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Exploring the challenges and solutions for cultivating an inclusive work environment in the energy sector in Zimbabwe



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the challenges and strategies of cultivating and promoting inclusivity and diversity in the energy sector. Grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm, a qualitative approach was adopted specifically using descriptive multiple case study design. In-depth interviews were conducted from sixteen purposively selected participants from the energy industry in Chipinge district, Zimbabwe. Data was analyzed using the thematic data analysis technique. The study found out that the work environment in the energy industry was partially inclusive. There is evidence of both success stories and challenges with regards to inclusivity in the energy sector. The main challenges faced by the energy sector in promoting inclusivity include resource inadequacies, unconscious biases, resistance to change, communication barriers, tokenism, lack of knowledge and commitment from managers, strategic misalignment, policy deficiency and gender disparities in leadership roles. The strategies that can be employed to cultivate an inclusive work environment are the development of comprehensive policies, cultural transformation through management training, deliberate inclusion in procurement and infrastructure design, regular employee surveys, inclusive leadership programs, and mentorship initiatives. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on fostering inclusivity in the workplace by equipping all stakeholders with full knowledge and understanding of inclusive workplace dynamics. The study also contributes to the body of knowledge by shedding light on the challenges faced by the energy sector and strategies for accelerating the embracing of inclusivity in the energy sector. Furthermore, the study adds to the underexplored discourse of diversity management in Southern Africa and brings a grounded qualitative voice to the broader literature.

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Introduction

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and 3 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); SDG5 on gender equality, SDG8 on promoting sustainable, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and decent work for all and SD9 on promoting resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable individualization and fostering innovation have made the need for organisations to promote inclusivity and diversity mandatory. The need to promote equality, diversity and inclusivity in workplaces ignited researchers in the past decade (Mukupu et al 2023, Brewster et al 2014, Mennicke & Cutler-Seeber 2016, Ryan and Oestreich 2016, Blick et al., 2016, Adams & Martinez, 2016, Kele & Nyanga 2023) to carry out several studies on the subject. Diversity and inclusivity in the workplace have been receiving an amplified attention by scholars (Blick et al., 2016, Barak, 2022), human rights specialists and various pressure groups. The amplification of studies on the subject has been necessitated by the ever growing need to expedite the promotion of inclusivity and address inclusivity related challenges in various organisations, countries, regions and the globe. A study by (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023) has shown the importance of diversity and inclusivity when it established that the issue of diversity is fundamental to addressing not only gender equity but also the industry's need for diverse skills which consequently lead to creativity and innovation. With a diverse workforce who bring with them diverse cultural backgrounds, organisations ought to demonstrate commitment to promoting multiplicity and inclusion, which is not only ethically sound but also strategically beneficial.

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Furthermore, the incorporation of gender diversity (Adams & Martinez, 2016) and also the inclusion of employees living with disabilities in all sectors of the economy, further make the need for developing inclusive workstations self-evident (Chumo et al 2023). Achieving gender diversity reflects not only a commitment to inclusivity but also acknowledges the unique perspectives and capabilities that individuals of all genders bring in organisations. Nyanga (2022) also established that incorporating inclusivity and diversity in the operations of business entities make them easily adapt to the endlessly changing, unpredictable, uncertain and ambiguous business landscape which consequently make them gain a competitive edge. Studies (Nyanga 2022, Fitriana 2023, Cox 2001)) have indicated that the promotion of inclusivity in various organisations, especially in the global south is lagging behind and has been plagued by several hurdles, which if they are to be addressed require proactive and intentional efforts by all key stakeholders. The hurdles faced by organisations in promoting inclusivity and diversity make the need to carry out this research self-evident.

Organisations in the fuel and gas sectors have not been spared from the challenges of promoting inclusivity and being required to establish, implement and maintain work environments that are diversity and inclusion conscious. Like other organisations in other sectors such as education (Nyanga & Chindanya, 2020), organisations in the energy sector are also required to develop an inclusive work environment which accommodates all the categories of workers, particularly those living with disabilities. In the energy industry, the importance of sustainable practices is underscored by global agreements such as the SDGs (Blick et al., 2016), which consequently make the need for carrying out this study necessary. The study unveils the extent to which the energy sector contributes to the realization of SDGs on sustainability and inclusivity.

