



# Navigating Gender Inequalities in Working Conditions: Accountable Politicians' Perspectives on Their Work Environment Responsibility in Swedish Municipal Organizations

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Jonas Welander,<sup>1</sup> Caroline Lornudd,<sup>2</sup> Ulrica Schwarz,<sup>3</sup> and  
Sara Göransson<sup>4</sup>

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## Abstract


Swedish municipal organizations exhibit persistent gender inequalities in working conditions, particularly between female-dominated caring occupations and male-dominated technical occupations. Drawing on devaluation theory and New Public Management (NPM) frameworks, this study investigates how politicians, accountable for the work environment of their employees, understand gender inequalities in the working conditions within municipal organizations. The study further explores what, according to the interviewees, may contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities. Semi-structured interviews with 18 politicians from caring and technical committees revealed widespread awareness of heavier workloads, limited resources, and lower status in caring professions. However, these issues were primarily attributed to organizational culture and structural constraints seen as beyond politicians' control. While technical sectors generate revenue and enjoy more flexible budgets, caring sectors face stricter financial limits. Emphasis on cost efficiency and hierarchical governance, characteristic of NPM, is cited as a major barrier to substantive reforms, reinforcing systemic undervaluation of women's work. A need for more proactive political leadership and accountability mechanisms is underscored by the findings to mitigate gender-based disparities in public administration. By illuminating how political decision-making intersects with societal norms and management practices, this study provides new insights into the persistent undervaluation of caring labor in public-sector contexts.


## Keywords:


gender inequalities;  
municipal politicians;  
work environment  
responsibility;  
devaluation theory;  
new public management;

## Practical Relevance

- Gender inequalities in working conditions within municipal organizations are often overshadowed by cost-cutting priorities driven by New Public Management (NPM), resulting in insufficient political attention and action to address these disparities.
- Politicians acknowledge the differences in working conditions between female-dominated care and male-dominated technical sectors, particularly regarding workloads and resources, which exacerbate gender inequalities.
- Evidence of politicians' "passivity" underscores a need for stronger political leadership and clearer lines of accountability to actively counter entrenched gender norms.
- The results underscore the importance of using interdisciplinary frameworks, beyond surface-level analyses, to inform strategies for mitigating gender inequities within municipal governance.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author: [Jonas Welander](#) , PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in psychology at Mälardalen University. His primary research interests lie in work and organizational psychology, with a particular focus on working conditions and governance in public organizations.

<sup>2</sup>Caroline Lornudd , PhD, is affiliated at Mälardalen University. Her main research interests relate to management and governance of occupational health and safety.

<sup>3</sup>Ulrica Schwarz , PhD, is a professor of psychology at Mälardalen University. Her main research interests are in work and organizational psychology, with a particular focus on how to design, govern, implement and evaluate changes in organizations.

<sup>4</sup>Sara Göransson, PhD, is affiliated at Mälardalen University. Her main research interests relate to work and organizational psychology.

## Introduction

The gender inequalities between men and women in Swedish municipal organizations have been well documented. Such inequalities are tied to the type of profession as well as to the organizational structure (SOU 2015; Swedenmark, Bolin and Nyhlén 2022) and to the continuance of New public management-practices (Lapsely and Miller 2024). Men, compared with women, are overrepresented in professions with better working conditions and are higher up in the hierarchical structure (Swedish Work Environment Authority 2017). The hierarchical segregation further enhances gender inequalities, with men dominating higher-ranking positions – generally characterized by better working conditions and health (Forsberg Kankkunen 2014; Siegrist and Marmot 2004). In 2021, Swedish municipalities had just under 34,000 managers (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions 2022). The proportion of women in management positions decreases higher up the hierarchy. The share of women is 74 percent among first-line managers, decreasing to 64 percent among mid-level managers, and 52 percent among top-level managers (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions 2022). Even though the number of female managers is slightly higher than that of male managers in Swedish municipalities, the working conditions for leadership roles can vary between administrations within the same municipal organization. For instance, when comparing the conditions for municipal managers in home care and in technical administration, home care managers tend to have more subordinates, whereas technical administration managers are typically offered better access to administrative support and material resources (Björk and Härenstam 2016; Swedish Work Environment Authority 2014). This situation may be explained by the cultural tendency to devalue women's performance, and the conventional tasks predominantly performed by women, such as caregiving (and associated professions), which have lower social prestige and offer lower salary than tasks and professions traditionally associated with men, such as technical tasks (England 1992; Kilbourne et al. 1994; Salminen-Karlsson and Fogelberg Eriksson 2023).

In Sweden, employers are mandated to take responsibility for the physical, psychological and social conditions that are important for ensuring a healthy work environment and preventing work-related illnesses (Ericson 2019; Swedish Work Environment Authority 2015). In politically governed organizations, such as municipalities, the primary obligation for ensuring a healthy work environment falls upon the accountable politicians as they act as representatives of the municipality in their role as employers. The politicians' administrative responsibility for work environment management is regulated by law in the Work Environment Act (SFS 1977:1160) and in Systematic Work Environment Management (AFS 2001:1). The municipal council holds the ultimate employer responsibility for the work environment and for ensuring a written line-of track for the allocation of work environment duties to the municipal executive board and to the committees with operational responsibilities. Thus, politicians in municipal organizations can formally delegate specific workplace environment tasks to civil servants and managers, but not the responsibility for ensuring compliance with work environment legislation, which always remains with the politicians as employer representatives (Work Environment Act SFS 1977:1160).

