

From bias to belonging: Gen Z and gendered pathways to disability inclusion



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Orientation: Workplace inclusivity is increasingly prominent, yet Gen Z's contribution to disability inclusion in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) within developing contexts remains underexplored.

Research purpose: This study aimed to examine Gen Z employees' perceptions of inclusivity, the influence of gender-awareness on fairness, and organisational strategies supporting workers with disabilities.

Motivation for the study: Prior work prioritises large corporations and managerial views, overlooking generational differences and gender-disability intersections. Gaps are critical in Indonesia's structural and cultural context.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative design was used across Pontianak, Palangka Raya, and Bandar Lampung, combining semi-structured interviews, open-ended surveys, and document analysis on workers with disability, peers without disability, mentors, managers, and human resource (HR) officers. Data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke).

Main findings: Gen Z acted as agents of adaptation, using digital tools, basic sign language, and teamwork to bridge communication and mobility barriers. Fairness was gendered: women often faced over-assistance; men were pushed towards hyper-independence. Organisational efforts (flexible scheduling, awareness training, mentorship) helped, but inaccessible infrastructure (e.g. lack of ramps or lifts) remained a major constraint.

Practical/managerial implications: Institutionalise peer-level support, implement gender-sensitive HR practices, and prioritise infrastructural accessibility.

Contribution/value-add: This study integrates generational and gender perspectives into disability inclusion, offering actionable guidance for SMEs in resource-constrained settings to move from symbolic compliance to systemic equity.

Keywords: workplace inclusion; generation z; gender-awareness; disability employment; small and medium enterprises.

Introduction

In recent decades, workplace inclusivity has become a central concern in global discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion (Nishii, 2012; Roberson, 2006; Shore et al., 2010). Yet workers with disabilities still face distinct barriers such as social stigma, uneven accommodations, and limited physical access (OECD, 2010; Schur et al., 2005; WHO, 2011). These barriers are especially visible in small and medium enterprises where formal human resource systems are still developing. This situation calls for practical mechanisms that can convert inclusion from principle into everyday practice (Derbyshire et al., 2024).

Generation Z (born roughly 1997–2012) enters the workforce with strong preferences for fairness, purpose, and open communication, shaped by continuous digital exposure and team-centric norms (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Compared with older cohorts, research notes a higher salience of diversity and ethical climates among Generation Z (Leslie et al., 2021) as well as readiness to use technology to lower collaboration barriers. These characteristics are directly relevant to disability inclusion in customer-facing and service roles. Framing disability inclusion through a generational lens clarifies why the narrative moves from global inclusivity to workers with disabilities and then to Generation Z. The values and digital fluency of this cohort

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provide plausible levers that help translate inclusion ideals into daily routines in small and medium enterprises (Visser & Terblanche, 2025).

Orientation

Building on the Introduction, this section positions gender and intersectionality as the conceptual bridge that links disability inclusion to the everyday practices and values of Generation Z. Gendered experiences of workers with disability are read through Gen Z preferences for fairness, teamwork, and digital communication, and the analysis asks how these preferences amplify or constrain equitable participation in routine tasks.

Gender and intersectionality are not treated here as general backdrops. They are examined through the lens of Generation Z, whose sensitivity to fairness and inclusion is frequently enacted via micro practices such as peer assistance, basic sign use, and digital coordination (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). These practices can generate gendered patterns in everyday work, for example, more protective assistance towards women with mobility limitations and higher expectations of independence among men with similar conditions, which in turn shape perceived justice and belonging (Derbyshire et al., 2024).

The role of gender awareness is pivotal yet underexamined in workplace inclusivity. Research shows when employees and leaders are explicitly sensitised to gendered norms, perceptions of fairness and everyday decision-making improve because people are better able to recognise and interrupt bias-laden scripts (Colquitt et al., 2001). However, gender awareness rarely addresses how gender intersects with disability; an omission can reproduce dependence for women with disabilities and 'hyper-independence' expectations for men. Intersectional studies emphasise that gender and disability co-produce distinctive risks of exclusion, making context-specific awareness essential (Acker, 2006; Traustadóttir, 2017).

Moreover, ambivalent forms of sexism, especially benevolent protection towards women, can feel supportive while subtly undermining autonomy and evaluations of competence, thereby distorting equality initiatives unless leaders surface and counter these dynamics (Glick & Fiske, 2001). In societies such as Indonesia, where cultural scripts about gender roles are strong, and accessibility barriers persist, embedding gender-aware (and intersectional) training into human resource (HR) practices is therefore crucial to ensure inclusion efforts translate into equitable treatment for workers with disabilities. According to data from *Badan Pusat Statistik* (2024), the prevalence of Type 3 disability in 2022 reached 1.43% of the total population, with a very low labour force participation rate of only 21.65% among people with disabilities. Female participation was even lower (13.93%) compared to males (30.46%). Furthermore, the majority of workers with disability were employed in the informal sector

(69.14%), highlighting the urgency of improving access to formal employment opportunities.

