



Nordic Council  
of Ministers

# Preventing Sexual Harassment at Work

Nordic Research Initiative 2021-2023

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# Foreword

## The Nordic research initiative on sexual harassment at work

It is impressive to see history unfold in front of you, and it's safe to say that the #metoo movement reshaped attitudes towards longstanding negative behaviors in the labor market. Through the courageous narratives of survivors, we have become aware of the negative effects of sexual harassment in the workplace and unraveled the negative culture of sexual harassment. This has led to a cultural shift, and companies and institutions now have prepared rules for how people should behave. This did not exist before.

For decades, the Nordic countries have cooperated on gender equality issues, which has brought us forward and has been rewarding and instructive for all of us.

The initiative of the Nordic Council of Ministers on sexual harassment in the labor market, which was launched in 2019 during Iceland's presidency, is an excellent example of Nordic cooperation. The project is a joint initiative of the sectors for gender equality, culture, working life, and the Nordic Committee for Children and Young People in which all the Nordic countries participated. It has been an eye-opener and an milestone to draw attention to the devastating impact of sexual harassment in the labor market.

Our task in the years to come is to make sure that the legacy of the #metoo movement lasts and to keep on fighting because sexual harassment and violence are a threat to individual rights and gender equality in our societies.

The Nordic Research initiative is an important milestone in our journey to draw attention to the damage that sexual harassment has on the well-being of those who are exposed to it and the resulting damage to society as a whole.

Change begins with awareness, dialogue, and solidarity. Together and united the Nordic countries have the power to create a safer environment in the labor market where we all can flourish and contribute to a safer work environment to the benefit of us all.

**Katrín Jakobsdóttir**

Prime Minister and Minister of Gender Equality in Iceland



## Introduction

Sexual harassment at work is a challenge for the Nordic labour market and to the goal of creating an inclusive, gender equal and cohesive region. International and Nordic studies alike show that sexual harassment exists in all sectors of the labour market and that it has serious negative consequences. There is good research evidence of sexual harassment having psychological, physical and work-related harmful effects for those who experience it. Sexual harassment affects entire workplaces, organisations and sectors, including in the form of negative economic effects due to sickness absence, and as a contributing factor to continued sex segregation in the labour market. In working towards a sustainable Nordic region in which workplaces are free from abuse and harassment, preventing sexual harassment is therefore of the utmost importance.

### **Knowledge gaps regarding preventive measures**

Research overviews are clear that there are major knowledge gaps regarding sexual harassment and preventive work in Nordic workplaces. Existing research is unable to answer the question of how sexual harassment can best be prevented or of how preventive measures can be implemented effectively and beneficially.

If we are to develop successful preventive measures, we need new knowledge, both about sexual harassment as a phenomenon, and about

specific situations in the Nordic labour market. Building that knowledge takes close dialogue and collaboration, in which researchers, practitioners and decision-makers are all involved and contribute relevant and practical input.

Previous studies also indicate that more knowledge is needed on how different positions and circumstances interact in workplaces in order to identify incidences of sexual harassment, the consequences of experiencing sexual harassment, and good preventive methods. Intersectional perspectives, in other words exploring the interplay between social categories and dimensions such as sex, age, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, etc., are needed to add to knowledge about the organisation of work and the multifaceted world of work in the Nordic region. An understanding of how working life is made up of people with widely differing backgrounds and positions is crucial in helping to combat abuse and harassment in the labour market in the long term.

## **A Nordic collaborative initiative**

In the light of the state of knowledge and the requirements identified for producing relevant knowledge, the five Nordic gender equality ministers decided to allocate funding for new research on sexual harassment in working life in the Nordic Region 2021-2023. The research initiative involved initiating research, launching new collaborative interfaces, and opening up new questions and exploratory perspectives.

As early as the initial phase, when existing research was being surveyed and the calls for proposals were being written, many considerations arose. Those gave rise to new insights, not least on how a project can tackle a wide-ranging theme given, for a research context, relatively small funding and a limited timeframe. The initiative as a whole came to incorporate research projects, network meetings, dissemination initiatives and the conference "Prevent and Intervene – Ending Sexual Harassment at Work" held in Oslo in autumn 2023.

## **Development of knowledge and continued research**

The five projects that were granted funding have been surprising and impressive in many ways. In collaboration across sectors and disciplines and between labour market actors, they have added more knowledge and improved work to combat sexual harassment in the workplace in the

Nordic countries. Every project has produced concrete knowledge such as proposed measures, methods and approaches. They also demonstrate some of the factors that are needed to build knowledge about prevention in the Nordic countries and how these affect the type of research, knowledge and prevention carried out.

The projects have been and still are actively sharing their results in several national, Nordic and international contexts. We are also delighted that several of the projects have been able to continue their work that the Nordic research initiative started.

When the research funding initiative was designed, interdisciplinarity, collaborative research and a Nordic dimension were identified as key principles to produce new knowledge and new preventive methods. This publication initially describes these three principles with examples from the knowledge developed in the projects. We then take a closer look at each of the five funded projects and conclude with a summarising reflection on preventive work against sexual harassment in the Nordic region.

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**We need to figure out how to prevent, intervene and end sexual harassment at work. It is an ambitious goal, but there is really no alternative. It is high time to go from metoo to me neither.**



*Lubna Jaffery, Minister of Gender Equality and Culture in Norway, quote from the Nordic Conference: Prevent and Intervene – Ending Sexual Harassment at Work, in Oslo 2023*



**Sexual harassment is not a personal problem, but a structural, and we must act structural. We need an intersectional approach and must keep in mind that not all people have the same voice or language to speak up.**



*Sirið Stenberg, Minister for Social Affairs and Culture of the Faroe Islands, quote from the Nordic Conference: Prevent and Intervene – Ending Sexual Harassment at Work, in Oslo 2023*

## Facts about the research initiative

**The Nordic research funding** initiative on sexual harassment at work 2021–2023 sought to initiate relevant research, cross-sectoral collaboration and shared knowledge building.

**The research funding initiative** was carried out in collaboration between the Nordic sectors for gender equality, culture and working life and the Nordic Committee for Children and Young People.

**The objective of the initiative** was mainly to contribute towards new knowledge on sexual harassment at work in the Nordic countries with a focus on preventive measures and intervention methods. The findings were to contribute towards a good knowledge base for policy development and to cross-sectoral Nordic collaboration within the Nordic Council of Ministers.

**The research funding initiative** was administered by NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender, and commissioned by and run in close collaboration with the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Gender

Equality and LGBTI. NIKK is a co-operation body under the Council of Ministers based in the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research at the University of Gothenburg.

**The calls for research funding** were made in 2021. A total of DKK 3.7 million was announced in two calls with different criteria:

**The first call** was aimed at ongoing research projects where an additional grant from the research initiative would add a Nordic dimension and added value to the ongoing project with relevance for knowledge about sexual harassment at work.

