



THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF INCLUSION AMIDST GENDER DIVERSITY ON BOARDS OF PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- Despite progress in achieving gender diversity on corporate boards, there is a growing recognition that mere representation of women does not guarantee their inclusion in terms of active participation and influencing board decisions. This research paper aimed at generating a substantive grounded theory that gives the meaning of inclusion in the boardroom and what should be the ideal practice of inclusion on boards of public sector organizations in Uganda

Methodology- A qualitative study was carried out applying a constructivist grounded theory approach. This approach acknowledges the researchers' introspection and involves interpretation of data. A purposive sampling method and snowball technique were used to obtain a sample of 16 female directors serving on boards of public sector organizations in Uganda. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data. The collection of data and analysis were done concurrently using the coding method to analyze data and to enable a thematic analysis of the themes that define inclusion and the ideal practice of inclusion within boards.

Findings- Findings indicate that inclusion means diversity, gender sensitivity, equal opportunity, exploiting potential, and adopting a board charter. On the other hand, the developed ideal practice of inclusion model had some themes similar to the meaning of inclusion. The themes included; Gender Sensitivity, Diverse competencies, Necessary skills, Inclusive behavior, Exploiting potential, and board charter.

Conclusion- The original value of this paper lies in its exploration of the complementary relationship between gender diversity and inclusion on boards. Highlighting the importance of inclusion efforts to reap the benefits of gender diversity on boards. Additionally, by applying the constructivist grounded theory approach this paper provides practical guidance for organizations that strive to achieve gender diversity and inclusion on boards

Keywords: Female directors, board of directors, inclusion, gender diversity, public sector organizations.

JEL Codes: J16, G34, M14

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)10 Promotes social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of status. Similarly, SDG 5 considers the promotion of gender equality and ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere (AUO, 2018). In line with the two goals, gender diversity on corporate boards has gained significant attention as a means to foster equality and harness the benefits of diverse perspectives (ILO, 2019). However, much attention has been paid to gender diversity (having women appointed on boards) at the expense of inclusion on boards (how women are engaged when they get on boards). The focus on gender diversity is vivid where developed countries such as Norway, Spain, and France have taken strong initiatives to increase the representation of female directors on corporate boards by implementing gender quotas (Seierstad *et al*, 2021). Elsewhere, organizations use national public policies to increase the number of women on boards (Klenk *et al.*, 2022; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015). Global and local networks are also used to influence women's access to boards (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2022). The investors also influence women's appointment to boards (Nor *et al.* 2016). Corporate governance guidelines encourage appointing authorities to appoint women to boards (Hamdan *et al.*, 2022).

In Uganda, the context of interest for this study, The Uganda Gender Policy (2007) promotes women's inclusion in social political, and economic governance activities. This is because women have historically been underrepresented in corporate

leadership roles and largely due to cultural norms (Nakawesi and Magezi, 2018). Consequently, public sector organizations have made efforts to increase the representation of women on boards through various initiatives and policies (Rahman *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, many public sector organizations have ensured that they have at least one-third of the board members being women (UNMA Act., 2012). Moreover, Uganda has the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) that monitors the progress of gender equality in different fields including education, political, economic, and social activities but does not pay attention to women on boards (The Equal Opportunities Commission, 2022). Uganda as a country, has now seen an improvement in respect to the presence of women on boards of public entities and as such, has reduced gender imbalance. The gender composition in governing boards question, therefore, appears to be progressively addressed. Nonetheless, another issue of concern that has emerged, relates to inclusion. In this regard, research shows that after women's access to boards, the intentional inclusion of female directors in board decision-making is required otherwise, their presence may be just a gender yardstick that has no impact (Binti, *et al.*, 2018). An ideal practice of inclusion entails women's voices not only being heard but also valued, and that their perspectives influence decision-making processes. Gender inclusion goes beyond simply having women present in board positions. Incidentally, the terms diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably. Inclusion complements diversity and so, gender diversity is incomplete without inclusion, (Fredette *et al.*, 2016). "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance" (Diligent Institute, 2022 p.2) Inclusion is feeling that you belong to a workgroup and that your uniqueness is appreciated (Chung *et al.*, 2019)

The available literature is scanty on women's inclusion on boards in Uganda. This provided an opportunity to undertake this research with a view of establishing, in the respondents' own opinion, What is the meaning of inclusion in the board context? what is the ideal practice of inclusion on boards? By addressing these research questions, this study provided insights into the process of inclusion within boards, shedding light on the necessary conditions and practices for creating an inclusive environment aimed at leveraging gender diversity on boards.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Underpinning

Social constructionism theory informed this study. The theory emphasizes that individuals and societies construct meaning through social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 2016). These social constructs are not inherent or universal but are shaped and maintained through collective human interactions, cultural practices, and shared beliefs. The theory of social constructionism proposes that people collectively develop the meanings (denotations and connotations) of social constructs. This perspective recognizes that inclusion is socially constructed and varies across different contexts (Zhao, 2020). This study explored how inclusion is socially constructed on boards and how these constructions influence board dynamics and decision-making processes. However, the theory does not explain how inclusion unfolds. Therefore, a constructivist grounded theory approach was applied. That approach enables the researcher to explore the meaning and practice of inclusion making it possible to uncover the process and to generate a substantive theory derived from the female directors' experiences serving on boards of public sector organizations in Uganda.