The Work Environment Act (SFS 1977:1160) is explicated in numerous provisions emphasizing the employer's responsibility to plan, lead, and supervise operations in a way that ensures a healthy work environment. It also stipulates that the employer must take all necessary measures to prevent employees from being exposed to health risks or accidents (Work Environment Act SFS 1977:1160). For example, the employers' obligations include reviewing the working environment and risks for ill health and accidents in the organization regularly (Systematic Work Environment Management AFS 2001:1).

The politicians' decisions regarding budgets, organizational structures, reforms and control systems can have profound implications for gender inequalities regarding working conditions and well-being of employees. Drawing on devaluation theory, with New Public Management (NPM) as a contextual backdrop, this study examines how municipal politicians in Sweden, who are responsible for essential services such as education, social welfare, urban planning, and infrastructure management (e.g., roads, water), understand gender inequalities in the working conditions of female- and male-dominated professional groups and how their governance may contribute to or mitigate these inequalities. To our knowledge, no study has yet examined

municipal politicians' perspectives on their responsibility for the work environment and their perceptions of what contributes to the maintenance of gender inequality in municipal organizations

## Theoretical Framework: Devaluation Theory

Within the field of public administration, numerous studies have documented gender-based pay disparities; however, they often adhere to conventional explanations and thereby overlook the underlying factors that perpetuate this enduring inequality (Pandey et al. 2023). Although existing research often acknowledges the wage gap, many analyses remain bound to traditional economic explanations, overlooking the deeper social roots of undervaluation (Sandberg et al. 2018). Devaluation theory, also referred to as comparable worth discrimination, is a widely used sociological explanation for inequalities stemming from the gender composition of various occupations. According to this theory, which extends beyond surface-level observations of inequity, devalued groups exhibit two key characteristics: they are seen as having low status, and they feel that their group does not receive respect or recognition from their organizational community (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Worth discrimination occurs when male-dominated occupations are assigned higher value than female-dominated ones. The prevalent social devaluation of women's work leads to reduced wages in female-dominated occupations, affecting both men and women in such occupations (England 1992; Kilbourne et al. 1994). For example, a recent study shows how the reproduction of pay inequalities in Swedish municipalities at the organizational level is made possible by the overall societal discourses on the value of women's and men's work (Salminen-Karlsson and Fogelberg Eriksson 2023). Another form of gender-based devaluation occurs when traditionally feminine responsibilities, such as caregiving, are undervalued owing to their historical association with women (England 1992; Rubery and Grimshaw 2015). Thus, discrimination occurs at the occupational level rather than at the individual level. According to the devaluation theory, because women are culturally undervalued, tasks and jobs traditionally associated with them receive lower value than those associated with men; this also becomes institutionalized within the wage structure (England and Folbre 2005; Koskinen Sandberg 2018; Le Grand 1997; Muzio and Tomlinson 2012).

From an occupational health perspective, the devaluation of women's labor may increase the risk of poor working conditions and subsequently of poor health owing to an imbalance between what is needed to get the work done (in terms of effort, training and risks) and the rewards that follow (such as payment, prestige and career opportunities) (Leineweber et al. 2020). In line with this, European data show that women have higher sickness absence rates than men (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2023a). Of all European countries, the difference in sickness absence rates between women and men is the highest in Sweden, with the former at 3.3 percent and the latter at 2 percent sickness absence rate. In a comparison of Swedish municipal branches, the number of initiated sick leave days per 1,000 employees is nearly double in the female-dominated care sector, with an average of 18.2 sick leave days, compared to the male-dominated technical sector, which averages 9.8 sick leave days per 1,000 employees (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2023b). Both citizens and employees at different organizational levels hold stereotypical gender expectations (Björk, Forsberg and Bejerot 2011; Hedegaard and Ahl 2013; Porter and Muhonen 2021). Employees use gender as a framework to understand their roles within an organization, and they engage in – and are subject to – gender-related behaviors (Acker 1990). Because men have historically held control over social and political institutions, they have also influenced the conventions within those institutions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). In support of this, Stivers (2000) argues that public organizations tend to promote masculine characteristics to enhance their perceived legitimacy, in line with the prevailing gender norm. Devaluation theory does not imply that employers intentionally devalue women; instead, it points to a societal culture of undervaluing women's work, wherein members of society assign less value to work performed by women compared with that performed by men. Municipal politicians, as members of society, can therefore also be assumed to be influenced by cultural gender-based devaluation.

