



Study on sexual harassment in the workplace

Summary of report

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Study on sexual harassment in the workplace - summary of report

Below is a summary of the findings of the representative study on sexual harassment in the workplace. The study was conducted on behalf of the Federal Office for Gender Equality (FOGE) and the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO).

Background and procedure

In 2008, the FOGE and the SECO published data for the first time on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace in German- and French-speaking Switzerland (Strub & Schär Moser, 2008).¹ To continue the evidence-based development of their efforts to combat sexual harassment in the workplace, in 2023, the two federal offices commissioned a new study to gather up-to-date figures, include the viewpoints of employers and find out how much employees and employers know about the subject.

From a legal point of view, the **term** sexual harassment in the workplace refers to gender-based discrimination and is expressly prohibited as such in the Federal Act on Gender Equality (Gender Equality Act, GEA). Further relevant legal bases can be found in the labour law, the civil code, the code of obligations and the criminal code. Employers are legally obliged to protect their employees from sexual harassment in the workplace. All sexual or sexist behaviours occurring in the context of work that are unwanted by the affected persons and perceived as harmful to their personal dignity are considered to be sexual harassment in the workplace. In specific cases, sexual harassment can cover a wide range of behaviours. The working context includes the actual place of work as well as all other places connected to work (e.g. canteen, Christmas party, business trips) as well as work-related contacts outside of working hours (end of the working day, weekends) and with persons outside the company (e.g. clientele, patients and suppliers).

When gathering **empirical data** on sexual harassment in the workplace, it should be borne in mind that each individual interviewed may have their very own set of ideas as to what types of behaviour this includes. For this reason, based on the study from Strub & Schär Moser (2008), a broad approach was chosen that would collect data on both potentially harassing behaviour (sexist and sexual behaviours) and sexual harassment in the workplace in

the legal sense (behaviours that are experienced as harassing). Data on sexual harassment was gathered from **three perspectives**:

- Incidents of potentially harassing behaviour experienced by persons themselves (based on 12 specific types of behaviour).
- Subjective harassment (behaviour that is felt to be sexual harassing or intrusive).
- Observation of potentially harassing behaviour towards another person in the company (third person perspective).

This approach ensures that the topic is not unduly restricted due to the survey instrument being too narrow.

Methodological procedure

Employees answered the survey online (letter with access to online questionnaire). A separate questionnaire was generated for each employee, as different target groups with specific issues were addressed. As the sample source was different for each survey, employees and employers were not recruited from within the same companies. The survey was conducted by a specialised market research institute (M.I.S Trend).

For the **employee survey**, a random sample was drawn from the Federal Statistical Office's (FSO) sampling frame for person and household surveys (SRPH). The drawn sample contained disproportionate stratifications by language region, gender and age in order to ensure there are sufficient case numbers to analyse different sub-groups. The target group encompassed people aged between 16 and 65, who work at least six hours per week as an employee. Altogether, 2,533 people completed the questionnaire.

For the **employer survey**, the random sample came from the FSO's Business and Enterprise Register (BER). Companies with at least 10 people took part in the survey. Within the companies, one person belonging to the board of managers or in charge of human resources was addressed. In order to conduct separate, group-specific analyses, quota characteristics were introduced into the sampling (language region, company size, economic sector). 2,063 companies took part in the survey.

¹ As part of the 'Gender Equality' National Research Programme (NRP 60) a survey was conducted in an identical manner in Ticino (cf. Strub et al., 2013).

Findings of the employee survey

The prevalence of potentially harassing behaviour

Employees taking part in the survey were shown 12 potentially harassing behaviours and asked whether they had experienced any of these in the workplace in the previous 12 months or at any time in their entire working life. More than half (52%) had experienced at least one of the specified sexist or sexual behaviours in the course of their entire working life. Women (58.8%) were more likely to be affected than men (45.9%). In the previous 12 months, around a third of respondents (30.3%) had experienced at least one of the specified sexist or sexual behaviours; among women 34.5% and among men 26.5%. Employees in German-speaking Switzerland were more likely (53%) to report incidents than employees in French-speaking Switzerland (51%) and in the canton of Ticino (44%).