Research context

This research was conducted in Pontianak, Palangka Raya, and Bandar Lampung, three developing Indonesian cities where inclusivity efforts face unique challenges because of uneven accessibility infrastructure and limited resources. Cafés were selected as the study setting because, as small and medium-sized enterprises, they are generally more flexible in implementing inclusive practices than large corporations (Ferdman & Deane, 2013), and they frequently employ workers with disability in customer-facing roles and collaborate closely with Generation Z co-workers. This combination provides a direct environment in which workers with disabilities interact with customers, including Gen Z, enabling naturalistic observation of how inclusion, gendered expectations, and Gen Z practices take shape in everyday service work (Adamson et al., 2021). Moreover, several Indonesian cafés have pioneered hiring workers with disabilities, such as deaf or blind employees, illustrating community-level initiatives towards inclusion (Vohra et al., 2015). The gender diverse staffing typical of cafés further makes this context suitable for analysing how gender-awareness influences perceptions of fairness and equality among workers with disability. Given these conditions, the analysis focuses on cafés in developing Indonesian cities as the primary organisational setting where disability inclusion, gender-awareness, and Generation Z practices intersect in daily service work.

Research purpose and objectives

This study foregrounds Generation Z as the main respondents because they are entering the workforce with strong expectations of inclusivity, fairness, and ethical climates, and their values are reshaping workplace dynamics globally. Research indicates Gen Z prioritise purpose, diversity, and equity in their employment choices, which directly influences organisational culture and retention (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Their soft-skills profile, however, remains uneven, making structured organisational support essential for translating inclusive values into practice (Visser & Terblanche, 2025).

Gen Z's orientation towards recognition and flexible working arrangements has been empirically linked to stronger retention and productivity, showing inclusivity is both a normative and strategic concern (Kgarimetsa & Naidoo, 2024). Furthermore, their distinct capacity to leverage digital technologies to reduce communication barriers aligns with evidence that digital human resource management (HRM) systems can strengthen employee experience when inclusively designed (Chapano et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2025). Beyond technical competence, Gen Z's diversity orientation and team-centric mindset allow them to function as cultural brokers in multi-generational and disability-diverse workplaces (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Together, these insights underscore why Gen Z perspectives are indispensable

for advancing workplace inclusivity, particularly in contexts where disability and gender intersect with broader cultural and structural barriers.

Previous studies have confirmed the benefits of inclusivity. Schur et al. (2005) found that inclusivity enhances both productivity and employee loyalty. However, most such studies examine large corporations in developed countries, raising questions about their relevance in the Indonesian context. Meanwhile, Gallie et al. (2021) demonstrated that gender awareness affects fairness perceptions, yet this has not been linked directly to disability inclusion. Therefore, this study addresses three questions:

- How do Gen Z employees evaluate and practice inclusion of co-workers with disability in daily tasks?
- How do gender norms influence assistance, expectations, and competence evaluations towards women and men with disabilities?
- Which HRM strategies at the levels of policy, leadership, and infrastructure most effectively strengthen belonging?

The study is expected to contribute theoretically by integrating generational and gender dimensions into inclusivity research, practically by offering insights for small and medium enterprises, and socially by raising public awareness on the importance of inclusivity for all, including workers with disabilities.

Literature review

This review develops a cumulative argument. Inclusive workplace theory establishes the climate level foundations for belonging (Ferdman & Deane, 2013). Organisational justice clarifies the evaluative mechanisms through which inclusion is experienced as fair or unfair (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intergroup contact explains the conditions under which everyday interactions reduce bias (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Generation Z brings a distinct set of values and digital practices that shape those interactions in contemporary service work (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Leslie et al., 2021; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Gender-awareness specifies how norms about women and men may differentiate help, expectations, and recognition for workers with disability (Gallie et al., 2021). Disability inclusion strategies identify policy and practice levers available to organisations, particularly in resource-constrained small and medium enterprises (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005). Together, these strands converge on a focused question about how Gen Z micro practices interact with gendered expectations to produce or hinder belonging for workers with disability in small and medium enterprises (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Derbyshire et al., 2024).

