



## Indigenous people with disabilities in the Arctic

Birgit Paukštāt, Trond Bliksvær, Merete Kvamme Fabritius, Sophie Elixhauser, Annapia Ferrara, Ryan Weber & Laura William

To cite this article: Birgit Paukštāt, Trond Bliksvær, Merete Kvamme Fabritius, Sophie Elixhauser, Annapia Ferrara, Ryan Weber & Laura William (29 Aug 2024): Indigenous people with disabilities in the Arctic, The Polar Journal, DOI: [10.1080/2154896X.2024.2391216](https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2024.2391216)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2024.2391216>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 29 Aug 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 38








View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Indigenous people with disabilities in the Arctic

Birgit Pauksztat <sup>a</sup>, Trond Bliksvær <sup>a</sup>, Merete Kvamme Fabritius <sup>a</sup>,  
Sophie Elixhauser <sup>b</sup>, Annapia Ferrara <sup>c</sup>, Ryan Weber <sup>d</sup> and Laura William <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Nordland Research Institute, Bodø, Norway; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria; <sup>c</sup>Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment, University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy; <sup>d</sup>Department of Medical Education, Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Scranton, PA, USA; <sup>e</sup>Centre for Research in Employment and Work (CREW), Greenwich Business School, University of Greenwich, London, UK

Over the past years, there has been an increasing focus on diversity and inclusion across the globe. In the Arctic, the focus has mostly been on gender;<sup>1</sup> less attention has been paid to other groups, such as people with disabilities. Existing studies about disability in the Arctic have started to contribute to a better understanding of the prevalence, causes and treatment of selected impairments and chronic diseases. In addition, over the last decade, a few research projects in different parts of the Arctic have started to address the lived experiences of Indigenous disabled people within their social, cultural, political, geographical and historical contexts. For example, Gjertsen, Melbøe and colleagues started to map the experiences and challenges faced by Sámi disabled people in northern Norway.<sup>2</sup> In Greenland, the reports prepared by the national advocacy organisation Tilioq provide detailed information and first-hand accounts of the experiences of disabled people in Greenland.<sup>3</sup>

To bring together researchers and experts interested in the lived experiences and inclusion of Indigenous disabled people in the Arctic, a one-day hybrid workshop ‘Indigenous People with Disabilities in the Arctic: Workshop for Initiating Research Collaboration’ was held on 31 May 2024 at the Valnesfjord Health Sports Centre in Valnesfjord, Norway. The workshop was organised by the Nordland Research Institute in collaboration with the Centre for Saami and Indigenous Studies at Nord University in Bodø, Norway, and supported by the Research Council of Norway. The aim of the workshop was, first, to map existing knowledge about the challenges experienced by Indigenous disabled people in the Arctic regions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Sápmi, and second, to identify knowledge gaps and develop a shared research agenda. Discussions among the 18 participants from 10 countries centred on two overarching questions: What are the challenges experienced by Indigenous disabled people in the Arctic? And what are the most important research needs?

---

**CONTACT** Birgit Pauksztat  [bpa@nforsk.no](mailto:bpa@nforsk.no)  Nordland Research Institute, Bodø 8049, Norway

<sup>1</sup>e.g., Oddsdóttir et al., ‘Gender Equality’

<sup>2</sup>e.g., Gjertsen, ‘Mental Health’; Melbøe, ‘Cultural Sensitivity and Barriers’

<sup>3</sup>Tilioq, ‘Tiliup Saqqummersitai Sulliallu’

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

During the workshop, participants identified multiple interrelated challenges. First, people with disabilities across the globe have faced considerable battles to achieve recognition for the discrimination and disadvantage they face in society.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous disabled people in the Arctic face similar problems. In the Arctic, the literature suggests that the focus is often on impairment as a medical problem rather than on the lived experiences of disabled people and the disadvantages and discrimination they experience through stigmatisation and social oppression. This perspective reflects the medical model of disability, where disability is seen as a tragic burden and a deficiency with no space for valuing social differences. As in other parts of the world, ableism seems to dominate in the Arctic, with a widespread lack of awareness and low prioritisation of the needs of disabled people.

Second, there are significant challenges related to access to education, the job market, healthcare and other services, as well as to participation in leisure activities and tourism. These challenges are partly connected to the dispersed population and the Arctic environment and climate. While some basic services may be delivered virtually (e.g. telemedicine), access to specialised treatment and services often requires travelling or even permanently moving to the South.