**The second call** was aimed at researchers and practitioners who intended to initiate practice-based research activities in collaboration. This call focused mainly on preventive measures and methods for intervention through industry studies or comparative studies of different industries. A contribution to Nordic benefit and partnerships between several Nordic countries were criteria. An interdisciplinary focus and intersectional perspectives were recommended, as was reflection on definitions and concepts.





## Interdisciplinarity

Sexual harassment is a complex problem and knowledge from several research areas is needed to understand what the problem looks like and what can prevent and counteract sexual harassment and its consequences. Knowledge about the division of labour in the labour market, about different positions and power in working life and in the workplace, about people's varying backgrounds and how this affects their choice of occupation, and about development and change in organisations are just some examples of areas that contribute towards this understanding. These areas overlap and affect each other to a great extent and often come from different fields of research. An interdisciplinary approach is crucial if we are to understand what sexual harassment is and its impact on the individuals, workplaces and industries affected and on the labour market as a whole.

### **Provides synergy between practice and research**

Interdisciplinary research enables expertise in different areas and methods to help to solve common questions, which in turn can lead to more effective and well-founded work for change in practice. Interdisciplinarity paves the way for a more coherent picture of knowledge in the field, both of the problems of sexual harassment at work and of what the effective preventive measures might be. Interdisciplinary approaches can also create synergies between research areas and partners in different sectors.

For example, the projects in the research funding initiative show how bringing together organisational perspectives and pedagogical perspectives can build new knowledge about change work and how power perspectives and economic perspectives can create a new understanding of the specific characteristics of vulnerability.

## **Interacting aspects create vulnerability**

When there is a need to build knowledge to produce effective preventive strategies and methods, the research will be limited if it solely uses *gender* as the basis for experiencing sexual harassment and inequality. To gain a picture that is closer to the experience described by victims of sexual harassment, studies also need to be conducted based on additional and intersecting aspects, such as ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status and age. Different aspects have varying impacts in working life, not least because sectors and workplaces tend to have different ways of organising and structuring their work. The projects in this research funding initiative provide clear examples with age highlighted as a key factor in vulnerability in one project and ethnicity in another. Similarly, geographical location has an impact when looking at people in the Nordic countries, where rural and urban areas both share similarities and display major differences on everything from the composition of the population to educational provision and work opportunities, career paths and working conditions.

To create change, the research results also need to be disseminated and taken on board in the sectors and workplaces concerned. When researchers in different areas work together with different industries and parts of the labour market, opportunities open up to discuss and embed the design of the project with more collaborative partners. This also makes it easier to pass on the results to more actors.



## Collaborative research

As described in the section on interdisciplinarity, it is important that research is founded on the needs and experiences that exist in workplaces in different sectors and industries. Research conducted in close collaboration between researchers and practitioners contributes in interesting ways by embedding experiences from practice and developing a broader and more nuanced understanding of sexual harassment. This exchange of knowledge between partners in industry organisations, labour market partners and researchers has proved able to produce several synergies in building knowledge, both in and via research collaborations and directly linked to practice. The second call of the research initiative was therefore geared towards researchers and practitioners looking to initiate practice-based research activities in collaboration with industry actors. The funded projects focused on preventive initiatives and intervention methods through sectoral studies and comparisons.

### **Learning examples essential to knowledge dissemination**

Studies conducted in collaboration have a unique opportunity to accurately bring on board several perspectives at the very start of the project. This also enables learning examples which are shared by and between the working life partners. In the funded projects, for example, collaboration has led to a clearer picture being gained of how widespread harassment is. In some of the projects it also became clear that

exchanging learning examples is important for spreading knowledge between actors in similar sectors and in similar workplaces, because this opens up more perspectives when identifying problems and risks. This in turn provides an opportunity for researchers to see how the problem can be understood from more angles than might perhaps be common in their own field of research. Collaboration between research and practice also increases clarity regarding what is more general knowledge about sexual harassment at work and what is more local and site or industry-related knowledge that needs to be taken into account in preventive work. All in all, collaboration offers greater opportunities to develop more reliable strategies to prevent sexual harassment in different sectors and in different workplaces.

Collaboration with the labour market partners can also provide important benefits for research by facilitating communication with key actors, as several of the projects show. This in turn enables the generation of improved local knowledge about the organisations studied and their context. As a researcher, being able to access key actors in the organisations in focus is naturally important if the research questions are to be answered with any accuracy.

## **Experience should guide preventive measures**

At the same time, collaborative research perhaps makes extra high requirements in terms of research ethics, not least in terms of ensuring voluntary participation and the ability to protect the confidentiality of participants. It is also important that sufficient, comprehensible information about the purpose and opportunities of the research is provided, so that both parties are agreed on the premises and the positions of both parties in relation to the research carried out.

There is the possibility that in research conducted in close collaboration between researchers and practitioners, the experience of research participants will affect local change work. This is important, not least because the development of preventive strategies and methods needs to be guided by experiences of the people who have suffered harassment. At the same time, it is important to point out that participant-based research must not be seen as a way of placing the responsibility for change on those who share their experience of harassment. Instead, it is a way of using research to take experiences from practice seriously.



## Nordic dimension

Earlier studies show that there is a lack of research into sexual harassment with a preventive focus in the Nordic countries. Therefore, a Nordic dimension and collaboration between several Nordic countries were criteria for the projects granted funding by the research funding initiative. A Nordic dimension contributes to building knowledge about sexual harassment in several ways, both in relation to *which* knowledge can be built and *how* it can be built. The ability to easily share information, gather data and build networks, and geographical proximity and access to shared arenas, form fertile ground for developing research. Collaboration, dialogue and discussion between people and organisations acting in the Nordic countries, and sharing empirical material and data, help to nuance knowledge.

## Important to highlight regional differences

The world of work in the Nordic countries has many similarities in terms of overarching structures, regulations, practices and procedures, but there are also differences between and within the countries. The similarities and differences between the Nordic countries can help to increase knowledge about sexual harassment in the labour market in general, but also highlight the fact that the specific conditions of the location need to be explored in their context.

The way in which regional differences affect efforts to prevent sexual harassment may further explain the specific Nordic situation. A phenomenon shared by some Nordic regions is that part of the workforce lives in one Nordic country but work in another. The way work is organised in these regions may involve different challenges compared with other regions in terms of knowledge about legal frameworks and cultural and linguistic understanding of sexual harassment. Regional differences between urban and rural areas, sectors and industries also need to be incorporated in understanding how sexual harassment is expressed and can best be prevented. Sectors differ and the composition of people working in different industries and workplaces varies. As stated in the section on interdisciplinarity, the composition of the population also looks different in rural areas and in cities, for example, and the sites themselves offer different education and work opportunities.