Inclusive workplace, organisational justice, and intergroup contact theory

The inclusive workplace theory emphasises that inclusion is not merely symbolic hiring or compliance but a holistic practice in which differences are valued, resources are

distributed fairly, and all employees experience belonging (Adamson et al., 2021). For workers with disabilities, this entails not only access to jobs but also dignity, appropriate accommodations, and integration into the social and professional fabric of the workplace, while embedding inclusivity in daily operations helps to reduce stigma, strengthen collaboration, and improve performance outcomes (Shaw et al., 2022). Organisational justice offers a complementary lens by defining fairness as distributive, procedural, and interactional, and when applied to disability inclusion, it highlights that fair accommodations and respectful treatment raise satisfaction and lower turnover intentions, whereas perceived unfairness fosters alienation and disengagement (Herr et al., 2020; Samosh et al., 2023). Intergroup contact theory further suggests that under conditions of equality, cooperation, and institutional support, interactions between employees with disability and employees without disability can reduce prejudice and build cohesion, a claim supported by evidence that supportive climates and socialisation practices enhance the integration of workers with disability (Allport, 1954; Sanclemente et al., 2024). Taken together, inclusive climates create enabling conditions yet equitable experiences depend on how employees judge procedures and interactions as fair, which points directly to justice and contact as the next layers of explanation and to the importance of the conditions that sustain high quality contact in frontline service work (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Ferdman & Deane, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These conditions are increasingly shaped by communication styles and coordination habits introduced by younger cohorts, which makes a generational lens, especially Generation Z, a critical next step in the argument (Adamson et al., 2021; Leslie et al., 2021; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015).

Gen Z perceptions of inclusivity

Gen Z are digital natives, highly aware of social issues, and place strong value on inclusivity, fairness, and belonging in the workplace (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Zain et al., 2025). They expect flexible work, diversity support, and equal opportunities for career growth. Yet research also reveals a paradox: while endorsing inclusivity in principle, Gen Z may hesitate to openly discuss disability-related accommodations, reflecting cultural discomfort or limited awareness (Kulkarni et al., 2016). This paradox highlights the complexity of translating inclusive values into practice. Evidence portrays Gen Z as purpose-oriented, diversity-attentive, and fluent in digital coordination, traits that can lower day-to-day barriers for co-workers with disability in service roles (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). These enabling traits are filtered through gender norms that influence who is helped, how autonomy is judged, and whose competence is recognised, which motivates closer attention to gender-awareness in disability inclusion (Gallie et al., 2021).

Gender awareness and fairness

Gender awareness, defined as recognising and challenging gendered biases, has been linked to improved fairness

perceptions and equality initiatives (Petzel et al., 2024). Employees with higher gender awareness tend to support inclusive climates (Parmaxi et al., 2024). However, poorly designed interventions may produce defensive resistance, and the intersection of gender with disability remains underexplored. Given women with disabilities often face 'overprotection', while men are expected to embody hyper-independence, integrating gender-sensitive perspectives into inclusivity is essential (Acker, 2006; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Gender awareness highlights patterned differences in assistance and expectations directed at women and men with disabilities, with downstream effects on perceived justice and belonging (Gallie et al., 2021). These patterns suggest that inclusion mechanisms are not neutral and can be nudged by daily practices in teams that include Gen Z members, which turns the discussion to organisational strategies for disability inclusion in small and medium enterprises (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005).

Disability inclusion strategies

Effective inclusion requires both cultural and structural strategies. Supportive climates and fair accommodation processes promote integration and reduce turnover intentions (Samosh et al., 2023; Sanclemente et al., 2024). New Ways of Working (e.g. remote work, flexible scheduling) can enhance accessibility but may also create new forms of exclusion (Klinksiek et al., 2023). Critics argue that many organisational initiatives remain symbolic, and leadership commitment and structural reforms are necessary for sustainable inclusion (Shaw et al., 2022). Overall, disability inclusion strategies must balance policy, practice, and culture to produce meaningful outcomes. Existing strategies focus on accommodations, accessible design, and inclusive HRM routines, but most evidence derives from large organisations in developed contexts and gives limited attention to how generational micro practices interact with gendered expectations in small and medium enterprises (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005). This observation motivates an integrative synthesis that centres the Gen Z and gender intersection in everyday inclusion.

Synthesis and conceptual gap

Across these literatures, a coherent pathway emerges. Inclusive climates provide the backdrop for belonging, justice perceptions translate climate into felt fairness, and contact quality governs how diverse teammates work together in practice (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Ferdman & Deane, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Generation Z contributes values and digital fluency that can enable bias reduction in everyday coordination, while gender awareness clarifies why the same practices may differentially affect women and men with disabilities (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Gallie et al., 2021; Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Disability inclusion strategies offer organisational levers, yet prior research largely overlooks how these levers interact with Gen Z micro practices and gendered expectations in small and medium enterprises in developing city contexts (Adamson et al., 2021; Derbyshire

et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005). The conceptual gap is therefore the under-examined intersection of generational practices and gendered dynamics in disability inclusion, which directly motivates the study's research questions in Indonesian café settings served by Generation Z employees (Adamson et al., 2021; Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022).

Research design

Approach, method, and strategy

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach to illuminate inclusion as a context-dependent process that unfolds through everyday practices and interactions. The design is a multiple instrumental case study in which several cafés are examined to understand a phenomenon rather than to profile any single organisation (Stake, 1995). In complementary terms, the cases are treated as literal replications that permit cross-case patterning and analytic generalisation to theory rather than to populations (Yin, 2018).