2.2. The Gender Diversity Drive on Boards

For a considerable period, business leaders and policymakers have advocated for augmenting the presence of women on boards, emphasizing the importance of incorporating their unique perspectives into the decision-making process (World Bank, 2022; European Commission, 2019). Therefore, promoting the appointment of women on organizational boards is based on the business case that argues that women bring value to boards (Miholić, 2020; Martinez and Rambaud, 2019) and also the ethical case for women to be present as a way of promoting justice and equality (Seierstad, 2016). Gender diversity initiative on boards challenges the traditional gender stereotypes and biases about having women present on boards through legislation (Elomäki, 2018). The drive is influenced by multiple actors including micro, meso and macro levels of influence (Blommaert and Brink, 2020)

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD Factbook, 2019), the Institute of Directors South Africa (IoDSA) (KingVI, 2016), and the Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance (CACG, 1999) promote the appointment of women on boards. In Uganda, the Capital Markets Authority charter promotes the recruitment of women to Publicly listed companies (Kibirango, 2003) and also the Institute of Corporate Governance in Uganda (ICGU) emphasizes recruitment with gender sensitivity on boards of both the public and private organizations (ICGU, 2008). Indeed, national policies have enabled the increase of female directors on boards (Hamdan *et al.*, 2022; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015) and also the global and local networks continue to influence women's access to boards (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, board ownership and board independence also drive the recruitment of women to boards to improve firm performance (Bozhinov *et al.*, 2021)

The European Commission (EC) encouraged member countries to increase the number of women on corporate boards through mandatory gender quotas (European Commission, 2021). Mandatory board quotas are taken seriously appointing females to comply and avoid penalties unlike voluntary efforts (Mensi-Klarbach and Seierstad, 2020). Countries like Norway,

Spain, and France have aggressively promoted the inclusion of female directors by introducing gender quotas on boards (Seierstad, *et al.*, 2021; Egon Zehnder, 2018; Choobineh, 2016). In the same spirit, Organizations in the United Kingdom and Sweden set a target number of female directors on boards (Haley *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, practitioners and researchers advocate for a critical mass of at least 30 % female directors on boards as a means of promoting gender diversity (Ardito, *et al.*, 2021; Godfrey, *et al.*, 2020; Catalyst, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2019; Deloitte, 2018).

The recent Deloitte (2022) report indicates that progress towards global gender parity on boards is occurring, although at a slow pace. The global average of women on boards currently stands at slightly below 20% (19.7%), which represents an increase of only 2.8 percentage points since the previous report in 2019. Based on this trajectory, achieving gender parity is not expected until at least 2045, which is over twenty years from now. While the rate of change remains disappointingly slow, there has been a slight acceleration compared to Deloitte's 2019 report, which projected parity to be reached by 2052. This reduction of almost a decade suggests a marginally improved timeline, albeit still far from satisfactory. Research shows that more interventions must be exported to have more women recruited on boards (Gabaldon *et al.*, 2016).

According to a report by the African Development Bank, women hold a mere 12% of corporate board seats across the African continent. In 2015, Kenya had the highest representation of women on boards among African countries, with 19.8%, closely followed by Ghana with 17.7% and South Africa with 17.4%, and Uganda had 12%. (African Development Bank, 2015) However, by 2021, Kenya had made significant progress, with boardroom diversity increasing to 36% from 21% in 2017, as reported by the Board Diversity and Inclusion Survey (James, 2021). The slow access of women to boards has fueled the continued focus on the gender diversity drive and not paying attention to inclusion. Likewise, in Uganda, the role of women on boards continues to be challenged by cultural norms (Muhoro, 2022; Nakawesi and Magezi, 2018) based on this, the study is significant in bridging the gap. Fostering inclusion amidst gender diversity on boards for the few women who access the boards.

2.3. Meaning of Inclusion and Inclusion within Boards

The terms diversity and inclusion are closely related and are often treated as interchangeable yet they carry different meanings. The relationship is that inclusion complements diversity by creating an inclusive environment and creating business value among diverse talents (Shore *et al.*, 2017; Ferdman, 2014). Precisely, diversity means bringing together people of multiple identities and cultures to work together in a given setting while inclusion involves harnessing an abundance of ideas and perspectives from the diverse members in a beneficial way (Chang *et al.*, 2019). Hence inclusion is grounded in what we do with diversity when we value and appreciate people because of and not due to their differences or their similarities (Hwang and Hopkins, 2015). In other words, inclusion involves acknowledgement and meaningfully utilizing an individual's differences in the work environment (Ferdman, 2017). Its importance notwithstanding, boards have paid more attention to gender diversity at the expense of inclusion which aims at involving female directors and meaningfully exploit their potential within boards (Weck, *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, the micro-level psychological theory on societal gender beliefs has firmly established that within groups, women may not enjoy the same level of influence and status as men do, even when women hold positions of power and occupy roles akin to men (Bae, *et al.*, 2017). The cultural norms and negative societal perceptions against women challenge their access to boards (Nakawesi and Magezi, 2018). These societal perceptions that challenge the role of women on boards have even penetrated the boardroom (Weck *et al.*, 2022; Ouedraogo, 2018; Potter, 2018). Therefore, as boards strive to attain critical mass and avoid tokenism, the gendered beliefs and biases against women require interventions (Elomäki, 2018).

