

DENMARK: PREVENTING OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

Introduction

This case study provides an overview of the exposure of a diverse workforce to psychosocial risks (PSRs) related to sexual harassment, highlighting the experiences of women and young workers in particular. It reviews how these challenges are tackled under the 2022 tripartite agreement on sexual harassment and other related initiatives, focusing on the actions implemented by the Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA). The WEA has adopted a proactive approach to preventing sexual harassment, bullying, and other offensive behaviours such as discrimination – PSRs to which a diverse workforce is often exposed. Before the adoption of the tripartite agreement, the WEA received government funding to raise awareness and provide support to victims of sexual harassment. The measures have included enhancing the operation of an anonymous reporting and advice hotline and launching a national communication campaign. Efforts to prevent sexual harassment are also integrated into labour inspections, with priority given to high-risk sectors.

Key takeaways and transferability

- Key ingredients supporting the proactive approach taken in Denmark include a strong legal framework on equal treatment, non-discrimination, PSRs and OSH; a government commitment to providing resources to promote awareness and cultural change; and a consensus-building approach among social partners.
- Although social partnership is a key part of the Danish social model at national, sectoral and workplace levels, achieving a similarly high level of engagement among social partners in other countries will be challenging without robust regulations to support tripartite cooperation, collective bargaining and active involvement from trade unions and employers.
- Despite this, the proactive focus on preventing offensive behaviour, including sexual harassment and a range of other behaviours such as discrimination, is transferrable to other Member States.
- Transferability depends on a strong regulatory framework and the provision of resources, training and guidance materials, as part of a multifaceted approach, which has been crucial to the success of the proactive approach in Denmark.

Legal framework and related guidance

Denmark's Working Environment Act, together with related executive orders, safeguards workers and provides for a safe and healthy working environment. Employers have a legal obligation to conduct risk assessments, including an assessment of psychosocial risks (PSRs), every three years. An Executive Order came into effect on 1 November 2020, establishing measures to prevent psychosocial risks in the workplace. The risk factors covered by the Executive Order include heavy workloads and time pressures, unclear and conflicting demands, high emotional demands when working with people, and work-related violence, harassment and sexual harassment. Employers are required to implement measures to ensure a safe work environment, taking into account the individual and collective dimensions of workplace risks (EU-OSHA, 2025). Section 7 of the Executive Order outlines that the requirements for employers to prevent PSRs regarding the planning and organisation of work, the content and requirements of the work, how the work is performed, and the social relations within the workplace, as well as the organisational conditions that are important to the work carried out by employees. Section 8(2) addresses particularly sensitive risk groups, including pregnant and nursing women, who must be protected against psychosocial risks in the working environment that could seriously affect them, as stipulated in the Executive Order on work performance.

To support the implementation of these regulations, the WEA has developed specific PSR assessment guidelines aimed at raising awareness and facilitating compliance. Guideline D.4.3.1, which is currently being updated, covers offensive behaviours, including bullying, sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination. It also addresses the causes of offensive behaviour, outlining strategies for prevention and appropriate responses when such behaviour occurs. Interview guides have been developed for labour inspectors, alongside an online tool designed to assist employers and occupational health and safety (OSH) specialists in risk assessment. The tool includes a specific question about offensive behaviour and sexual harassment.

In addition, sexual harassment is prohibited and has been defined as a form of gender-based discrimination under Section 1(6) of the Equal Treatment Act, which stipulates that 'Sexual harassment is any unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical behaviour of a sexual nature that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity, in particular by creating a threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating or unpleasant climate.' Employers have a statutory duty to address and prevent sexual harassment. Failure to act may result in compensation being awarded to affected individuals.

Description of the interventions

Tripartite Agreement on Initiatives to Counter Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Despite the strong legal framework, pressure had been building up for several years to strengthen the provisions on the prevention of sexual harassment amid continued evidence of women's significant exposure to sexual harassment in the workplace (see box below). For example, the Confederation of Danish Trade Unions (FH) had been calling for stronger regulations on sexual harassment, an enhanced role of social dialogue, improved compensation for victims of sexual harassment and clear employer duties to prevent harassment.

