

GEDSI and Sustainable Business Performance: A Systematic Literature Review

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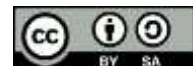
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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews the relationship between Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) and sustainable business performance. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was employed to synthesize 29 scholarly papers identified through Google Scholar, with the review process guided by systematic screening, eligibility assessment, quality evaluation, data extraction, and thematic synthesis. The findings reveal a substantial imbalance in the literature: 60% of the reviewed studies primarily focused on gender equality or gender diversity, 10% directly examined disability inclusion, and 30% addressed broader social inclusion, workplace inclusion, or integrated diversity and inclusion practices. Overall, the evidence indicates that GEDSI does not automatically improve business performance through demographic representation alone. Instead, its contribution depends on whether equality and diversity are translated into meaningful organizational inclusion. Six major mechanisms were identified: human-capital utilization, governance and decision-making, employee engagement and participation, innovation and knowledge integration, corporate reputation and stakeholder legitimacy, and sustainability practices and disclosure. Gender equality was particularly associated with governance, corporate social responsibility, environmental performance, and sustainability disclosure, while disability inclusion showed potential benefits for firm performance and corporate reputation. Workplace inclusion emerged as a critical mechanism for transforming diverse human resources into innovation and sustainable organizational value. The review concludes that GEDSI should be understood as a strategic sustainability capability whose impact is multidimensional, indirect, and context-dependent. Future research should prioritize integrated GEDSI measurement, disability inclusion, emerging economies, SMEs, longitudinal analysis, and the mediating mechanisms connecting inclusion with sustainable business outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The growing emphasis on sustainable development has fundamentally changed how business performance is conceptualized and evaluated. Organizational success is no longer assessed exclusively through profitability, market growth, and shareholder returns, but increasingly through firms' ability to balance economic viability with social responsibility, environmental stewardship, ethical governance, and long-term organizational resilience (Burnard et al., 2018; Hussain & Papastathopoulos, 2022; Mizrak, 2023). This shift reflects mounting expectations from employees, customers, investors, governments, and communities for businesses to demonstrate responsible practices concerning equality, accessibility, human rights, diversity, and meaningful social participation. Within this context, diversity and inclusion have evolved from peripheral compliance concerns into strategic organizational issues with potential implications for human capital, innovation, stakeholder legitimacy, reputation, and sustainable value creation (Arokiasamy, 2013; Brixiová et al., 2020; Mathis & Jackson, 2016). One framework that captures this broader orientation is Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI), which emphasizes the systematic identification and removal of barriers that prevent individuals and social groups from participating equitably in economic, organizational, and social activities. By integrating gender equality, disability inclusion, and broader social inclusion (Chandani et al., 2016; Nautiyal, 2023), GEDSI recognizes that exclusion often operates across multiple and intersecting dimensions. Although the concept has traditionally been associated with development programs, public policy, education, and community empowerment, its underlying principles are increasingly relevant to contemporary business management and corporate sustainability.

The strategic relevance of GEDSI arises from the growing recognition that organizations operate within socially diverse environments and depend on employees, customers, communities, supply chains, investors, and other stakeholders with heterogeneous demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Firms that fail to accommodate this diversity may encounter difficulties in attracting talent, understanding differentiated markets, maintaining employee commitment, and establishing stakeholder legitimacy. In contrast, organizations that establish equitable and inclusive environments may gain access to broader knowledge resources, greater workforce participation, stronger stakeholder relationships, and enhanced innovative capacity. Existing research provides considerable evidence regarding gender equality, particularly gender diversity within corporate boards, management teams, and organizational workforces. Gender-diverse decision-making structures may broaden perspectives, improve monitoring, strengthen stakeholder sensitivity, and introduce heterogeneous experiences into strategic processes. (Bear et al., 2022; Calabrese et al., 2023; Pitenoei et al., 2022), for example, identified an association between female board representation and corporate sustainability performance, while (Nautiyal, 2023; Nguyen, 2024) demonstrated that board gender diversity positively influenced firm performance, with sustainability disclosure serving an important mediating role. Evidence from other institutional settings, including ASEAN markets, similarly indicates that gender diversity can be associated with corporate performance and sustainability practices. These findings suggest that equality within organizational structures may generate strategic value when representation is accompanied by mechanisms that enable diverse perspectives to influence organizational decision-making. However, gender equality represents only one dimension of an inclusive organization. Disability and broader social inclusion remain comparatively underexplored despite their potential implications for sustainable business performance. Persons with disabilities continue to face barriers related to recruitment, workplace accessibility, career advancement, organizational participation,

