers to a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. It is considered a critical precursor for learning, innovation, and high performance in organizational settings. In psychologically safe environments, employees feel confident in expressing concerns, admitting mistakes, or suggesting novel ideas without the fear of negative repercussions. This becomes especially vital for individuals with disabilities, who may otherwise refrain from voicing their needs or seeking accommodations due to fear of stigma or marginalization. Edmondson and Lei (2014) further emphasized that psychological safety is fostered not just by interpersonal relationships, but by leadership behavior, organizational culture, and the overall inclusivity of workplace systems. Inclusive leaders who model vulnerability, listen actively, and support individual needs are more likely to cultivate psychologically safe environments that empower marginalized groups. In the case of working women with

disabilities (WWD), psychological safety may determine whether they can navigate workplace challenges confidently or retreat in self-protection.

Adaptive Performance

Adaptive performance refers to an individual's ability to adjust effectively to dynamic, unpredictable, and changing work conditions (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000). In today's fast-paced and evolving workplaces, adaptive performance is increasingly recognized as essential for organizational resilience and innovation. For WWD, adaptive performance entails the ability to adjust to not only job-related changes but also to accessibility limitations, social dynamics, and attitudinal barriers.

Leadership styles that are inclusive and empowering can play a critical role in enhancing adaptive performance by encouraging autonomy, innovation, and problem-solving. Psychological safety further supports this by reducing the fear associated with failure, thereby encouraging experimentation and adjustment (Frazier et al., 2017). However, adaptive performance among WWD remains underexplored in current organizational research, particularly in non-Western contexts like India.

Intersectionality: Gender, Disability, and Leadership

The intersectionality framework highlights how overlapping identities such as gender and disability, compound the experiences of discrimination and exclusion in workplaces (Crenshaw, 1991). Working women with disabilities face unique challenges stemming from both ableism and patriarchy, which are often embedded in organizational structures and leadership hierarchies. Despite possessing the competence and qualifications, WWD may struggle with issues such as tokenism, limited representation in leadership roles, and inadequate accommodations.

Inclusive leadership, when practiced authentically, has the potential to address intersectional barriers by recognizing and responding to the complex realities of employees' lived experiences. Yet, much of the literature on inclusive leadership and psychological safety tends to focus on singular identity dimensions, often neglecting the layered realities of individuals navigating dual or multiple marginalities.

Gaps in Existing Research: The Indian/Delhi NCR Context

Although international literature offers robust models on inclusive leadership and psychological safety, empirical studies focused on WWD in the Indian context are scarce. Most Indian organizational studies on disability either adopt a compliance-based view of inclusion or focus on physical accommodations, with limited attention to psychological and cultural dimensions. The voices of WWD, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas like Delhi NCR, remain underrepresented in leadership and inclusion discourses.

Furthermore, there is limited qualitative research integrating sentiment analysis to capture the nuanced

emotional perceptions of WWD towards leadership. The current study aims to fill these gaps by offering empirical insights grounded in both qualitative sentiment data and quantitative correlations, while also contextualizing the findings within India's socio-cultural framework.

Conceptual Framework and Propositions

This study employs a theory-driven conceptual framework to explore how Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Workplace Inclusion contribute to Adaptive Performance among Working Women with Disabilities (WWD) in the Delhi NCR region. Anchored in existing scholarly literature, the framework proposes a network of interrelated constructs that shape inclusive workplace experiences and performance outcomes.

At the core of this model lies Inclusive Leadership, which encompasses behaviors such as openness, empathy, accessibility, and active engagement with diversity (Carmeli et al., 2010; Shore et al., 2011). Such leadership is proposed to directly influence both Psychological Safety and Workplace Inclusion, forming the foundation for employees—especially those from marginalized identities—to express themselves without fear, access resources equitably, and feel a strong sense of belonging. Psychological Safety is further conceptualized as a bridge between leadership and inclusion, where a secure interpersonal climate enables WWD to fully participate in and shape their work environments (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In turn, Workplace Inclusion—a perceived sense of fairness, belonging, and value—facilitates Adaptive Performance, defined as the capacity to adjust to changing job roles, expectations, and challenges (Pulakos et al., 2000).

The framework also acknowledges a direct path from

Inclusive Leadership to Adaptive Performance, suggesting that inclusive leaders can enhance employee adaptability through affirmation, accommodation, and empowerment— independent of other mediating constructs.