## New Public Management and Gender Inequalities

The devaluation of women's labor is not just a historical issue, but an ongoing process influenced by modern governments, employers, and management practices (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). NPM emerged in the mid-1980s, adopted into public management based on models from the male-dominated private business sector (Montin 2007). NPM describes the adoption of new methods, concepts, and principles in public sector organizations in Western industrialized nations, with a focus on accountability, efficiency, deregulation, decentralization, performance measurement, outsourcing, and competition (Hood 1995; McLaughlin et al. 2002). Several studies have raised concerns about the negative impact of NPM-style reforms on gender equality in public organizations. This concern includes recognition that the techno-economic rationality in NPM represents a masculine norm. Emphasizing competition and strong leadership among politicians and officials exemplifies this masculinization (Lapsely and Miller 2024), as does using values to define success based on a techno-economic rationale rather than a care-oriented one, even in, for example, social services (Welander, Astvik and Isaksson 2018). In line with this, it has been suggested that NPM's rise has diminished women's influence in local politics, reinforced men's dominance in management roles (Hedlund 2013), and promoted a masculine culture within public institutions (Thomas and Davies 2002; Hedegaard and Ahl 2013). Attempts to establish a distinct hierarchical leadership structure and decentralize responsibility for results and expenses have been linked to increased work demands without sufficient resources to manage them, particularly in female-dominated sectors in public organizations (Audit Commission 2002; Astvik, Melin and Allvin 2014; Chandler et al. 2015; Conley, Kerfoot and Thornley 2011; Härenstam 2005; Shanks, Lundström and Wiklund 2015).

In the 2000s, a shift in what Connell (2005) terms hegemonic masculinity occurred, with the introduction of a softer version of NPM. Ideas such as democratization, process-oriented management, and communicative leadership became more central, and direct alignment with private business was no longer seen as modern (Hedlund 2006). However, this softer approach did not address economic inequality as a form of structural injustice, and issues of redistributing economic resources along gender and class lines remained largely ignored (Hedlund 2013). In 2016, the Swedish government formed a delegation to explore how trust-based management could be enhanced in the public sector. The goal of this investigation was to determine how public welfare management could be improved by better utilizing the skills and experience of employees to deliver higher-quality services for citizens and businesses (SOU 2018). The delegation identified several issues, such as poor collaboration within and between public organizations, increasing administrative burdens, and the monitoring of targets that do not benefit the organization. According to the delegation, these problems stemmed from governance and management practices (SOU 2018). However, although employees are seen as central to addressing these challenges, Swedish research has shown that implementing a trust-based approach at the operational level is challenging when public organizations are still driven by NPM logic, which prioritizes control and efficiency (Håkansson 2022). Without significant organizational or institutional reforms, trust-based governance is more likely a continuation of NPM practices rather than a true shift towards a different model (Håkansson 2022). Recent research (Lapsely and Miller 2024) indicates that NPM remains prevalent in government bodies and agencies, where calculation and quantification continue to dominate, which arguably exacerbates the challenges of gender inequalities in public organizations.

## Scope and Aim

Gender inequalities and the working conditions of employees in public organizations often receive limited political attention. Their significance in political discourse is typically fleeting and takes a back seat to cost-cutting measures aligned with NPM logic. Political choices that shape all professions within the municipal sector are, either directly or indirectly, influenced by decisions related to resource allocation, which in turn are suggested to be influenced by NPM as well as long-standing gender-based norms and expectations. The present study aims to investigate how municipal politicians, accountable for the work environment of their employees, understand gender inequalities in working conditions within municipal organizations.

Additionally, it explores their perceptions of what may contribute to the reproduction of these gender inequalities.

## Method

### Setting

Sweden has 290 lower-level local government entities, or municipalities, which are financed in multiple ways – mainly by taxes, fees paid by the citizens for specific services and government subsidies. The municipalities have a considerable degree of autonomy and independent powers of taxation. They are responsible for providing a significant proportion of public services to their citizens, for example, via schools, social services, elderly care, urban planning, rescue service and water and sewer service. Tax revenues fund schools, social services and healthcare to a greater extent than, for example, heating, sewage, waste and broadband, which are more often financed through revenue. Municipal services are organized and provided by different administrations via employees who undertake the services. Municipalities employ approximately 1.2 million people, and women represent just over 75 percent of the total number of employees (Statistics Sweden 2024). Each administration is governed by a committee council comprising politically appointed board members. The committees break down the overall goals established by the municipal council into their own areas of services and are responsible for the performance of their administration based on the budget decided in the municipality council and on potential fees and subsidies. The overall responsibility for work environment–related tasks rests almost exclusively with the committees before the tasks are delegated to managers at various levels.

### Participants

The study participants are elected politicians within Swedish municipalities who were chairs or vice chairs on a committee council in their municipality and were responsible for either technical occupations (e.g., urban planning and rescue services) or caring occupations (e.g., social services and elderly care). Chairs or vice chairs were targeted because they were expected to have more experience of governing than other committee members. The recruitment strategy aimed for a sample with a broad representation of politicians in terms of geography, municipality size, gender and political parties, including representatives from both the majority parties and the opposition. To achieve this, a random stratified sample comprising 29 municipalities was initially taken from the classification of Swedish municipalities (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions 2023), which includes three groups: (1) large cities and municipalities near large cities, (2) medium-sized towns and municipalities near medium-sized towns and (3) small towns/urban areas and rural municipalities. Out of 48 politicians contacted, 18 agreed to participate. The study participants (10 women and 8 men) were recruited from the random stratified sample (9 participants from caring committees and 9 from technical committees). Table 1 describes the study participants, and Table 2 displays their political party affiliation.