The importance of not assuming similarities between the Nordic countries, for example, becomes clear in relation to how languages, words, concepts and definitions need to be negotiated and discussed. What is it actually that we need to prevent? Are we in agreement about what sexual harassment is? Does the legislation in the different countries agree? If not, what does that mean for building knowledge?

## **Words and concepts need negotiation**

Several of the projects in the initiative highlight the importance of being clear about concepts, clearly defined terms and understandings of sexual harassment and other related concepts, both for developing trans-Nordic knowledge and for comparative studies between Nordic countries. Simultaneous studies in several different Nordic countries are needed for comparison purposes. Several projects also point to a need for new and different concepts in order to encapsulate experience of sexual harassment in specific sectors and so enable more accurate prevention work. Some words, concepts and terms also risk encountering more resistance than others. Concepts and words may therefore need to be chosen carefully to frame the phenomenon and at the same time encourage more and larger groups to contribute towards prevention. All these needs exist in parallel, and a Nordic focus shows how definitions and concepts cannot be taken for granted and need to be clarified and problematised within the remit of specific projects, sectors and workplaces.

The question of definitions and concepts also relates to the way languages, translation and information are handled. The Nordic dimension shows that it is important to translate material and methods into the respective Nordic language to make it accessible in the different Nordic countries. This is especially important when boosting prevention, where participants in workplaces in different sectors need to be able to fully understand and take on board methods and material. The Nordic labour market also consists of many people whose native language differs from that spoken by the majority society. If information about sexual harassment is to reach its intended audience, it needs to be translated into languages that the employees in the workplace understand well, and it needs to be passed on in the channels where the target groups are.



## Preventing harassment with memory workshops and forum theater

It can be difficult to render visible, put into words or talk about sexist and sexual harassment in workplaces. Studies show that staff in the health and care sectors are highly vulnerable to sexist harassment and that their strong professional care ethic makes staff inclined to conceal or normalise workplace harassment. Therefore, in the project Power Plays – preventing sexual harassment through memory work & forum theater in workplaces of care, researchers in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, together with health and care industry partners, developed a new preventive tool that comprises a memory workshop, forum theatre and a tool compass. The Power Plays Memory Workshop is a workshop for staff only, involving collective analysis of personal memories and experiences of sexist harassment in a workplace context. In Forum Power Plays, staff and management engage in forum theatre in which situations are played out and participants jointly identify what is going on and factors that enable harassment, and together work out how harassment can be tackled.



The purpose of the Power Plays Memory Workshop and Forum Power Plays is to:

- Make it easier for individuals and groups to talk about sexist harassment.
- Develop perspectives and a vocabulary for recognising and talking about sexist harassment.
- Educate staff on sexist harassment in the workplace.
- Develop skills for dealing with first-hand and second-hand experiences.
- Engage the whole workplace and the organisation in preventive work.

The Power Plays Tool Compass supports the workplace in choosing between and combining existing tools to prevent, survey or follow-up sexist harassment.

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**When sexist harassment occurs in workplaces it is a sign that the workplace culture, hierarchies, organizational structures and work relations have an everyday sexist nature that enables sexist harassment.**



*Marta Padovan-Özdemir, Roskilde University*

## **Interview with Marta Padovan-Özdemir, Roskilde University, head and principal investigator for Power Plays.**

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### **What makes the Power Plays toolbox unique?**

The Power Plays Memory Workshop and Forum Power Plays enable workplaces to build knowledge and skills to recognise, problematise and prevent or tackle sexist harassment. Our survey shows that more wide-ranging toolboxes for preventing sexist and sexual harassment in the Nordic countries are lacking. In our study, we have only found 38 tools online in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, the majority of which are described as guidelines to tackle sexual harassment. In addition to these, there are a few described as survey tools and a smaller number as educational tools.

### **Is the Power Plays toolbox hard to use?**

Everyone can use the tools, but the manuals and instructions should be followed in detail to achieve maximum effect. The toolbox demands that workplace actors read and understand the manuals in order to lead the workshops in a way that let the participants trust the process. It is also required that the management reserves time for the workshops and follows up on the action plans proposed.

### **Why do you prefer to talk about sexist harassment rather than sexual harassment?**

As a concept, sexist harassment encompasses all the different forms of harassment that are an effect of a sexist culture: Everything from everyday sexism, subtle sexism, sex discrimination, unwanted sexual attention to sexual harassment, sexual coercion, rape, or attempted rape. Furthermore, the term means that sexist harassment is not about sex but about power. In other words, some people benefit from a sexist culture while others are sanctioned, restricted or repressed.

## **What are the most important ways of preventing sexist harassment in the workplace?**

First and foremost, everyone in the workplace needs to develop awareness of sexist harassment. This means the ability to recognise situations, behaviours, language and other aspects that are sexist. We can only prevent sexist harassment once we can recognise it and talk about it. The next step is to find out what is enabling sexist harassment – and then change that.

## **How can we solve the problem of colleagues who witness harassment but don't do anything?**

When colleagues witness sexist harassment, there can be various reasons why they fail to act. Firstly, they might not be able to identify the situation as a matter of sexist harassment. They might not know how to intervene. They might be worried about their career or about creating conflicts at work.

The Power Plays Memory Workshop and the Power Plays Forum create a space to equip colleagues to recognise, prevent, and intervene in situations of sexist harassment.

## Key messages from the project

- Preventing sexist harassment takes more than just minimising risk factors such as chauvinist humour, tabooed reporting, solo working, etc. Workplaces need to develop a collective awareness and understanding of what sexist harassment is and the factors that enable it in the workplace.
- More studies are needed on preventing sexism and sexist harassment, especially on measures that focus on changing the culture. The key research question is how are sexism and sexist harassment upheld and reproduced in organisations and institutions in different industries and sectors? Such research should also explore how vulnerability to sexism coincides with other forms of vulnerability such as racism, disability and age discrimination.
- Developing the prevention of sexism and sexist harassment in the workplace, we should seek to vary and combine preventive tools that are geared towards increasing awareness, action and aftercare and are applied before, during and after sexist harassment.

## More about the project

The project Power Plays – preventing sexual harassment through memory work & forum theater in workplaces of care was allocated funding in the second call of the research initiative. This targeted practice-based research activities in collaboration, focused mainly on preventative measures and methods for intervention through industry studies and comparative studies of different industries. The applications built on partnerships between several Nordic countries.

### Project partners

Roskilde University (primary applicant), VIA University College and Oulu University, in partnership with Jämställd Utveckling Skåne, two privately owned physiotherapy clinics, two municipally run group housing units and one municipal youth unit.

## Ongoing research

The results of the project are used in courses and programmes at the partner universities. The results are also developed further in new projects, including to prevent sexist and sexual harassment among university students: Power Plays Academy, Malmö University 2023–2025. The new project is headed by Jämställd Utveckling Skåne.