Cafés are defined as bounded cases because they combine three features that are directly relevant to the research questions. Firstly, cafés are small and medium enterprises with lean structures in which HRM routines are visible in daily shift coordination. Secondly, cafés frequently employ workers with disability in customer-facing roles alongside Generation Z co-workers, which concentrates the interactions that the study seeks to analyse. Thirdly, service work in cafés is organised around short cycle tasks and intensive peer communication, providing naturalistic windows into assistance, autonomy, and recognition. The unit of analysis is the café as an organisation. Boundaries are set at the level of the workplace, its employees, and routine service processes during the period of data collection. Evidence is generated through semi-structured interviews, short open-ended questionnaires used for accessibility, and document review. Cross-case analysis follows a replication logic in which initial propositions about inclusive climates, justice perceptions, and intergroup contact conditions are compared within and across cases to identify convergent and divergent patterns linked to Generation Z micro practices and gendered expectations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). This specification strengthens the alignment between the qualitative approach, the chosen case strategy, and the study's research questions.

Research setting, entrée and establishing researcher roles

Fieldwork was conducted in Pontianak, Palangka Raya, and Bandar Lampung, developing cities where inclusion faces structural and resource challenges. Studying non-metropolitan sites supports contextualised insights into routine HR practices (Thomas, 2011). Access to research sites was negotiated through café owners and HR managers. The researchers presented formal letters of introduction, clarified research objectives, and obtained informed consent. In line with ethical guidelines, interviews with participants with disability, especially those with cognitive impairments, were

conducted with job coaches or mentors present to ensure accessibility and comfort (Orb et al., 2001; Peticca-Harris et al., 2016).

Research participants and sampling methods

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, to ensure representation across three groups: (1) Gen Z employees (aged 21–29 years) who had worked in the café for at least 3 months and had regular, direct interaction with co-workers with disabilities; (2) workers with disabilities (for example Deaf, physical impairment, Down syndrome) who were formally employed in front of house or back of house roles for at least 3 months; and (3) organisational stakeholders (HR managers, mentors and café owners) who held direct responsibility for staffing, supervision or inclusion related decisions. Individuals under 18 years of age, temporary staff, and employees without direct exposure to co-workers with disability were excluded. Purposive sampling enables the deliberate selection of participants most relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). It was chosen to deliberately recruit information-rich participants occupying key roles in disability inclusion (Gen Z co-workers, workers with disabilities and organisational stakeholders), rather than relying on random or convenience access. Role homogeneous strata across sites enhanced within role comparisons while still allowing contrasts across roles and locations (Palinkas et al., 2015). Sample adequacy followed the information power principle, prioritising sample specificity, dialogue quality, and analytic focus over numerical targets (Malterud et al., 2016). Recruitment concluded when consecutive interviews yielded no new codes, consistent with established guidance on saturation (Guest et al., 2006).

A total of 13 participants were recruited across three cities (Pontianak = 4; Bandar Lampung = 5; Palangka Raya = 4) with an age range of 21–34. By gender, there were 8 males and 5 females. By role: 5 workers with disability (Deaf = 3; physical impairment = 1; Down syndrome = 1), 4 Gen Z co-workers without disability, 2 mentors or job coaches, 1 HRM manager, and 1 café manager and owner (see Table 1). Typical positions included barista and server, frontliner and service, and kitchen helper, with stakeholders responsible for

accommodations, training, and policy. This composition provides a balanced, multi-angle view of daily practice (worker–peer–mentor/HR) and organisational decision-making in inclusive cafés.

Data collection and recording

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey instruments. In Pontianak, Arman Jaya conducted interviews using *Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia* (BISINDO). In Lampung, Aline R.O Satrianingsih and Fathi Ikasari interviewed workers with Down syndrome accompanied by mentors, and Deaf participants responded via open-ended Google Forms. In Palangka Raya, Nurlia E. Damayanti combined direct interviews with online surveys. The use of Google Forms for qualitative, open-ended responses has precedent: Agherdien (2025) demonstrated its effectiveness in capturing nuanced insights while maintaining flexibility for marginalised groups. Document analysis of HR manuals, training policies, and promotional materials was added to triangulate interview data (Bowen, 2009). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim; sign language sessions were cross-checked with interpreters. Google Form responses were exported, anonymised, and stored securely. Coding and audit trails were managed using qualitative data analysis software to support transparency and rigour (Woods et al., 2015).

Data analysis

Credibility was enhanced via method and source triangulation (worker–peer–mentor/HR) and member checking to verify transcripts (Birt et al., 2016). The authors addressed trustworthiness criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) through thick description, audit trails, and reflexivity (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, defining themes, and reporting. This approach allowed researchers to move from descriptive categories to interpretive insights, highlighting patterns across generational, gendered, and organisational dimensions of inclusion. Findings are reported thematically, supported by direct quotations from participants to illustrate lived

TABLE 1: The participants of the research.