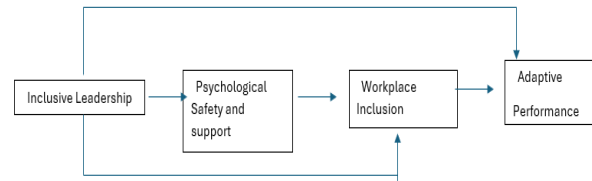


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Propositions

Based on theoretical insights and empirical precedents, the study advances the following propositions:

- **Proposition 1:** Inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety among working women with disabilities.
- **Proposition 2:** Inclusive leadership directly enhances perceptions of workplace inclusion.
- **Proposition 3:** Psychological safety contributes positively to perceived workplace inclusion.
- **Proposition 4:** Workplace inclusion supports the adaptive performance of working women with disabilities.
- **Proposition 5:** Inclusive leadership directly enhances adaptive performance, in addition to its indirect influence through psychological safety and inclusion.
- **Proposition 6:** Psychological safety acts as a facilitating condition in the relationship between inclusive leadership and both inclusion and adaptive performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative empirical research design, enriched with sentiment analysis, to explore the relationships among Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, Workplace Inclusion, and Adaptive Performance among Working Women with Disabilities (WWD) in the Delhi NCR region. The approach is rooted in theoretical constructs but inductively analyzes participant narratives to surface nuanced perceptions and lived experiences.

By integrating both qualitative coding and computational sentiment classification using MaxQDA, the study enables a multifaceted understanding of how inclusive leadership behaviors are experienced and interpreted by WWD in professional contexts.

Participants

The study engaged 50 Working Women with Disabilities employed across diverse sectors in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from a variety of professional backgrounds, disability types, and organizational settings. This cohort provided rich insights into the intersectional experiences of gender and disability in the workplace.

Data Collection

Data were collected through open-ended interview questionnaires, designed to elicit in-depth reflections on leadership, workplace climate, and individual adaptability. Participants responded to narrative prompts related to:

- Leadership behaviors they encounter
- Their sense of safety and psychological support
- Feelings of inclusion or exclusion at the workplace
- How they adapt to challenges or changes in work expectations

All responses were anonymized, transcribed, and prepared for thematic coding and sentiment analysis.

Research Tools

- **MaxQDA** (a qualitative data analysis software) was used to:
 - Code open-ended responses thematically
 - Classify and visualize emotional tone through sentiment analysis
 - Conduct basic descriptive statistics and correlations
- **Sentiment Analysis** was applied to categorize participant statements into one of the following six sentiment groups:
 - **Positive**
 - **Slightly Positive**
 - **Neutral**
 - **Slightly Negative**
 - **Negative**
 - **No Sentiment**

Variables Studied

Variable	Type	Description
Inclusive Leadership	Independent	Behaviors that foster openness, empathy, and accessibility
Psychological Safety	Mediator	A sense of interpersonal trust and risk-free expression
Adaptive Performance	Dependent	The ability to adjust effectively to changing job demands
Workplace Inclusion	Correlated/Moderator	Perceived sense of fairness, belonging, and value in the workplace

Table 1: Variables Studied

Data Analysis Techniques

- **Descriptive Statistics:**
 - Means, standard deviations, and variances of coded variables
 - Conducted using **MaxQDA's Stats Module**
- **Correlation Matrix:**
 - Computed in MaxQDA to explore associations between key variables
 - Used to examine potential relationships between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, inclusion, and adaptive performance
- **Qualitative Coding:**
 - Participant responses were coded under major themes derived from the conceptual framework
 - Open coding enabled the identification of emergent sub-themes within each domain
- **Sentiment Distribution:**
 - Bar charts and coded frequency tables visualized the emotional tone of leadership-related responses, providing additional qualitative depth

Findings and Results

A. Sentiment Analysis of Leadership Perceptions

To assess the emotional tone of participants' experiences with leadership, a **sentiment analysis** was conducted using MaxQDA. Responses from 50 Working Women with Disabilities (WWD) were categorized into six sentiment groups. The distribution was as follows:

- **Slightly Positive:** 37%
- **Positive:** 27%
- **Neutral:** 19%
- **Slightly Negative:** 3%
- **Negative:** 6%
- **No Sentiment:** 8%