Figure 1: Potentially harassing behaviour



Source: Employee survey

The most frequently experienced **behaviours** are typical derogatory or obscene remarks or jokes and derogatory or lewd comments relating to the person in question. Also relatively common are imposed stories with sexual content, obscene gestures, unwelcome physical contact, wolf-whistling/staring as well as unwanted derogatory or obscene messages or emails. Unwanted invitations with sexual intentions and unwelcome pornographic content achieve medium distribution values, followed by groping/kissing. Sexual coercion and sexual assaults/rapes were the least reported behaviours. Three quarters of the affected persons (74%) reported several such incidents.

Younger employees experienced more incidents in the past 12 months than older ones. Age has a particular influence among women. Analysis of further **characteristics linked to jobs and individuals** showed higher values for people in education and training, assistants and those doing shift work, evening work or extra work. Furthermore, Swiss nationals reported more incidents than employees of

foreign nationality. The differences by nationality are more distinct for men than women.

Potentially harassing incidents at work can affect the **work environment** considerably. Employees' assessment of the work environment is significantly worse if they have experienced sexual or sexist behaviours at their current place of work.

The **economic sectors** with a disproportionate number of incidents of potentially harassing behaviour are the construction sector, the hotel and catering industry, and banks, insurance companies and real estate. Additionally, the transport/information sector for women, and health and social services for men. With regard to the prevalence of individual sexist and sexual behaviours, male-dominated manual, *blue-collar* sectors such as construction or the manufacturing industry and wholesale trade show a broad prevalence of derogatory and obscene remarks, jokes, gestures, leering and pornographic material. In *white-collar* jobs (especially banks, insurance companies and real estate) on the other hand, unwelcome sexual advances, coercion and assault are relatively common. In the health and social services sector and also in education, employees are frequently subject to unwelcome physical advances (e.g. unwelcome physical contact, groping, being kissed against their will). In the hotel and catering industry all types of behaviour occur at a well-above-average rate.

Lastly, there is a strong correlation with **company size**. Employees working in companies employing greater numbers of people are more likely to report incidents of potential harassment.

Location and perpetrators of potentially harassing behaviour

Most incidents take place **in the company** at the person's workplace. Up to a third of unwanted sexist and sexual behaviours occur in the company's shared spaces such as the canteen, break room or communal kitchen. In these spaces, verbal forms of potentially harassing behaviour are common (derogatory or obscene remarks and jokes in general, unwanted stories with sexual content or personal innuendos. Up to a quarter of incidents happen in the company's transit areas (e.g. entrance hall, lift). Among women, the most frequent of these incidents are unwanted staring/wolf-whistling and among men unwelcome physical contact. Sexual and sexist behaviours often take place outside normal working hours or the workplace in the evening or at weekends during company events (e.g. Christmas party, company excursion) and more rarely, on business trips.

Regarding the **professional relationship to the perpetrator**, potentially harassing behaviour most frequently comes from colleagues with the same hierarchical rank. Women (36%) are more likely than men (26%) to report harassment from superiors. Generally speaking, subordinates are rarely the perpetrators of potentially harassing behaviour. Men (7%) however, report incidents with subordinates more frequently than women (4%). Also, people outside the company (e.g. clientele, patients or business partners) are often perpetrators of potentially harassing behaviour. Employees working in sectors where contact with clients or customers is frequent (such as hotel and catering, health care or retail trade) are affected to a greater extent.

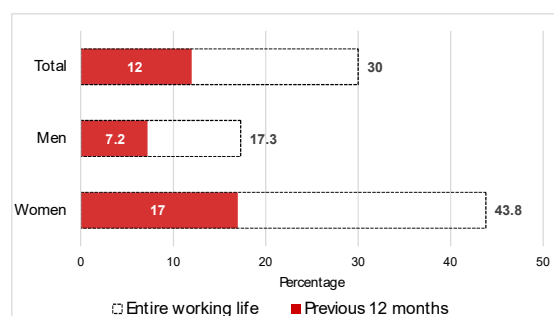
With regard to the **gender of the perpetrators**, overall, potentially harassing behaviour is significantly more often initiated by men and less likely to come from women. Both men (67%) and women (85%) most frequently reported incidents in which one or more men were the perpetrators. Physical assaults on women and men, however, are more frequently committed by the opposite sex. Furthermore, 19% of female respondents and 27% of the male respondents have experienced sexist or sexual behaviours from a mixed-gender group.