Lack of intentional inclusion within boards is a potential hindrance to leveraging the benefits of gender diversity in Africa (Muhoro, 2022). Yet, minimal attention has been given to inclusion within boards. It is in the organization setting where significant attention has been paid to the inclusion of diverse employees within workplace activities. Indeed such studies show that the concept of inclusion has attracted great attention from researchers and practitioners due to its positive stance in appreciating and valuing individual differences (Deloitte, 2019; Qi *et al.*, 2019). Mor-Barak and her colleagues in the social work field were the first to systematically research inclusion in an organization (Mor-bracket *et al.*, 1998). Thereafter other researchers have endeavoured to clarify that inclusion is imperative, especially for those who have been historically excluded (Kabat-farr *et al.*, 2020; Jansen, Otten and Zee, 2016). They further indicate that being always the minority in official work engagement, women's visibility should be promoted through workgroup inclusion (McCluney, and Caridad, 2018; Bae *et al.*, 2017).

In addition, literature revealed that embracing diversity along with inclusion reduces conflict and turnover (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2016; Welbomeet *et al.*, 2016). An inclusive climate ensures fair and unbiased treatment of workers (Le, and Johnson, 2020), and enhances the experience of belongingness and uniqueness (Chang *et al.*, 2019). Companies that de-emphasize differences create an inclusive climate where minority members and vulnerable women feel valued (Hills, 2019) similarly, encouraging communication from diverse members improves relationships among staff and this leads to a climate that promotes inclusion and consequently enables psychological safety (Madriral-Moreno, *et al.*, 2020). Leveraging the potential

benefits of gender diversity requires shifting focus from just advocating for the presence of women on boards to paying more attention to female directors' inclusion when they access the boards (Fredette et al., 2016). Whereas inclusion has been examined elsewhere, little is known about the inclusion of women within boards of public sector organizations in Uganda.

Literature from Europe, Asia, and America, between 2016 and 2023 presented numerous studies on gender diversity on boards and many examined inclusion in the organizational context. This leaves a gap in the literature on inclusion in a broad context. In line with inclusion literature in Africa, studies focused on inclusion which means adding people into systems such as education (Kalanda, et al., 2021; Kalanda, et al., 2020). Inclusion of people with disability (Rohwerder, 2020). Financial inclusion (Okello et al., 2016) and Inclusive leadership in organizations (Bagorogoza et al., 2022). Likewise, existing research on organizational boards in Uganda focused on firm performance and the role of the boards (Tumwebaze et al., 2022; Nalukenge, 2020; Summit, 2018; Nkundabanyanga, 2016). There is a gap in the literature on inclusion within boards in Uganda

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY.

3.1. Research Design

The study conducted a qualitative research design applying the constructivist grounded theory methodology. Constructivist grounded theory is an approach to qualitative research that centres on crafting theories based on individuals' viewpoints and experiences. It recognizes reality as shaped by social constructs and personal subjectivity, highlighting the significance of researchers' introspection and involved interpretation of data. Through systematic data analysis and conceptualization, this method aims to extract insights that reflect the intricate array of participants' perspectives, culminating in the development of novel theories. (Charmaz, and Belgrave, 2019). Moreover, relativist ontology was applied to this study as it recognizes the role of subjective experiences, perceptions, and social contexts in shaping our understanding of the world. Likewise, constructivist epistemology was used. In constructivist epistemology, individuals are seen as active participants in the learning process, actively constructing meaning and understanding based on their prior knowledge and experiences. This approach adopts the systematic methods of coding and analyzing data (Glaser and Stauss, 1967)

3.2. Population and Sample Size

The research participants were female directors who have served for over two years on boards of public sector institutions in Uganda. The Uganda Gender Policy, (2007) made it possible to have female directors appointed on those boards. The organizations involved in the study included the National Environment Management Authority, UMEME Uganda, Uganda Registration Services Bureau, National Social Security Fund, Petroleum Authority Uganda, National Planning Authority, Uganda Railways Corporation, National Drug Authority, New Vision Group, Housing Finance Bank, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, Uganda Fund Services, Mandela National Stadium, and Uganda National Meteorological Authority. Thirteen participants were interviewed physically in Kampala, one in Jinja, one via phone, and another via Zoom. All participants had extensive board experience, having served for more than two years, which provided them with valuable insights into the perceptions of female directors on boards. Education-wise, all participants were highly educated, with four holding PhDs, eleven having master's degrees, and only one possessing a bachelor's degree. Purposive sampling was employed, along with a snowballing technique, to gather a sample of 16 participants. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, ensuring that enough information was obtained. This means that no new insights emerged after a total of 16 participants (Georgieva and Allan, 2008). The participants provided informed consent and were assured of the confidentiality and privacy of their responses.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers utilized semi-structured interviews to guide the interview process. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. The researchers gathered in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of research participants. Data was collected and analysed concurrently. The applied inductive inquiry involves an interactive strategy where the research process involves cycles of data collection, analysis, and refinement of research questions or methods. This helped in understanding the social phenomena and constructing theories grounded in data (Charmaz, and Belgrave, 2011). Hence, the researchers employed a constant case comparative analysis method, a key aspect of grounded theory, to analyze the interview data. The process begins with open coding, identifying codes of the meaning and also the ideal practice of inclusion. Conducted axial coding to identify relationships between codes and to develop categories that capture the essence of the data. Engaged in selective coding to refine and integrate the categories and developed a model that explained the meaning of inclusion and a theoretical framework that explains the ideal practice of inclusion amidst diversity (Glaser and Stauss, 1967).