Box 1: Data on sexual harassment in Denmark

Various campaigns, several high-profile sexual harassment cases and the #MeToo movement have highlighted the significant exposure of women to the risk of sexual harassment, particularly from third parties. A survey by the trade union confederation FH (2021) showed that more than one in ten workers (11 %) had experienced sexual harassment in the previous year. For young people under the age of 30, the figure is one in five. In addition, women are more likely to experience sexual harassment from clients, patients or customers (60 %), a risk closely connected to their predominance in health and social care roles that require continuous, close contact with citizens. Employees in the hotel and restaurant sector are particularly at risk, with 23 % workers in this sector reporting experiences of sexual harassment.

In addition, EU data indicates that sexual harassment is a significant challenge in Denmark. The 2021 European Working Conditions (EWCS) Telephone Survey revealed that across the EU, almost 3 % of workers reported unwanted sexual attention in the last month, with the figure being highest in Denmark at 7 %.¹

Eurostat data shows that Danish women experience sexual harassment at a rate higher than the EU average, with 6.3 % of Danish women reporting that they experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months and 46.4 % reporting that they have experienced sexual harassment during their lifetime.²

On 4 March 2022, the Danish government, trade unions and employers' organisations signed a national tripartite agreement on initiatives to end sexual harassment in the workplace. The agreement forms part of a strong tradition of tripartite cooperation in Denmark, which covers all areas of labour market policy. It applies to areas regulated by legislation, such as the working environment. The agreement led to

¹ Eurofound, European Working Conditions Telephone Survey 2021 dataset: <https://eurofound.link/ewcts2021data>.

² Eurostat data set on sexual harassment at work: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gbv_shw_occ/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.gbv.gbv_shw.

amendments to the Equal Treatment Act and the Working Environment Act. The latter stipulates employers and workers' obligations (measure 5).

Drawing on a substantial knowledge base, the government and social partners agreed on several measures to prevent and address sexual harassment, determine compensation levels in such cases, the use of confidentiality clauses and identify the need for additional legislation. A strong focus has been placed on cultural change in the workplace, based on the idea that workplace culture determines whether sexual harassment is ignored or tolerated, or even becomes a commonplace feature of the work environment.

The agreement sets out 17 initiatives designed to promote cultural change by improving the prevention and management of sexual harassment in the workplace. These include more explicit rules in this area, higher compensation for serious cases of sexual harassment, improved prevention measures, increased awareness and enhanced legal protection for students and apprentices who have experienced sexual harassment. The initiative clarifies that workers are expected to help prevent and address sexual harassment in the workplace. For instance, under the Danish Working Environment Act, workers have an obligation to disclose information about sexual harassment at work if they become aware of it and are unable to resolve the issue themselves.

The agreement places a strong focus on prevention through OSH and psychosocial risk assessment, with contributions from the National Research Centre for the Working Environment, the Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA) and the Health and Safety Council. It sets out the responsibilities of employers, which were subsequently incorporated into amendments to the Equal Treatment Act. This has been important for achieving an integrated approach between law on equal treatment and OSH law, policies and practices. It is one of several agreements signed in Denmark in recent years; another example regarding equal treatment is the proactive agreement on parental leave.

The agreement has introduced a comprehensive range of binding measures and sets out the responsibilities of both employers and workers. It addresses five main issues and introduces 17 measures. Among these, the measures on preventing sexual harassment clarify employers' responsibilities under OSH legislation to create a healthy culture in the work environment by implementing policies to address and prevent sexual harassment.

Box 2: Summary of the main provisions in the tripartite agreement

A new regulatory framework for matters involving sexual harassment and increased compensation in cases of severe harassment: an increase in compensation for sexual harassment and the introduction of a clear definition of the employer's duty to ensure a working environment that is free from harassment.

Protection against sexual harassment in the workplace: reference is made to the Danish WEA's checklists on sexual harassment and other offensive behaviours at work. There is a specific focus on the role of OSH risk assessments (APVs) in preventing sexual harassment, and the five industry committees on the Working Environment (BFAs) are encouraged to prioritise sexual harassment in their risk assessment processes.

Awareness of and knowledge about sexual harassment: among other proposals, the Danish WEA will be required to publish an annual report on the number of actions taken as a result of inspections, decisions, guidelines and other measures implemented to prevent sexual harassment.

Trainees and apprentices: strengthening the rights of trainees and apprentices to make sexual harassment claims, and the possibility to terminate training agreements in the event of sexual harassment. This will require an amendment to the Vocational Education Act.