## Read more and links

The Power Plays Toolbox is available free of charge in Danish, Swedish, Finnish and English. Managers, staff, HR personnel, union representatives or health and safety officers can use the tools themselves by following the manuals in the toolbox, which can be found here: [Power Plays – preventing sexual harassment in workplace of care – Jämställd Utveckling Skåne \(jamstalldutveckling.se\)](https://jamstalldutveckling.se).

*[Preventing sexist harassment in the workplace. A mapping and typology of available sexist harassment prevention tools in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden](#)*, Padovan-Özdemir, M, Louhela, H, Woge Nielsen, B, Schjølberg, A & Wrang, N. Roskilde Universitetscenter (2023)



## Nordic questionnaire opens up new opportunities for analysis and -follow-up

National questionnaire studies in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden have shown major variations in the prevalence of sexual harassment at work. Measurements produce different results depending on the method used and in 2021, researchers in Denmark developed the questionnaire Inventory Workplace Sexual Harassment (IWS) to conduct standardised measurements of workplaces in Denmark. The project IWS-Nordic: A Nordic questionnaire assessing sexual harassment at work developed this further with the aim of creating a reliable, standardised measurement method for comparative research between Nordic countries.

The questionnaire contains a large number of questions in three categories: unwanted sexual attention, gender-based harassment, and sexual coercion. The project's researchers translated the questionnaire tool into Norwegian, Swedish and English. They then conducted questionnaire surveys in workplaces in Norway and Sweden and analysed the results together with the existing Danish data.

## Need for more comparative studies

In the study, prevalence of sexual harassment has been measured in samples of employees in the three countries. The results indicate that Denmark and Norway seem relatively comparable, but that the Swedish questionnaire data differs somewhat from these two other countries. The differences partly concern what the project terms a sexualised workplace climate, in other words, harassment not necessarily directed towards an individual but a general way of talking about sex in an uncomfortable manner, or in a way that makes some people uncomfortable. Further analysis will be needed to be able to state anything with any certainty regarding the aspects in which the countries differ. However, where differences are found, potential explanations might be: the stronger #MeToo movement in Sweden, the partly differing legislation in the countries and differences in workplace culture, argues Ida E H Madsen, Senior Researcher at the National Research Centre for the Working Environment in Denmark and head of the IWS Nordic project.

"The major contribution the project makes is that there is now a standardised questionnaire in three Nordic languages that enables us to measure sexual harassment in workplaces and compare it consistently," says Ida E H Madsen. "Then the material indicates that the Nordic countries are not as alike in every aspect, and that there are some cultural differences that we will be better able to shed light on in the future."

## Good starting point for workplace health and safety

Another aim of IWS Nordic was to give workplaces a more extensive and nuanced picture of the prevalence of sexual harassment. Because it can be difficult to incorporate the wide-ranging survey as part of ongoing health and safety efforts in the workplace, the project has also produced a short version. Ida E. H. Madsen explains that this can be used to launch, survey, and follow up health and safety work on sexual harassment.

"It enables workplaces to start conversations on 'what problems do we have?' 'What experiences do people have here?'" she says. "Of course, this doesn't go far enough but it's a good place to start. After that, tools for dialogue and conversations about boundaries need to be applied, and perhaps a review of the policies in place in the workplace and whether there are enough preventive measures and follow-up."

Earlier national questionnaire studies indicate that the problem of sexual harassment at work is widespread but, in the workplaces studied in the project, the first reaction is often 'Sexual harassment? That doesn't happen here,' Ida E. H. Madsen explains.

"We have used this questionnaire in many workplaces in Denmark, Norway and Sweden now and not a single one of them has come back with the figure being zero, far from it," she says.

## Conversations about boundaries and definitions

There are several different definitions of sexual harassment in the Nordic countries and in Europe. The focus varies but what they all have in common is that they encompass behaviours that are unwanted, sexual or sex-related and which are experienced as offensive by the recipient.

"The key here is the issue of sexual or sex-related, because sex-based harassment isn't necessarily sexual, but relates to sex or gender," says Ida E. H. Madsen.

She emphasises how important it is to have conversations in the workplace about what sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention and gender-based harassment are.

"There are cases of sexual harassment at work that are clearly criminal offences, but cases where there is no recourse under the law can also be very unpleasant for targets. If you as a manager want a good work environment in which employees are happy, you also have to tackle behaviours that are making people feel uncomfortable," says Ida E. H. Madsen.



**"We have used this questionnaire in many workplaces in Denmark, Norway and Sweden now and not a single one of them has come back with the figure being zero, far from it.**



*Ida E. H. Madsen, National Research Centre for the Working Environment*



## Key messages from the project

- More research is needed that studies the effect of preventive measures against sexual harassment. Many interventions are put in place but there is far too little research into what actually works.
- Research shows negative health impacts for targets of sexual harassment, such as depression and attempts to take their own life, but more studies are needed of mental health impacts over a longer period.

## More about the project

The project IWS-Nordic: A Nordic questionnaire assessing sexual harassment at work was granted funding in the research initiative's first call geared towards ongoing research able to add a Nordic dimension to its project.

### Project partners

The National Research Centre for the Working Environment (NFA), Denmark (primary applicant), the National Institute of Occupational Health (STAMI), Norway, the Stress Research Institute, Stockholm University, Sweden, and the National Institute of Public Health, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark.

IWS-Nordic was based on the Danish research project [Unwanted sexual attention from managers and colleagues](#), 2018–2023, National Institute of Public Health, University of Southern Denmark, the National Research Centre for the Working Environment, COWI A/S, Anerkende Psykolog Praksis and NIRAS, headed by Maj Britt Dahl Nielsen, Senior Researcher at the National Institute of Public Health, University of Southern Denmark.

### Read more and links

The questionnaire is available in English and Danish on the project website. It will also be published in Swedish and Norwegian: [Questionnaire \(sdu.dk\)](#)

*Work-related sexual and gender harassment: conceptual challenges and the need for evidence-based prevention*, Madsen, IEH & D Nielsen, MB, Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health, 49(7), 449-452 (2023)

Larsson, N. P., Craven, L., & Madsen, I. E. H. (2023). *The role of gender composition in workplace sexual harassment*. *European Journal of Public Health*, 33(Supplement\_2), ckad160-1327.

Dahl Nielsen MB, Andersen AB, Grundtvig G, et al. *Workplace sexual and gender-based harassment in Denmark: a comparison of the self-labelling and behavioural list method*. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*. 2024;0(0). doi:10.1177/1403494824122815



## "Speak Up!" engage the whole workplace against sexual harassment

The project "Speak up!": A practice-oriented research project on the prevention of Sexual Harassment (SUSH) tested and developed research-based interventions against sexual harassment in different industries, geared towards 'bystanders', in other words, people who witness sexual harassment or hear about it from someone at the same workplace. Researchers in Denmark, Norway and Sweden participated in the project in partnership with the Norwegian Police Service, Gothenburg municipality and the union Vision in Sweden, and the work environment organisation BrancheFælleskab for Arbejdsmiljø – Velfærd og Offentlig Administration, in Denmark.