3.4. Study Credibility

The researchers enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. memos were incorporated to validate and complement the interview data. Further, to enhance the credibility of the research, member checking was done. This is where the emerging findings were shared with participants to ensure accuracy and obtain their feedback to be considered.

3.5. Ethical Consideration

The researchers complied with ethical guidelines and regulations. It was voluntary participation. The researchers obtained informed consent from participants. Participants were assured of anonymity and privacy of information shared and their identity in the study was hidden, being identified as P1 up to P16.(P stands for Participant)

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Meaning of Inclusion within Boards

The study intended to explore the meaning of inclusion within boards and also to establish the ideal practice of inclusion on boards. The main themes that emerged include; *diversity, gender sensitivity, equal opportunity, board charter and exploiting potential*. This section will be presented reflecting on the level of participants' views on a certain theme where terms like *Majority, all, and many* will be applied to where 11 to 16 participants were part. Then 10- 6 participants' responses will have the terms *several or on average* applied and for those that had few participants 5- 1 the term *a few* will be applied

Diversity. All the participants explained diversity as the meaning of inclusion and this emerged as the major category. They acknowledged that diversity is the situation of having people with diverse backgrounds being allowed to be part of the system so that no one is disadvantaged or left out. They affirmed that board work requires diverse resourceful people with the skills and capabilities needed. This was emphasized in the qualitative responses below;

"Inclusion means, different dimensions of diversity; gender, disability, religion all those kinds of diversities. The different groups of special needs to be included in whatever it is". (P6)

"Inclusion means giving people the opportunity to be part, to participate or benefit from a particular group, committee, sector so that no one is disadvantaged or left out based on their unique or particular identities" (P12)

Gender diversity. Whereas gender diversity is one of the dimensions of diversity, many participants singled it out as an important aspect of the meaning of inclusion to consider. They argued that boards have to consider both men and women among the needed diverse backgrounds and skills. They emphasized as below;

I think inclusion is driven more by the gender line. If we may think aloud gender diversity should reflect in the elements of diversity required on boards. This is because financiers, civil society and governments are recognizing the issue of gender equality. So like the 1.5 points that were given to Makerere female students, there was a boost given. (P5)

Inclusion in boards means knowing gender numbers, how many are male or female if you are to diversify opportunities and if women are few, then get more females to join the board so that we have gender balance in terms of gender (P3).

Memo It is never considered inclusion without paying attention to having women as part of the board processes.

Exploiting Potential. Several participants attributed the meaning of inclusion to exploiting the potential. They emphasized that besides gender sensitivity, the presence of female directors should be leveraged by allowing women to exploit their potential, having women's views presented without gender biases. Allowing all members to participate. They explained the meaning of inclusion within boards as follows:

" In my view, when boards are formed they have various entities and representation and the fact that a lady is chosen to be on the board is the first step for inclusion. Then being listened to when you are attending the board meetings is also another. It is taking your suggestions and submissions as a board member (P15).

"Before we used to have many male-dominated boards whereby when there was an opportunity to select who to sit on the board the men were given priority, but because of the government policy of inclusion now the government entities even the private are taking it on themselves to ensure that there are women who are serving on boards. There is a competent woman. However, inclusion is not about getting any women and putting them on the boards. The board gets a competent woman able to serve, deliberate and make positive contributions to the affairs of the board (P4)

A few participants also attributed the meaning of inclusion to giving equal opportunities, ensuring the adoption of policies to enable equal treatment and participation. this was emphasised;

(Inclusion within a board context refers more or less to the same equal opportunity for as long as you have the qualifications for that position. You should be given an equal chance and nobody should be biased because of your gender” (P9)

“To ensure that the special interest groups are included, represented in a fair and just manner in the board context and are recognized and they are treated equally just like everyone else on the board(“P6).