Subjective harassment

Another perspective of the topic of sexual harassment in the workplace is subjective harassment. Subjective harassment is crucial in determining whether sexual harassment and therefore discrimination under the Gender Equality Act has taken place. Subjective harassment was registered in the survey in two stages: First, respondents were asked whether they felt sexually harassed by any of the sexual and sexist behaviours presented or by similar incidents in the workplace. If the response was negative, they were asked if they considered these incidents to be intrusive or unpleasant.

In the previous 12 months, 4.6% of respondents said they felt sexually harassed, while 16.6% said this had happened in relation to their entire working lives. In the previous 12 months, a further 7.4% of respondents had experienced relevant incidents that they perceived as intrusive or unpleasant. Over their entire working life, 13.4% said this was the case. If both types of subjective harassment are considered together, over their entire working life, 30% of respondents had experienced sexually harassing and/or intrusive sexist or sexual behaviours. At 43.8%, the proportion of women was considerably higher than that of men with 17.3%. With regard to the previous 12 months, 12% of respondents had experienced sexually harassing and/or intrusive sexist or sexual behaviours.

Figure 2: Subjective harassment



Source: Employee survey

Women showed substantially higher values than men for subjective harassment and **gender-specific differences** could also be seen in how incidents are evaluated: Women are more likely to experience the specified behaviours as sexual harassment (28.1%) than as unpleasant or intrusive (15.7%), while for men, the reverse is true (6.1% vs. 11.2%).

There are no noticeable differences between **language regions**. Subjective harassment varied, however, between the **economic sectors**, although gender also played a role in this. Men working in health and social services, public administration, professional services and education were disproportionately affected. For women, the hotel and catering industry and the manufacturing industry were sectors with above-average values. The overall greater harassment of women compared with men can be seen in all sectors.

Findings for other **characteristics specific to jobs and individuals** show that subjective harassment increases with company size, although the differences by company size are only significant for women. Persons in training and education, assistants and people working shift, evening or night work show above-average values, as do younger employees, with the age-effect being particularly evident for women. With regard to the previous 12 months, around a third (31%) of women aged between 16 and 25 were affected by sexual harassment in the workplace in the legal sense, i.e. in the working context, sexist or sexual behaviours were experienced as harassing or intrusive/unpleasant.

Reactions and consequences

All respondents who reported at least one incident of potential harassment in their working lives so far and/or who said that they had felt subjectively harassed due to this or similar incidents, were asked about the reactions to and consequences of their experience. This concerned 54% of employees participating in the survey.

The most frequent **reaction** to (potentially) harassing incidents was to talk about the experience in one's private sphere (57%) or with work colleagues (51%). Those affected were less likely to turn to their superior (18%) or an external person of confidence (13%) or their personnel officer (9%). It was also relatively common (40%) for those affected to not react to relevant incidents.

41% of employees with (potentially) harassing experiences reported negative **consequences**, with women (51%) being affected by negative consequences much more often than men (29%). The most frequent negative consequences were feelings of shame (20%), worsening of the work environment (19%) and wanting to resign (18%).

Observation of potentially harassing behaviour

A third way to compile information on sexual harassment is the third-person perspective. One in five employees (21%) has observed potentially harassing incidents towards male and female work colleagues at the current place of work. Most frequent were derogatory or lewd comments, jokes, stories or pornographic material (17%). Less common were sexual coercion (1.6%) or sexual assault in the current workplace.

Potentially harassing behaviours toward other people were most frequently observed, and more frequently than the all-sector average, in companies in the following **sectors**: the hotel and catering industry, banks/insurance companies/real estate and health and social services.

When considered by **gender and language region**, women observe incidents more often than men. Overall, respondents from German- and French-speaking Switzerland reported potentially harassing behaviour towards male and female work colleagues more frequently than respondents from Ticino.

Views on how companies deal with the subject of sexual harassment

A large majority of employees (81%) assess their company's handling of the subject of sexual harassment in the workplace positively and consider that sexual harassment is taken seriously by the management board. Only 4% think this is not the case (15% are undecided). However, one in five employees (20%) – women more often than men – think that more should be done in the company to combat sexual harassment in the workplace.

