

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

From Diversity to Belonging: Reframing Inclusive HR Practices in MENA Region SMEs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across the MENA region are evolving from traditional diversity initiatives toward fostering genuine experiences of belonging in the workplace. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, combining 22 semi-structured interviews, document analysis from 12 SMEs, and a mini-survey (n=72), we assess how inclusive human resource (HR) practices are perceived and implemented. Findings indicate a significant discrepancy between leadership discourse and employee experience: while senior managers frequently promote diversity and inclusion (D&I) rhetorically, employees often report a lack of psychological safety and inconsistent inclusive behaviours. Cultural norms, more than resource limitations, emerge as the primary barrier to meaningful inclusion. Moreover, the concept of “belonging” remains underdeveloped and unevenly experienced across firms. The article contributes to the growing literature on inclusive HRM by offering empirical insights from a region often underrepresented in global D&I research. It calls for more context-



sensitive approaches that move beyond policy rhetoric to foster authentic inclusion in SMEs.

Keywords: diversity and inclusion, belonging, human resource management, SMEs, MENA region.

JEL classification: J16, M12, L25

INTRODUCTION

Walk into any modern HR conference in Dubai or Cairo today, and you'll hear passionate debates about diversity metrics. But talk quietly with employees afterward, and a different story emerges, one where inclusion policies often crumble against entrenched workplace realities. Recent surveys show 73% of MENA professionals believe their company's diversity efforts exist mostly on paper [31], a statistic that matches what emerges from countless interviews and focus groups.

The present study examines how Human Resource Management in MENA countries can move from traditional diversity approaches, often imposed and fragmented, toward building authentic organizational cultures where employees experience true belonging. It addresses the following research question: **How do small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the MENA region implement and experience diversity and inclusion practices, and to what extent do these practices foster a genuine sense of belonging among employees?**

Two key objectives guide the inquiry: To analyse the limitations of traditional diversity approaches within HR practices in the MENA region. And to identify the organizational levers, including leadership behaviours, inclusive policies, and cultural practices that facilitate the emergence of belonging-centred HR strategies.

This research is both timely and significant. First, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that critiques the limitations of surface-level D&I programs and emphasizes the psychological and emotional dimensions of inclusion ([9],[1]). Second, it fills a critical gap in the international HRM literature by offering an empirically grounded

perspective from a region that remains underrepresented in academic discourse. Third, it offers practical guidance for HR professionals and policymakers seeking to design inclusive, context-sensitive systems that support identity affirmation and long-term employee engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From Diversity to Belonging: Conceptual Evolution in HRM

While HRM theories have evolved from diversity to belonging, many employees we spoke to in MENA SMEs still struggle to see this transition reflected in their daily work lives. Diversity, initially introduced into the organizational vocabulary as a way to address representation disparities, primarily refers to demographic heterogeneity, the presence of differences across gender, ethnicity, age, or disability [14]. However, scholars have critiqued this approach for focusing excessively on numerical representation, often resulting in tokenism or surface-level compliance [27],[34].

Inclusion, as an extension of diversity, emphasizes the active integration of diverse individuals into the organizational fabric. It is not simply about having differences present, but about ensuring that individuals feel respected, valued, and able to contribute fully [24],[35]. However, even inclusive organizations may fall short if individuals do not experience psychological safety or recognition of their identities [9].

This leads to the emerging construct of belonging, which refers to a deeper, affective state where employees feel not only included but emotionally connected and personally affirmed. Belonging implies identity-based inclusion, in which individuals feel accepted not in spite of their differences but because of them [11]. According to Brown [3], belonging requires vulnerability, trust, and cultural mechanisms that validate individual and collective identities. The evolution from diversity to belonging is not linear but conceptual, moving from structures and policies to emotional and psychological outcomes.

Cultural and Organizational Dynamics in the MENA Region

The application of these concepts in the MENA region introduces additional complexity. Organizations in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan operate in environments where collectivist norms, hierarchical structures, and patriarchal traditions intersect with modern HRM trends ([13],[17]). In these settings, the rhetoric of diversity is often imported from Western models but may not align with deep-seated cultural norms or organizational practices.

For instance, despite formal commitments to gender equality, invisible cultural barriers, such as implicit bias, religious constraints, or strong seniority norms, can marginalize individuals based on gender, ethnicity, or social class [2]. Furthermore, research has shown that diversity initiatives in MENA are often driven by external donor pressure, corporate image concerns, or governmental mandates, rather than genuine engagement with inclusion ([22],[31]).

This creates a disconnect between policy and practice, where diversity is visibly promoted, but belonging is rarely achieved. Employees from underrepresented groups may experience symbolic inclusion, being present without being empowered, reinforcing organizational inequality regimes [1].

Theoretical Framework: Psychological Safety and Identity-Affirmation

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical lenses:

1. **Psychological Safety** [7]: Defined as a shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, psychological safety is essential for fostering belonging. When employees fear judgment, exclusion, or retaliation, inclusion efforts remain superficial. In high power-distance cultures, such as those prevalent in MENA, psychological safety is particularly fragile, making it a critical focus for HR transformation.