Board Charter. Several participants also acknowledged that inclusion within boards means adopting the board charter. being accountable for the decisions and what is taking place. They also remarked that some board charters support having female directors while others do not. Diversity emerged as the main theme among other themes as generated in Table 1 below;

Table 1: Selective Coding/Cross Coding Form A Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Core categories	Sub Categories	Respondents	Rating%	Selected code	Main Theme
Board charter	a) Guidelines	2/16	12.5	b)18.7	
	b) Policies	3/16	18.7		
Diversity	c) Diverse skills	7/16	43.7	c) 43.7	Diversity
	d) Diverse background	5/16	31.2		
Gender sensitivity	e) Gender balance	6/16	37.5	e) 37.5	
	f) Appointing women	5/16	31.2		
Equal opportunity	g) Equity	5/16	31.2	g)31.2	
	h) Fair representation	2/16	12.5		
Exploiting potential	i) Participating	6/16	37.5	i)37.5	
	j) Contribution	5/16	31.2		

Figure 1: Graphical Representation of Themes Derived from the Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

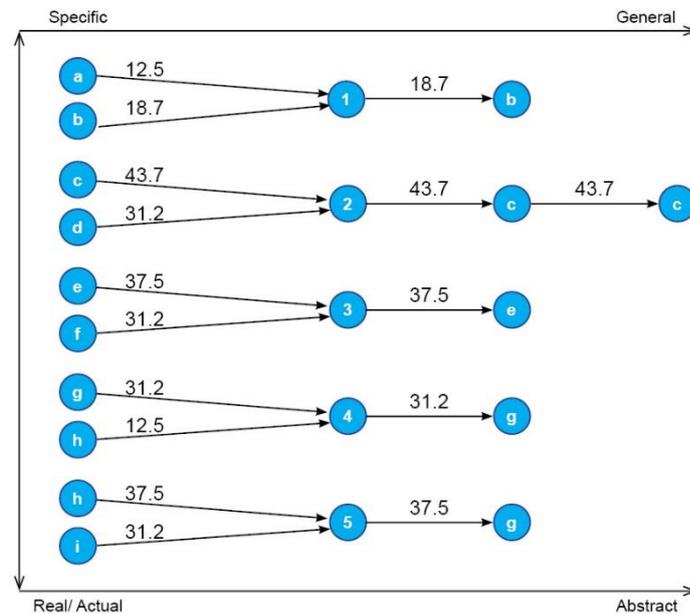
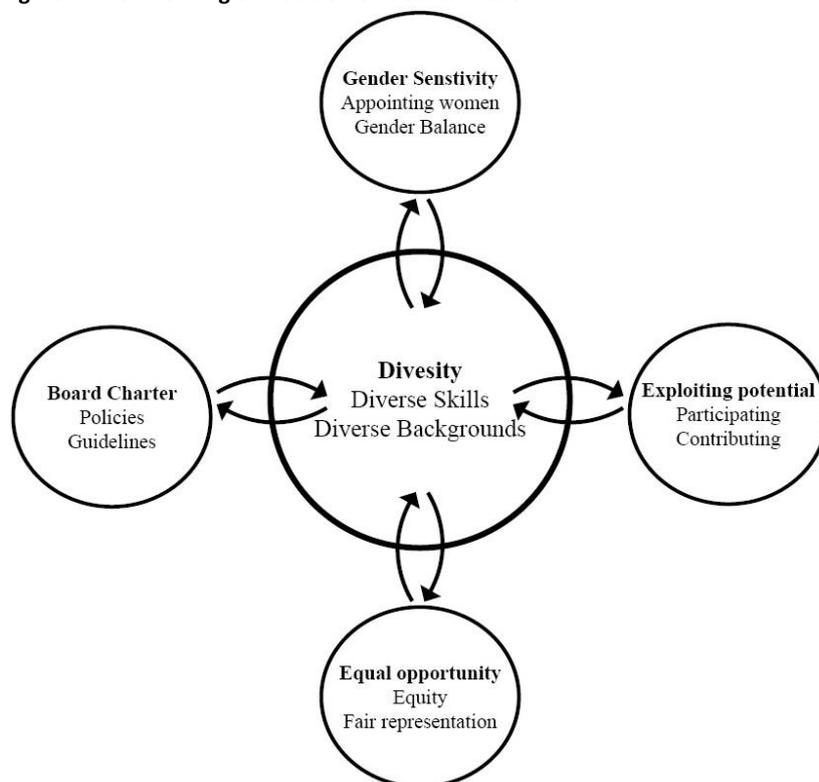


Figure 2: The Meaning of Inclusion on Boards Model



The emergent model explaining the meaning of inclusion from the experiences of the 16 participants in this study is represented a system, organized around the core category of *Diversity* (diverse skills and diverse background) . The circle around the core category signifies that there is a combination of other constructs that inform the core category and the core category embodies the main narrative of the meaning of inclusion. In this model diversity is embedded in several contextual inputs which flow into the core, interact with it in a mutual impact, and flow out again as actions and consequences indicated by double arrows.(Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The inputs in this model are *Board Charter*,(policies, guidelines), *Gender Sensitivity* (Appointed women, Gender balance), *Equal Opportunity* (Equity, Fair representation), *Exploiting Potential* (Participating, Contributing)

Therefore, the grounded theory statement for the meaning of inclusion on boards is “*The process of recruiting diverse members on the boards based on the policies in place, being gender sensitive and giving equal opportunities of participation in the board discussions and exploiting the potential of all board members*”.

4.2. Ideal Practices of Inclusion on Boards

For this, some concepts overlapped with those of the meaning of inclusion. The participants acknowledged that the ideal practice of inclusion would be considering the *diverse representation of competencies but emphasised being gender sensitive amidst diversity*. This position also appeared in the meaning of inclusion earlier presented.