ID	City	Gender	Age (years)	Role and Group	Impairment (if any)	Job title and Notes
PNK-01	Pontianak	Male	23	worker with disability	Deaf	Barista and server
PNK-02	Pontianak	Male	24	Disabled worker	Physical impairment	Frontliner and service
PNK-03	Pontianak	Female	22	Gen Z employee (without disability)	-	Barista and server
PNK-04	Pontianak	Male	24	Mentor for worker with disability	-	Supports workplace accommodation & training
LAM-01	Bandar Lampung	Male	21	Worker with disability	Down syndrome	Frontliner and service (Works with job coach/mentor)
LAM-02	Bandar Lampung	Male	23	Mentor and job coach	-	Frontliner, service, and mentor
LAM-03	Bandar Lampung	Female	23	Worker with disability	Deaf	Helper (kitchen)
LAM-04	Bandar Lampung	Male	24	Gen Z employee (without disability)	-	Chief
LAM-05	Bandar Lampung	Female	32	HRM Manager	-	Policy & inclusion strategy perspective
PLK-01	Palangka Raya	Male	22	Worker with disability	Deaf	Frontliner and service
PLK-02	Palangka Raya	Male	25	Gen Z employee (without disability)	-	Barista and server
PLK-03	Palangka Raya	Female	34	Manager and owner	-	Decision-maker on inclusive practices
PLK-04	Palangka Raya	Female	24	Gen Z employee (without disability)	-	Frontliner and service

experiences. Data extracts are anonymised and coded by participant ID (e.g. PNK-01 for Pontianak, LAM-03 for Lampung). Interpretations are explicitly linked to theoretical frameworks and supported by multiple sources to enhance credibility (Tracy, 2010).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Tanjungpura (Approval No. 8346/UN22.2/TU.00.01/2025; 07 October 2025). Informed consent was obtained in writing after participants received plain-language information about aims, voluntariness, withdrawal rights, and data use. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through coded identifiers and removal of direct or indirect identifiers; only de-identified data were analysed and reported. Audio and transcript files were stored on encrypted drives with restricted access, with retention for 5 years followed by secure deletion. Interviews with deaf participants used Indonesian Sign Language or text-based channels, and a job coach was present when cognitive support was required. No supervisors attended staff interviews, incentives were modest and non-coercive, and participation had no employment consequences.

Results

The analysis identified three interrelated themes that together explain how inclusion is enacted in daily service work. Theme 1 describes Generation Z as day-to-day enablers of inclusion through digital coordination, peer assistance, and basic sign use. Theme 2 details gendered dynamics that shape help, autonomy expectations, and competence judgements for women and men with disabilities. Theme 3 presents organisational strategies that support belonging, including HRM routines and attention to physical accessibility. Each theme is elaborated below with illustrative excerpts and cross-case contrasts.

Theme 1: Gen Z as agents of adaptation and inclusion

The findings consistently highlight that Generation Z employees act as pivotal agents in promoting workplace inclusion for colleagues with disabilities (Table 2). Unlike older cohorts, Gen Z demonstrates a stronger orientation towards diversity and equity (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Leslie et al., 2021) and digital adaptability (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Their openness to difference, coupled with technological fluency, enables them to reduce barriers that otherwise hinder effective collaboration. This aligns with evidence that Generation Z values inclusive and transparent

workplace practices that support personalised employee experiences and equity-oriented cultural change (Thomas et al., 2025).

Deaf participants (PNK-01; LAM-03; PLK-01) repeatedly emphasised that their ability to perform work tasks improved substantially when Gen Z colleagues adopted creative communication strategies. These ranged from using basic sign language, preparing written notes, to leveraging mobile applications for real-time exchanges. Such adaptations, although minor in effort, yielded significant impacts, reducing misunderstandings, enhancing customer service, and building trust. Co-workers without disability (PNK-03; LAM-04) supported these accounts, admitting initial discomfort in working with Deaf peers, but pointing out Gen Z's willingness to innovate with tools such as visual menus and shared sign glossaries quickly normalised inclusive practices. Their creativity resonates with global findings that Gen Z employees use digital platforms and assistive technologies as natural extensions of teamwork (Al-Twal et al., 2025).

Similarly, physically impaired workers (PNK-02; PLK-02) highlighted moments when younger peers offered to help carry trays upstairs during rush hours, despite the absence of elevators. Crucially, these gestures were not interpreted as acts of pity but as genuine teamwork reinforced solidarity. Such peer support confirms Gen Z's inclusivity is grounded in personalisation of work experience and flexibility. Thomas et al. (2025) emphasised that employee empowerment and collaboration are essential to Gen Z's workplace values. In the Indonesian context, Zain et al. (2025) argue that Gen Z's inclusivity orientation is shaped by both global digital exposure and local communal traditions, making them particularly adept at embedding solidarity and mutual help in daily work interactions. Similar values were observed in Jordan, where Gen Z employees emphasised fairness in decision-making, transparency, and teamwork, which in turn fostered trust and belonging (Al-Twal et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Gendered perceptions in disability inclusion

Gender emerged as a salient factor shaping inclusivity dynamics in the workplace (Figure 1). Female participants with disability (PNK-01; LAM-03) consistently described how customers often preferred to interact with male staff, reflecting an implicit bias women with disabilities were less competent in service roles. These workers also reported being offered unsolicited help more frequently than their male counterparts, reinforcing dependency rather than autonomy. This pattern is consistent with findings by

TABLE 2: Field evidence on Gen Z's role in workplace inclusion.