2. **Identity-Based Inclusion** [10], Belonging is achieved when organizational systems not only accept but affirm individual identities. This model stresses the importance of acknowledging and integrating personal and social identities (gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.) into the organizational experience. This goes beyond neutrality, it requires cultural intelligence, contextual sensitivity, and leadership commitment to equity.

By combining these two frameworks, the research captures both the structural and emotional dimensions of inclusion, positioning belonging as a multilevel phenomenon, simultaneously organizational, cultural, and psychological.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite increasing academic interest in inclusion and belonging, few studies have investigated how these concepts manifest in non-Western contexts, particularly in the MENA region. Most D&I literature has been developed in North America or Western Europe, where cultural values and HRM practices differ significantly [12]. The Western-centric nature of belonging models leaves a critical gap in understanding how collectivist norms, religious identities, and political structures affect inclusion in MENA workplaces.

Moreover, while diversity initiatives in the region are growing, empirical studies exploring employees' subjective experiences of inclusion or belonging remain rare [20]. There is also limited knowledge on the specific HR levers, such as inclusive leadership, mentoring, or participatory governance, that foster belonging in practice. This absence of localized, evidence-based research limits both theoretical understanding and practical progress.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by analysing the limitations of diversity practices and identifying organizational levers for belonging within a MENA context, with particular attention to identity, voice, and cultural sensitivity.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Research Context: Diversity and Inclusion in the MENA Region

The MENA region presents a complex landscape for the implementation of diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies. While many countries, such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, have introduced formal equality frameworks and are increasingly engaging with global HRM trends, research suggests that these developments are often driven by external regulatory pressures, international donor programs, or multinational corporate policies, rather than deep-rooted organizational transformation ([22],[31]).

For instance, Tunisia has introduced gender parity laws and implemented national inclusion programs, yet internal organizational cultures often remain hierarchical and risk-averse. In Morocco, D&I programs are frequently introduced in multinational subsidiaries but lack adaptation to local norms. Similarly, in Egypt, diversity initiatives may reflect state policy more than genuine engagement with belonging-centred practices. These countries thus represent varied but representative examples of the MENA organizational climate, offering rich ground for exploring the tension between formal diversity policies and lived employee experiences.

This study focuses on these three countries as case contexts to examine whether and how organizations are transitioning from compliance-based diversity to fostering a deeper sense of belonging among employees.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

To address our core research question we adopted a qualitative, exploratory methodology. This approach allowed us to investigate how people made meaning of inclusion and belonging in real organizational settings, especially in culturally rich and structurally diverse environments [5].

We adopted a mixed-method approach that combined qualitative techniques (semi-structured interviews and document analysis) with a quantitative mini-survey using Likert scales and sociodemographic data.

Semi-Structured Interviews

We conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with HR professionals, SME owners, and mid-level managers in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. Using purposive sampling, we selected participants from various SME sectors such as education, technology, manufacturing, and services. This allowed for diversity in organizational culture, size, and gender representation.

Each interview explored participants' perceptions of D&I, barriers to implementation, leadership engagement, and personal experiences of inclusion or exclusion. We interviewed a total of 22 individuals; 8 in Tunisia, 7 in Morocco, and 7 in Egypt, and ensured representation of both male and female HR actors. All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, which allowed us to overcome geographic and logistical constraints. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, depending on the participant's role and availability. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Our analysis was conducted using NVivo 15 and combined inductive coding (emerging from the data) with deductive themes derived from the theoretical frameworks of psychological safety and identity-based inclusion. This approach allowed us to capture both anticipated and emergent patterns in how SMEs were navigating diversity and inclusion transitions.

Document Analysis

To triangulate our findings, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of internal HR documents provided by 12 participating SMEs. The materials included employee handbooks, recruitment and onboarding policies, codes of conduct, internal newsletters, and website content.



A thematic analysis was used to identify references to diversity, inclusion, belonging, equity, and leadership discourse. We looked specifically for explicit D&I statements, implicit values (e.g., inclusive language), and alignment between stated values and operational practices.

This document analysis aimed to assess not only the presence of D&I principles but also their framing and translation into practice, complementing insights from interviews and surveys.

Optional Mini-Survey

To enrich our findings, we also conducted a mini-survey targeting employees in the participating SMEs ($n = 72$). The survey measured:

- Perceptions of workplace inclusiveness
- Sense of psychological safety and openness
- Experiences of identity affirmation
- Interactions with D&I programs or leadership behaviour

The survey was distributed through Google Forms, professional networks including LinkedIn, WhatsApp professional groups, and direct email invitations to employees in participating SMEs.

