

Barriers to Inclusion: Identifying Factors Affecting the Sense of Belonging among Firefighters in Argao, Cebu

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INTRODUCTION

Workplace inclusion has become a central concern in organizational research because employees do not thrive on diversity alone; they also need to feel respected, heard, and able to participate meaningfully in organizational life. Recent reviews describe inclusion as a workplace experience shaped by fairness, belongingness, participation, and the ability to contribute without fear of marginalization (Nguyen et al., 2024). Qualitative evidence also shows that inclusion is influenced by organizational, employer, interpersonal, and societal conditions, with attitudinal barriers at the organizational level among the most commonly reported obstacles (Rezai et al., 2023). In addition, newer multilevel research suggests that an inclusive psychological climate, leader inclusion, and workgroup inclusion are associated with stronger trust in the organization and deeper organizational identification (Chung et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest that inclusion is not merely a symbolic organizational value but a condition that can shape employee well-being, connection, and effectiveness.

These concerns are especially relevant in occupations where teamwork, risk, and coordinated action are essential. Firefighting is one such profession. Fire service work is highly structured, physically demanding, and dependent on mutual trust among personnel. In this environment, belonging is not peripheral to performance; it can shape communication, confidence, willingness to speak up, and day-to-day cooperation. Recent evidence from U.S. fire departments shows that safety climate, management commitment, and supervisor support are consistently linked to job satisfaction and other downstream organizational outcomes (Geczik et al., 2024). At the same time, research on women first responders indicates that even as participation has increased, many continue to encounter sexism, glass ceilings, inadequate equipment, and uneven access to advancement and support (Gregory et al., 2025). These findings suggest that formal inclusion efforts may coexist with subtle barriers embedded in culture, leadership, and routine workplace practices.

Existing scholarship has therefore begun to clarify several dimensions of inclusion that are likely relevant to firefighters, including respectful treatment, voice, inclusive leadership, organizational support, and workgroup climate. However, much of this recent literature has been generated in broader organizational settings or in non-Philippine first-responder contexts. In the Philippine setting, especially within local units of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), there remains limited empirical work examining how firefighters experience inclusion in their own station environments. This is important because inclusion is highly context-dependent. A workplace may appear cohesive and orderly on the surface while still containing subtle barriers related to rank, gender expectations, communication patterns, task assignments, and access to participation.

The local context of Argao, Cebu makes this issue particularly relevant. Firefighters work in a public service institution that depends on discipline, shared responsibility, and operational trust, yet these same features may also normalize hierarchy and informal expectations that affect belonging in unequal ways. In such a setting, understanding inclusion requires looking not only at whether overt discrimination is reported, but also at whether firefighters feel valued, listened to, and fairly treated in everyday interactions. The lack of local studies on belonging and inclusion among firefighters in a municipal BFP station therefore represents an important gap in the literature. Without such context-specific evidence, policies and interventions may remain too generic to address the actual interpersonal and structural conditions shaping inclusion in the station workplace.

In response to this gap, the present study examines the barriers to inclusion and the factors affecting the sense of belonging among firefighters in Argao, Cebu. Specifically, it focuses on how gender, hierarchy, organizational culture, and workplace dynamics shape firefighters' experiences of inclusion in the BFP. It also identifies practical strategies and policy directions that may strengthen a more supportive and inclusive workplace environment. Guided by these aims, the study addressed the following research questions: (1) What are the perceived barriers to inclusion among firefighters in Argao, Cebu? (2) How do factors such as gender, hierarchy, organizational culture, and workplace dynamics affect the sense of belonging among firefighters? and (3) What strategies and policies can be implemented to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment within the fire service?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive design that combined quantitative survey responses with qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended responses and interview data. The quantitative component was used to describe firefighters' perceptions of inclusion, belonging, leadership, workplace respect, and inclusion-related policies and programs. The qualitative component drew on a phenomenological orientation in order to capture how firefighters experienced inclusion and exclusion in the context of their daily work (Creswell, 2013). This design was appropriate because the research questions required both measurable patterns and contextual accounts of how inclusion was experienced in the station environment.

The participants were firefighters stationed in Argao, Cebu. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation across gender, rank, and length of service. To be eligible, participants had to be current BFP personnel with at least some direct experience of station life and workplace routines. A total of 14 firefighters participated in the study. Of these, 10 were male and 4 were female. Most respondents were non-officers, and the sample included personnel with varying years of service, from newly hired firefighters to those with more than 10 years of experience. The sample size was considered sufficient for this localized inquiry because the study aimed to develop a focused understanding of station-level experiences rather than broad statistical generalization. The qualitative component was also guided by the principle of data saturation, or the point at which no substantially new insights emerge from additional responses (Guest et al., 2006).