Participant group	Observed barrier	Gen Z adaptive strategy	Perceived impact
Deaf workers (PNK-01; LAM-03; PLK-01)	Miscommunication with customers	Written notes, phone apps, basic sign language	Greater confidence; reduced anxiety
Non-disabled Co-workers without disability (PNK-03; LAM-04)	Initial awkwardness	Visual menus, sign lists	Improved cohesion and teamwork
Physically impaired worker (PNK-02)	Carrying trays upstairs without lift	Colleagues help during rush hours	Strengthened solidarity and trust

Kulkarni et al. (2016) that women with disabilities often experience ‘overprotection’, a form of benevolent sexism unintentionally undermines their agency.

In contrast, male workers with disabilities (PNK-02; PLK-02) reported higher expectations of independence. They were less frequently assisted by peers, even in physically demanding situations such as delivering items upstairs. This indicates a gendered asymmetry: while women were prematurely relieved of tasks, men were pushed to perform beyond their physical limits. Mentors (PNK-04; LAM-02) confirmed these dynamics, observing that colleagues often intervened quickly in the case of female workers, while giving male workers more time to ‘prove’ themselves. Similar patterns were found in research by Berkelaar (2017) who found that gendered stereotypes intersect with disability to produce differentiated expectations of performance and resilience.

Moreover, the data reveal how gender intersects with disability to shape perceptions of fairness and equality. Female participants reported that unsolicited help was framed as politeness, yet it reinforced feelings of being underestimated. Male participants, meanwhile, described experiencing ‘hyper-independence’, where lack of support translated into heightened workload and, at times, physical strain. This resonates with work by Lindsay et al. (2018) which found that gender and disability together influence how inclusion strategies are enacted and how support is distributed unevenly across employees. The mentors’ observations further underscore the subtlety of gendered dynamics. While they advocated for equal expectations regardless of gender, their accounts reflected how deeply ingrained biases in peer and customer interactions could distort perceptions of competence. Such findings confirm the argument of Santuzzi and Waltz (2016) who emphasise that inclusion cannot be achieved solely through equal opportunity rhetoric; instead, organisations must actively confront how gender norms intersect with disability to structure workplace experiences.

Theme 3: Organisational and managerial strategies

Managers and HR officers emerged as central actors in embedding disability inclusion into organisational practices

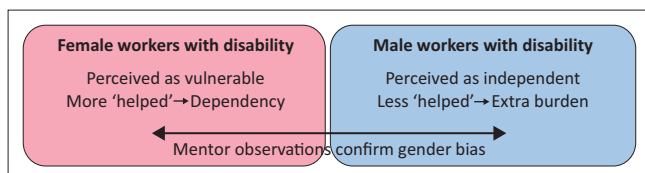


FIGURE 1: Gendered perceptions in workplace inclusion.

TABLE 3: Organisational practices and limitations.

Strategy type	Evidence	Strengths	Limitations
HR policies	Flexible shifts; socialisation (LAM-05)	Formalised equality; awareness raising	Limited infrastructure resources
Managerial interventions	Sign language training; role redistribution (PLK-03)	Enhanced communication, fairness	Context-specific; not system-wide
Mentorship	Firm, target-based coaching (PNK-04; PLK-04; LAM-02)	Builds professionalism, accountability	Risk of being seen as harsh
Structural solutions	Request for lifts/ramps (PNK-02; PLK-02)	Long-term sustainability	Currently absent

HR, human resource.

(Table 3). The evidence from fieldwork indicates HR representatives (LAM-05) introduced flexible scheduling, awareness training, and structured socialisation programmes, providing formal mechanisms to normalise inclusion. Café managers (PLK-03) operationalised these commitments by offering sign language programmes and establishing equal performance standards, ensuring workers with disabilities were held to equitable, not diminished, expectations. Mentors (PNK-04; LAM-02) further reinforced this by adopting a coaching style balanced support with accountability, signalling that accommodations should foster equity rather than dependency. Workers with disabilities reported positive psychosocial impacts from these strategies. The firm yet fair coaching approach increased self-esteem and reinforced their sense of belonging. However, persistent structural barriers, particularly the absence of lifts or ramps, compelled physically impaired workers (PNK-02; PLK-02) to rely on coworker solidarity for mobility during shifts. While social support bridged these gaps temporarily, both employees and managers recognised that sustainable inclusion requires investment in physical accessibility.