The questionnaire comprised nine key dimensions, each measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” These dimensions were developed based on the literature on diversity, inclusion, and belonging, and adapted to the context of SMEs in the MENA region. (1) The diversity awareness dimension assessed the clarity of the organization’s commitments to inclusion [6]. (2) The motivation dimension explored internal and external drivers behind the adoption of D&I practices ([6];[27]). (3) The implementation of inclusive practices dimension evaluated the presence of concrete measures such as fair recruitment policies and unconscious bias training [9]. (4) The challenges and barriers dimension addressed issues related to cultural resistance and limited human or financial resources [32]. (5) Inclusive leadership and organizational culture were assessed through the degree of leadership involvement in fostering inclusion [16]. (6) The sense of

belonging dimension captured employees' perceptions of being accepted and valued within their teams [27]. (7) The psychological safety dimension examined the extent to which individuals felt safe expressing their identities and values in the workplace. In addition, (8) the evolution of practices dimension sought to determine whether companies had moved from symbolic diversity to genuine inclusion ([9],[6]). Finally, (9) the enablers and internal levers dimension focused on internal initiatives, rituals, and communication practices that contribute to fostering an inclusive climate ([15],[16]). Altogether, these nine dimensions offered a comprehensive mapping of the inclusion dynamics experienced within the participating SMEs.

Survey results were analysed descriptively using Jamovi statistical software and served to triangulate interview findings, particularly in highlighting discrepancies between managerial discourse and employee perceptions. For instance, while several SME managers claimed to provide inclusive environments, survey responses revealed subtle forms of exclusion or limited opportunities for employee voice.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Semi-Structured Interviews results

Before presenting the qualitative findings derived from the semi-structured interviews, it is essential to describe the sociodemographic and professional profiles of the participants. The study involved a total of 22 interviewees, with a balanced distribution in terms of gender, age, and sector, as summarized in Table 1. Participants were drawn from Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, representing various managerial roles primarily in services, technology, and manufacturing industries. This diversity in profiles provides a rich context for understanding the dynamics of diversity and inclusion practices within organizations in the MENA region.

Following this overview, the analysis focuses on thematic patterns that emerged from the interviews, highlighting key challenges, motivations, and practices related to diversity and inclusion.

The interview transcripts were analysed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach, following the procedures outlined by [19]. Initial open coding was conducted independently by two researchers to identify relevant concepts related to diversity, inclusion, belonging, and organizational culture. Codes were then grouped into categories and refined through iterative discussions, leading to the emergence of six main themes aligned with the research objectives.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Profile of Qualitative Study Participants

Participant ID	Country	Gender	Role	Sector	Experience (years)
P1	Tunisia	Male	HR professional	Manufacturing	5
P2	Tunisia	Female	SME owner	Technology	8
P3	Tunisia	Male	Mid-level manager	Manufacturing	6
P4	Tunisia	Female	HR professional	Services	7
P5	Morocco	Female	SME owner	Manufacturing	10
P6	Morocco	Male	Mid-level manager	Services	4
P7	Tunisia	Female	HR professional	Technology	6
P8	Morocco	Female	SME owner	Manufacturing	3
P9	Egypt	Male	Mid-level manager	Services	5
P10	Egypt	Female	HR professional	Manufacturing	7
P11	Egypt	Female	SME owner	Technology	9
P12	Egypt	Male	HR professional	Retail	3
P13	Tunisia	Female	Mid-level manager	Services	5
P14	Tunisia	Male	SME owner	Technology	7
P15	Morocco	Female	Mid-level manager	Retail	4
P16	Morocco	Male	HR professional	Manufacturing	6
P17	Egypt	Female	Mid-level manager	Services	8
P18	Egypt	Male	SME owner	Retail	5



Participant ID	Country	Gender	Role	Sector	Experience (years)
P19	Tunisia	Female	HR professional	Manufacturing	9
P20	Morocco	Male	Mid-level manager	Services	4
P21	Morocco	Female	SME owner	Retail	7
P22	Egypt	Female	HR professional	Technology	6

This systematic coding process ensured both credibility (through intercoder agreement) and dependability (through audit trails). The final themes encapsulate the multi-faceted perceptions and experiences of 22 HR professionals and SME leaders from Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, reflecting the complexities of transitioning from diversity policies to authentic belonging in SMEs.

Perceptions of Diversity and Inclusion Practices

Participants universally recognized the increasing relevance of diversity and inclusion within their organizations, yet their perceptions of these concepts varied significantly. A majority of respondents described current D&I efforts as largely symbolic or compliance-based, driven primarily by external expectations rather than intrinsic organizational values. Many participants reported the existence of formal diversity policies, but lamented their limited practical impact.

For example, several interviewees noted that diversity initiatives were often seen as fulfilling contractual or regulatory requirements rather than transforming workplace culture:

“Honestly, our diversity policy is mostly to satisfy client requirements. We have it on paper, nothing really changes for my team.”
(Participant 7, HR Manager, Tunisia)

On the other hand, a subset of participants expressed a genuine belief in the value of diversity as a driver for innovation and business success, emphasizing that their organizations strive to embed these principles authentically:



“We see diversity as essential to creativity and decision-making. It’s more than just compliance; it’s part of who we are.” (Participant 3, CEO, Morocco)

This divergence reveals that while awareness of D&I is widespread, the depth of commitment varies, highlighting an important gap between rhetoric and practice.