*Table 1. Characteristics of the participants*

Type of committee	Sex		Political role		Total no. of respondents
	Women	Men	Chair	Vice chair	
Caring	7	2	5	4	9
Technical	3	6	6	3	9
Summary	<i>n</i> = 10	<i>n</i> = 8	<i>n</i> = 11	<i>n</i> = 7	<i>n</i> = 18

*Table 2. Political party affiliation of the participants (N = 18)*

Political party	N
The Social Democrats	7
The Moderates	5
The Centre Party	2
The Green Party	1
The Christian democrats	1
The Left Party	1
Local Independent parties	1

### Data collection

Data collection took place from autumn 2022 to spring 2023, using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to minimize researcher bias. The guide was flexible, allowing for follow-up questions, and encouraged factual, personal responses. It was validated by an advisory committee, including representatives from unions, employers, and the Swedish Work Environment Authority. Two pilot interviews were conducted (not included in the analysis), leading to minor adjustments. Participants were recruited via municipal websites, contacted by email, and provided with study details. Interviews were scheduled online, with two conducted offline, and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, and were digitally recorded. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2022-01778-01), and all participants gave informed consent, including for digital recording.

### Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed by a template approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022; King 2004, 2012) using the NVivo data analysis program. Key themes within the data were identified and organized into a hierarchical framework, and broad themes were subdivided into more specific ones. Template analysis allows the use of some *a priori* themes; these themes, identified in advance, are potentially useful for organizing the data given the theoretical and/or practical concerns of a particular project (King 2004). However, these should always be seen as tentative and open to modification. Further, the analysis focused on identifying shared traits across the diverse subjects, while also accounting for key differences among the interviewees, to ensure the findings remained closely aligned with the interview data (see Braun and Clarke 2022). The dimensions of “understanding” and “contributing to” gender inequalities were used as *a priori* themes in the current study to capture the essence of devaluation theory, which posits that the structural undervaluation of “feminine” work perpetuates and reinforces gender inequalities, maintaining the gendered division of labor and unequal power relations evident in public organizations. Each of the four researchers initially analyzed a data subset comprising three individual interview transcripts. The texts were closely examined from the standpoint of understanding and contributing to gender inequalities, with new sub-themes created as needed. The coding was then collaboratively reviewed and adjusted to ensure that the thematic structure was grounded in the data itself. Through an iterative process of refinement and review, a set of sub-themes related to *understanding gender inequalities* and *contributing to gender inequalities* was established and consistently applied across all interviews. This cooperative way of establishing validity is frequently recommended in qualitative research. Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) describe this in terms of dialogical intersubjectivity, referring to the reciprocal negotiation and interpretation of meaning during all study phases.

## Results

The sub-themes summarizing politicians' understandings of gender inequalities and of the way in which they may (inevitably) contribute to reproducing them are presented in Table 3.

*Table 3. Description of key themes and sub-themes*

Key themes	Sub-themes	Description
Understanding gender inequalities	Sub-theme 1: <i>Differences in working conditions</i>	Acknowledgement of differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts
	Sub-theme 2: <i>Consequences of differences in working conditions</i>	Acknowledgement of the consequences of differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts
Contributing to gender inequalities	Sub-theme 3: <i>Organizational culture</i>	Values, beliefs, norms, and meanings that are deeply ingrained and consistently reinforce existing gender dynamics within the organization
	Sub-theme 4: <i>Organizational structuring</i>	The organizational structure, consisting of formal and informal systems, that upholds traditional gender norms in decision-making, coordination of activities, and distribution of resources

### Understanding gender inequalities

This key theme represents the politicians' understanding and views of gender inequalities in working conditions as well as their perceived consequences of differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts. A notable finding was that almost all politicians, regardless of committee affiliation (caring or technical), were aware of the differences in various working conditions as well as their consequences in gender-labelled contexts.

#### *Differences in working conditions*

The politicians identified several aspects affecting the working conditions in female-dominated caring occupations more negatively than those in male-dominated technical occupations (besides recognizing the general lower salary in caring occupations). First, all politicians agreed that differences exist between gender-labelled contexts regarding material prerequisites. Employees in male-dominated technical occupations were exclusively provided with appropriate workwear, whereas employees in female-dominated caring occupations were expected to use their personal clothing although they assisted with patients' daily hygiene routines. In the few municipalities that provided work shoes for employees in female-dominated caring occupations, this privilege was preceded by a long political struggle. Another difference in material prerequisites that indirectly affected the overall working conditions relates to how additional investments in utility vehicles were made beyond an already determined budget in the technical sector. Regardless of their committee affiliation, the politicians shared an understanding that such additional investments were regularly made. Rather than perceiving strategic decisions as a rigid framework binding the organization, the technical committees, through their practices regarding daily occurrences, consider the budget and other goals as *preliminary* decisions open to modification according to the organizational sectors' needs and ongoing activities. A vice chair from a technical committee reflected on this type of decision-making departure from budget constraints:

So, I'd say the budget is the framework that maintains the structures. "There's no clothing account in the social services", they say, or "within the framework". The firefighters, their every single car, vehicle, is like several million SEK. No one even considers cutbacks there because everyone thinks emergency services are super important and so on. Also, very male-dominated. And fantastic preventive healthcare and clothing and all that.