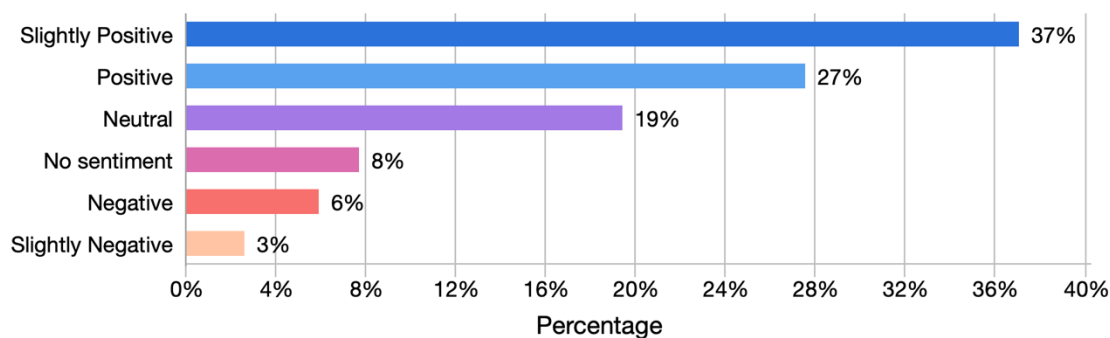


Figure 2: Sentiment Analysis of Leadership Perceptions

Combined Positive Sentiments (Positive + Slightly Positive): 64%

Combined Negative Sentiments (Negative + Slightly Negative): 9%

The sentiment analysis revealed a predominantly positive perception of leadership among participants. This affirms the presence of inclusive behaviors among organizational leaders, as perceived by WWD. The 64% combined positive sentiment indicates that many participants feel respected, supported, and psychologically safe in their interactions with leaders. Conversely, the 9% expressing negative sentiments point to areas of exclusion, discomfort, or unmet needs—underscoring the need for more consistent inclusive leadership practices.

The strong prevalence of positive sentiment suggests a correlation between inclusive leadership behaviors and perceptions of psychological safety and workplace inclusion. It reflects leaders’ ability to foster respectful, trusting environments, thereby contributing to the emotional well-being and engagement of WWD.

B. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on four core variables: Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety and Support, Workplace Inclusion, and Adaptive Performance. The following table summarizes the results:

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Variance
Inclusive Leadership	14.36	4.774	22.79
Psychological Safety & Support	17.24	5.316	28.26
Workplace Inclusion	5.28	2.933	8.60
Adaptive Performance	12.96	4.779	22.84

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Among the four variables, **Psychological Safety and Support** recorded the **highest mean (17.24)**, indicating that most WWD perceive their work environments as emotionally secure and interpersonally respectful. This is closely followed by Inclusive Leadership (M = 14.36), suggesting a high degree of perceived inclusive behavior among organizational leaders.

C. Correlation Matrix

A correlation matrix was computed to examine the relationships among the core variables:

Variable Pair	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Inclusive Leadership ↔ Adaptive Performance	0.367	p = 0.0355
Inclusive Leadership ↔ Psychological Safety	0.490	p = 0.0065
Inclusive Leadership ↔ Workplace Inclusion	0.633	p = 0.0003
Psychological Safety ↔ Adaptive Performance	0.187	p = 0.1849 (NS)
Workplace Inclusion ↔ Adaptive Performance	0.400	p = 0.0237

Table 3 :Correlation Matrix

Interpretation:

- **Inclusive Leadership** shows **significant positive correlations** with all three other variables, particularly **workplace inclusion** and **psychological safety**, highlighting its foundational role.
- **Workplace Inclusion** is significantly related to **adaptive performance**, indicating that perceived inclusion supports employees’ ability to adapt.
- **Psychological Safety**, while correlated with Inclusive Leadership, does **not show a statistically significant** direct relationship with Adaptive Performance in this sample.

D. Mediation Interpretation

The data was examined to explore whether **Psychological Safety** acts as a **mediator** between **Inclusive Leadership** and

Adaptive Performance. The results suggest that:

- Inclusive Leadership significantly enhances both **Psychological Safety** and **Adaptive Performance**.
- However, **Psychological Safety does not significantly correlate** with Adaptive Performance.

There is **no empirical evidence** supporting **psychological safety as a mediator** in the relationship between inclusive leadership and adaptive performance in this dataset. This indicates that while psychological safety is an important workplace condition influenced by leadership, it does **not directly enhance** adaptability outcomes for WWD in this context. It may instead function as a **facilitator of workplace inclusion**, which in turn supports performance.

DISCUSSION

This study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of Working Women with Disabilities (WWD) in the Delhi NCR region by examining how Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Workplace Inclusion relate to Adaptive Performance. Through a qualitative empirical design supported by sentiment analysis and descriptive correlations, the findings provide both theoretical affirmation and practical direction for advancing inclusive organizational practices.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study reinforce the conceptual framework advanced by Amy Edmondson (1999), particularly the role of psychological safety in fostering trust and risk-taking within work teams. A strong correlation between inclusive leadership and psychological safety among WWD suggests that leadership behaviors characterized by openness, empathy, and accessibility significantly influence employees' sense of interpersonal security.