Zimbabwe, being a full member of the UN and ILO fully assented to SDGs 5, 8 & 9 on diversity (Maphiri et al, 2021) is compelled to undertake initiatives to embrace the principles of diversity and inclusivity in all its operations. As the country is advancing towards meeting its goal of an upper-middle-economy society by 2030, it needs not to leave anyone behind, hence inclusivity becomes necessary. However, the initiatives to promote an inclusive work environment is always met with several hurdles which make its full development and implementation difficult (Landorf (2023)). While the significance of embracing diversity, inclusion and sustainable energy practices is widely recognized within the energy sector, the specific challenges and strategies relevant to Zimbabwe remain an underexplored area. As organizations in the energy sector work to align with evolving energy trends and meet national and international sustainability targets, there is an urgent need to gain insights into the practical challenges and effective strategies involved in fostering and sustaining an inclusive workplace in the energy sector in Zimbabwe. It is imperative to establish how the execution of inclusive and sustainable practices within the energy sector harmonizes with national, regional and international policies and initiatives on diversity and inclusion. The literature search shows that the discourse of diversity and inclusivity management in the energy in Southern Africa is underexplored hence the carrying out of this study brings a grounded qualitative voice to the broader literature.

The purpose of this study is to establish the status of inclusivity in the energy sector and also to explore the challenges and strategies related to the cultivation of an inclusive work environment in the energy sector in Zimbabwe. The research further intends to develop a more informed inclusivity management best practices, foster organizational development and propel the advancement of SDG number 8, ILO guidelines on diversity and also national policies on diversity and inclusivity. This paper is divided into 4 sections namely: the introduction part, literature review with theoretical and empirical studies, research methodology, results, discussions and implications, conclusion, recommendations, future research directions and implications of the study.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

This study was guided by the intersectionality theory and the social identity theory. The intersectionality theory which was coined by Crenshaw in (1989) emphasized that individuals experience overlapping social identities that can lead to unique forms of discrimination or privilege. In studying inclusivity in the energy sector, this framework allows researchers to examine how various identities such as race, gender and socio-economic status interact and affect individual's experiences in the workplace. It underscores the need for tailored strategies that address these intersecting identities to promote true inclusivity.

Another theory guiding the study is the Social identity theory (SIT) developed by Tajfel & Turner (1979) which posits that individuals derive a sense of self-confidence from their group memberships. In the context of the energy sector, this theory can help researchers and readers understand how employees from diverse backgrounds perceive their inclusion or exclusion based on their identity groups such as gender and ethnicity. This theory highlights the importance of fostering an inclusive culture that values diversity to mitigate feelings of alienation among underrepresented groups. The two theories provide a comprehensive framework that facilitate organizational change and fosters inclusivity, placing a strong emphasis on proactive strategies to effectively manage diversity. The models advocate for organizations to go beyond a passive approach to diversity management and actively cultivate an environment where differences are not only acknowledged but valued and integrated into every aspect of the organizational culture and practices. The theories recognize the three critical components essential for creating an inclusive workplace, which are deep understanding, respect, and appreciation for diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Cultural competence is considered foundational for creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels acknowledged and respected. The theories underscore the importance of integrating inclusive practices into various organizational processes, including recruitment, talent development, decision-making, and communication strategies.