The three sub-projects studied what is needed to run initiatives geared towards bystanders, the risks of running these kinds of interventions, and the impacts the partner organisations found the initiatives had on knowledge, attitudes, and action in the workplace. In their analyses, the researchers drew on theory and empirical research on bystander behaviour, organisational interventions, and sexual harassment as well as critical perspectives on gender and other factors such as age, ethnicity and sexual identity.

## **Denmark: "Clear generational shift in assumptions of what is acceptable behaviour"**

The Danish part of SUSH tested the Danish intervention tool Grib ind overfor krænkende handlinger af seksuel karakter (Intervene Sexual Harassment) in a public organisation consisting of several teams. The intervention is a dialogue meeting where participants learn about bystander behaviour and discuss different ways of acting and intervening in sexual harassment situations.

Prior to implementing the intervention, we carried out a baseline questionnaire survey to assess the prevalence of sexual harassment. Results showed that 37% answered 'yes' to having experienced sexual harassment at least once in the previous 6 months. Yet, baseline group interviews showed that most interviewees thought that no sexual harassment was taking place. Preliminary analyses of the interviews also pointed to a clear generational difference in terms of which behaviours were considered acceptable, with younger employees having issues with the type of banter that their older colleagues found unproblematic.

The preliminary analyses of the follow-up qualitative data showed that the employees in general thought the intervention's dialogue-based format was relevant and useful. Interviews also pointed to Intervene Sexual Harassment having enabled constructive dialogues on boundaries and appropriate types of humour. There was also greater awareness that preventing sexual harassment in the workplace must be a joint responsibility.

*Eva Gemzøe Mikkelsen and Kristian Stampe Nielsen, Department of Psychology, University of Southern Denmark*

## **Sweden: "Made use of employees' resources in coming up with solutions"**

In Sweden, we worked with established partners and participants from two municipal units with support from our trade union partner. We started with knowledge development in the form of a series of lectures on organisational culture, gender equality, gender-based violence, research into sexual harassment, and preventing sexual harassment, the labour law dilemmas related to reporting, and investigating sexual harassment, and preventive measures.

We ran talks and workshops, drawing inspiration from an American intervention programme to reduce the risk of sexual violence and dating violence on campus, and an Australian prevention programme. The main aim of the programmes is to change social norms in the workplace, identify harassment risk situations, attempt to interrupt, or divert the risk situations, and support victims in various ways.

We explored opportunities to improve the work environment and prevent sexual harassment by participants themselves suggesting steps that could be taken. Applying an inclusive and participant-oriented approach, it was possible to capture the interests, capacities, and collective resources of the employees to create solutions for preventing sexual harassment. One insight from the project is that if we want to change social norms in the workplace, and reduce the risk of sexual harassment, a large amount of training is needed with discussions and exercises on repeated occasions.

*Ulla Carin Hedin and Linda Lane, Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg*

## **Norway: "Despite long-term efforts, there is no systematic follow-up"**

The Norwegian sub-project worked with the Norwegian Police Service (NPS). As the NPS had worked on preventing sexual harassment for a long time, the first step was to compile and go through all the documentation on previous initiatives and attempt to say something about the presumed effects of these initiatives. The next step was to translate and adapt the Danish intervention tool Intervene Sexual Harassment to the police setting and include a focus on intersectionality.

The results showed that although the NPS has been working on this issue for a long time, more focus has been placed on 'doing something' than on developing measures based on existing national and local data and then systematically following up the effects of their own intervention work. Some earlier measures included bystander and intersectional perspectives, such as potential effects of visible religious symbols, age, occupational background, etc. but the majority did not.

We will, based on the results from SUSH, further develop and finalise our version of the Danish Bystander Intervention in the Norwegian part of the four-year project Understanding and Intervening against Sexual Harassment at work (UISH), funded by Nordforsk. There we will also continue to study the long-term effects of efforts to combat sexual

harassment, the management's understanding of the sexual harassment, and the organisational fatigue that the different subprojects in SUSH found may arise when working with prevention work directed at sexual harassment.

*Brita Bjørkelo and Tatanya Valland, Norwegian Police University College and Celine Pedersen, Norwegian Police University College/Oslo Metropolitan University*

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**Applying an inclusive and participant-oriented approach, it was possible to capture the interests, capacities and collective resources of the employees to create effective solutions for preventing sexual harassment themselves.**



*Linda Lane, University of Gothenburg*

## Key messages from the project

- Bystander interventions to combat sexual harassment need to be systematic and continuous. Start out with assessing organisational risk factors for sexual harassment including own statistics and results. Use knowledge about the organisation when choosing interventions, and focus on the link between what is done, and the effect it has had when continuing internal preventive work.
- Bystander intervention programs is a good complement to methods such as zero tolerance policies, training, reporting procedures, etc. Yet to achieve positive effects, the workplaces must prioritise resources for its implementation, evaluation, and follow-up.
- Ensure that all employees participate in the intervention to achieve the necessary shared understanding of the tone of conversation and code of conduct in the workplace and how to act.
- Use a QR code to disseminate information about policies, rules, and procedures regarding sexual harassment in the workplace This makes the information easily accessible to everyone without causing stigma.
- Given the right knowledge and support (i.e., Intervene Sexual Harassment), workplace teams can take an active part in participating and potentially co-developing instruments that aim at preventing sexual harassment at work. Management needs to trust the employees' capabilities to take on an active part in prevention work directed at bystanders of sexual harassment, and provide resources such as time, and agency to enable changes being made, as a result of participatory prevention work.
- Management should encourage communication both upwards and downwards in the organisation and create a work environment characterised by trust. This demands leadership that allows grievances and criticisms to emerge, and that acts when sexual harassment is reported.
- Mixed-method studies are needed that monitor workplaces over several years and evaluate different measures over time.

## More about the project

The project "Speak up!": A practice-oriented research project on the prevention of Sexual Harassment (SUSH) was allocated funding in the second call of the research initiative. This targeted practice-based research activities in collaboration, focused mainly on preventative measures and methods for intervention through industry studies and comparative studies of different industries. The applications built on partnerships between several Nordic countries.

### Project partners

The Norwegian Police University College, Norway (primary applicant), the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and the University of Southern Denmark, in partnership with the diversity committee at the Norwegian Police University College, the union Vision and Gothenburg municipality in Sweden and the work environment organisation BFA Velfærd og Offentlig administration in Denmark.

### Ongoing research

The Norwegian SUSH sub-project is continuing in a new project [Understanding and Intervening against Sexual Harassment at work \(UISH\)](#), 2023–2027 funded by NordForsk. The researchers in the Danish and Swedish SUSH sub-projects are contributing as members of the UISH academic council. In UISH, police researchers will investigate the understanding of and approaches to working with sexual harassment in practice in partnership with the police in Sweden, Iceland, and Norway.