and leadership opportunities. From an organizational perspective, disability inclusion may expand access to underutilized human capital while reinforcing commitments to responsible employment and social legitimacy (Meltzer et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018). The cited studies identified a significant, although nonlinear, relationship between disability employment and firm performance, while more recent evidence suggests that disability-inclusive employment may also contribute to organizational reputation and other performance outcomes. Social inclusion further extends the discussion beyond demographic representation by emphasizing belonging, voice, fair treatment, participation, access to organizational resources, and opportunities to influence decision-making. This distinction is important because workforce diversity alone does not necessarily translate into superior organizational outcomes. For instance, the reviewed literature indicates that diversity management was insufficient to improve workplace performance unless it was supported by practices facilitating meaningful employee inclusion. Innovation represents another potentially important mechanism linking GEDSI with organizational outcomes. Diverse employees bring heterogeneous experiences, knowledge, and problem-solving approaches, but these resources create value only when organizational structures enable their effective integration. (Meltzer et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018) similarly demonstrated that gender diversity was associated with inclusive innovation, which subsequently influenced firm performance. Consequently, GEDSI may affect sustainable performance through interconnected mechanisms involving human capital utilization, knowledge integration, innovation, employee participation, reputation, stakeholder relationships, and organizational legitimacy.

Despite increasing scholarly and managerial attention to diversity and inclusion, the available evidence remains conceptually and empirically fragmented. Most studies investigate individual dimensions of GEDSI separately rather than examining gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion as components of an interconnected organizational framework. Gender diversity, particularly women's representation on corporate boards, has received substantially greater attention than disability inclusion, while research concerning social inclusion frequently relies on broader concepts such as diversity management, workplace inclusion, equality, or inclusive organizations without explicitly adopting a GEDSI perspective. Considerable variation also exists in the conceptualization of business performance. Some studies emphasize traditional financial indicators such as profitability, return on assets, firm value, or market valuation, whereas others examine innovation, sustainability performance, employee outcomes, corporate reputation, ESG performance, governance, and broader social outcomes. Moreover, the diversity–performance relationship is not necessarily direct or uniform; its effects may depend on organizational practices, institutional environments, sustainability disclosure, innovation capabilities, and the extent to which representation is translated into meaningful participation. These fragmented streams make it difficult to establish a coherent understanding of how GEDSI contributes to sustainable business performance and whether it should be regarded primarily as a social responsibility commitment or as a strategic organizational capability capable of generating long-term economic, social, and organizational value. A systematic synthesis is therefore necessary to integrate these dispersed findings, clarify the mechanisms connecting GEDSI with organizational outcomes, and identify areas where empirical evidence remains insufficient.

Accordingly, this study conducts a systematic literature review of 29 relevant scholarly papers identified through Google Scholar to synthesize existing knowledge on the relationship between GEDSI-related practices and sustainable business performance. The review addresses three principal questions: (1) What dominant themes and theoretical perspectives characterize the