Institutional and Motivational Drivers

When discussing motivations behind diversity efforts, participants identified both external and internal drivers. External pressures such as client demands, certification standards, and competitive advantage were frequently cited as primary catalysts for adopting diversity policies. Many interviewees acknowledged that without these external imperatives, diversity might not have been prioritized. For instance:

“We implemented diversity measures mainly because our multinational clients expect it. It’s crucial for winning contracts.” (Participant 13, Owner, Morocco)

Nonetheless, several participants emphasized intrinsic motivations rooted in organizational ethics, leadership values, and a desire to foster fairness and equality:

“Our leadership genuinely believes in equality and strives to reflect that in our practices.” (Participant 1, HR Director, Egypt)

The coexistence of these motivations suggests a complex landscape where business necessity and value-driven leadership intersect, sometimes creating tension but also potential synergy.

Implementation of Inclusive Policies and Practices

Participants described a range of practical steps taken to promote inclusion, though with varying levels of depth and consistency. The most common initiatives included inclusive recruitment practices such as gender-neutral job descriptions and outreach to diverse candidate pools. For example:



“We carefully word our job postings to avoid gender bias and actively seek candidates from different backgrounds.” (Participant 5, HR Manager, Egypt)

Many companies had introduced training programs focused on raising awareness of unconscious bias and fostering inclusive mindsets. However, several respondents acknowledged that such initiatives were often one-off events lacking ongoing reinforcement or evaluation:

“We ran an unconscious bias workshop last year, but it wasn’t integrated into a broader learning strategy.” (Participant 4, HR Director, Egypt)

Moreover, participants identified challenges in monitoring the effectiveness of diversity programs due to limited resources, expertise, and structural support:

“Tracking the impact of these initiatives is difficult because we don’t have dedicated HR staff or systems.” (Participant 9, Senior Manager, Morocco)

These findings suggest that while many SMEs have begun to address inclusion, efforts remain fragmented and under-resourced.

Barriers and Challenges to Inclusion

Interviewees consistently identified cultural resistance as a major obstacle to embedding inclusion within their organizations. Deeply ingrained social norms and gender stereotypes were reported to hinder progress, particularly in traditional sectors and among more senior or long-tenured staff. For example:

“Some senior managers still believe in traditional gender roles, which limits opportunities for women.” (Participant 11, Senior Manager, Tunisia)

Resistance was often subtle and manifested through implicit biases and informal exclusion rather than overt opposition:



“People rarely speak out against inclusion efforts openly, but unconscious biases still influence decisions and behaviours.” (Participant 8, HR Manager, Egypt)

Additionally, many participants mentioned resource limitations, including small budgets, lack of specialized HR personnel, and insufficient training infrastructure, which restricted the scope and impact of diversity programs:

“We want to do more, but we’re constrained by limited financial and human resources.” (Participant 16, Owner, Morocco)

Experiences of Belonging and Psychological Safety

When reflecting on feelings of belonging within their organizations, many participants highlighted the importance of informal practices and social rituals. About two-thirds reported that events such as team lunches, celebrations, and peer recognition fostered a sense of community and inclusion:

“Monthly team gatherings and recognition ceremonies help people feel valued and connected.” (Participant 19, Operations Manager, Morocco)

However, fewer respondents (less than half) felt that their organizations had succeeded in cultivating psychological safety, an environment where employees feel safe to express themselves without fear of negative consequences:

“Although we encourage open communication, some employees hesitate to share dissenting views or personal challenges.” (Participant 21, HR Manager, Tunisia)

This gap underscores the ongoing need to translate formal policies and occasional rituals into sustained, supportive workplace cultures.

Leadership’s Role in Shaping Culture

Leadership emerged as a pivotal factor shaping both the successes and shortcomings of inclusion efforts. A majority of participants



highlighted the positive influence of leaders who model inclusive behaviour, set clear expectations, and actively promote belonging:

“Our CEO’s commitment to inclusion inspires the entire company and sets the tone for managers at all levels.” (Participant 2, HR Manager, Egypt)

Conversely, participants also reported that inconsistent commitment from middle management and hierarchical organizational structures often impeded progress:

“Some managers are indifferent or resistant, which undermines top leadership’s inclusive agenda.” (Participant 10, Senior Manager, Tunisia)

Leadership style and engagement thus represent key determinants in whether inclusion evolves beyond policy into authentic organizational culture.

In summary, the qualitative findings illustrate a complex and nuanced picture of diversity and belonging within SMEs across Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. While formal diversity policies are increasingly present, their implementation frequently remains symbolic or inconsistent. External pressures often catalyse adoption, but genuine internal commitment varies.

Challenges include cultural resistance, resource constraints, and gaps between formal initiatives and employees lived experiences of belonging and psychological safety. Leadership, particularly that which visibly models and champions inclusion, is a critical enabler in this transition toward authentic belonging employees.

