

PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS, GENDER AND DIVERSITY: LESSONS FROM RECENT EUROPEAN SOCIAL PARTNER AGREEMENTS

Introduction

A tripartite approach and cooperation between the social partners are considered essential in developing Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) policy in practice. At the European Union (EU) level, this is reflected in the European Commission's tripartite committee, which assists in preparing, implementing and evaluating activities related to occupational safety and health. European social partner agreements between European employers' and trade union organisations can take various forms. For instance, they may offer guidelines that build on existing legislation or address new areas not currently covered. OSH issues may be sector-specific or may involve general principles on OSH prevention that require adaptation to particular sectors. These operate at the European cross-sector level, covering the entire economy, as well as through European sector social dialogue committees. These committees are key forums for developing agreements and practical guidelines tailored to their sectors. Notably, agreements can serve as crucial tools in establishing principles and initiatives for regulations and collective bargaining at national and sectoral levels, especially to respond to urgent emerging policy issues in a rapidly evolving world of work.

This case study describes some recent European-level social partner agreements, highlighting the emergence of agreements that include gender and diversity-related psychosocial risk (PSR) factors. At the European level, a cross-sectoral agreement on digitalisation signed between ETUC, Business Europe, SME United, and CEEP has established a framework for digitalisation to be applied at the national level and contains several provisions to prevent PSRs related to the use of digital technologies for work. Furthermore, three European social partner agreements illustrate multi-sectoral and sectoral approaches. One of these agreements covers third-party violence and harassment (TPVH) in five sectors, another addresses gender-based violence and telework in six sectors, and a final example is an agreement on digitalisation in central government organisations containing provisions related to PSRs and gender.

Key takeaways

- The agreements are built on a substantial knowledge and evidence base, in some cases following significant engagement through meetings, surveys and research to inform the negotiations.
- Social dialogue, particularly collective bargaining, is critical to achieving effective policies and prevention initiatives that are relevant to workers' lived experiences and that workers and employers trust.
- In relation to TPVH, a gender and intersectional approach is critical to addressing the specific hazards and risks faced by groups who face some of the most significant vulnerabilities, including women, black and minority ethnic women and migrant workers who directly provide services to customers, patients and clients.
- OSH policies, risk assessment and risk mitigation play a crucial role in preventing TPVH and addressing broader issues that contribute to heightened levels of TPVH.
- Consideration could also be given to updating existing European social partner agreements on violence and harassment, and stress, to reflect new world of work issues and challenges, such as those resulting from increased exposure to TPVH, risks associated with digitalisation and telework, or the workplace effects of domestic violence.

Description of the interventions

Cross-sectoral Framework Agreement on Digitalisation (ETUC, BusinessEurope, SME United & CEEP)

A cross-sectoral autonomous European social partner framework agreement on Digitalisation was signed by the cross-sectoral social partners (ETUC, Business Europe, SME United and CEEP) in 2020 (ETUC et al., 2020). The framework agreement highlights the opportunities that digitalisation offers, while also emphasising the need to prevent and mitigate the risks related to the use of digital technologies in the workplace. It provides a focus on diversity through a human-centred approach and includes a pillar on respect, human dignity, and surveillance. In addition to recognising the importance of integrating digital technologies effectively in the workplace, the agreement provides a framework for employers and unions to introduce digital transformation strategies in partnership, adopting a human-centred approach at national, sectoral, company, and workplace levels. This covers the identification of risks and measures to ensure safety and health, such as when connecting and disconnecting, as well as adherence to working time rules and the implementation of appropriate measures to ensure compliance. This takes into account the quality of relationships at work (such as collaboration, communication and work atmosphere), the management style, the occurrence of violence or harassment, conflict management, support procedures, and mechanisms.

Diversity is highlighted in relation to upskilling or reskilling workers to meet the digital challenges of enterprises, considering the diversity of the workforce, so that digital technologies and tools improve work organisation, communication, learning possibilities, improved work relations, better work-life balance and gender equality. The agreement highlights the importance of an equal opportunities policy in ensuring that 'digital technology results in benefits for all workers'. However, it warns that if digital technology contributes to inequality, such as the disparity between women and men, the issue must be addressed by the social partners. The signatory parties to the agreements state that they will monitor the progress in implementing the agreement, which will be implemented within three years after the date of signing this agreement. The ETUC has made digitalisation and cyber-harassment, including gender-related issues, a priority area for action under the ETUC work programme (2022-2024).