Data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire and qualitative prompts. The survey covered four broad areas: perceived barriers to inclusion; factors affecting the sense of belonging; policies and programs on inclusion; and strategies for improving inclusion and belonging. Items addressed experiences or observations of discrimination, perceptions of organizational culture, leadership support, fairness of task assignments, workplace respect, comfort in raising concerns, and the adequacy of diversity-related policies and training. Open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to describe challenges to inclusion, moments of inclusion or exclusion, and recommendations for improving workplace belonging. Semi-structured interviews were also used to deepen the qualitative data and clarify themes reflected in the written responses.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, to summarize the distribution of responses across key variables. This approach was appropriate because the sample was small and the study was primarily exploratory and descriptive in intent. Qualitative data from the open-ended survey items and interview responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process allowed patterns related to belonging, leadership, communication, task assignment, and policy implementation to emerge systematically from the participants' own accounts.

Ethical standards were observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and were asked to participate voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by reporting results in aggregate form and by using short, non-identifying excerpts when presenting qualitative themes. Participants were also informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study without penalty. These procedures were intended to protect respondents and support honest disclosure about a potentially sensitive workplace topic.

RESULTS

A total of 14 firefighters from the Bureau of Fire Protection in Argao, Cebu participated in the study. Ten respondents (71%) were male and 4 (29%) were female. In terms of age, 6 respondents (43%) were below 30 years old, 6 (43%) were between 30 and 39 years old, and 2 (14%) were between 40 and 49 years old. Regarding years in service, 7 respondents (50%) had served for more than 10 years, 4 (29%) had served for 1 to 5 years, and 3 (21%) had served for less than 1 year. Most participants were non-officers (79%), while officers comprised 21% of the sample.

For perceived barriers to inclusion, most respondents indicated that direct experiences or observations of discrimination were infrequent. When asked whether they had experienced or observed discrimination based on gender within the BFP, the largest proportion answered never or rarely. A similar pattern was observed for the item asking whether colleagues had faced gender bias or discrimination in the workplace. Reports of unequal treatment in promotions or task assignments due to gender, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background were likewise limited, with half of the respondents indicating that such experiences had never occurred. However, responses were more mixed on whether gender bias affected workplace decision-making, with several respondents choosing the neutral response and a smaller group indicating that such bias occurred occasionally.

The results also showed generally positive perceptions of belonging. Most respondents described the BFP's organizational culture as somewhat inclusive or very inclusive. Many agreed that their contributions and opinions were valued regardless of gender, and most agreed or strongly agreed that leadership actively promotes gender diversity and inclusion. A similar majority reported that they felt they belonged and were treated equally within their team regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. The physical environment was generally rated as accommodating, and respect for different genders within the organization was largely described as highly respectful or somewhat respectful. Most respondents also reported being at least somewhat comfortable discussing diversity-related concerns with colleagues or supervisors, although discussions or training on diversity and inclusion were said to occur only occasionally or, for some, at least once a year.

The qualitative findings added depth to these survey responses. Thematic analysis of responses about barriers to inclusion generated five themes: absence of perceived challenges, interpersonal and communication barriers, structural and organizational barriers, gender and physical capability concerns, and organizational and management challenges. Some respondents stated that they did not perceive major inclusion problems in the station. Others identified misunderstandings, differences in communication style, recruitment bias, lack of diversity training, cultural insensitivity, and management-related issues as challenges. A smaller but important set of responses pointed to gender and physical capability concerns, particularly the idea that assumptions about strength may affect perceptions of equality in operational work.

When respondents described situations in which they felt included or excluded, four themes emerged: absence of perceived inclusion or exclusion experiences, the role of leadership and team dynamics, task assignments as a factor in inclusion and exclusion, and workplace equality and rank influence. Many participants emphasized teamwork and stated that they had not experienced clear exclusion. Others reported that they felt included when their contributions were recognized, when leaders listened, and when workmates were supportive. In contrast, exclusion was associated with having one's opinions dismissed or being assigned tasks that did not align with one's perceived skills and abilities. Rank was also described as influencing respect in the workplace, although it was not consistently presented as a direct source of exclusion.

Perceptions of policies and programs on inclusion were generally favorable. Most respondents believed that there were sufficient policies and programs to promote gender inclusivity and that anti-discrimination and anti-harassment measures were implemented either somewhat effectively or completely effectively. Training programs received the strongest positive ratings, with most respondents indicating that training was designed to accommodate the diverse needs of all genders. In the final open-ended item on recommendations, five themes were identified: perceived sufficiency of current inclusion efforts, training and skill development initiatives, team-building and workplace relationships, leadership and policy recommendations, and personal

and mental well-being. While some respondents believed that no major changes were necessary, others called for more communication training, diversity training, mentorship, team-building activities, inclusive leadership practices, and support for mental and spiritual well-being.

Analysis

The findings indicate that inclusion within the BFP in Argao is generally perceived as positive, but not uniform in its depth or consistency. The low frequency of reported direct discrimination suggests that overt forms of exclusion may not be a dominant feature of the station. At the same time, the presence of neutral responses across several survey items and the emergence of structural and interpersonal concerns in the qualitative data suggest that inclusion is not simply the absence of explicit discrimination. Rather, it appears to be shaped by the quality of everyday interactions, the fairness of workplace practices, and the extent to which organizational support is consistently felt by personnel.