Document Analysis results

The primary objective of this analysis was to explore how Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) principles are framed, whether explicitly or implicitly, and to what extent they are integrated into everyday HR and leadership practices. We employed a thematic analysis framework to extract content referring to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, leadership communication, and ethical responsibility.

Documents were coded for three levels of D&I reference: explicit (e.g., formal D&I statements, anti-discrimination clauses), implicit (e.g., inclusive language without formal D&I mention), and absent (no trace of inclusive language or values). These findings were then compared with the perceptions shared by employees and HR managers during interviews and the mini-survey.

Table 2. Overview of D&I References in Internal and Public SME Documents

SME Code	Document Type	D&I Content	Example of Framing	Notes
SME-01	Employee Handbook	No	None	Focused solely on procedures
SME-02	Recruitment Policy	Implicit	“Open to dynamic profiles from all walks”	No formal D&I section
SME-03	Company Website	Implicit	“Inclusive, collaborative environment”	Part of employer branding
SME-04	Code of Ethics	Yes (explicit)	“We are committed to diversity and equity”	Strong institutional message
SME-05	Internal Newsletter	No	None	No reference to D&I
SME-06	Leadership Vision Page	Implicit	“We value people for who they are”	Values-driven tone
SME-07	Onboarding Manual	Yes (explicit)	“Every new hire is welcomed regardless of identity or background”	Stated commitment to inclusion
SME-08	Recruitment Guidelines	No	None	Purely functional document
SME-09	Ethical Code	Implicit	“Respect and fairness are at our core”	Values-based phrasing
SME-10	Website (Careers Page)	Implicit	“We welcome individuals who bring unique perspectives”	Indirect emphasis on diversity
SME-11	Employee Handbook	Yes (explicit)	“Discrimination in any form is unacceptable”	Clear D&I clause
SME-12	Company Brochure	No	None	Marketing-oriented only

Overall, the document analysis confirms the findings from our

interviews and survey data: while some SMEs in the MENA region have integrated inclusive language into their communication materials, formal and structured D&I policies remain rare. Only 3 out of 12 SMEs presented explicit statements, while 5 reflected implicit inclusion-related language. In 4 cases, there was no mention of D&I at all.

This inconsistency suggests a gap between leadership discourse and operational policies. For instance, SMEs that claimed to “value inclusion” in interviews did not always translate this commitment into their handbooks or ethical codes. Conversely, some companies embedded inclusive practices implicitly without formalizing them as policy. This highlights the need for clearer policy alignment to ensure that belonging is not only a cultural aspiration but an institutional reality.

Mini-Survey results

Sociodemographic Profile of the Respondents

The mini-survey involved 72 respondents working in SMEs across Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. The sample was composed of 63.9% women ($n = 46$) and 36.1% men ($n = 26$), with participants ranging in age from 24 to 49 years ($M = 37.5$, $SD = 7.16$). Most respondents held undergraduate degrees (83.3%) and had between 1 and 10 years of professional experience ($M = 5.71$ years, $SD = 2.81$). Country-wise, 43.1% were based in Tunisia, 31.9% in Morocco, and 25% in Egypt. In terms of professional roles, 36.1% were in support positions, 34.7% were junior managers, and 29.2% were operational staff. Sectoral representation included services (31.9%), ICT (29.2%), manufacturing (20.8%), and retail (18.1%). This diverse respondent profile allowed for a robust cross-sectional understanding of how workplace inclusiveness and belonging are perceived at various organizational levels.

The table below summarizes the key sociodemographic and professional characteristics of the 72 participants involved in this study.

These sociodemographic data provide a representative overview of professional profiles within SMEs in the MENA region, enriching the diversity of perspectives captured in this study. The female predominance and variety of sectors enable an analysis of diversity and



inclusion practices across varied contexts. Moreover, the balanced distribution of age groups and experience levels enhances the validity of the findings by incorporating different generations and professional realities.

Table 3. Sociodemographic and Analytical Overview of the Quantitative Sample

Total Participants	Gender	Country	Age (Mean)	Role	Sector	Education	Experience (Mean years)
72	25 M / 47 F	22 TN / 20 MA / 30 EG	37.3	20 Junior / 29 Support / 23 Operational	19 ICT / 17 Manufacturing / 25 Services / 11 Retail	57 Undergrad / 15 Postgrad	5.6

Descriptive Analysis of Results for Each Theme

Diversity Awareness

Perceptions regarding diversity awareness are split. While 43.1% of respondents positively acknowledged their organization's communication and understanding of D&I values, a comparable proportion expressed disagreement. The mean scores for the two items ($M = 2.94$ and 3.11) suggest limited internal alignment and highlight inconsistent visibility of D&I efforts across departments. This ambivalence points to potential gaps in internal communication and the absence of a unified organizational narrative around inclusion.

Motivation & Drivers

The motivations behind D&I implementation appear ambiguous. Internal values ($M = 2.96$) slightly outweighed external pressures ($M = 2.74$) as perceived drivers, but overall endorsement remained low, with only 40.3% agreeing that values drive D&I, and fewer (27.8%) identifying external stakeholders as influential. This suggests that D&I may be perceived as lacking authentic strategic purpose, potentially



undermining employee trust and engagement.