"It's Not Part Of The Job". Multisectoral Guidelines to Prevent and Address Third-Party Violence And Harassment (EPSU et al., 2025)

On 6 May 2025, European-level social partners representing employers and unions in five sectors (local and regional government, central government, hospitals and healthcare, education, and hospitality) agreed on new updated Multisectoral Guidelines to prevent and address third-party violence and harassment (TPVH) (EPSU et al., 2025). The Guidelines, which align with the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190¹ and Recommendation No. 206,² address new world of work issues such as digitalisation, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), PSRs and risk assessment, and a gender and intersectional approach to preventing TPVH. The Guidelines build on the first Multisector guidelines, agreed upon by European Social Partners in 2010. They are a response to an urgent need for effective measures to address the significant increase in incidences of TPVH during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. Eurofound (2022) data show that 12.5% of workers in the EU have experienced some form of adverse social behaviour, and is significantly higher in sectors where there is direct contact with the public, such as healthcare, education, and transport. Nearly 30% of workers who regularly interact with people reported not receiving the necessary support from management.

At the European level, a two-year social partner project (2022-2023), including research, thematic webinars, collection of over 40 case studies and examples of policies and collective agreements, a website and a European-level conference, laid the groundwork with social partners across Europe (Pillinger & EPSU et al., 2023).

In summary, the Guidelines include:

- Recommendations on the key elements for a TPVH workplace policy, jointly drawn up by management, workers, and trade unions, and anchored in social dialogue, occupational safety and health, gender equality, and non-discrimination, and an intersectional approach.

¹ https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190

² https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:4000085:NO

- Practical tools and measures for risk assessments, taking into account factors arising from contact with the public and clients, as well as staffing levels, enhanced security and responses, awareness raising, training, and transparent reporting and complaint procedures.
- Principles on fostering a culture of respect and zero tolerance to TPVH, including by learning from previous incidents and cooperating with relevant public authorities.
- Remedies to support victims and hold perpetrators accountable, including support and transparent investigations.

Specifically, the Guidelines highlight the importance of OSH and risk assessment to address the root causes of TPVH while considering the occupations, locations, and working practices that expose workers to TPVH. It addresses prevention through measures to ensure safer environments in workplace design, relevant to different sectors, and the needs of workers at the most significant risk of violence or harassment. Emphasis is also placed on gender-based TPVH and the recognition that domestic violence has work-related consequences. In particular, a gender-based approach to TPVH, ‘...can be rooted in the job content and training due to harmful social norms and stereotypes based on gender, other grounds of discrimination, and unequal power relations at work’ (EPSU et al., 2025:6). The need to address the risks of cyberviolence and harassment associated with increasing digitalisation is emphasised, as is the goal of achieving a fair distribution of workload and maintaining safe staffing levels. Finally, the Guidelines call for a review of the risk assessment during times of change, such as when there is restructuring, the introduction of new technologies, or in the event of a health emergency. A preventative approach, reinforced through training, encourages better awareness of the signs of violence and harassment, such as absenteeism, decreased motivation, reduced job performance, and increased staff turnover.

Following the adoption of the Guidelines, the signatories plan to disseminate and promote their implementation among their members at the national level, including through collective agreements, with a commitment to review the implementation of the Guidelines in four years. The Guidelines are non-binding and will rely on the efforts of the social partners to ensure their effective implementation at national and sectoral levels.

European Guidelines on psychosocial risks and gender-based violence in service sectors (UNI Europa et al., 2023)

The European Guidelines, signed in 2023, covering service sectors (telecoms, gaming, graphical design and packaging, finance and commerce) were an outcome of a two-year project that included research, thematic sector-specific webinars, and separate sector-specific guidelines (UNI-Europa, 2023). The Guidelines address the social partners’ urgent priorities related to violence and harassment in retail, commerce, telecommunications, gaming, finance, care, and other sectors. The Guidelines give specific focus to three main key themes in the framework of OSH: gender-based TPVH, domestic violence as a workplace issue, and exposure to PSRs for teleworkers. These issues were identified as priorities due to the consequences for workers’ mental health and well-being.

A survey on mental health carried out during the project found that 52% of trade unions and 63% of employers viewed gender-based violence as a factor in their sector (covering commerce, gaming, ICTS, graphics and design, finance, care, postal sector, cleaning, social services, paper makers, media, hairdressing). The main risks associated with teleworking were identified as work intensification, work overload, social isolation, work-family conflict, and the blurring of boundaries between the domains of work and private life. In addition, domestic violence was identified as an important workplace issue, with 79% of employers and 88% of trade unions responding to the survey highlighting fear, stress and anxiety as the most prominent symptoms of domestic violence in a work-related context.