In a specific example, however, the purchase of vehicles for operations was centralized to ensure that acquisitions were preceded by a needs analysis rather than based on tradition. Previously, it had been customary for technical administrations to mostly use larger vehicles, whereas home care services predominantly used smaller cars.

Further, they noted the heavy workload in female-dominated caring occupations, with job demands (primarily quantitative demands) exceeding job resources and ultimately limiting employees' ability to deliver quality work. The politicians also acknowledged that the substantial staff absences (owing to turnover and sick leave) in female-dominated caring occupations create staff shortage, leading to challenging working conditions for those at work, including reports of reduced competence in terms of routines, methods and knowledge about clients, patients, students and networks. The politicians recognized that these factors increased the already high workload. Moreover, some politicians mentioned that this situation in caring occupations is worsened by the work schedule, which involves split shifts, alternating weekend duties and extended shifts that allowed little time for recovery. They also emphasized the challenges involved in planning when working with humans. A vice chair from a caring committee explained the challenges of working in home care compared with working in technical occupations:

I would say it's more difficult to work in sectors where, if I may say so, you have to help other people. It's more mentally demanding. You can't plan in the same way, and many people suffer with not being able to plan. Then you end up in a sector where planning isn't possible, like in home care, for example. But, of course, in an urban planning office, it's much easier to plan. No one gets caught in the middle, and nobody presses the alarm button saying, "I need to go to the toilet." So, there's a difference.

The heavy workload affects not only the employees but also the first-line managers. The politicians were aware that the first-line managers in female-dominated caring occupations had substantial workloads and large control spans (i.e. the number of subordinates under a manager's direct control); they often oversee 40–50 employees. A chair from a technical committee reflected on the differences in control spans between first-line managers in female-dominated caring occupations and those in male-dominated technical occupations:

And somehow, it comes from the top. They've discovered, or at least started discussing, that managers in female-dominated jobs have more than twice as many subordinates to conduct appraisal interviews with and keep track of, compared to managers in male-dominated technical areas. There are huge differences, and everything moves so incredibly slowly. It's so slow in this line of work.

### *Consequences of differences in working conditions*

The interview data revealed that the politicians were aware of the negative consequences of the perceived differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts in female-dominated caring occupations. Their collective view, regardless of committee affiliation, was that stress was prevalent and had a detrimental impact on the work environment, job performance and job satisfaction in female-dominated caring occupations. Stress was believed to be more pronounced among those working in the female-dominated caring sector, especially in home care, than among those in the male-dominated technical sector, ultimately leading to increased sick leaves and turnover. These employees often operated independently, travelled considerable distances between clients' residences and operated within tight time constraints. Their scheduling structure was, according to the politicians in care committees, commonly seen as a negative element in the work environment, fostering stress and a sense of inadequacy owing to limited timeframes (measured in minutes). Sick leave among elderly care staff was a significant concern for many of the politicians in care committees. A vice chair from a care committee explained the relation between sick leave in elderly care and the work environment:



Well, we're talking [about] a lot of sick leave. And in elderly care, there's a high ... there's a very high level of sick leave. And we have to come to grips with that, but of course we have to make sure there's a good working environment because that has a lot to do with it. If things are strained at work or the climate is bad, or whatever it is, then if you feel the slightest thing, you stay at home. So it's all connected – sick leave and us being able to make sure we have a good working environment.

An indirect consequence of differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts was that sick leave and turnover also posed difficulties in finding suitable temporary replacements in the female-dominated caring sector. Some politicians in care committees stated that the uncertainty surrounding employee sick leave and turnover contributed to stress, with available temporary employees often lacking qualifications and struggling with the Swedish language. Overall, recruiting and retaining trained staff was more challenging in the female-dominated caring sector than in the male-dominated technical sector. Some politicians reflected that the challenging working conditions in the female-dominated caring sector may contribute to poor perceptions of caring as a suitable occupational choice for young people. A chair from a technical committee expressed the difference between gender-labelled contexts when attracting and recruiting prospective employees:

You can also see it in job applications. In our case, we might get 115 applications for a janitor position, while in home care services, you're lucky to get any applicants at all when it's advertised. Professions also differ in terms of, maybe not status, but attractiveness in the labor market.

Another consequence of the detrimental working conditions that result in high turnover in certain female-dominated caring occupations was the increased recruitment of temporary registered nurses. According to some politicians, the filling of vacancies with temporary nurses was necessary to ensure that the desired nurse-to-patient staffing ratios were met. However, the politicians were aware that the growth in agency working among nurses was attributable to the enhanced pay and flexibility as well as an opportunity to break away from the frustrations of unmanageable workloads and insufficient resources when working as a permanent employee.

