

# **Living up to the ideal worker norm: A critical case study about women with invisible disabilities working from home**

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# Working from home – an opportunity for inclusion?



# Why this study?

- One third of people with disabilities have experienced discrimination connected to work (SCB, 2024)
- Women in general face barriers to equal opportunities at work (Bam & Ronnie, 2020).
- There is a need for more empirical research focusing on disabilities and work accommodation that employ an intersectional perspective on inclusion and work from home (Palm & Vänje, 2022).



# Aim

The aim is to critically explore, from an organisational perspective, the intersections between where work takes place, invisible disabilities, gender and the prevailing norms around work within a public organisation.

- 1) How do female white collar workers with invisible disabilities experience opportunities and hindrances for inclusion when working from home?
- 2) How do managers and human resource officers support and understand the workplace needs of female white collar workers with invisible disabilities?



# Context and participants

- One Swedish municipality
- Ten participants: HR, managers and employees with invisible disabilities
- Women 34-60 years old



# Methods

- Photo-elicitation interviews
- Semi-structured interviews
- Written diary
- Document analysis

(Thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2006)



# Theoretical framework

- Ideal worker norm (Acker, 2006)
- Inclusion (eg., Shore et al., 2011)
- Disclosure (eg., Kulkarni, 2021)



# Three emerged themes

Coping on an  
individual level

Navigating  
norms

Competence



# “Is it supposed to be this way?”

“One struggles so much for all those things that others take for granted”.



# ”Uncomfortable but saving workspace”

”They might say we have to be in the office, so it’s a fine line as to what one can demand”.



# Conclusion

Social expectations to be the abled ideal worker were reinforced, compelling the women in the study to use strategies to feel valued and included. One such strategy was to work from home and manage daily work tasks on their own terms - and in some cases also hide their disability. There was a lack of understanding in the organisation about ableism and gendered norms. This made inclusion normatively based, leaving individuals to solve their needs.



# Implications

- Educate about the intersection of gender, disability and workplace.
- Design remote and hybrid work as standard modes of work when possible
- Acknowledge variation in energy, health and capacity as normal rather than exceptional.
- Create an inclusive work climate with understanding and respect throughout the organisation.
- Communicate boundary settings. From a gendered perspective, this is important as women often experience expectations of both uninterrupted work and uninterrupted care when working from home.
- Follow-up and make sure to actually "walk the talk".



# So, is working from home a possibility for inclusion?

... Well, it depends.

It can be, yet inclusion is complex, requires several strategies and organisations need to challenge the ideal worker norm.



# Thank you!

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