Gender sensitivity. The qualitative responses alluded to the sensitivity of gender diversity as below;

It is now a requirement, just take the recent example of the National Social Security Fund NSSF board. The parliament rejected to pass a board that was composed of only men. It is now a policy when a board is set up they will state that at least two should be women (P4)

There should be deliberate policies for inclusion within organizations, having clauses or provisions for the inclusion of women (P6).

Inclusion is practised fairly when there are both men and women on boards. Years ago there used to be only men but I believe these days women are also part of the board (P8)

Necessary skills. Whereas gender diversity was noted as an ideal inclusion practice, the majority of the participants made further explanations that it is not all about having female directors present on the boards. They must be eligible for board governance. Having the necessary skills, they acknowledged that;

Before we are appointed we must have the required qualifications and we should also not sit back. We should sell ourselves, these days there are many platforms where we can sell our skills and ambitions so that we can be seen. We can use professional associations, social media, LinkedIn, and Facebook so that we are seen. It is up to us now to fight for ourselves to be sought after (P9)

I belong to one association of females on boards and we were founded through the Federation of Uganda Employers it is something that came from Norway they took stock in the 80s and they realized there is a way women would competently serve on boards. They had to be intentional about getting women who are credible to boards because they had the mandate all of them had to have a certain number of women on boards. They were not finding them so they took that federation of their employers and it started the training. They also came here in Uganda and we were the first African county to be trained. So it is not just to get the gender quota or a woman sitting in but the equipped person. Where they are chosen on merit you really see it is helpful and actually there may be research, maybe we do not have a lot of it here and you are going to contribute to this. You are going to open the doors then we are going to come in and start building on it (P5)

On this board that I serve, we are a bit many in relation to other boards that I know. You inevitably find yourself in some position of responsibility. It depends a lot again on your qualifications for example in finance you are put on a committee to chair and it doesn't matter whether you are male or female as long as you have qualifications (P7)

Board Charter. Several participants also asserted that the board charter should determine the ideal practice of inclusion. Spell out the composition and running of the board affairs. This was also echoed in the meaning of inclusion. They explained that:

Every institution has policies like human resource policies, and the board charter and so the original structure ensures that when the board is being nominated that they will include people from both genders and balanced people with experiences (P10)

There should be deliberate policies for inclusion within organizations. Some of the boards I have served on are government parastatals so they are set up by acts of parliament. Under those acts, there are clauses or provisions for inclusion and gender balance. So that is one way of addressing inclusion within boards. But there are those boards where it is silent, the policies and the board charters, procedures and practice don't mention inclusion and gender balance (P6)

Inclusive Behavior. Many participants also emphasized that it is not all about the board charter and gender diversity for the ideal practice of inclusion on boards, but it is ensuring and influencing inclusiveness. Enabling all the diverse members on the board to contribute and arrive at decisions that take into account everybody's perspective. Promoting a board culture that respects every one. Being listened to, making a contribution and taking their suggestions. They emphasized as below;

"The aspect of the role of the chairperson is important, how to ensure everyone is on board. The general rapport between and among board members and how to manage (P16)

"Being able to have everybody participate in the decision-making. By expressing themselves first of all and arriving at a decision which takes into account everybody's perspectives or views P3

Psychological safety. Finally, a few participants highlighted the issue of providing psychological safety for women. This was to help them express their views without fear of being rejected or frustrated. They stated that;

"Enabling women to feel comfortable sharing their views without worrying about trashing them (P6)

"Boards to ensure the promotion of psychological safety for the women, believing that they are unique and have creative ideas to bring to the table (P1)

The findings are presented in the table, figures and model presented next

Table 2: Selective Coding/Cross Coding Form A Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Core categories	Sub Categories	Respondents	Rating%	Selected code	Theme/concept
Gender Sensitivity	a) Gender balance	4/16	25.0	b) 37.5	
	b) Gender equity	6/16	37.5		
Diverse Competencies	c) Diverse responsibilities	2/16	12.5	d) 31.2	
	d) Diverse Skills	5/16	31.2		
Necessary skills	e) Qualifications	7/16	43.7	e) 43.7	
	f) Trained Women	4/16	25.0		
	g) Expertise	3/16	18.7		
Inclusive behaviour	h) Board chairperson	5/16	31.2	h) 31.2	
	i) Inclusive board culture	2/16	12.5		
Exploiting potential	j) Contribution	11/16	68.7	j) 68.7	Exploiting potential
	k) Psychological safety	2/16	12.5		
Board charter	l) Inclusive policies	4/16	25.0	i) 25	
	m) Inclusive guidelines	2/16	12.5		

The table shows analysis results , the core categories were formed from the subcategories and these emerged from open coding which is not reflected (because they are too many words/phrases). In each subcategory the number of respondents was noted giving a percentage of the mention of that particular theme. The selected coding column shows the sub theme that had more mentions and they are bolded. Overall exploiting potential emerged as the core theme in it, contribution sub category had the highest number of respondents.