### **Contributing to gender inequalities**

This key theme reflects the politicians' perceptions, regardless of committee affiliation, on the aspects contributing to the persistence of gender inequalities in working conditions. It encompasses their views of how the organizational structure, including both formal and informal systems, shapes decision-making, coordinates activities, and distributes resources that uphold traditional gender norms.

#### *Organizational culture*

This sub-category represents the politicians' perceptions of how differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts are deeply embedded within an organizational culture that reinforces beliefs and practices. While the politicians labelled themselves as employers of the staff, only few acknowledged, without being prompted, that their political responsibilities encompassed the actual responsibility for the work environment of those employed in the municipality, including the responsibility to prevent work-related illness. The interviews reveal that although the politicians acknowledge the existence of differences in working conditions between gender-labelled contexts, the prevailing sentiment among them was that these differences are perpetuated (and reproduced) by organizational culture, tradition and norms. Moreover, a few politicians perceived themselves as outsiders to the organizational culture, whereas many saw themselves as passive recipients rather than active participants in shaping it. This underscores a fundamental disconnect between the awareness of gender inequalities owing to organizational culture and meaningful engagement in addressing them, which ultimately reproduces the gender inequalities. A chair from a technical committee elaborated on the difficulties in breaking these patterns:

By tradition, it's become so – unthinkingly, over a long period of time, is all I can say. I encounter very few people who reflect and ask, "Why's it like this? How does this relate to any other broader context?" This seems to be an extremely rare attitude.

This respondent emphasizes the lack of ongoing collective reflection among politicians regarding how hierarchical and bureaucratic arrangements within municipal organizations, developed over time, have, and have had, implications for gender inequality. What is clear to this respondent is not so clear to other politicians based on their perspectives. As stated above, a few politicians saw themselves as organizational outsiders regarding the organizational culture. In other words, they saw themselves as neither part of the organizational culture nor co-creators of it; instead, they considered that the creation and upholding of organizational culture is workplace-driven, where employees operate within 'fields' where certain rules and practices are institutionalized into various micro-cultures that the politicians are not a part of. However, the main view among the majority of the politicians, after some consideration, was that the overall organizational culture has largely incorporated values, norms, and meanings that mostly reflect men's rather than women's experiences and interests because municipal organizations have traditionally been dominated by men. A vice chair from a technical committee reflected on how the overall organizational culture perpetuates traditional gender norms and expectations, dictating acceptable behaviors and roles for men and women that reproduce differences between gender-labelled contexts in working conditions:

So, there's also a gender issue here, I think, where female-dominated professions are often expected to suffer in silence and just be grateful to have a job - and it's often a low-wage job too. Meanwhile, technical and male-dominated professions, often linked to companies, have much more proactive policies, with fitness allowances, occupational healthcare, and similar benefits. There are differences here, absolutely. There's every reason for us politicians to reflect on why things are this way.

The quote above reflects a cultural expectation that female-dominated professions should endure poor conditions without complaint. This cultural norm not only perpetuates gender-based inequities but also reinforces the idea that women's work is less valuable or deserving of improvement. The expectation for these workers to "suffer in silence" suggests a broader organizational culture that devalues traditionally female roles and discourages advocacy for better working conditions.

### *Organizational structuring*

Several respondents highlighted the potentially important differences in how the administrations of caring and technical occupations are financed and how this impacts the administrations' degree of autonomy as well as the view – their own and other's – of their relative value. First, in contrast to the administration of caring occupations, the administration of technical occupations is largely financed through fees from the citizens and to a larger extent bears its own costs; it sometimes even generates revenue for the municipality by producing a surplus and can therefore be an important source of income to the municipality. The connection between understaffing (due to, for example, sick leaves or downsizing) and financials is apparent in these administrations, which can be used to argue for resources. A chair from a technical committee expressed the following:

It happens that I go in and explain to the municipal council that if they do this, these will be the consequences. After all, the building permit and environment departments are the only ones in the entire municipality that generate revenue, while everyone else just spends. I'm the one bringing in money. If their actions force me to reduce staff, it will result in even less revenue.

This financial structure may also allow for short-term employments to manage temporary high workloads in the administration, such as when more building permit applications than forecasted are received. In this aspect, the administration of a technical occupation has a logic similar to that of a limited company. Further, the financial structure seemed to affect the language used to describe, and to understand, the function and value of the different administrations. Politics is much about being able to come across with a message, which also has an impact in budget negotiations. A chair from a caring committee stated the following:

Every year since I've been in politics, the public works department has informed us that they're in the red for snow removal because it's underfunded, and the northern part of Sweden gets a lot of snow. Then I said, "From now on, I'll respond by arguing that elderly care is underfunded." And if they think snow removal costs a lot, I'll say, "Well, we also have a lot of elderly people." And if you do that persistently enough, sooner or later you'll no longer be the defending party.

This respondent mentions a transformation from being the “defending part” to something else. The need for defending oneself, or one’s administration, may be a natural response to a perceived accusation – for example, for being a costly administration. The administration of technical occupations has return on investment, whereas the administration of caring occupations primarily has expenses. A chair from a caring committee reflects on the different wording on budgets regarding the female-dominated caring sector and the male-dominated technical sector: “We mostly talk about the operating budget. They mostly talk about the investment budget”.