Empirical Review and Hypothesis Development

Unpacking inclusivity and diversity concepts

Literature suggests that there is definitional controversy on inclusivity and diversity. It appears that there is no universally agreed definition of inclusivity (Nyanga & Nyanga, 2013). However, many authors (Rani 2023, Dobusch 2021, Eshete & Birbirssa 2024) seem to agree on some common features of inclusivity such as: removal of barriers for employment, fostering equal opportunities and recognizing and appreciating diverse perspectives. According to Croitoru et al (2022) diversity refers to the presence and inclusion of individuals from various backgrounds, such as different races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, ages, abilities and cultural or social backgrounds, within an organization. In the context of the energy sector in Zimbabwe, diversity is the active representation and inclusion of employees from a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. It embraces individuals with varying life experiences, skills, and demographics, contributing to a rich and heterogeneous workforce (Khan & Javaid, 2023). Inclusion is the practice of including and accommodating employees who often face discrimination and exclusion due to race, gender, ability, sexuality or identity so that everyone feel welcomed and valued (Wilson 2023). Inclusion means establishing a workplace culture where all employees, regardless of their backgrounds, are encouraged to contribute, voice their opinions, and collaborate as equal members of the organization (Javed, 2024). It is about making every employee have a feeling of belonging and having a meaningful role to play in the organisation. Inclusion signifies the practice of creating an environment in which every individual feels respected, valued, and empowered to participate fully in the activities of the organization.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership (2018) strengthens the idea that fostering a sense of belonging needs deliberate efforts to recognize and celebrate diverse cultural backgrounds. Inclusive leadership plays a vital role in producing an atmosphere where people feel respected, appreciated and included. Blick et al. (2016) argues that inclusive work environments contribute to an improved quality of life, with feelings of belonging being a critical factor. Various international institutions (The Society for Human Resource Management, 2018, The European Commission's handbook on tackling discrimination 2017) argue that it is essential for organisations to implement inclusive practices that foster a sense of belonging among workers from different backgrounds. Ryan & Oestreich's (2016) argue that effective leadership encompasses recognizing and appreciating the diverse talents and contributions of all employees. Diverse talents and contributions are usually associated with diverse workforce and an environment which promote inclusivity. Leaders who aggressively practice inclusivity by creating an inclusive work environment contribute to organizational success and growth by making every worker feel appreciated and valued.

A study by Chacón-Patiño & Rezaei (2024) in the energy sector acknowledges the valuable contributions made by women in bringing new perspectives and innovative research to the energy industry. The study highlighted several barriers women face in accessing leadership roles in energy companies. They argue that the environment consciously or unconsciously sideline women from occupying leadership positions and also being employed in the sector. The study also explores strategies for enhancing female participation through policy reforms that favour the vulnerable groups in society.

One of the critical factors driving the need for organisations to remain competitive is their ability to create an inclusive work environment, a variable which is on the list of sustainable development goals (SDG), goal number 8. Green & Brown (2018) argue that diversity and inclusion are essential components in promoting sustainability and innovation in all organisations. An inclusive work environment fosters innovation, enhances employee engagement, job satisfaction (Nyanga, 2022) and ultimately propels enterprises to thrive in the global market. Schneider & Smith's (2004) argue that organizations can turn diversity into a strategic advantage by appreciating the unique perspectives and skills that diverse individuals bring to the table. Smith's (2015) established a direct relationship between inclusive practices, recognition, and enhanced organizational outcomes. The study suggests that organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion through recognition initiatives are more likely to experience improved performance. Smith (2013) opines that beyond simple acknowledgment, organizations should implement policies and practices that actively appreciate and leverage diversity for long-term success.

The background of the study and the review of related literature have indicated that there is yawning research gap on the problems and solutions of promoting inclusivity in the energy sector in a developing country. Most studies on the subject were done in the global north and very little if any were done in a developing country. Challenges and solution of inclusivity and diversity are area specific hence the need to carry out this study becomes incontrovertible. Carrying out this study will help organizational leaders to intentionally foster a culture that values inclusivity and diversity.

Research and Methodology

To carry out the study on the status, challenges and solutions of inclusivity in the energy sector, a qualitative research approach anchored on a multiple-case study design was adopted. A qualitative approach was preferred mainly because it is viewed as indicated by Creswell (2017) as the most appropriate in exploring the intricacies of human feelings, experiences, behaviours, and social phenomena. It is most suitable because it helps researchers to generate in-depth insights, interpretations and meanings that capture the subjective perspectives of participants. The researchers also opted to use the qualitative research embedded with multiple case design because it allows for a contextual understanding of the challenges, strategies, and best practices associated with cultivating and maintaining an inclusive work environment in the energy sector in Zimbabwe.