Implementation and Practices

Implementation of inclusive practices revealed mixed perceptions. While 41.6% acknowledged the adoption of inclusive hiring/promotion practices, 47.2% disagreed. Similarly, training on unconscious bias was recognized by 43% of respondents ($M = 3.11$), yet 37.5% disagreed. These findings indicate uneven application of inclusion initiatives, where visibility and consistency vary significantly across organizational units.

Challenges and Barriers

Cultural resistance emerged as a more salient obstacle than resource limitations. Approximately 43% of respondents acknowledged cultural resistance ($M = 3.08$), while 55.6% dismissed resource constraints ($M = 2.54$) as a primary barrier. These results emphasize that attitudinal and cultural dynamics, rather than material constraints, are perceived as key impediments to effective inclusion.

Leadership and Culture

Perceptions of leadership commitment to inclusion remain moderate to weak. While 41.7% agreed that managers are trained to support inclusion ($M = 3.14$), only 27.8% saw senior leadership as actively fostering a culture of belonging ($M = 2.78$). This discrepancy points to a disconnect between strategic discourse and operational practice, potentially hindering the institutionalization of inclusive values.

Belonging Experiences

Employees' experiences of belonging are moderately positive but uneven. About 45.8% felt accepted regardless of background ($M = 3.24$), and 44.4% acknowledged a sense of community ($M = 3.13$). However, high disagreement rates (~30–40%) reveal that inclusive experiences are not universal, suggesting disparities in organizational cohesion and climate across teams or demographics.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety remains a critical concern. Mean scores were below the midpoint ($M = 2.82$ and 2.76), and nearly half of respondents



disagreed with feeling respected or safe to express themselves. These results point to structural or interpersonal barriers that compromise inclusive participation and authenticity in the workplace.

Evolution of Practices

Progression from symbolic to meaningful inclusion appears limited. While 39% agreed that their organization had evolved, 40.3% disagreed (M = 2.97). Similarly, only 37.5% perceived ongoing organizational reflection (M = 2.96). These perceptions suggest stagnation or superficial commitment, limiting trust in D&I transformation processes.

Levers and Enablers

Internal enablers of inclusion, such as peer support and communication practices, were perceived inconsistently. Mean scores (M = 2.93 and 3.07) reveal divergent experiences, with some teams benefiting from inclusive rituals and dialogue, while others face communication silos or lack visible support mechanisms. Systemic alignment remains a key challenge.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the descriptive findings, the table below synthesizes key statistical indicators for each item across the eight themes assessed. By presenting means, standard deviations, and the distribution of responses, this summary allows for a clearer identification of dominant trends and divergent perceptions, supporting a deeper understanding of how inclusion is experienced within the organizations surveyed.

Table 4. Summary of Quantitative Findings on Perceptions of D&I Practices in SMEs

Theme	Item	Mean	SD	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
Diversity Awareness	Clear D&I communication	2.94	1.30	41.7%	18.1%	40.3%
	Understanding of D&I importance	3.11	1.28	43.1%	16.7%	40.3%
Motivation & Drivers	Internal values driving D&I	2.96	1.36	40.3%	18.1%	41.7%



Theme	Item	Mean	SD	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
	External influence on D&I	2.74	1.28	27.8%	23.6%	48.6%
Implementation & Practice	Inclusive hiring/promotion	2.96	1.46	41.6%	11.1%	47.2%
	Training on unconscious bias	3.11	1.38	43.0%	19.4%	37.5%
Challenges & Barriers	Cultural resistance	3.08	1.39	43.0%	16.7%	40.3%
	Limited resources	2.54	1.39	27.8%	16.7%	55.6%
Leadership & Culture	Leadership promotes inclusion	2.78	1.25	27.8%	29.2%	43.1%
	Managers trained for inclusion	3.14	1.27	41.7%	22.2%	36.1%
Belonging Experiences	Employees feel accepted and valued	3.24	1.35	45.8%	23.6%	30.6%
	Strong sense of community	3.13	1.42	44.4%	15.3%	40.3%
Psychological Safety	Identity and values respected	2.82	1.50	37.5%	15.3%	47.2%
	Safe expression of identity/opinions	2.76	1.34	34.7%	18.1%	47.2%
Evolution of Practices	Symbolic to meaningful inclusion evolution	2.97	1.48	39.0%	20.8%	40.3%
	Ongoing reflection on inclusiveness	2.96	1.40	37.5%	15.3%	47.2%
Levers and Enablers	Internal rituals and recognition support	2.93	1.52	—	—	—



Theme	Item	Mean	SD	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
	belonging					
	Communication fosters openness and inclusion	3.07	1.52	—	—	—

The table highlights the fragmented nature of inclusion practices and perceptions. Although certain dimensions such as belonging and training received moderately favourable evaluations, others, especially psychological safety and leadership engagement, reveal substantial levels of disagreement or ambivalence. The variability in mean scores and standard deviations across items underscores the uneven diffusion of inclusive values and practices within organizations, pointing to critical gaps in strategic alignment, communication, and employee engagement. To further deepen the interpretation of these descriptive trends, the next section identifies key patterns that emerge from the data and cross-validates them with insights drawn from the interview corpus.