### Read more and links

Intervene sexual harassment, [Grib ind overfor krænkende handlinger af seksuel karakter](#) is available in Danish and English: [Prevent harassment: Start the dialogue on your workplace \(godtarbejdsmiljo.dk\)](#). Intervene sexual harassment is developed by Eva Gemzøe Mikkelsen and Tine Ravn Holmegaard with Lise Keller from the Danish work environment organisation BFA Velfærd og Offentlig Administration and was based on a previous intervention programme on bullying in the workplace: [Grib ind - Godt kollegaskab uden mobning](#) (Mikkelsen & Høgh; 2019; Mikkelsen, Holmegaard, Scherfig & Høgh, 2016).



Pedersen, C., Valland, T. D., & Bjørkelo, B. (2023). *Forebygging av seksuell trakassering i politiet og effektene av arbeidet. «Speak up! »: A practice-oriented research project on the prevention of Sexual Harassment (SUSH).*

Valland, T. D., Bjørkelo, B., & Pedersen, C. (2023). *Intervening against sexual harassment in the police: Efforts and results LEPH 2023*, Umeå, Sweden.



## Customer-oriented approach increases harassment risk

How are employees in the service industry affected by the way in which the Nordic service tradition sees the customer as the most important person in every situation? This is the subject of researchers Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk and Markus Fellesson's project Customer Sexual Harassments in the Nordic Service Workplace, at the Service Research Centre, CTF, at Karlstad University. Drawing on previous research material, they analysed how the customer-centred service tradition affects service workplaces in the Nordic countries, and how its ideas are reproduced in research into service management and explained and applied in practice. Their research shows that the harassment risk increases when the concept that the customer is always right means that management and staff on the ground are expected to be flexible and fulfil all customers' wants and needs.

"Service workplaces train and encourage their staff to approach their work in a way that involves doing as much as possible for the customer, so creating a culture where this is seen as important and natural," says Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk. "This is a kind of overarching management principle that underpins all organisational activities, not just in the service sector but throughout society, because we are consumers, or at least are treated as customers, practically everywhere."

The analysis is based on data from previous research projects which studied rude customers and customer service in several service occupations. The main focus of this particular project was retail, where many members of staff are often working alone or in the presence of only a few colleagues.

"The shop situation is fairly typical. Especially in terms of these more everyday problems in the grey area of 'what actually was that? It didn't exactly feel OK but it wasn't bad enough to make a fuss about', which easily arises when a service role is subject to commercial demands," says Markus Fellesson.

## **Difficult to obtain management support when harassed by customers**

The project found that the customer-centric ideal unintentionally normalises power and gender structures that in turn drive injustices in the workplace and 'allow' sexual harassment by customers towards staff. Female workers in the service industry are particularly vulnerable as they are expected to act and serve in a submissive manner, in line with stereotypical and heteronormative ideals of customer service.

"Even in situations where you shouldn't reasonably be providing any form of service any longer, you still do it because it's what you do if you are doing your job properly," says Markus Fellesson. "No-one is saying it's OK for customers to harass the staff, but it becomes a grey area, and it's left to the staff to deal with that grey area themselves."

The researchers state that conditions in the service sector mean that the management are directly and indirectly legitimising the status of the customer and continuing customer harassment, despite whistleblowing and calling out untenable working environments, as in the #MeToo movement, which included the voices of retail staff. The material includes examples of employees becoming passive and failing to confront or report unpleasant customers because they will not be fully supported by management or feel that they are failing to do their job and so might be fired.

"The idea of 'working for the customer' tends to prevent management functions from taking full responsibility for the workplace environment. In particular, it makes the management less inclined to tackle or prevent customer behaviour problems that are considered to be in a 'grey area', such as customers who are rude, demanding and generally obnoxious to

staff. Our study shows that when work environments like this are permitted, there is a significantly increased risk of more explicit abuse and sexual harassment," says Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk.

## **Need for alternative ways of demonstrating professionalism**

The project shows that abuse from customers is almost a blind spot in terms of health and safety at work, despite the link between a customer-oriented approach and sexual harassment. The researchers call for alternative ways of demonstrating professionalism. Although staff are aware of the problem of abuse from customers, they have few options other than being polite, even when customers are aggressive.

"The importance of being customer-focused and friendly 'no matter what' still defines the idea of being a professional in the service industry and that makes it hard for staff to take countermeasures," says Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk.

According to the researchers, the relatively high degree of independence that staff in the Nordic countries enjoy at work, combined with the commercial logic of earning money for the employer, can also reinforce vulnerability in the service sector in particular.

"We delegate responsibility and authority a lot in the Nordic countries, and there are a lot of pluses to that at work in general, but that means that these difficult cases also become a question of personal responsibility, where the employee is expected to cope on their own," says Markus Fellesson.



**We are seeing abuse from customers being normalised and tackling the customer being seen as an individual responsibility rather than a structural problem. This makes it difficult to call out the customer.**



*Markus Fellesson, Karlstad University*

## Key messages from the project

- Managers need to be aware of the negative effects of a customer-oriented approach so that they are not indirectly prioritising the customer at the expense of their staff. Customer orientation as a management principle must come second to staff health and safety and not the other way round.
- No forms of rudeness or abuse are acceptable. If low-key abuse is allowed to persist in the workplace, such as no-one calling out rude customers, the risk of more serious violence and sexual abuse increases dramatically.
- Managers must raise the issue of sexual harassment, take problems seriously and make sure issues are reported. Keep an eye out for staff assuming they have to deal with problems themselves and incidents failing to reach management.
- Managers must not only rely on formal procedures and should instead also encourage informal methods of reporting abuse from customers. Discussions between colleagues are often crucial to resolving the situation.
- Advertising and marketing affect the way service personnel are viewed and employers are responsible for the expectations of staff

that customers take from customer-oriented communication.

- Staff training should include how to deal with sexual harassment. The employer and employee unions can build further on existing collaboration and make sure that sexual harassment is highlighted and included in training platforms, for example.
- Decision-makers need to review how third-party abuse should be handled, potentially through initiatives to strengthen legal protection at work.
- Employers in the service sector need more tools to help them tackle the problems, and for this more research is needed.

## More about the project

The project *Customer Sexual Harassments in the Nordic Service Workplace* was granted funding in the funding initiative's first call geared towards ongoing research able to add a Nordic dimension to its project.

### Project partners

Markus Fellesson, Associate Professor of Business Administration, CTF, Karlstad University

Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk, Associate Professor of Business Administration, CTF, Karlstad University and the School of Business, Society and Engineering, Mälardalen University

*Customer Sexual Harassments in the Nordic Service Workplace* was based on the research project [Customers with 'benefits': #MeToo, power and gender in customer-centric service work](#), CTF, Karlstad University headed by Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk and Markus Fellesson.