A future strategy on the prevention of sexual harassment will be developed through an alliance between the labour market, the education sector and civil society, with the aim of strengthening prevention efforts.

The role of the WEA in implementing OSH prevention measures in the agreement addresses this issue in the framework of offensive behaviour – a broad term that encompasses sexual harassment and other degrading behaviour, including discrimination, as provided for in the Act prohibiting discrimination in

employment.³ In the context of PSR factors, the approach has been to implement multiple measures simultaneously, by addressing the prevention of sexual harassment, bullying and offensive behaviour, such as discrimination, as well as third-party violence and harassment from customers, clients, etc.

In the 2021 government budget, WEA was granted DKK 10 million (approximately EUR 1.4 million) of funding for 2021 and 2022 to tackle sexual harassment and improve the psychosocial work environment. The tripartite agreement includes an evaluation of these measures. More specifically, the evaluation (Østergaard et al., 2023) found the following:

- Between May and July 2021, the WEA ran a social media and radio campaign, which aimed to raise awareness of employers' duties to prevent offensive behaviour, including sexual harassment, and inform workers of available resources. The campaign also provided an opportunity to publicise the hotline operated by WEA. According to the evaluation, the communication campaign was a great success, reaching almost 1.5 million people.
- The WEA has a call centre, which has operated a hotline for anonymous reporting and advice for more than 10 years. It addresses both internal and external offensive behaviour and offers guidance to workers and employers on how to prevent and address offensive behaviour, explaining how victims, witnesses and employers can best handle offensive behaviour and make complaints to the WEA. During the communication campaign, the number of calls to the hotline increased threefold compared to the same period in the previous year.
- Preventing offensive behaviour and sexual harassment is integrated into the Authority's inspection system, which aims to encourage companies to address prevention by improving their knowledge and management of the working environment. WEA has been successful in its reach out efforts, using inspections to encourage companies, including those in high-risk sectors. However, significant variations were found in the companies' capacity to prevent and handle offensive behaviour. The focus has been on providing advice and specific training, as well as issuing interview guides for inspectors on PSRs to assist labour inspectors in this role. Targeted inspection visits and dialogues have been conducted with companies in female- and male-dominated sectors. The evaluation found that the inspectors' roles had positive outcomes.

Other interventions to prevent offensive behaviour and sexual harassment

Various campaigns have also been carried out to support employers in addressing offensive behaviour, including national research and practical tools.

21 questions about types of sexually harassing behaviour

To address a problem, one needs to first understand what is happening. As part of a study conducted by the National Research Centre for the Working Environment (Larsen et al., 2023) on unwanted sexual attention and harassment in workplaces in Denmark, a 21-item questionnaire (see box below) has been developed for companies to improve their knowledge of prevention and motivate them to take preventive action. As previous national surveys on the prevalence of sexual harassment have not assessed this type of behaviour – for example, the WEA used only one question to identify risks of sexual harassment in the Danish national survey on the working environment – the authors recommended a method that builds specific knowledge about the types of behaviour workers are likely to occur, in order to establish a basis for preventive work. Using the behavioural list method⁴ makes it possible to uncover the complexity and nuances of sexual harassment.

As a result, the study has made a valuable contribution to achieving the national occupational health and safety objectives, one of which is to reduce the number of people exposed to psychosocial stress. The report has also highlighted the challenges involved in providing a safe and inclusive working environment for all workers, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, such as LGBTIQ, ethnic minorities, and migrants working in care and cleaning. In this regard, a recent analysis by the Danish

³ The Act prohibits discrimination and harassment on the grounds of race, skin colour or ethnic origin; religion or faith; sexual orientation; gender identity, gender expression or gender characteristics; national or social origin; political views, age and disability.

⁴ This is an evidence-based methodology developed under the EU ASTRAPI programme. It is based on specific risk assessment tools focused on sexual harassment behaviours (see Gómez-González et al. (2022): <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12840>). It has also been used surveys such as the CLC survey on sexual and gender-based violence (2022) <https://documents.clcctc.ca/human-rights/Respect-at-Work-Report-EN.pdf>.

Institute for Human Rights of the discrimination faced by these groups has helped inform prevention initiatives by building a stronger evidence base.

Box 3: Suggested list of questions on unwanted sexual attention and harassment for company surveys and risk assessments (Larsen et al., 2023)

In the last 12 months, how many times have you been exposed to the following in connection with your work?