Consequently, the Guidelines state that “psychosocial risks are the most prevalent health risks associated with teleworking and may result in negative psychological, physical, and social outcomes”. In making recommendations, the social partners called for improvements in the safety and health of workers, particularly in the assessment and management of stress, which should be developed through joint approaches by the social partners. In line with the European Parliament resolution of 5 July 2022 on mental health in the digital world of work (2021/2098(INI)), the Guidelines suggest that the EU introduce more effective measures to prevent gender-related effects of digitalisation. Measures are also proposed to strengthen social dialogue and existing European and national framework agreements on violence and harassment, work-related stress, and to consider the introduction of gender-specific clauses related to PSRs and telework in those agreements.

Collective bargaining is a core provision for preventing violence and harassment, such as through

sectoral or multi-sectoral agreements addressing gender violence and harassment, action plans against sexual harassment in collective agreements, specifying risk assessment, prevention, support for victims, and consequences for harassers, and workplace policies on bullying, harassment, and domestic violence agreed through negotiations with between employers and trade unions.

The Guidelines proposed that the social partners develop an operational strategy to ensure their effective implementation. Key features of this should include having gender balance in decision-making in the governing structures of trade unions and employers' organisations; facilitation of the regular sharing of best practices; awareness raising and training for managers and leaders; development of codes of conduct and supporting a corporate culture shift that fosters gender equality and that embodies trust, support and protection of workers.

Agreement on Digitalisation by the Social Dialogue Committee for Central Government Administrations (TUNED & EUPAE, 2022)

This further example of a European sectoral agreement incorporating elements of PSR factors and diversity is the agreement on digitalisation that was stipulated in 2022 by the Social Dialogue Committee for Central Government Administrations, signed by the Trade Unions' National and European Administration Delegation (TUNED) for the trade unions and the European Public Administration Employers (EUPAE) for the employers (TUNED & EUPAE, 2022).

Although digitalisation can offer benefits, it can lead to work intensification, OSH risks, including psychosocial risks, long working hours, isolation and blurring of work and private life, and a lack of protection of personal data. The social partners agreed to promote a culture of prevention through the active participation of employers, workers, trade unions, health and safety bodies and labour inspectorates. In particular, emphasis is given to the duty of employers, in close consultation with trade unions, to provide a safe working environment and that the social partners have an important role to play in promoting prevention, risk assessment and the assessment of PSRs related to digitalisation. It is recommended that risk assessments should address physical, mental, and cognitive health risks and prevent the negative impact of digitalisation, including artificial intelligence, on workers' safety and health. This should include risk factors associated with staffing levels, workload, change in work organisation or management or job content; discrimination; working at night or alone or at home; access to and quality of service, including the provision of safe services and staffing levels, along with measures to address risks of harassment and violence. In addition, the agreement recognises that gender inequalities, cyber harassment and domestic violence are risks that must be addressed in the light of the increase in teleworking across the state sector.

Success factors

- The agreements described underscore the crucial role that the social partners can play in addressing exposure to PSR factors and conducting risk assessments to a wide range of issues relevant to workforce diversity, including preventing TPVH, and the effects of digitalisation and teleworking on diverse groups of workers. This approach has helped to identify emerging work-related issues and to provide practical responses to them.
- The social partners have stressed the importance of building trust and finding common ground within the scope of their organisational mandates, and applying this to preventive actions, considering gender and intersectionality.
- All of the agreements place a strong focus on gender equality and, in some cases, an intersectional approach, recognising that in some sectors, women predominantly work in jobs that are most vulnerable to TPVH or to the effects of digitalisation. In three of the agreements, domestic violence as a workplace issue is highlighted.
- New factors are addressed, such as the effects of digitalisation on the intensification of work, increased levels of cyber violence and harassment, as well as issues relating to adequate staffing levels to provide good quality services, and the effects of domestic violence in the workplace.
- The agreements serve as a crucial reference point for national authorities and social partners at national, sectoral, and workplace levels, establishing frameworks and principles for regulations and collective bargaining.

Challenges

- The main challenges concern implementation at national and sectoral levels, including in collective bargaining.
- Implementation will depend on the strength of national social partners' structures and the commitment to play an active role in ensuring that all workers benefit from workplace policies and risk assessments, and that these approaches include gender-based and intersectional perspectives.
- A further issue is that measures to monitor and review progress in implementation and share learning and examples of progress need to be emphasised, as this will contribute to the sustainability of the agreements and initiatives implemented.
- While gender issues are effectively addressed in the agreements, based on an identified need and the number of workers affected, other areas of diversity could also be looked at in the future.

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