### Read more and links

Drawing on *Customer Sexual Harassments in the Nordic Service Workplace*, a university course has been produced at Karlstad University which problematises the customer relationship based on gender and other power relations: [Perspectives on customer-oriented service work](#)



## Sharing experiences provides new solutions in tourism and hospitality

The project Sexual Harassment in Tourism and Hospitality: Using the past and present to inform the future studied strategies to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and in working life organisations in the tourism and hospitality industry in Norway, Iceland and Sweden. The project's researchers used workshops and interviews with participants from government organisations, trade unions and the industry, and a large number of reports, policies, and campaign and marketing material, to ask questions about current and previous preventive strategies and interventions and study how sexual harassment is defined in the sector in different Nordic countries. Can a broader understanding of what sexual harassment is and analysis of the steps that have been taken and are being taken lead to new preventive strategies?

Women are the group that is most vulnerable to sexual harassment in the workplace and women make up the majority of staff in the Nordic tourism and hospitality industry. Many, on both the staff and management side, are young and many are recent immigrants from countries outside the Nordic region. Precarious employment conditions, low levels of education or a migrant background, plus factors such as a different sexual identity or ethnicity from the majority population, increase the risk of experiencing sexual harassment. Many of the project's participants confirm that sexual

harassment is often seen as part of the job. It also emerged that many think that the legal definitions of sexual harassment that do exist are difficult to apply when events that fall into a 'grey area' are common and part of your daily life at work.

"How sexual harassment is seen affects which situations are reported and investigated. We need to work on the way sexual harassment is defined in the legislation and the way it's perceived and interpreted both by the victims and in the workplace as a whole," says project lead Tara Duncan, Professor in the School of Culture & Society at Dalarna University in Sweden.

The Nordic tourism and hospitality industry is largely made up of small businesses and according to the project, small businesses with few employees need more support to prevent and tackle cases of sexual harassment.

"Smaller organisations and business owners need more help to prevent sexual harassment and more information about how to deal with incidents that are reported effectively and appropriately," says Tara Duncan. "Small businesses often lack the resources in terms of time, knowledge, policies or money needed to tackle reported cases of harassment."

Information initiatives on sexual harassment are already being carried out in the industry, by the unions and by employers, but the project shows that this information is often failing to reach its target group.

"Language and culture easily pose barriers," Tara Duncan points out. "We must involve younger managers and younger members of the workforce when producing information material and campaigns, and make sure the information is available in several languages so that it really reaches the people who need it."

The researchers say that everyone in the workplace needs training and that preventive initiatives need to be carried out as part of long-term strategies to a greater extent, not just as one-off campaigns.

"Campaigns are good but they have a 'shelf life' and don't guarantee that harassment will decline over a longer period," says Tara Duncan.



## **Norway: "Involve health and safety representatives and union representatives more"**

We focused on grey areas and the gap between more formal definitions of sexual harassment and how they are applied in practice. Just because something isn't illegal doesn't mean it's OK so where do we draw the line? There are many young staff in the hotel and hospitality industry and also many young and inexperienced managers who find talking about and dealing with issues of sexual harassment incredibly difficult. Language was also key and we tried to avoid bureaucratic, academic language and instead used language that spoke to a wider target group. We realised that health and safety representatives and union representatives need to be much more involved and, in our view, they need to be given the same training on sexual harassment as the management. It's important to have simple, safe and accessible systems that can be applied in practice, plus tools for facilitating dialogue using role play, case studies, stories and digital solutions. We talked about the importance of including different groups and not just looking at sex but also age, nationality and LGBT perspectives.

*Tone Therese Linge, Norwegian School of Hotel Management, University of Stavanger*

## **Sweden: "Different actors in the industry need to work together"**

We saw similar results in Sweden and Norway, and in our groups, communication and getting the information out were a major issue. Campaigns are run but the information doesn't always get to the people who need it. Might there be a need for clearer frameworks for bottom-up feedback from ordinary staff and managers, so information material can be produced and tailored to different occupations and groups of employees? There is a gap between definitions in legislation and how sexual harassment is viewed. There was a high degree of recognition among participants in the workshops that sexual harassment is seen as part of the job, that it shouldn't be that way but that's how it is, and that a certain level of sexual harassment is 'OK'. Different actors in the industry need to work together more and we need more ongoing and wide-ranging preventive measures out in the workplaces. Preventive initiatives are carried out but these are often isolated from other stakeholders rather than being collaborations to find solutions. Our project has shown that

there is huge interest in existing campaigns and material about preventive initiatives.

*Tara Duncan, School of Culture & Society, Dalarna University*

## **Iceland: "The most important thing is getting the issue on the agenda"**

In Iceland, the number of migrant workers in the tourism and hospitality industry has soared in the past three years and today almost half the people working in the sector are migrants, mainly from Eastern and Southern Europe. Not much work has been done on sexual harassment in the industry so the project's most important job was getting the issue on the agenda. The participants were willing to cooperate, but we came up against the difficulty that 80% of the companies have fewer than 10 staff. One direct result of the project is that the Icelandic industry organisation, the Tourism Competence Center, has included information on sexual harassment in its training platform, specifically geared to small businesses. The workshops highlighted the importance of information in employees' native language, and that guests should also be informed of the company's sexual harassment policy.

*Magnfríður Birnu Júlíusdóttir, Department of Geography and Tourism Studies, University of Iceland*

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**How sexual harassment is seen affects which situations are reported and investigated. We need to work on the way sexual harassment is defined in the legislation and the way it's perceived and interpreted both by the victims and in the workplace as a whole.**



*Tara Duncan, Dalarna University*

## Key messages from the project

- Provide simple, safe and accessible systems that can be used in practice, plus tools for facilitating dialogue using role play, case studies, stories and digital solutions.
- Involve elected representatives and union representatives in training initiatives and work to combat sexual harassment in the workplace. New staff should also be given the training and information about sexual harassment that managers receive.
- Small businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry need more support and more toolkits to prevent and tackle cases of sexual harassment.
- Information about sexual harassment, how to prevent it, react and report must be clear and accessible for managers and other staff. Also inform guests of the company's 'zero tolerance policy'.
- Language and culture can create barriers, so communication needs to be tailored to the generation and given in the employees' mother tongue. Younger managers and younger staff need to be involved in campaigns and information material to make it relevant to them.

## More about the project

The project Sexual Harassment in Tourism and Hospitality: Using the past and present to inform the future was allocated funding in the second call of the research initiative. This targeted practice-based research activities in collaboration, focused mainly on preventative measures and methods for intervention through industry studies and comparative studies of different industries. The applications built on partnerships between several Nordic countries.

### Project partners

Dalarna University, Sweden (primary applicant), the Norwegian School of Hotel Management, University of Stavanger, Norway, Geography and Tourism Studies, Faculty of Life & Environmental Science, University of Iceland, Iceland, and the working life partner, the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority.