1. Unwanted sexual comments about your body, clothing or lifestyle;
2. Unwanted sexual comments in a larger group/assembly;
3. Unwanted messages with sexual content (e.g. letters, text messages, emails or messages on social media); ring or flirtatious looks with sexual undertones that were unwanted or unpleasant;
5. Unwanted physical contact with sexual undertones (e.g. patting, kissing or hugging);
6. Unwanted movements with sexual undertones directed at you;
7. Unwanted requests;
8. Someone showing you pornographic images or other material with sexual content that was unwanted or unpleasant for you;
9. Being whistled at or catcalled in an unwanted or uncomfortable way;
10. Someone exposing themselves to you (e.g. taking their clothes off) in a way that was unwanted or uncomfortable for you;
11. Being involved in conversations about sex against your will;
12. Someone spreading sexual rumours about you;
13. Being told stories with sexual content that was unwanted or unpleasant;
14. Someone speaking disparagingly about women or men in an unwanted or unpleasant way;
15. Sexually explicit activities (e.g. games or strippers) at festive events that were unwanted or unpleasant for you;
16. Being belittled because of your gender or sexuality;
17. Being excluded from socialising or social networks because of your gender or sexuality;
18. Being asked for sexual favours in exchange for a reward (e.g. a pay rise or promotion);
19. Being threatened with punishment or sanctions (e.g. dismissal) if you refuse sexual favours;
20. Being touched against your will (e.g. groped you and/or held you down);
21. Attempted rape or actual rape.

▪ **Danish WEA campaigns and initiatives on ending offensive behaviour and sexual harassment**

A recent initiative has targeted **young people and students**, with a specific focus on the restaurant and **hospitality industry**, where young women in particular experience high levels of sexual harassment. WEA has visited several vocational schools, where students are training for careers in the restaurant and hospitality industry. The WEA has held presentations and started a dialogue about sexual harassment and offensive behaviour. This innovative approach focuses on raising awareness among students and young people before they enter the labour market, ensuring that they are aware of sexual harassment and its prevalence in high-risk sectors. It helps them prepare to address potential problems, such as sexual harassment, and recognises that they will be the workers and managers of the future.

Where do we draw the line? In collaboration with employers' organisations and trade unions, Denmark's WEA ran an innovative awareness-raising campaign entitled 'Hvor går grænsen?' ('Where do we draw the line?').⁵ It acknowledges that people have different perceptions of what constitutes a sexual offence. The campaign provides tools to help prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and deal with situations involving unwanted sexual attention.

The second part of the campaign addresses **sexual harassment directed at young LGBT+ employees**. Launched in 2022, 'Din grænse' ('Your Limit') was aimed at managers and health and safety committees, encouraging them to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and promoting a shared responsibility between employees and management for the creation of a safe working environment. The main message of the campaign is that it is crucial to respect other people's boundaries in the workplace and that fostering an inclusive culture can prevent offensive behaviour. IKEA and the City of Copenhagen are given as examples of organisations that have created inclusive and diverse workplaces.

Another campaign, 'Tag Snakken' (Talk it over!), has addressed offensive behaviour, focusing specifically on **how managers can communicate** about and address such behaviour and violence at work. The campaign was based on background information materials and more practical documents, such as guides and talking points for managers to use in meetings (EU-OSHA, 2025).

Updated guidelines addressing **digital forms of violence and offensive behaviour** were issued in November 2020.⁶ These cover psychological violence and threats via SMS, email, social media, and other digital and online channels. Workplaces must actively prevent such behaviour. WEA has undertaken campaigns on digital harassment to help employers manage these risks, providing them with resources, fact sheets, guidelines and sector-specific examples (EU-OSHA, 2025).