These findings align with broader scholarship on organisational inclusivity. Sanclemente et al. (2024) show that supportive climates and structured socialisation foster deeper integration of employees with disability into the workforce. Similarly, Bezyak et al. (2020) emphasise that employer commitment to inclusion strategies directly correlates with hiring intentions and long-term engagement. Yet, as Shaw et al. (2022) caution, many policies risk remaining symbolic without genuine leadership commitment and structural reform. Complementing this, Gould et al. (2022) argue that embedding disability within diversity frameworks allows organisations to sustain inclusion beyond one-off initiatives.

Recent insights on inclusive leadership also highlight the role of managers in reducing stigma and empowering employees with disability to request necessary accommodations without fear (Zhu et al., 2025). However, organisational strategies are effective only when they integrate short-term interventions with long-term reforms, combining HR policies, managerial initiatives, and infrastructural commitments (Bezyak et al., 2020; Gould et al., 2022). Organisational strategies in the studied cafés illustrate a multilayered inclusion model: HR policies provide formal structure, managerial initiatives ensure daily operational fairness, mentorship develops employee capacity, and infrastructural reform remains the missing pillar. As emphasised by Bezyak et al. (2020) and Gould et al. (2022), only when these elements work together can inclusion be fully institutionalised, moving from ad hoc solidarity to systemic equity in workplaces.

Discussion

Outline of the results

The findings of this study reveal workplace inclusivity is not a monolithic process but a dynamic interplay of generational values, gendered expectations, and organisational strategies. Each level contributes differently to shaping the experiences of workers with disabilities, and taken together, these insights broaden our understanding of how inclusivity is enacted, challenged, and sustained in practice.

At the micro-level, Gen Z co-workers demonstrate a distinctive role in bridging communication gaps and normalising collaboration. Their readiness to experiment with digital tools, adopt basic sign language, and implement creative solutions reflects both technological fluency and a value orientation towards fairness. This pattern resonates with Benitez et al. (2022) who emphasised that Gen Z's digital competence and intercultural openness enable them to adapt more quickly to diverse workplace contexts. Furthermore, their actions go beyond symbolic gestures, echoing Surugiu et al. (2025) who found that Gen Z's motivation is strongly tied to collective collaboration and peer-based trust. In the present context, these behaviours transform inclusion from an abstract principle into everyday practice, reinforcing the claim that sustained peer interactions reduce prejudice and foster belonging (Al-Twal et al., 2025).

At the meso-level, however, gendered perceptions complicate the inclusive environment. Female workers with disabilities were often over-assisted, framed as being 'protected', which paradoxically reinforced dependency, while male workers were expected to embody resilience, sometimes at the cost of safety. This asymmetry highlights how gender intersects with disability to produce differentiated expectations. Kulkarni et al. (2016) similarly observed that benevolent forms of bias often undermine women with disabilities, while men face pressures of hyper-independence. Beyond individual perceptions, these patterns suggest inclusivity initiatives risk becoming superficial unless supported by explicit gender-awareness interventions. Lindsay et al. (2018) stressed that gender-sensitive approaches are crucial in ensuring accommodations foster equity rather than reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, inclusivity at the meso-level must address both organisational routines (such as HR training) and cultural attitudes that subtly shape fairness.

At the macro-level, structural accessibility or the lack thereof, emerged as the most enduring barrier. Despite supportive HR policies and mentoring, workers with physical impairments continued to depend on co-workers to navigate stairs, underscoring the limits of social solidarity. Bezyak et al. (2020) argue organisational commitment to inclusion must extend to infrastructural investments if it is to be sustainable. Gould et al. (2022) also observed that while policies may normalise inclusion symbolically, they fail to achieve transformation unless embedded in broader systems

of accessibility. This study confirms this: without ramps, lifts, or task redesign, inclusivity remains contingent on temporary goodwill, risking inequity during peak operational demands. Figure 2 visualises this layered perspective, illustrating how micro-level peer practices, meso-level gender norms and HR strategies, and macro-level structural investments intersect to create sustainable inclusion. This model advances existing research by showing workplace inclusivity is not simply a function of policy but of alignment across levels. Where only one or two levels are addressed, inclusion tends to remain symbolic rather than systemic, limiting its sustainability and impact.

Practical implications and recommendations

This study highlights several practical lessons for advancing disability inclusion in organisations. At the peer-level, training programmes should formally encourage Gen Z employees to use adaptive communication methods such as mobile apps and basic sign language, institutionalising practices they already employ informally to ensure sustainability. Beyond awareness campaigns, inclusivity requires gender-sensitive training, as benevolent biases towards women with disabilities and hyper-independence expectations for men undermine equity, underscoring Lindsay et al.'s (2018) call for intersectional approaches. Most critically, infrastructural investments (e.g. ramps, lifts, and ergonomic redesign) are essential, as HR and managerial scaffolding alone cannot reduce dependency. Finally, leadership commitment must be visible and consistent because leaders who set expectations and model inclusive practices are pivotal in moving workplace cultures from symbolic compliance to genuine equity (Gould et al., 2022).