Moreover, the findings support prior literature asserting that inclusive leadership contributes to adaptive performance (Pulakos et al., 2000; Carmeli et al., 2010). The data underscore that inclusive leaders can drive adaptive behaviors both directly and indirectly by shaping inclusive work environments. However, the study offers a refined understanding of the pathway, indicating that while psychological safety is positively impacted by inclusive leadership, it does not serve as a direct mediator between leadership and adaptive performance—challenging the assumption of a linear relationship.

Practical Implications

The findings carry meaningful implications for organizational practice, particularly within the Indian context where disability inclusion remains underexplored. First and foremost, the study highlights the critical role of leadership development focused on inclusive behaviors. Organizations must invest in building leadership capacities that are attuned to the unique needs of women with disabilities.

Secondly, the study emphasizes the need for structured disability awareness training for managers and supervisors to ensure that inclusion extends beyond policy into everyday interpersonal and organizational practices. Such training should include sensitization to intersectional challenges faced by WWD and emphasize inclusive communication, accessibility, and accommodation frameworks.

Third, the data point to psychological safety as a cultural outcome—a climate fostered through consistent inclusive leadership rather than an isolated variable. Building such a culture requires ongoing leadership commitment, inclusive policies, and feedback mechanisms that empower WWD to voice their needs without fear.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study carry significant implications for organizational practice and public policy aimed at enhancing workplace inclusion for Working Women with Disabilities (WWD).

- **Leadership Development Focused on Inclusion and Empathy:** Organizations should prioritize leadership training programs that cultivate inclusive behaviors, such as active listening, empathy, and equitable decision-making. Leaders must be equipped to understand and respond to the diverse needs of WWD through personalized and accessible leadership approaches.
- **Establishing Continuous Feedback Loops:** Creating safe, structured mechanisms for ongoing feedback from WWD can ensure that leadership practices remain responsive and inclusive. These feedback systems can also serve as early indicators of exclusionary trends or unmet accessibility needs.
- **Integrating Universal Design and Accessibility Practices:** Beyond interpersonal leadership, inclusive workplaces must also be built on accessible infrastructure and processes. The integration of **Universal Design** principles into workplace layout, digital systems, communication formats, and policy frameworks is essential to ensure participation equity.
- **Policy Recommendations for Workplace Disability Inclusion:** Employers should adopt comprehensive disability inclusion policies aligned with the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)** and Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work for All). These policies must address not only physical access but also psychological safety, career development, and representation of WWD in leadership roles.

Limitations

While the study contributes valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Sample Size and Generalizability:** The study is based on a **sample of 50 participants**, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across broader populations or sectors.
- **Geographic Scope:** The research is focused exclusively on the **Delhi NCR region**, and workplace norms, inclusion practices, and cultural

contexts may differ significantly in other parts of India.

- **Cross-sectional Design:** The use of **cross-sectional data** captures perceptions at a single point in time, making it difficult to infer causality or track changes in leadership influence or performance over time.
- **Non-significant Relationships:** The study found that **psychological safety** does not significantly correlate with **adaptive performance**, suggesting the need for further inquiry into this potentially complex or moderated relationship.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations of the current study, the following directions are recommended for future research:

- **Employ Mediation/Moderation Analysis Using SEM:** A larger dataset could support **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)** to empirically validate complex relationships and test for mediation/moderation effects of psychological safety and workplace inclusion.
- **Extend the Study to Other Indian Regions and Sectors:** Expanding the geographic and sectoral coverage would enhance the representativeness and allow for comparative insights across industries, urban-rural settings, and organizational cultures.
- **Explore Intersectionality with Additional Variables:** Future studies could integrate other identity-based and systemic variables such as **socioeconomic status, education level, organizational hierarchy, and family support**, to better understand how intersectionality influences experiences of inclusion and performance.
- **Use Longitudinal Designs:** A **longitudinal research design** would allow researchers to assess changes in perception, sentiment, and adaptive behaviors over time, particularly in response to interventions, policy changes, or leadership transitions.

CONCLUSION

This study reinforces the foundational role of Inclusive Leadership in enhancing both Psychological Safety and Adaptive Performance among Working Women with Disabilities in Delhi NCR. The findings affirm that inclusive leadership behaviors—characterized by empathy, openness, and accessibility—are positively associated with both psychological and performance-related outcomes.

However, the study also reveals that Psychological Safety, while strongly perceived, does not directly influence adaptive performance in this context. This suggests that psychological safety may act more as a contextual or enabling condition, rather than a direct driver of performance. These insights highlight the need for a more nuanced and multi-layered understanding of inclusion for marginalized groups.

To foster genuinely inclusive workplaces, organizations must invest in targeted leadership development, institutional support systems, and culturally sensitive disability inclusion policies. As India's workforce becomes more diverse and complex, such inclusive models are not only ethical imperatives but also strategic necessities for resilience, innovation, and growth.

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