literature linking GEDSI-related practices with sustainable business performance? (2) Through what mechanisms do gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion influence organizational and business outcomes? and (3) What research gaps and future research opportunities emerge from the existing literature? By addressing these questions, the study makes several contributions. First, it integrates research streams that have generally evolved independently by positioning gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion within a common GEDSI framework. Second, it broadens the conceptualization of business performance beyond short-term financial outcomes to encompass innovation, human-capital, stakeholder, reputational, governance, social, and sustainability outcomes. Third, it synthesizes the organizational mechanisms through which GEDSI may generate sustainable value, thereby distinguishing numerical representation from meaningful inclusion and participation. Finally, the review identifies areas in which empirical evidence remains limited, particularly regarding disability inclusion and the simultaneous integration of multiple GEDSI dimensions into business sustainability research. In doing so, the study provides a more coherent conceptual foundation for future empirical research and offers insights into how organizations can integrate equality and inclusion into long-term sustainability strategies.

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research on Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) and sustainable business performance. The review covered studies on gender diversity, disability inclusion, workplace inclusion, diversity management, ESG, innovation, and organizational performance. The SLR process included research-question formulation, literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, data extraction, thematic coding, and synthesis. Three research questions guided the review: (RQ1) What major themes characterize research on GEDSI and sustainable business performance? (RQ2) Through what mechanisms do GEDSI dimensions influence organizational outcomes? and (RQ3) What research gaps and future research opportunities emerge from the literature?

The literature search was conducted through Google Scholar and covered scholarly publications available through September 2026, primarily peer-reviewed journal articles. Search terms combined GEDSI-related concepts, such as gender equality, gender diversity, disability inclusion, workplace inclusion, and diversity management, with performance-related terms including firm performance, ESG, sustainability, innovation, and organizational performance. Multiple targeted keyword combinations were used, and titles, abstracts, keywords, and full texts were screened based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included when they examined at least one GEDSI dimension in relation to organizational, business, sustainability, innovation, or performance outcomes. Following screening and eligibility assessment, 29 scholarly papers were included in the final review.

Table 1. Criteria Research

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication type	Scholarly journal articles and academically credible research papers	News articles, magazine articles, blogs, presentations, and non-academic web content
Main topic	Gender equality, gender diversity, disability inclusion, social inclusion,	Studies unrelated to equality, disability, diversity, or inclusion

	workplace inclusion, or diversity and inclusion	
Organizational context	Business, corporation, workplace, organization, enterprise, or related economic institution	Studies with no meaningful organizational or business relevance
Outcome	Financial, organizational, sustainability, ESG, innovation, employee, governance, reputational, or social performance	Studies without identifiable organizational or sustainability outcomes
Accessibility	Sufficient title, abstract, methodology, and findings available for evaluation	Publications with insufficient information for meaningful assessment
Relevance	Direct or theoretically meaningful relationship with GEDSI and sustainable business performance	Only incidental reference to gender, disability, or inclusion
Language	English-language scholarly literature	Publications that could not be reliably evaluated in English
Duplication	One version of each unique study	Duplicate versions of the same publication

The literature selection followed a PRISMA-informed process consisting of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, quality evaluation, and final inclusion, resulting in 29 studies for analysis. Each study was assessed for conceptual relevance, methodological clarity, and its contribution to understanding GEDSI and sustainable business performance. Relevant information was then extracted and classified according to GEDSI dimensions, research methods, theoretical perspectives, performance outcomes, and key findings. Because the studies were heterogeneous, the review employed thematic and narrative synthesis to identify recurring mechanisms linking gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion with human capital, employee engagement, innovation, governance, stakeholder relations, reputation, and sustainability performance. Structured search, screening, extraction, and coding procedures were applied to strengthen transparency and consistency, although reliance on Google Scholar as the sole database remains a methodological limitation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Dominant Themes in GEDSI and Sustainable Business Performance Research

Social and workplace inclusion emerged as an important theme because diversity and inclusion represent distinct organizational concepts. Diversity reflects demographic representation, whereas inclusion determines whether employees have meaningful access, voice, recognition, participation, and influence within organizational processes. An inclusive environment can reduce relational bias and conflict in diverse groups while improving employee satisfaction and reducing turnover. Similarly, diversity management alone may not be sufficient to improve workplace performance unless employees are provided with opportunities to participate and express their perspectives. These findings indicate that demographic diversity creates potential organizational resources, while meaningful inclusion determines whether those resources can be effectively utilized.