Figure 3: Graphical Representation of Themes Derived from the Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

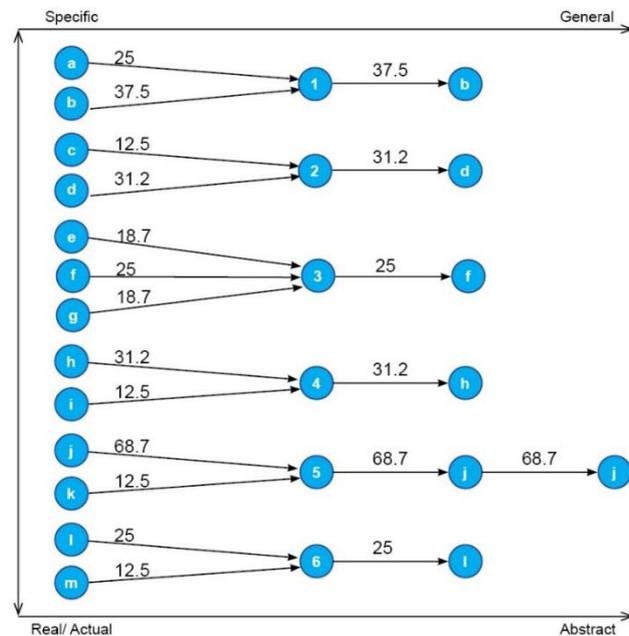
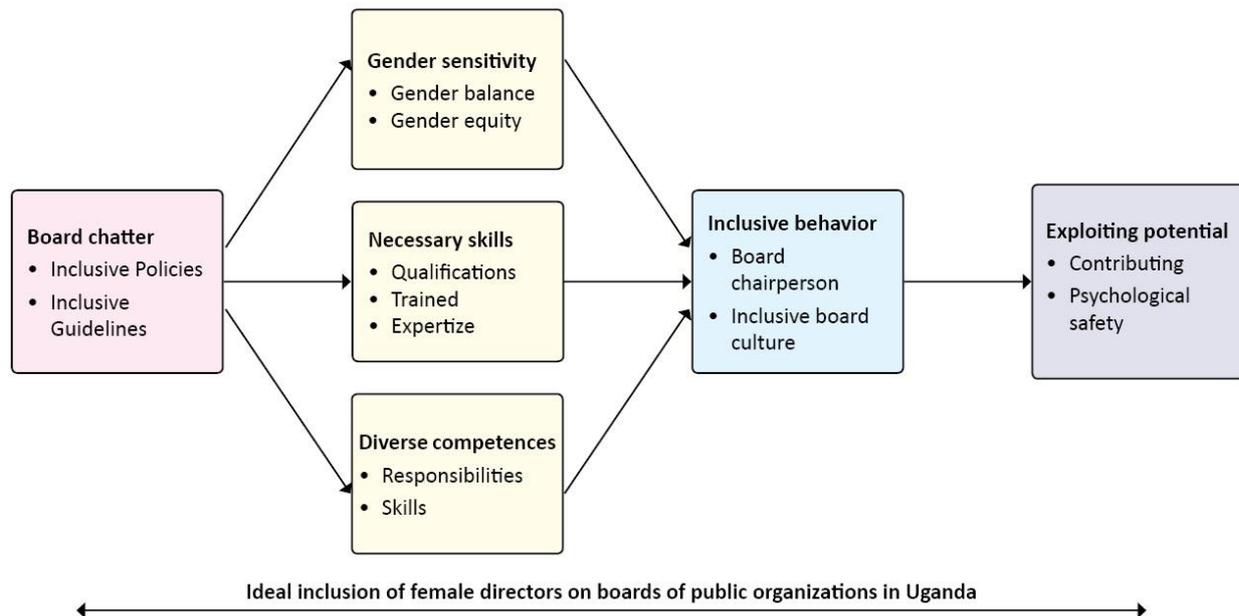


Figure 4: The Model of Ideal Inclusion for Boards



The emergent model explaining the ideal practice of inclusion from the experiences of the 16 participants in this study is represented as a process, beginning with a board charter that prescribes the board's inclusion direction, these influence gender sensitivity, appointing board members with the necessary skills and ensuring diverse representation of competencies. Having achieved that, the board further promotes inclusive behaviours which may not appear in the board charter. These are inclusive behaviors and actions by the board chairpersons and an inclusive board culture. These end up enabling the board to exploit their potential. By embracing the process of ideal inclusion practices, boards can effectively leverage the full potential of their diverse members, ultimately leading to more effective and well-informed decision-making processes.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research intended to achieve two objectives one, to explore the meaning of inclusion in the board context and two, to understand the ideal practice of inclusion of female directors within boards. The conclusions and implications are presented and implications are identified in line with the research questions, literature review and the generated grounded theory.

The generated theory of the meaning of inclusion was “The process of recruiting diverse members on the boards based on the policies in place, being gender sensitive and giving equal opportunities of participation in the board discussions and to exploit the potential of all board members” This process is in line with other studies that defined inclusion in the organizational context. Chung et al.(2019) assert that inclusion means creating an inclusive environment for all members including the marginalized groups enabling them to feel belongingness and uniqueness. It also echoes the resource dependence theory that brings out the board's role of connecting the organization to the external environment explained by (Orazalin, and Baydauletov, 2020) However the generated meaning emphasizes gender sensitivity and exploiting the potential.