Population and Sampling procedure

The exact population of the study could not be established since there was no data base for workers in the energy sector in Chipinge district. There are approximately 30 fuel and gas organisations in Chipinge district. Based on the average number of 4 employees per organisation, the population was approximated to be 120. The population of the study included all workers working in organisations in the energy sector in Chipinge district in Zimbabwe. Snowballing was utilized to select 10 organisations (6 fuel, 4 gas) that participated in the study. Chipinge town and Chisumbanje growth point contributed the highest number of organisations. Thirty-three (20 males; 13 females; Managerial staff 6; Staff, 27) purposive sampling technique selected participants took part in the study. The decision on choosing the sampling method was based on Cohen & Ariel (2017)'s view that purposive sampling technique was the most appropriate technique to use to select participants for a qualitative study. Furthermore, the approach was the most preferred because it gives researchers room to select participants based on a specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Andrade, 2021). Purposive sampling technique also aligns well with the need to include participants who possess appropriate information and experiences about the subject under investigation. In line with Parker et al (2019)'s argument that in selecting participants using purposive sampling method, researchers should ensure that only those people who fit in the criteria should be selected, the researcher developed selection criteria. Workers who had worked in the energy sector for at least 6 consecutive months were eligible for selection.

The demographic data of participants showed a mosaic of age, gender, qualifications, roles, and experience, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives. The age range among participants spanned from 18 to 56 years. The gender distribution leaned predominantly to male, with only thirteen female contributors. Educational backgrounds were diverse, with educational qualifications ranging from basic education to Master's degrees, which is a clear demonstration that the energy sector employ people with varied educational qualifications. Participants assumed various roles such as technical advisor, fuel attendants, security officers, administrator, managers, human resource personnel and general labourers.

Procedure and data collection

A largely semi-structured face to face interview was utilised to collect data from participants. The interactive nature of the interviews allowed for probing and clarification of issues, thereby ensuring a comprehensive examination of the challenges bedeviling the promotion of inclusivity in the energy sector. The majority of the participants were interviewed individually at their work places except for 3 who opted to be interviewed at other places apart from their work stations. Each interview session lasted between 45 and 55 minutes. Interviews covered biographical data, worker's perceptions about inclusivity, challenges of promoting inclusivity, and solutions to challenges related to inclusivity in the energy sector. All the participants gave individual consent.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was utilised to analyse data. Thematic data analysis technique was the most favoured because it is simple and easy to interpret and comprehend. Furthermore, the chosen data analysis approach was opted for because of its ability to allow the researcher to organize and interpret data in a systematic and manageable fashion. Themes and sub-themes were identified as the researcher was recording the participants' responses. Consistent with Peel, (2020)'s views, data was grouped and coded according to themes and sub-themes. Some selected verbatim quotations from participants were also presented. The thematic data analysis approach also gave the researchers room to adjust themes and sub-themes as and when new themes emerge.

The study had some potential limitations such as sample size constraints, geographical scope, and potential response bias. To ensure credibility of the study several strategies such as prolonged engagements, peer review, triangulation and ensuring clarity and transparency during the research process were employed.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

Status of inclusivity and diversity in the energy sector

Results showed that there were mixed views regarding the status of inclusivity and diversity in the energy sector. Participants indicated that while there is remarkable progress in promoting inclusivity of the physically and socio-economically vulnerable people through developing infrastructure that caters for them, the invisible traits of work stations such as the use of non-inclusive communication system and glass ceiling remain a huge challenge. Below are some of the sentiments made by participants; participant 06; *"While the office layout and furniture partially cater for the needs of employees with physical disabilities and females, the language used at workstations directly and indirectly excludes vulnerable workers."* Participant 10, *"Although organizations still lag behind in terms of providing appropriate furniture and infrastructure, which cater for women and those who live with disabilities, significant progress has been observed in this area."* Participant 01, *"I often feel excluded in decision-making processes, where issues that affect us are discussed."* Participant 13; *"Some workers, though few use a language that is derogatory towards people with disabilities or women."* Participant 10; *"There's lack of inclusivity and diversity in leadership as women find it very difficult to progress into managerial positions."* The results showed that vulnerable employees' ergonomic and professional needs and conditions were not fully catered for.

Challenges and solutions of cultivating an inclusive work environment in the energy sector.