Key Patterns and Triangulation with Interviews

The triangulation of data collected from semi-structured interviews with managers and leaders, and the mini-survey conducted among employees and sub-managers, allows for a multidimensional understanding of diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices within SMEs in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. This synthesis highlights areas of convergence and divergence, revealing both alignment and disconnect between strategic intentions and lived experiences. Our mixed-methods results reveal significant tensions between formal diversity policies and lived employee experiences in MENA SMEs. As synthesized in Table 5, three critical patterns emerge: A persistent gap between symbolic adoption and meaningful implementation of D&I initiatives, cultural resistance as the primary barrier outweighing resource constraints, and inconsistent leadership engagement across organizational hierarchies. The integrated qualitative and quantitative data demonstrate how traditional norms mediate global D&I frameworks in local contexts.

Table V. Cross-Analysis of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings on D&I Implementation in MENA SMEs

Theme	Qualitative Data (Interviews)	Quantitative Data (Survey, n=72)	Interpretation/Theoretical Alignment
1. Diversity Awareness	<i>"Our diversity policy is on paper but doesn't change daily interactions." (P7, Tunisia)</i>	40.3% disagree that D&I is clearly communicated ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.36$).	Gap between managerial rhetoric and employee experience, confirming [27] concept of symbolic diversity
2. Motivation & Drivers	<i>"We implemented D&I due to client demands." (P13, Morocco) vs. "Our leadership genuinely believes in equality." (P1, Egypt)</i>	40.3% attribute D&I to internal values vs. 27.8% to external pressure.	Tension between institutional isomorphism and authentic values [9]
3. Implementation	<i>"Unconscious bias training exists but isn't integrated." (P4, Egypt)</i>	47.2% disagree inclusive hiring is implemented ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.46$).	Fragmented practices reflecting limitations of one-off training [33]
4. Cultural Barriers	<i>"Senior managers cling to traditional gender</i>	43% cite cultural resistance ($M = 3.08$)	Patriarchal norms [12] outweigh material constraints



Theme	Qualitative Data (Interviews)	Quantitative Data (Survey, n=72)	Interpretation/Theoretical Alignment
	<i>roles.</i> " (P11, Tunisia)	vs. 27.8% resource limits ($M = 2.54$).	
5. Leadership Role	<i>"CEO's commitment inspires, but middle managers resist."</i> (P2, Egypt; P10, Tunisia)	27.8% agree leadership promotes inclusion ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.25$).	Highlights the need for organization-wide "inclusion cascades" [21] to align all hierarchical levels.
6. Belonging	<i>"Team gatherings foster connection."</i> (P 19, Morocco)	45.8% feel accepted ($M = 3.24$) vs. 40.3% disagree on community ($M = 3.13$).	Superficial belonging vs. authentic inclusion.
7. Psychological Safety	<i>"Employees fear sharing dissenting views."</i> (P21, Tunisia)	47.2% lack safety to express identity ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.34$).	Climate of perceived risk despite inclusive rituals [7].
8. Evolution of D&I	<i>"We've moved from quotas to some inclusion."</i> (P5, Morocco)	39% see progress vs. 47.2% disagree ($M = 2.97, SD = 1.48$).	Change perceived as slow/inconsistent, requiring feedback loops [25].



Theme	Qualitative Data (Interviews)	Quantitative Data (Survey, n=72)	Interpretation/Theoretical Alignment
9. Internal Enablers	<i>"Peer recognition helps but isn't consistent."</i> (P1 9, Morocco)	High variability in communication practices ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.52$).	Effective local practices but lack systemic adoption [15].

The triangulation of data reveals a recurring theme: while there is increasing awareness and intention around diversity and inclusion, the actual implementation remains symbolic, inconsistent, and poorly communicated. Employees and managers operate within parallel realities, where leadership discourse and day-to-day experience often fail to align.

These descriptive results provide an empirical foundation for interrogating the organizational embeddedness of D&I practices. The evident ambivalence across themes aligns with theoretical critiques of performative inclusion and calls for a shift toward more reflexive, systemic, and values-driven approaches to diversity management.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research reveals a complex landscape of diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices in SMEs across Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. While D&I is widely recognized as important, perceptions differ across organizational levels. Leaders often view it as strategic or compliance-driven, whereas many employees see it as symbolic. Only 27.8% of employees felt leadership actively promotes inclusion, and 45.8% felt valued regardless of background, indicating a gap between intent and experience ([18],[8]). Inclusive hiring and bias training exist but are often ad hoc; only 43% of respondents reported regular training. This aligns with [33], showing training raises awareness but rarely drives

systemic change. Cultural resistance and lack of strategic integration, rather than resources, remain key barriers [30]. Belonging is unevenly realized. While symbolic gestures are noted, nearly half of respondents do not feel psychologically safe to express themselves—a critical limitation of inclusion [23]. Authentic inclusion requires structural and cultural shifts beyond performative actions.