Understanding the ideal practice of inclusion gave rise to a grounded theory stating that “When boards prioritize diverse competencies, gender sensitivity, necessary skills, and foster inclusive behaviours under an inclusive leadership, it creates an environment conducive to exploiting the full potential of board members. By recognizing and leveraging the unique skills, perspectives, and experiences of board members, boards can enhance decision-making, drive innovation, and achieve better outcomes. This synergy of elements fosters a dynamic and inclusive board that maximizes the contributions and potential of each board member, leading to improved board effectiveness and organizational success”. This is in line with Chang et al. (2019) who argue that inclusion involves harnessing an abundance of ideas and perspectives from diverse members beneficially. However, the developed theory brings in the element of inclusive leadership and driving innovation.

Diversity, gender sensitivity and exploiting potential were identified in both research questions. Embracing diversity onboards is in line with extant literature that has promoted the diversity of backgrounds, professions, skills and expertise for best corporate governance practices (Egon Zehnder, 2018; Hughes, et al., 2017) Gender sensitivity as a theme for the meaning

and ideal practice of inclusion resonates in the studies that show aggressive promotion of gender diversity through affirmative action and legislation (Kolev, and McNamara, 2020; Knippen, *et al.*, 2019; European Commission, 2021; Credit Suisse Group, 2022) Similarly, Brieger *et al.* (2019) constructed a framework for promoting board gender diversity that elucidates the mechanisms through which action resources, emancipative values, and civic entitlements empower, inspire, and support women in assuming leadership positions on corporate boards.

Exploring potential as the meaning and also the ideal practice of inclusion was explained as being able to participate and contribute to decisions, promoting an inclusive environment and appreciating uniqueness. This is also in line with studies that have concluded that diversity is incomplete without inclusion (Fredette *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Kuzmina and Melentyeva, 2021) affirm that female directors exploit their potential and that an increased representation of women on corporate boards yields significant positive impacts on buy-and-hold returns. Participants also acknowledged that inclusion is influenced by the board's charters. This showed that it is important to incorporate inclusive practices within the board charter because it's the instrument of operation. This is in line with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD Factbook, 2019), the Institute of Directors South Africa (King, 2016) the Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance (CACG, 1999) and the Capital Markets Authority in Uganda which encourages to adhere to the corporate governance principles and guidelines.

Psychological safety as a means of ideal inclusion on boards is echoed in the studies that highlight the importance of psychological safety for members working together (Qian, *et al.*, 2020; Zhao, 2020; Markoczy *et al.*, 2020) Furthermore, the extension of diversity meaning to participation and psychological safety is in line with, Le and Johnson, (2020) who assert that inclusion focuses more broadly on the engagement of whole selves and learning from divergent perspectives it involves employee equitable practices, integration of differences and inclusion in decision making (Nishii, 2013). Necessary skills as a means of ideal inclusion practice showed that it was important to ensure that the recruited women have the necessary board competencies, they are trained and qualified. This is in line with studies that argue that women to be recruited on boards should be credible for board services (Gullet *et al.*, 2018). In the same spirit Avolio, *et al.*, (2023) Confirmed that female directors believe in training and development, professional expertise, self-reflection, mindset, adaptability, networking, effective communication, empathy, diligence, critical decision-making abilities, interpersonal skills, support systems, and a strong sense of passion towards their work. Limited understanding and training and the absence of operational guidelines affect the effectiveness of the board (Mijumbi *et al.*, 2023)

Promoting an inclusive environment was also highlighted as an ideal practice of inclusion. This is in line with past studies that affirmed that an inclusive climate is creating an environment of feelings of safety, respect, support, value, trust, fulfillment, engagement, and authenticity within the organizations (Shore *et al.*, 2017; Ferdman, 2014). Other studies concluded that inclusive leadership in organizations promotes member identification and better performance (Randel *et al.*, 2018) promotes innovative behaviour (Javed *et al.*, 2020) enforces set values (Kuknor, and Bhattacharya, 2020) encourages participation in decision-making (Minehart *et al.*, 2020; D'Aunno *et al.*, 2017)

In conclusion, this study established that inclusion within boards means appointing diverse members on the boards based on the policies in place, being gender sensitive and giving equal opportunities for participation in the board discussions thus, enabling exploiting the potential of all board members. On the other hand ideal inclusion unfolded as developing board charters that stipulate inclusive guidelines and inclusive policies. To be gender sensitive involves ensuring gender balance and gender equity; to recruit women who have the required skills including; qualifications and training experience on board matters. To leverage the potential of all board members an inclusive climate must exist being influenced by the board chairpersons and an inclusive board culture for members to exploit their full potential while experiencing psychological safety and contributing to board discussions. The meaning of inclusion almost had the same core themes as those of ideal inclusion except necessary skills and inclusive behaviour were over-emphasized in the ideal practice of inclusion. This showed how diversity is incomplete without inclusion.

This study highlights the importance of promoting inclusion amidst diversity on boards. By promoting inclusion, boards can create a more equitable and effective board environment that not only benefits the individuals involved but also contributes to the overall success and sustainability of the organization. Organizations need to recognize the value of gender diversity while considering the other diversity dimensions on boards and actively work towards fostering an inclusive environment that allows all board members to thrive and contribute their unique insights, ultimately driving organizational growth and success. Boards should have intentional initiatives to promote an inclusive environment for women on boards.

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