The findings also show that mobility-related barriers persisted where employees were expected to use stairs because of the absence of elevators, indicating that practical inclusion depends on physical as well as attitudinal change. In line with the principle of reasonable accommodation

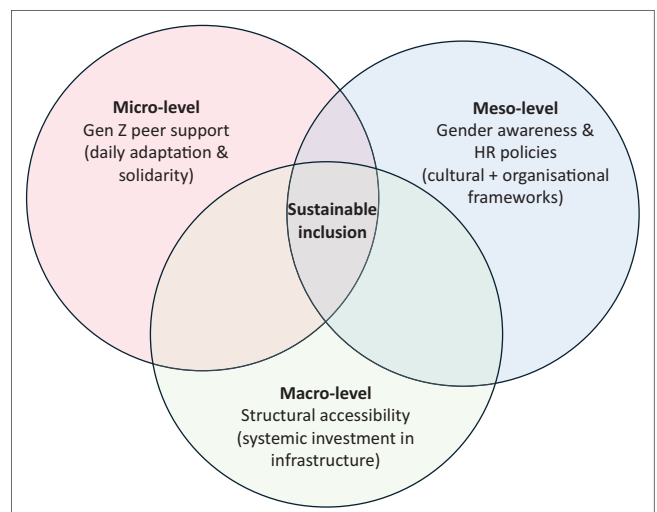


FIGURE 2: Multi-level model of workplace inclusion.

articulated in international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, accessibility should be treated as a core operational requirement rather than an optional add-on. In café settings, small and medium enterprises can advance belonging by combining inclusive HRM routines with feasible environmental adjustments and role-specific supports that remove the need for ad hoc assistance from co-workers and enable independent task performance (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005).

In practical terms, organisations should install site-appropriate adaptive infrastructure such as portable ramps, anti-slip surfaces, clear visual signage, and continuous accessible pathways to workstations and restrooms to address mobility barriers documented in resource-constrained settings (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005). Tasks and workflows merit redesign to remove vertical bottlenecks, for example, assigning stations on accessible floors and scheduling deliveries to areas reachable without stairs because structural adjustments are more reliable than discretionary help for sustaining inclusion (Derbyshire et al., 2024). Autonomy can be strengthened through assistive tools and technologies, including trolleys, mobile ordering devices positioned at an accessible height, and headsets or text-based channels that reduce communication barriers in service work (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Schur et al., 2005). The HRM processes should also formalise reasonable accommodation with clear and safe request channels and periodic reviews with employees, aligning everyday practice with inclusive climate and fairness principles linked to retention and well-being (Derbyshire et al., 2024; Schur et al., 2005).

Limitations and future research

While this study offers valuable insights, three limitations must be noted. Firstly, the sample was limited to cafés in Pontianak, Lampung, and Palangka Raya, which may not reflect experiences across industries or regions; future studies should include larger and more diverse sectors. Secondly, reliance on self-reported interviews and surveys risks bias, suggesting the need for triangulation with observations and policy analysis. Thirdly, the focus on frontline service settings may not capture challenges in corporate or remote-work contexts where digital accessibility plays a greater role. Based on these limitations, the study recommends: (1) institutionalising peer-support mechanisms such as mentorship between employees with disability and employees without disability; (2) mandating accessibility standards, especially for SMEs; and (3) exploring the long-term effects of gender-sensitive training and inclusive leadership on retention and career progression for workers with disabilities.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that workplace inclusivity is a multilevel phenomenon shaped by generational values,

gendered expectations, and organisational strategies. At the micro-level, Gen Z employees acted as pivotal agents of adaptation, using digital tools and creative communication to reduce barriers for colleagues with disabilities, thereby translating inclusive values into daily practice. At the meso-level, findings revealed gender-awareness critically shapes perceptions of fairness: women with disabilities often experienced overprotection undermined autonomy, while men faced hyper-independence expectations increased physical strain. At the macro-level, organisational and managerial initiatives, such as flexible scheduling, sign language programmes, and mentorship with accountability, were effective in supporting inclusivity, but structural barriers such as the absence of ramps or lifts remained the most significant limitations. Taken together, these insights confirm that sustainable inclusion requires alignment across micro, meso, and macro levels, integrating peer practices, gender-sensitive policies, and infrastructural investment to move beyond symbolic compliance towards systemic equity.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Arman Jaya: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – Original draft. Aline R.O Satrianingsih: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Nurlia E. Damayanti: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – review & editing. Fathi Ikasari: Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Arman Jaya, upon reasonable request. Transcripts and anonymised codes have been archived securely to protect participant confidentiality.

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