Results indicated that one of the challenges to inclusivity and diversity in the energy sector was tokenism and lack of commitment by leaders in promoting diversity and inclusivity. Below are some of the remarks from participants; Participant 16; *"Most managers lack commitment and zeal to initiate change that promote inclusivity and diversity at workplaces but instead promote tokenism."* Participant 17 remarked, *"Lack of commitment to promote inclusivity by top managers is the primary challenge impeding the implementation of inclusivity."* Participant 9; *"Without leadership commitment, inclusivity remains a peripheral concern rather than a priority."* Participants indicated that the challenge of lack of commitment can be dealt with by organizing attitudinal change training workshops.

The other impediment to inclusivity and diversity is unconscious bias by management and lack of involvement and participation of vulnerable workers in making decisions that directly and indirectly affect them. Unconscious bias is mainly propelled by lack of representation of vulnerable workers in leadership of organisations. Participant 4 remarked, *"Most vulnerable populations in the energy sector are not fully represented in management of organisations."* Participant 5, *"Lack of diversity in leadership was also viewed as a major propeller of unconscious bias and lack of commitment in dealing with diversity problems."*

Ineffective communication system significantly affects the promotion of inclusivity. Participants indicated that most organizations that trade in fuel and gas are family businesses hence they do not have perfect systems of involving workers in decision making. Below are some of the views of participants; Participant 11; *"There is lack of bottom-up communication system. Decisions are made without consulting and involving workers from the vulnerable populations which consequently result in overlooking issues that affect vulnerable populations."* Participant 12; *"Most family owned businesses do not have communication channels that create open forums where employees can express their concerns without fear of victimization. To address the challenge organizations should use a bottom-up communication system since it fosters a sense of inclusion."* It shows that lack of effective and efficient communication system hinders the process of inclusivity and diversity.

Participants also showed that lack of clear organizational policies that speak to diversity and inclusion is one of the major barriers to inclusivity and diversity. Most organizations in the energy sector do not have clearly defined and written policies on inclusivity and diversity. Below are some of the remarks which were given by participants; participant 19; *"Most organizations do not have diversity and inclusivity policies and their leaders are not familiar with government, regional and international policies and conventions that address issues of diversity and inclusion."* Participant 13; *"Flexible work policies can contribute to a more inclusive environment, allowing employees to balance work and personal responsibilities."* Participant 8; *"Incompetent management hinders the effective implementation of diversity initiatives."* Participant 12, also said: *"Leadership lacks the necessary skills to address inclusivity challenges and promote inclusivity programs at their workstations."* Participant 1, *"Strategic decisions often do not incorporate inclusivity."* Participant 02, *"Limited resources also hinder our ability to implement inclusive initiatives effectively."* Creating an inclusive workplace requires the integration of inclusive practices into different organizational processes, such as implementation of inclusive policies.

Resistance to change was also indicated as one of the key factors that impede the promotion of inclusivity in the energy sector. Employers, or managers or other stakeholders resist to embrace infrastructural, organisational structure and policy changes that advance inclusivity in organisations. Participant 11; *"The other challenge of promoting inclusivity is resistance to the new cultural of embracing and accommodating vulnerable populations."* The organisation may resist developing toilets and work-stations that can accommodate workers living with disabilities, due to the huge capital costs required to establish the same. Employees may exhibit resistance due to fear of the unknown, concerns about job security, or a reluctance to disrupt established routines. The success of diversity and inclusion initiatives hinges on the willingness of employees to embrace new paradigms and actively participate in fostering an inclusive culture. To address resistance to change organisations need to provide all stakeholders with detailed information regarding the reasons for implementing change.

Discussion

Status

The study revealed that there were a lot of issues and challenges which needed to be addressed for organisations to be fully compliant with the dictates and principles of inclusivity and diversity. Although a lot of issues still need to be addressed, a significant number of organisations are however applauded for making meaningful progress in creating a work environment that caters for all the vulnerable groups of workers. Results showed that the infrastructure and furniture in the energy sector was partially inclusive. Most work stations were designed in a way that accommodates all the categories of employees, for instance basic infrastructure such as ramps, parking space, entrances and toilets were designed to cater for all groups of workers. It was also observed that not all employees embraced the inclusive language, a language which does not offend other workers. Some workers had a tendency of using the language which implicitly define a person by their disability status, gender, age or educational qualifications which is contrary to the dictates and principles of inclusivity.

Challenges and solutions of cultivating an inclusive work environment in the energy sector.