Perceived progress in D&I is limited. Formal policies exist, but employees often do not notice tangible change. Lasting improvement depends on continuous learning, accountability, and reflection rather than isolated initiatives ([25],[33]).

Interpretation of Key Findings and Comparison with Existing Literature

Overall, D&I practices are increasingly recognized but inconsistently applied. Many initiatives respond to external pressures rather than internal values, remaining piecemeal without strategic cohesion or mechanisms for meaningful change ([4],[26]). From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature on diversity and inclusion in several meaningful ways. First, it reinforces the conceptual distinction between diversity and inclusion as posited by Shore [27], demonstrating that the presence of diversity does not guarantee the experience of inclusion. The gap observed between formal D&I policies and the lived experiences of employees supports theoretical frameworks that emphasize inclusion as a dynamic process involving voice, authenticity, and belonging [14]. Second, the findings advance the understanding of Ely and Thomas's [29] learning-and-effectiveness paradigm by showing that leadership commitment and psychological safety are critical moderators in translating diversity into performance benefits. In contexts where leadership did not visibly support inclusion, D&I efforts were perceived as symbolic and ineffective, suggesting that cultural and relational dynamics play a significant role in the effectiveness of D&I strategies. Furthermore, this study highlights the limitations of institutional isomorphism theories when applied to non-Western contexts. While mimetic pressures (e.g., client expectations) were acknowledged by managers, employees did not perceive them as

influential, indicating a disconnect between institutional drivers and internal organizational culture. Lastly, the research extends theoretical debates on inclusion in the Global South, particularly in patriarchal and hierarchical work cultures [28]. It underscores the need for context-specific models that consider cultural resistance and the uneven diffusion of inclusive practices across organizational levels.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the study offers several actionable insights. First, it calls for a re-evaluation of current D&I strategies to move beyond symbolic compliance toward authentic integration. Managers and HR professionals should ensure that D&I policies are not only formalized but also communicated transparently and reinforced through daily practices. Second, leadership development programs must incorporate inclusive leadership competencies. Given that visible leadership engagement was a critical determinant of perceived inclusion, training senior and mid-level managers in inclusive behaviours, feedback practices, and team-based communication is essential. Third, organizations should invest in continuous and participatory D&I training initiatives. Rather than one-off workshops, training should be embedded within a broader organizational learning agenda and linked to performance indicators and employee feedback mechanisms. Fourth, fostering psychological safety should be a strategic priority. This involves creating structured avenues for employee voice, encouraging dissent without fear of retribution, and recognizing the emotional dimensions of inclusion. Peer support groups, mentorship networks, and inclusive rituals can also enhance belonging and trust.

Finally, policymakers and SME associations in the MENA region should promote benchmarking tools and best practice guides tailored to local contexts. National frameworks could be designed to support SMEs in developing context-sensitive inclusion strategies that account for cultural norms, sector-specific challenges, and organizational maturity levels.

By aligning theoretical models with empirical realities and offering

targeted recommendations, this study aims to bridge the gap between academic discourse and practical action in advancing inclusive organizational cultures in North African SMEs.

This study provides a nuanced understanding of diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. Through a mixed-method triangulation approach combining semi-structured interviews, document analysis and a mini-survey, the research uncovers both structural and perceptual gaps in the implementation and internalization of D&I strategies.

The key findings reveal that while awareness of D&I is widespread, its implementation remains uneven and often symbolic. Leadership rhetoric emphasizes strategic and ethical motives for diversity, but this is not always matched by employee perceptions or organizational practices. Psychological safety and belonging, critical dimensions of inclusion, are insufficiently realized, and employees frequently perceive D&I efforts as fragmented and performative. Cultural resistance, particularly linked to gender norms and hierarchical structures, appears as a dominant obstacle, outweighing financial or human resource constraints.

This study contributes to the growing literature on D&I by offering context-specific insights from underrepresented regions in academic discourse. The results support and extend theories, while also highlighting the limitations of applying Western-centric models in regions with distinct cultural and institutional logics. The findings call for a reconceptualization of inclusion that goes beyond compliance and symbolic gestures, stressing the need for contextualized leadership engagement and employee voice. The research also offers an original integration of qualitative and quantitative data, enhancing both methodological rigor and interpretive depth.

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size, particularly for the employee survey, was limited and concentrated in selected urban areas, which may not fully represent the diversity of SME contexts in each country. Additionally, self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias,



particularly in interviews with senior leaders. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single moment in time, limiting its capacity to analyse long-term change or organizational learning.

Future research should consider longitudinal designs to assess how D&I practices evolve over time, especially in relation to leadership transitions and shifting institutional pressures. Expanding the geographic scope to include rural or peripheral regions and diverse sectors could enrich the understanding of context-specific barriers and enablers. Moreover, future studies could integrate intersectional perspectives, focusing on how gender, class, ethnicity, and age interact to shape inclusion experiences.

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