Second, the size of the administration of female-dominated caring occupations – providing a large proportion of the welfare services – is always significantly larger than that of the administration of the male-dominated technical sector. The caring sector thus takes up a significant share of the municipality budget, which can be up to several hundreds of millions Swedish krona (one Euro equals 12.25 Swedish krona, as of January 29th, 2025). This makes even small relative increases in costs large in absolute numbers. A chair from a caring committee noted:

Everyone else in the municipality should see how much work the social administration does and what kind of work it is, so they can understand the budget. They need to be able to look at the budget map and see why we hold such a large portion of it. And, excuse me, if we’re a few million in the red, there’s a huge outcry - even though it’s only about one percent. Meanwhile, another department can have a 10 percent shortfall, and no one even mentions it.

Thus, although several respondents acknowledged the inequalities between working in the care and technical sectors, they agreed that the inequalities would be expensive to eliminate and would require a hard-to-sell increase in taxes. In line with this, providing all care employees with workwear – such as shoes and clothing, which is a routine in technical administration – will also have substantial costs. A chair from a technical sector stated:

Well, it costs a lot of money to do something about it. If we’re going to double the number of managers in female-dominated professions, of course there’s a price tag. And if everyone who works in home care is to have free work clothes, including shoes and everything, there’s a price tag for that too.

By focusing on the costs associated with enhancing conditions in female-dominated professions, the quote above suggests that these roles may be perceived as lower priority within the organizational structure. The financial hesitance to invest in managerial roles or benefits for these professions indicates a structural bias that may undervalue the importance and needs of female-dominated sectors compared to other parts of the organization.

## Discussion

This study reveals that municipal politicians, responsible for the work environment of their employees, acknowledge the gender inequalities in working conditions in their organizations and their implications for occupational health. Nevertheless, many politicians consider these inequalities to be reproduced by organizational culture, tradition, norms and organizational structures beyond their own control, which increase the risk of unintentionally reproducing the inequalities.

The interviewed politicians across the studied committees identified heavy workloads, staff absences, challenging work schedules and inadequate material prerequisites as key factors negatively impacting the working conditions in female-dominated caring occupations. Moreover, the perceived consequences of these differences included increased stress levels, higher rates of sick leave and turnover, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining trained staff in these occupations. Although politicians acknowledged these issues, their responses showed a troubling lack of action to challenge the organizational norms that sustain gender inequalities, avoiding direct efforts to solve these problems. This passive approach to political leadership perpetuates the reproduction of gender inequalities within organizational structures. It indicates that unlike fields such as engineering, female-dominated professions such as nursing or teaching could be labelled as “semi-professional” and assigned lower “comparable worth” (England and

Folbre 2005; Muzio and Tomlinson 2012;), representing yet another form of undervaluing women's work.

Moreover, the results showed that the organizational culture within municipal organizations plays a crucial role in perpetuating gender inequalities. The deeply ingrained norms, values and beliefs favoring male-dominated occupations contributed to the reproduction of disparities in working conditions. Despite some awareness of these disparities among politicians, a pervasive acceptance of these cultural norms was noted, with only few actively challenging or questioning them. Organizations characterized by masculinity prioritize the rules, procedures, rituals and norms that align with traditionally masculine attributes, often marginalizing or undervaluing aspects associated with caregiving (Mastracci and Arreola 2016). Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995) suggest that men's historical dominance over social and political institutions has shaped these institutional norms and conventions. Consistent with Mackay's (2014) findings, outdated rules often linger, and new proposals face resistance from dominant groups wary of altering existing gendered power dynamics.

Our findings indicate that manifestations of masculinity permeate municipal financial structures. Technical sectors operate more autonomously and generate revenue, while care sectors depend on council-allocated budgets, an arrangement echoing traditional "breadwinner" roles. Such distinctions are underscored by labels like "investment budget" (technical) versus "operating budget" (care), which reinforce hierarchies favoring male-dominated work. As a result, female-dominated sectors often enter budget negotiations from a defensive stance, limiting their ability to secure resources. These findings also highlight how broader organizational and political frameworks, particularly under NPM, shape municipal politicians' perceptions of gender inequalities. Although laws (Work Environment Act, SFS 1977:1160; Systematic Work Environment Management, AFS 2001:1) confer ultimate workplace environment responsibility on politicians, many feel constrained by hierarchical governance and entrenched cultural norms. Some politicians saw themselves as passive observers, reluctant to challenge established structures that reproduce gender disparities. The interviewed politicians recognized systemic issues in female-dominated professions, such as heavier workloads, fewer resources, and undervaluation of women's work, yet also note that revenue-generating technical sectors receive more political and financial support (Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson 2023). Their awareness of these structural inequities is tempered by limited perceived capacity to advocate for change. Under NPM's emphasis on efficiency, performance metrics, and cost-cutting, caring occupations endure strict budgetary limits, while technical sectors can request additional funds. This dynamic perpetuates the devaluation of caring work (see England 1992). Politicians' reflections further reveal a tension between acknowledging gender inequalities and navigating NPM imperatives. Many expressed frustrations at the slow pace of progress in caring sectors, yet the institutional focus on cost efficiency makes structural reforms challenging. These observations align with critiques arguing that market-driven principles exacerbate gender inequities in public organizations (Conley et al. 2011; Thomas and Davies 2002; Hedegaard and Ahl 2013).