Consistent with preceding studies (Cox, 2001; McKinsey et al., 2020), one of the dominant challenges organizations in the energy sector face in cultivating an inclusive work environment was lack of commitment from leadership and tokenism. Most diversity and inclusion initiatives failed because of lack of strong and sustained commitment from senior management. Implementing diversity and inclusivity programs require a lot of human and material resources and to be directed by senior managers. When leaders are not fully committed, diversity initiatives may be perceived as superficial or insincere, resulting in a lack of trust and engagement from employees. The challenge of lack of management commitment manifests in several ways such as allocating insufficient resources and lack of visible advocacy for diversity and inclusion initiatives (Cox, 2001). When senior management does not prioritize diversity and inclusion in their decision-making processes, the initiatives fail to gain acceptance by the rest of the workers and may be viewed as one of the mere checkboxes put in place by management and law makers rather than essential apparatuses of gaining a competitive advantage. Overcoming the problem of lack of leadership commitment can be addressed by educating leaders on the importance of diversity, emphasizing the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce. Studies have persistently shown that senior managers in the global north seriously consider and implement ILO conventions and provisions and the requirements of SADC and other global protocols that address issues of inclusivity, which is inconsistent with what is happening in the global south.

One of the challenges that impede the operationalisation of inclusivity was tokenism. Tokenism occurs when individuals from underrepresented groups are included to give the appearance of diversity without genuine efforts to integrate their perspectives and contributions. Camargo (2023) underscores that tokenism can create a superficial semblance of inclusivity, while failing to address the deeper systemic issues that hinder true representation and engagement. Organizations engaging in tokenism may place individuals in visible roles without providing them with genuine decision-making power or influence. The findings are consistent with several preceding studies which argue that one of the key challenges impeding the promotion of workplace inclusivity is tokenism (Camargo, 2023; Ryan & Oestreich, 2016). Ryan and Oestreich (2016) further argue that tokenism undermines the principles of inclusion by reducing individuals to mere symbols, rather than valuing their unique skills and perspectives. This not only limits the potential contributions of diverse individuals but also creates an environment where their participants may not be heard or respected. The challenge of tokenism manifests in various ways, including individuals feeling isolated, facing stereotyping, and encountering limited opportunities for professional growth (Camargo, 2023). Tokenistic practices can lead to a lack of trust among employees, as they perceive diversity initiatives as insincere or driven by a desire for optics rather than genuine inclusion. To combat tokenism, organizations must adopt comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategies that go beyond mere representation (Ryan & Oestreich, 2016). This involves creating an inclusive culture where diverse participants are actively sought, valued, and integrated into decision-making processes. Leadership should also champion inclusive practices that go beyond numerical representation and focus on creating an environment where individuals from all backgrounds are empowered to contribute meaningfully (Camargo, 2023).

The study further established that another major challenge organizations in the energy sector encounter in their pursuit to cultivate an inclusive work environment is unconscious bias and failure to include vulnerable populations in decision-making positions and processes. Most organizations do not have representatives of vulnerable populations in their leadership teams which consequently result in impeding the initiatives of establishing inclusive infrastructures at their work stations. Deeply entrenched prejudices that subtly influence decision-making processes without individuals being consciously aware of them indirectly make promoting inclusivity difficult. This inherent failure to embrace inclusivity manifests in innumerable forms such as unconsciously making unfavourable decisions on certain groups of people especially the vulnerable such as women and those living with disability. The results are consistent with Jones & Kim (2017) who underscores the significance of understanding and managing unconscious bias to create a workplace that values diversity and ensures fair treatment for all employees. To tackle unconscious bias, firms should organise awareness and training programs targeted at equipping workers and management with skills and knowledge about promoting inclusivity in their organisations. The training programs provide management with tools such as the provisions of global, regional and local statutes, protocols and other initiatives that speak to issues of inclusivity and equal opportunities for employment. Such approaches help management to recognize and counteract unconscious biases in their decision-making processes. The results are in sync with Blick et al. (2016) who emphasize the importance of fair representation of vulnerable populations in leadership positions in creating inclusive work environments.