Third, the lived experiences of Indigenous disabled people may deviate from western medical epistemologies which are at the core of most nation states' healthcare systems. Epistemic injustice has a long history in the Arctic, from the colonial period to current political, economic and social systems. Divergent conceptions of disability and quality of life, as well as different ways of communicating and expressing emotions can contribute to communication difficulties between Indigenous disabled people and health practitioners, often non-indigenous. Further, discussions at the workshop highlighted the significance of nature and outdoor activities for Indigenous disabled people in the Arctic and their role in enhancing personal well-being and a feeling of connectedness not only to other humans but also to non-human agents and environmental elements.

Building on Crenshaw,<sup>5</sup> workshop participants noted the intersectional discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Indigenous disabled people in the Arctic. Their cultural and ethnic identities interact with their impairment, creating a synergy that exposes them to a distinct synergistic disadvantage (e.g. the choice between access to specialist medical care available in the South and maintaining a sense of cultural and social identity by living in their home community). Taken together, these issues reveal that the intersecting legacies of colonialism and ableism have imposed narratives of stigma as well as structural barriers on Indigenous disabled people.

Challenges remain in dismantling internalised and externalised forms of bias that pervade local, regional, and global discourses; addressing the social determinants of health that limit access to equitable care; and rupturing the hegemonic forces of normalisation that have shaped categories of pathology while limiting notions of personhood and agency. Achieving these goals requires that we not just centre disabled voices in discussions and decision-making processes, but amplify them through research and advocacy. To this end, workshop participants identified four promising directions for future research:

---

<sup>4</sup>Barnes and Mercer, *'Disability, Work and Welfare'*

<sup>5</sup>Crenshaw, *'Mapping the Margins'*

- Focusing on the lived experiences, perspectives and priorities of Indigenous disabled people;
- Investigating the obstacles to accessibility and trust in formal healthcare and welfare services, as well as their interplay with informal systems of care and support;
- Developing new approaches and pedagogies in medicine and other disciplines that foster inclusiveness, e.g. inspired by the principle of ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’;<sup>6</sup>
- Exploring the availability, impact, risks and opportunities offered by new technologies capable of promoting the agency and inclusion of disabled people in the Arctic.

Collectively, these initiatives hold the potential to transform disability from a biomedical problem to a vibrant source of possibility for valuing difference. Only then can we rupture the widespread narratives of exclusion and foster ever-wider horizons of inclusion.








### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

The workshop was supported by the Research Council of Norway [grant no. 352065].

### ORCID

Birgit Pauksztat  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2216-0836>  
 Trond Bliksvær  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3148-6085>  
 Merete Kvamme Fabritius  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-0517-1867>  
 Sophie Elixhauser  <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-6748-4622>  
 Annapia Ferrara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0008-0760>  
 Ryan Weber  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9115-1565>  
 Laura William  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1985-7640>

### Bibliography

- Barnes, C., and G. Mercer. “Disability, Work and Welfare: Challenging the Social Exclusion of Disabled People.” *Work, Employment and Society* 19, no. 3 (2005): 527–44. doi:10.1177/0950017005055669.
- Bartlett, C., M. Marshall, and A. Marshall. “Two-Eyed Seeing and Other Lessons Learned within a Co-Learning Journey of Bringing Together Indigenous and Mainstream Knowledges and Ways of Knowing.” *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2012): 331–40. doi:10.1007/s13412-012-0086-8.
- Crenshaw, K. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. doi:10.2307/1229039.
- Gjertsen, H. “Mental Health Among Sami People with Intellectual Disabilities.” *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 78, no. 1 (2019): 1565860. doi:10.1080/22423982.2019.1565860.

---

<sup>6</sup>Bartlett, Marshall and Marshall, ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’

- Melbøe, L. “Cultural Sensitivity and Barriers: Sami People with Disabilities Facing the Welfare System.” *Community Development Journal* 53, no. 3 (2018): 537–55. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsy025.
- Oddsóttir, E.E., H.Ó. Ágústsson, E.-M. Svensson, G.H. Gjørsv, S.S. Kendall, M. Smieszek, T. Prior, et al. “Gender Equality for a Thriving, Sustainable Arctic.” *Sustainability* 13, no. 19 (2021): 10825. doi:10.3390/su131910825.
- Tilioq. *Tiliup Saqqummersitai Suliallu*. <https://www.tilioq.gl/kl/ilisimasaqarfik/tiliup-saqqummersitai>. (accessed July 6, 2024).