It should also be noted that previous research has identified shortcomings in collaboration, where Swedish politicians perceive that civil servants may withhold information, thereby limiting their ability to influence and control resource allocation (Falkenström and Höglund 2019; Werntoft and Edberg 2015). The lack of accurate information about the work environment could arguably hinder politicians' decision-making processes, as well as their understanding and approach to work environment-related issues. In this context, the responsibility for perpetuating gender inequalities cannot rest solely with individual politicians. While they have agency in their decision-making, the aforementioned shortcomings in collaboration with civil servants, along with the institutional norms, financial structures, and regulatory frameworks in which they operate, serve as significant barriers to change.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the field of international public administration by offering nuanced insights into the interplay between gender inequalities, governance structures, and work environment management. While the existing literature (Panday et al. 2023) stresses the need for deeper theoretical perspectives centering gender and moving beyond surface-level indicators of inequality, our findings exemplify how these deeper structural and cultural

processes play out within local-government contexts. In particular, the results highlight how an organizational culture influenced by masculine norms, when combined with NPM frameworks, can inadvertently contribute to the devaluation of predominantly female-dominated caring work. This aligns with broader concerns of "undervaluation" noted in the public administration literature (Sandberg et al. 2018; McGinn and Patterson 2005; Fernando et al. 2019).

Although situated within the specific context of Sweden, the findings resonate with broader challenges in public administration globally, especially in systems influenced by NPM and entrenched cultural norms. It underscores how NPM principles, which prioritize efficiency and cost-cutting, exacerbate these disparities by marginalizing caregiving roles and privileging revenue-generating, male-dominated sectors. This intersection of NPM and gender dynamics advances our understanding of how structural biases are embedded in public sector management and resource allocation, reinforcing societal devaluations of women's work. Unexpectedly, while politicians in the study demonstrated awareness of gendered inequalities, they viewed themselves as passive actors constrained by organizational structures, norms, and financial frameworks. This challenges traditional assumptions of political agency and highlights the need for more proactive political leadership to disrupt entrenched inequities.

The findings highlight resource constraints, organizational culture, and institutional norms as key factors explaining the gap between awareness and action, while also illuminating why gender inequalities persist globally (World Economic Forum 2024). Scholars of feminist theory and social construction have long stressed the undervaluation of caregiving roles (Collins 2020; England and Folbre 2005). Our study illustrates this dynamic within municipal governance, where politicians recognize inequities but feel constrained by budgets, norms, and organizational culture. These insights underscore previous calls for public administration (Pandey et al. 2023) to adopt interdisciplinary theories rooted in the social sciences, thereby reframing routine decision-making processes that perpetuate or exacerbate gender inequalities. Hierarchical governance structures and budgetary rigidity further impede progress toward equity by favoring male-dominated sectors and perpetuating structural imbalances. Their embedded nature, combined with public administrators' perceived limited agency, helps explain ongoing stagnation and persistently poor working conditions in female-dominated care sectors. The results emphasize the need to re-evaluate governance models that balance efficiency with equity. Through municipal politicians' perspectives, the results reveal the dual roles of decision-makers and employers, exemplifying the multiple responsibilities public administrators undertake as political leaders. Although these roles vary across contexts, politicians universally face the challenge of managing obligations to constituents, political parties, and organizations (Vabo 2000).

The findings underscore a need for accountability mechanisms that compel politicians to address systemic inequalities, despite the inherent challenges this entails. Future research could explore the efficacy of gender-responsive budgeting, the role of political leadership in challenging organizational norms, and the transferability of these findings to other governance systems, such as federal or regional governments. By doing so, public administration can move closer to achieving its ethical mandate of fairness and equality in governance and workplace practices.

### **Methodological considerations**

The conclusions drawn from this research must be assessed within the framework of methodological considerations. One crucial aspect in qualitative inquiry is the quality of data collection. During interviews, respondents may present themselves in a socially desirable manner, leading to social desirability bias. However, this likelihood is minimized within an elite sample like the one in this study, as they are generally unafraid to express their opinions. Nevertheless, they are adept at handling media interactions and could potentially influence the interview process and selectively address questions (Harvey 2011). This understanding informed the interviewers throughout data collection, and assurances of confidentiality, along with the sincere engagement of the politicians, mitigated this concern. The interviews yielded comprehensive narratives shaped by the politicians' perspectives. Moreover, the recruitment strategy captured the subject's complexity, ensuring diverse viewpoints and experiences (Hsieh

and Shannon 2005). Thus, participants represented a wide spectrum of gender, roles, and political stances. However, the relationship between committees and administrations varies significantly across municipalities, potentially affecting how connected politicians are to operations. This study's design did not account for these variations, which constitutes a limitation. To enhance credibility, all authors independently analyzed data, followed by collaborative discussions. Excerpts from participants' statements are included to validate the findings.

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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