The study also revealed that another substantial barrier organizations in the energy sector encounter in promoting inclusive work environments is ineffective communication, language in particular plays a key role in promoting and implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives in organisations. There are languages and communication styles which are acceptable in society and make workers feel welcome. Ineffective communication may lead to misunderstandings, ambiguity, and a lack of clarity regarding the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion. The Society for Human Resource Management (2018) underscores the need for clear and transparent communication strategies to navigate the complexities of diversity and inclusion. Failure to communicate effectively can result in resistance, confusion, and a failure to garner widespread support for inclusivity initiatives. To overcome the challenge of ineffective communication, organizations should develop a code of communication and language which compel all workers to use acceptable languages and gestures which do not denigrate other workers but rather make all workers feel welcome. Organisations should also promote a two-way communication where employees feel free to share their views and concerns about their work environment expectations. The approach helps management to have adequate information about the inclusivity challenges their workers face, which consequently lead managers to address concerns promptly.

Another problem which organizations encounter in fostering an inclusive work environment was the inadequacy of knowledge on policies and guidelines which compel workers and employers to uphold inclusivity principles. The success of inclusivity efforts heavily depends on the presence of well-crafted and implemented policies that address diversity, equity, and inclusion in all facets of organizational operations. Inadequate policies contribute to favouritism, discrimination, thereby hindering the organization's progress towards creating a truly inclusive environment. The challenge of inadequate policies and practices may manifest in various ways, such as a lack of clear guidelines on diversity and inclusion, absence of mechanisms for reporting and addressing discrimination, and policies that unintentionally perpetuate systemic biases (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). To overcome this challenge, organizations need to conduct regular reviews of existing policies, ensuring they are inclusive, transparent and aligned with the organization's commitment to diversity. Implementing anti-bias training for employees and decision-makers help to prevent inadvertent discriminatory practices. Furthermore, organizations can benefit from benchmarking their policies against industry best practices and legal standards. The development of specific policies, such as those addressing flexible work arrangements, accommodation for individuals with disabilities and diversity in recruitment and promotion is crucial in creating an inclusive work environment (United Nations Global Compact, 2018).

The cultivation of an inclusive work environment was also hindered by resistance to change by internal and external key stakeholders. Resistance to change can take various forms including passive resistance, lack of engagement or even overt opposition to diversity and inclusion initiatives. This resistance may be rooted in cultural norms, ingrained biases, or a perception that inclusivity efforts threaten existing power dynamics (Ovans, 2018). The changes are resisted for various reasons such as inadequate material and financial resources to implement change. Ovans (2018) notes that resistance to change is a common challenge in organizations. To mitigate resistance, organizations should invest in comprehensive communication strategies that transparently convey the rationale behind diversity and inclusion initiatives (Society for Human Resource Management, 2018). Engaging employees in open dialogues, providing education on the benefits of inclusivity, and addressing concerns through accessible channels are vital components of overcoming resistance.

Conclusions

Firstly, the study concluded that the work environment in the energy industry was partially inclusive. Although there are some areas which needs to be improved on the amount of effort and initiatives organisations put to create an inclusive environment is highly appreciated and commendable. Secondly, the study concluded that, lack of commitment, tokenism, unconscious bias, lack of policies and regulations, lack of inclusive communication and resistance to change were the main impediments to inclusivity in the energy sector. Thirdly, the study concluded that to cultivate an inclusive, sustainable, and successful workplace environment in the energy industry, various strategic initiatives can be employed. These strategies should aim to address identified challenges and create a more inclusive culture within organizations. The strategies that can be employed include initiating the development of a comprehensive inclusivity policy, organising training programs and activities to change the attitude and perspectives of organizational leaders towards inclusivity, sourcing funding to promote inclusivity programs and also benchmarking from established organisations in the industry. Organizations in the energy sector should direct their efforts towards creating a culture that not only embraces diversity but actively seeks to adapt and evolve in response to the diverse needs and perspectives of its employees. This approach fosters a more inclusive and resilient workplace culture, where diversity is not just acknowledged but integrated into the fabric of the operations of organisations. Since this study was only delimited to one district, future research should focus on a wider geographical area so as to increase the generalization of findings. The organizational-systemic implications of the results of this study are that organisations and management in particular become better equipped to improve the work environment for vulnerable populations. The other implication of this study is that it promotes and informs policy direction and formulation for inclusivity and diversity.

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