A notable analytic pattern in the data is that the sense of belonging was tied more strongly to relational and organizational processes than to formal policy alone. Respondents tended to feel included when leaders acknowledged their contributions, when workmates were supportive, and when the station climate reinforced teamwork and mutual respect. Conversely, exclusion was experienced in more subtle ways, such as when opinions were dismissed, when communication breakdowns occurred, or when individuals were given tasks that they did not feel suited to perform. This pattern suggests that belonging in the fire service is enacted through daily recognition, interaction, and practical participation rather than through policy language by itself.

Task assignment emerged as a particularly meaningful element in how inclusion was experienced. In a profession where competency, readiness, and responsibility are central, work assignments appear to carry both functional and symbolic weight. Respondents who felt that tasks matched their abilities tended to interpret those assignments as signs of trust and inclusion. In contrast, assignments seen as mismatched or as influenced by assumptions about gender or capability were associated with exclusion. This indicates that perceptions of fairness are closely linked to how responsibilities are distributed, especially in a setting where physical and operational demands remain highly visible.

Hierarchy also shaped the social environment, even if rank was not widely described as an overt mechanism of exclusion. Participants acknowledged that rank influenced the level of respect people received, which indicates that station culture remains strongly structured by formal authority. In itself, this is expected in a uniformed public service institution. However, the data suggest that hierarchy may influence whose voice is heard, whose opinions carry more weight, and whose contributions are more readily recognized. Thus, belonging is partly negotiated within a chain of command rather than outside it.

Another important analytic issue is the distinction between the existence of inclusion-related policies and the visibility of their implementation. Most respondents recognized the presence of anti-discrimination measures, inclusion-related programs, and gender-accommodating training. Yet the relative infrequency of diversity discussions and the continued recommendations for more communication and mentorship indicate that formal provisions may not always be reinforced in ways that meaningfully shape daily experience. This suggests a gap between policy presence and policy practice. Overall, the data portray a workplace that is broadly respectful and functional, yet still influenced by subtle dynamics that can affect belonging through communication, leadership, task allocation, and the regularity of organizational support.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study suggest that firefighters in Argao, Cebu generally perceive their station as inclusive, yet their accounts also reveal subtle barriers that complicate this positive picture. This pattern is consistent with recent workplace inclusion literature showing that inclusion is best understood not merely as representation, but as the experience of fairness, participation, and meaningful membership in the organization (Nguyen et al., 2024). The qualitative review by Rezai et al. (2023) similarly underscores that barriers to inclusion often arise through attitudes, workplace relationships, and organizational practices rather than only through direct acts of exclusion. In the present study, overt discrimination was not commonly reported, but

concerns involving communication, recruitment bias, task distribution, and inconsistent diversity reinforcement remained visible in the data.

The strong role of leadership and workgroup dynamics in shaping belonging also aligns with recent empirical evidence. Chung et al. (2024) found that inclusive psychological climate, leader inclusion, and workgroup inclusion contribute to trust and organizational identification. In the current study, firefighters described inclusion in similar terms: they felt they belonged when their contributions were acknowledged, when leaders listened, and when colleagues were supportive. This suggests that inclusion in a fire station is experienced relationally. Even when formal policies are present, employees may still judge inclusion through everyday interactions that communicate whether they are genuinely respected and valued within the team.

The findings related to gender and physical capability concerns are also notable. Although respondents did not frequently report direct gender discrimination in Argao Fire Station, some still associated operational roles with assumptions about strength and suitability. This resonates with Gregory et al. (2025), who reported that women first responders continue to encounter workplace cultures and structures shaped by masculine norms, including problems related to equipment, advancement, and everyday support. The present study suggests that even in a workplace widely perceived as respectful, traditional assumptions about gender and capability may still influence how equality is understood in practice.

The positive ratings given to leadership support, workplace respect, and gender-accommodating training also echo the broader literature on fire-service climate. Geczik et al. (2024) reported that management commitment and supervisor support are linked to favorable organizational outcomes in fire departments. In the present study, respondents' relatively favorable views of their leaders and their sense of team belonging suggest that supportive station climate may serve as a protective factor for inclusion. However, the fact that diversity and inclusion discussions were often described as occasional rather than routine indicates that supportive climate should not be assumed to be self-sustaining. Inclusion requires continued reinforcement through communication, mentoring, and leadership practice.

The study has several practical implications. First, inclusion efforts in the BFP may be strengthened by moving beyond policy presence toward more regular implementation through communication training, structured dialogue, and mentorship opportunities. Second, leadership development should emphasize listening, recognition, and fairness in task assignment because these were central to firefighters' experiences of belonging. Third, inclusion initiatives may benefit from a more holistic orientation that includes not only gender equity and anti-discrimination measures, but also team-building and support for mental and emotional well-being. Overall, the study contributes local evidence showing that inclusion in a municipal fire station is shaped by both organizational systems and daily human interaction. Strengthening both dimensions may help create a more equitable, respectful, and cohesive workplace for firefighters in Argao, Cebu.

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