Success factors

- A strong legal framework and links between OSH, equal treatment and non-discrimination laws have ensured that WEA prioritises a proactive approach to prevention. The Authority maintains that a proactive focus on the positive aspects of this work is a proven means of engaging workers and employers. In contrast, a punitive approach undermines transparency and discourages the disclosure and reporting of sensitive PSRs, such as offensive behaviour and sexual harassment.
- Social partnership and cooperation through a binding tripartite agreement have resulted from a common and shared approach to prevent offensive behaviour and sexual harassment, marking a significant step forward in embedding better protection, prevention, and a culture change in the workplace with the involvement of social partners.
- In this regard, the tripartite agreement has helped to clarify obligations alongside the introduction of new legal provisions, such as increased compensation for victims and harsher penalties for non-compliant employers. The commitment of the tripartite partners to the importance of culture change has reinforced efforts to end sexual harassment and other forms of offensive behaviour at work.
- The agreement addresses all forms of violence and harassment, including internal and third-party violence and harassment. It supports WEA's actions designed with young people and specific sectors in mind.
- Overall, the agreement has had a positive impact on raising awareness of cultural change in the workplace and the need to prevent sexual harassment. It has also reinforced the importance of preventing PSRs for labour inspectors and in collective bargaining agreements at the workplace level. In addition, the involvement of multiple stakeholders in its implementation has a potentially multiplying effect, leading to a more systematic approach to prevention.
- The measures evaluated, such as the campaigns and the hotline operated by the WEA, have raised awareness and encouraged open discussions about offensive behaviour and sexual harassment. In a separate initiative, the proposed 21 questions on sexual harassment behaviours provide an innovative tool for assessing sexual harassment and represent an evidence-based approach to defining behaviours that can lead to targeted prevention measures.

⁵ <https://at.dk/arbejdsmiljoe/psykisk-arbejdsmiljoe/kraenkende-handlinger/hvor-gaar-graensen/>.

⁶ <https://at.dk/arbejdsmiljoe/psykisk-arbejdsmiljoe/vold-og-trusler/digital-chikane/>.

Challenges

- The evaluation found that a small number of companies have not addressed the issue, operating under the assumption that, without a formal notice requiring changes, no problem exists. This clearly shows that fostering a culture of prevention requires time, training and awareness of discrimination and sexual harassment as crucial elements of a safe workplace.
- Challenges remain in ensuring that the agreement is fully implemented across different industries and that employers use it to address PSRs in the workplace. Sexual harassment, discrimination and offensive behaviour continue to be significant challenges in Danish workplaces.
- However, data from the most recent (2024) Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) survey on violence against women⁷ shows a continued high prevalence of sexual harassment at work in Denmark, especially for professional women, younger women and women providing services to customers, clients, etc. This suggests that broader measures may be needed to change the culture and enforce employers' responsibilities, particularly in feminised and high-risk sectors.

Author: Jane Pillinger.

Project management: Maurizio Curtarelli and Sarah Copsey, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

This case study was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). The views expressed in it, including any opinions and/or conclusions, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

Neither the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) nor any person acting on behalf of the Agency is responsible for the use that might be made of the above information.

© European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2026

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the copyright of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

⁷ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/eu-gender-violence-survey-key-results>

References

- EU-OSHA. (2025). *Denmark: Psychosocial risk prevention – strategies and legislation*, <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/denmark-psychosocial-risk-prevention-strategies-and-legislation>.
- FH. (2021). *Kæmpe mørketal: Langt flere udsættes for seksuel chikane, end officielle tal viser*, <https://fho.dk/blog/2021/06/08/kaempe-moerketal-langt-flere-udsættes-for-seksuel-chikane-end-officielle-tal-viser/>.
- Larsson, N. et al. (2023). *Undersøgelse af Uønsket Seksuel Opmærksomhed og chikane på arbejdspladser i Danmark (USO-DK)*. Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Arbejdsmiljø. NFA-rapport, [https://nfa.elsevierpure.com/ws/portalfiles/portal/24630659/Undersøgelse af Uønsket Seksuel Opmærksomhed og chikane p arbejdspladser i Danmark USO DK Hovedrapport 2023.pdf](https://nfa.elsevierpure.com/ws/portalfiles/portal/24630659/Undersøgelse%20af%20Uønsket%20Seksuel%20Opmærksomhed%20og%20chikane%20på%20arbejdspladser%20i%20Danmark%20USO%20DK%20Hovedrapport%202023.pdf).
- Ministry of Employment. (2022). *Trepartsaftale om initiativer til at modgå seksuel chikane på arbejdspladser* (text of the tripartite agreement in Danish), <https://bm.dk/media/20425/aftaletekst.pdf>.
- Østergaard, J. et al. (2023). *Erfaringsopsamling på Arbejdstilsynets indsats over for seksuel chikane og andre krænkende handlinger*. Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Arbejdsmiljø, <https://at.dk/media/nyxpgw3h/erfaringsopsamling-indsats-seksuel-chikane.pdf>.
- Interview with a representative of the Danish Working Environment Authority.