Innovation represents an important mechanism through which diversity and inclusion contribute to sustainable business performance. Evidence shows that gender diversity in management and female representation on corporate boards can strengthen inclusive innovation, which subsequently contributes to firm performance. Firms with stronger diversity and inclusion practices have also demonstrated better innovation outcomes, particularly where employees play a central role in organizational innovation. From a Resource-Based View perspective, diversity provides heterogeneous knowledge, experiences, and human capital, while inclusion enables organizations to transform these resources into productive capabilities through communication, collaboration, knowledge exchange, and participation in decision-making. This helps explain why inclusion may have a stronger organizational effect than demographic diversity alone.

More recent evidence also indicates that workplace inclusion can generate direct economic benefits when it is embedded within organizational policies and practices, including flexible working arrangements, childcare support, disability inclusion, and equality policies. Stronger workplace inclusion has been associated with higher profitability and market valuation, suggesting that inclusion should not be viewed merely as a normative extension of diversity initiatives. Instead, inclusive practices can improve organizational outcomes by reducing conflict, strengthening employee participation and commitment, facilitating knowledge sharing and innovation, and improving talent utilization. Consequently, inclusion can function as an organizational capability that transforms workforce diversity into sustainable and productive business outcomes.

RQ2: Mechanisms Linking GEDSI to Sustainable Business Performance

The second research question examined the mechanisms through which GEDSI-related practices influence business and organizational outcomes. The synthesis indicates that GEDSI can strengthen human-capital utilization by reducing barriers associated with gender, disability, and social exclusion. Inclusive human-resource practices provide broader access to organizational participation and enable diverse employees to contribute their knowledge and capabilities more effectively (Boubakary & Peretti, 2023). Gender diversity may also strengthen governance through broader decision-making perspectives and strategic involvement, although its effects depend on organizational conditions and governance structures (Darmawan, 2024; Mbarek & Ayadi, 2025). From a Resource-Based View perspective, diversity therefore increases the heterogeneity of organizational resources, while inclusion enables those resources to be transformed into productive capabilities.

Innovation and meaningful participation represent further mechanisms through which GEDSI can contribute to sustainable business performance. Inclusive organizational environments facilitate employee participation, knowledge exchange, collaboration, and the utilization of diverse perspectives. Research on inclusive human-resource management highlights the importance of organizational systems that remove participation barriers and create supportive conditions for diverse employees. Diversity and inclusion can consequently function as organizational resources that strengthen performance when employees are provided with meaningful opportunities to contribute. Gender diversity has also been associated with sustainability-oriented strategies and stronger ESG outcomes, suggesting that diverse leadership can influence organizational innovation and sustainability practices (Samsudin et al., 2025).

GEDSI can additionally contribute to corporate reputation, stakeholder legitimacy, and sustainability performance. Corporate social responsibility has been consistently associated with stronger corporate reputation and long-term sustainable development. Disability inclusion may similarly generate economic and reputational benefits, as employing persons with disabilities has

been associated with firm performance and corporate reputation. Gender-diverse governance is also associated with sustainability disclosure, ESG performance, and environmental outcomes (Alodat et al., 2023). These findings indicate that GEDSI may generate organizational value through stronger stakeholder orientation, transparency, responsible governance, reputation, and sustainability practices rather than through financial outcomes alone.

Finally, the evidence indicates that the relationship between GEDSI and business performance is multidimensional and context-dependent. Gender diversity may positively influence financial, sustainability, ESG, and environmental outcomes, but its effects vary according to governance arrangements, board composition, institutional conditions, and the extent to which women can participate meaningfully in decision-making (Darmawan, 2024; Muhammad & Migliori, 2022). Disability inclusion may initially require investment in accessibility and organizational adaptation before measurable performance benefits emerge (Jing, 2022), while broader inclusive management practices depend on supportive human-resource systems and organizational environments (Boubakary & Peretti, 2023). Overall, GEDSI should therefore not be understood as producing uniform or automatic performance improvements; its contribution depends on how effectively organizations translate diversity into meaningful participation, inclusive governance, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable organizational capabilities.