## Read more and links

Article in Hotellrevyn: ["Det finns ett verkligt behov av verktyg" | Hotellrevyn](#)



## How do we prevent sexual harassment in the Nordic region?

So, in summary, what do the results of the research funding initiative and the general knowledge situation tell us about preventing sexual harassment in Nordic workplaces? What does well functioning and effective prevention look like and who does it protect? And how do we obtain the knowledge we need to shift preventive efforts forward?

To answer these questions, we also need to ask questions about *what* needs to be prevented and what preventive measures should *consist of*. Opinions on that are numerous and wide ranging, not least about the scope and the boundaries of such efforts and what preventive work is able to achieve. One important guiding insight on sexual harassment and preventive measures is that if the description of the problem is a) based on the experiences of people who have experienced sexual harassment and b) based on the sector-specific or regional context, there is a greater likelihood that the preventive measures will hit the right spot. Or to put it another way, there is not just one way of experiencing sexual harassment and so nor is there only one way of preventing it. There is no *one* method that everyone can use.

Consequently, the somewhat contradictory answer is: Take on board the general knowledge of what sexual harassment is and how it can be prevented. Make use of shared lessons learned but don't stop there. Also explore what the risks look like in every sector and in every workplace.

Research studies describe common underlying factors to draw on, such as the fact that harassment has to do with power, and with hierarchies and inequality. What these hierarchies look like in different sectors and workplaces and how they can be linked to positions within and between occupational groups will differ, however. Therefore, it is also important to draw attention to how vulnerabilities interact, giving rise to shifting types of harassment and their subsequent consequences. The risk factors differ, which means that studies of the specific context are needed in order to develop knowledge and an understanding of how the specific risk factors can be tackled to achieve the best possible preventive effect.

The research under the research funding initiative on sexual harassment at work clearly shows that the hierarchies look different in the different contexts studied. For example, the projects show how the strong care ethic among staff in the care sector can lead to sexual harassment at work being unreported or normalised. Vulnerability to sexual harassment among retail staff can vary depending on factors such as working alone, age or job security. Industry-specific and local circumstances all add to the problem scenario, making which measures are needed clearer. One lesson learned across the projects is that information about sexual harassment needs to be available in languages that the staff understand and spread in channels where the target groups are. That said, which languages and which channels are relevant in which context varies, although there can also be similarities within sectors. A sector with many young employees – who may also be in managerial roles – faces many challenges. When the work revolves around keeping customers or users happy, other questions arise. And if the likelihood of having their contract extended is determined based on a member of staff's most recent performance, that employee may be very vulnerable.

The Nordic focus of the research initiative shows that definitions and concepts cannot be taken for granted. They may need to both be clarified and problematised in all workplaces, in all research projects and in all collaborative dialogues. This knowledge is general. But how these conversations can and should be organised will differ depending on the context, as will the expectations that exist about what they should contain, involve and culminate in. The same applies to the need for conversations, discussion and reflection on concepts, definitions and understandings of sexual harassment. One common, clear definition is needed to gather comparative data from several different countries. At the same time, there is a need for a more open-ended definition and understanding so that a particular workplace can conduct conversations about norms, organisation and preventive measures.

Effectively preventing sexual harassment at work seems therefore to require a balancing act. We need to absorb knowledge from people who experience sexual harassment and its consequences, the risk factors that exist and lessons learned about preventive strategies and methods. At the same time, we need to investigate what all this consists of in the specific industry and in the specific workplace. To pull off this balancing act, we also need safe conditions in the workplace, for people who experience sexual harassment and everyone around them, so that they can talk about their experiences. Local circumstances need to be allowed to serve as a concrete guide in implementing work environment management to combat sexual harassment. When lessons are learned from previous cases and put to good use in preventive efforts, there are also real opportunities for positive change.

## Concluding key messages

- Sexual harassment is a complex problem. Contributions from several research areas can provide further perspectives on the nature of the problem and what can prevent and stop sexual harassment and its consequences.
- Research in close collaboration between researchers and practitioners can contribute to a deeper knowledge of the problem. By basing the studies in the needs and experiences that exist in practice, they can provide a broader and more nuanced understanding of sexual harassment in different industries.
- A Nordic dimension in research can nuance knowledge by clarifying similarities and differences between the countries. This applies both to differences and similarities in legislation, use of concepts and working conditions.
- Understanding how different vulnerabilities interact is essential to address harassment and its consequences. As risk factors vary across sectors and workplaces, studying specific contexts is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies.
- Prevention requires both general knowledge of sexual harassment and specific knowledge of the relevant industry and workplace. If local circumstances and the experiences of those who have been exposed to sexual harassment are taken into account, prevention efforts are more likely to be effective.

- Definitions and concepts, as well as understandings of what sexual harassment is, cannot be taken for granted and may need to be both clarified and problematised. Dialogue, discussion and reflection on this needs to be adapted to the local context. At the same time, clear general definitions are needed in order to be able to make comparative studies.



# Read more about Sexual Harassment at Work

*Re-Imagining Sexual Harassment – Perspectives from the Nordic Region*, editors: Maja Lundqvist, Angelica Simonsson and Kajsa Widegren, foreword by Ruth Lewis, Policy Press/Bristol University (2023)

[Policy Press | Re-Imagining Sexual Harassment - Perspectives from the Nordic Region, Edited by Maja Lundqvist, Angelica Simonsson and Kajsa Widegren \(bristoluniversitypress.co.uk\)](https://www.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/)

*The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, editors: Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir, foreword by Cynthia Enloe, Routledge (2021)

[The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement - 1st Ed](#)

*Preventive work against sexual harassment in Swedish and Nordic working life – A summary*, Angelica Simonsson, Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research (2020)

[Preventive work against sexual harassment in Swedish and Nordic working life – summary.pdf \(gu.se\)](#)

*Sexually harassed at work – An overview of the research in the Nordic countries*, Nordic Council of Ministers

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*Efforts to prevent sexual harassment in academia – An international research review*, Maja Lundqvist and Fredrik Bondestam, Swedish Council for Higher Education (2019)

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*What does the law say about #metoo?*, Ida Måwe, NIKK Nordic Information on Gender (2018)

[2018-What-does-law-say-metoo.pdf \(nikk.no\)](#)

*Norden fritt från sexuella trakasserier – en förutsättning för jämställdhet. Initiativ och åtgärder efter #MeToo*, Susanna Young Håkansson, NIKK, Nordic Council of Ministers (2019)

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*One year after Me Too – Initiatives and action in the Nordic and Baltic countries*, Ida Måwe, NIKK Nordic information on Gender (2018)

[One year after #metoo. Initiatives and action in the Nordic and Baltic countries \(nikk.no\)](#)

# About this publication

## Preventing Sexual Harassment at Work Nordic Research Initiative 2021 – 2023

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