RQ3: Research Gaps Identified from the Literature

The third research question identifies several important gaps and opportunities for future research. The most prominent gap is the imbalance between gender and disability research, as gender diversity particularly women's representation on corporate boards has received substantially greater attention than disability inclusion (Faraudello & Cacciolo, 2025; Rudaitienė, 2024). Future research should therefore give greater attention to disability-inclusive recruitment, workplace accessibility, reasonable accommodation, career development, leadership participation, and inclusive human-resource management (Jing, 2022; Boubakary & Peretti, 2023). Another important gap concerns the limited integration of gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion into a unified GEDSI construct. Future studies should develop multidimensional measures encompassing representation, accessibility, equitable employment, participation, organizational voice, and anti-discrimination practices. Greater attention is also required to mediating mechanisms such as sustainability disclosure, ESG practices, stakeholder trust, reputation, and innovation, as existing evidence indicates that these mechanisms can translate diversity and inclusion into organizational performance (Alodat et al., 2023; Anindyastri & Risfandy, 2025; Mrad & Hassan, 2026). Longitudinal research, studies in emerging economies, and research involving SMEs are likewise needed because the effects of GEDSI may vary according to institutional conditions, organizational resources, and implementation costs.

Based on these gaps and the systematic synthesis, this study proposes an integrated model in which gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion collectively contribute to an inclusive organizational environment that strengthens human-capital utilization, employee participation, knowledge sharing, and governance quality. These organizational capabilities can subsequently support innovation, stakeholder trust, corporate reputation, sustainability practices, and broader sustainable business performance. Existing evidence supports the relevance of gender-inclusive governance for ESG and sustainability outcomes (Samsudin et al., 2025; Muhammad & Migliori, 2022), disability inclusion for organizational and reputational performance (Jing, 2022), and inclusive management for sustainable organizational performance (Boubakary & Peretti, 2023). Sustainable business performance is therefore conceptualized as multidimensional, encompassing

economic, social, environmental, governance, and organizational-resilience outcomes, while leadership commitment, organizational culture, accessibility, institutional conditions, industry characteristics, and regulatory context may strengthen or weaken these relationships.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review of 29 scholarly studies concludes that Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) is increasingly relevant to sustainable business performance, although its effects are multidimensional, indirect, and highly context-dependent. The literature remains dominated by gender-related research, particularly women's representation on corporate boards, while disability inclusion and broader social inclusion receive substantially less empirical attention. Overall, the evidence indicates that representation alone is insufficient to generate organizational value; meaningful inclusion is required to ensure that diverse individuals have access, voice, participation, recognition, and opportunities to contribute. GEDSI can influence sustainable business performance through human-capital utilization, governance and decision-making, employee engagement, innovation and knowledge integration, corporate reputation, stakeholder legitimacy, and sustainability practices. These mechanisms help explain why positive effects are often more consistent for non-financial outcomes such as CSR, ESG performance, environmental responsibility, reputation, stakeholder trust, and organizational resilience than for short-term financial indicators. The findings are consistent with the Resource-Based View, Stakeholder Theory, and organizational inclusion perspectives, which collectively explain how diverse resources can generate value when supported by inclusive organizational capabilities and stakeholder-oriented governance. Future research should place greater emphasis on disability inclusion, integrated GEDSI measurement, mediating mechanisms, longitudinal analysis, SMEs, and emerging-market contexts. Ultimately, GEDSI should be understood not merely as a compliance requirement or demographic objective, but as a strategic sustainability capability that can strengthen long-term economic, social, environmental, governance, and organizational performance when embedded in meaningful inclusion and supportive organizational systems.

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