How employees assess the situation in their company is largely dependent on any potentially harassing incidents and company measures to combat sexual harassment. Employees who have experienced

such incidents are more likely to believe that the management board does not take sexual harassment seriously and should do more about it; employees are less likely to hold this opinion in companies with measures in place. Furthermore, assistants are significantly more likely to share this opinion than people in other professional positions, while men and older employees see less need for action than women and younger people. Employees from French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino are much more likely to recognise the need for action than those from German-speaking Switzerland.

Knowledge of rights

In the survey, employees were shown and asked about various aspects of the **legal framework** governing sexual harassment in the workplace. Only one in five participants (20%) knew about all 10 of the rights and obligations presented. This means that the vast majority of employees (80%) has gaps in their knowledge of at least one of the items presented. The biggest gaps shown concerned the right to stay away from work if the protection and support offered by the employer are insufficient (64% have no knowledge of this). Many were also unaware that the employer's prevention obligation also entails protection from harassment in the working context outside of the place of work or working hours (49%) and from people outside of the company such as visitors, clients or patients (30%). A fifth of employees (20%) were not even aware of the employer's prevention obligation and one employed person in ten (11%) did not know that in the event of sexual harassment, superiors, personnel officers or the management board can be informed and an official complaint submitted.

With regard to **characteristics specific to jobs and individuals**, men and employees from German-speaking Switzerland are better informed about the legal provisions. Older employees are also significantly better informed than young ones. However, the knowledge of the youngest age group (16-25 year-olds) tend to be better than that of 26-35 year-olds. The professional position is also relevant. The more management responsibility respondents have, the more likely they are to be informed about rights and obligations. Lastly, employees of companies with measures to combat sexual harassment in the workplace are considerably better informed about all of the legal provisions presented than employees of companies with no such measures.

Findings of the employer survey

Overall thoughts and assessments of the situation in the company

An assessment of the **statements made on sexual harassment in the workplace in general** shows that the majority of employers are sensitive to the subject of sexual harassment in the workplace. Victim blaming is rare (2%), many are aware that both men and women can be affected (87%) and that harassment can also occur without a hierarchical imbalance of power (66%). However, a quarter of employers (25%) were unaware that in the event of transgressions, one's own perception does not necessarily have to coincide with that of the other person. Around one in five employers (19%) also assumes that sexist behaviours do not come under sexual harassment and one in ten employers (11%) thinks that sexual harassment is often just a harmless joke.

Employers were also asked about the **situation in their own company**. The majority assumes that sexual harassment is not a problem in their company (52% said this was absolutely the case and 26% that it was rather so), 18% of employers said they could not exclude it. The other assessments were much more conclusive. A substantial majority (95%) said that sexual harassment in the workplace is taken seriously in their company. 90% indicated that employees know to whom they can turn in the event of sexual harassment. Furthermore, 89% of companies said that superiors know how to react when receiving reports or complaints. 14% of employers thought that more should be done in their own company to prevent incidents of sexual harassment.

More than half of employers (56%) assume that at least one category of potentially harassing behaviour occurs in their company. According to the employers' assessments, the most frequent **incidents** are derogatory or lewd remarks, jokes, stories or messages.

A fifth of the employers participating (20%) know of **reports of sexual harassment** in their company. 15% know of a single report, 5% of several. The percentage rises with the size of the company. In companies with more than 200 employees, 62% of employers are aware of at least one such report. The percentages of employers aware of such reports are higher in German- (21%) and French-speaking Switzerland (19%) than in Ticino (10%). There are distinct differences between the economic sectors. The highest proportion concerns nursing homes and hospitals with 46%, the lowest is seen in the construction sector (8%).

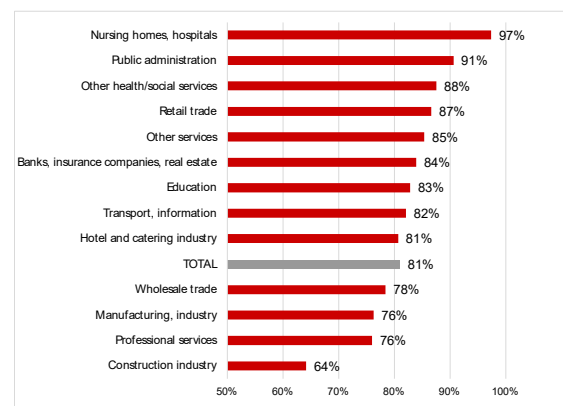
Company measures

81% of companies have implemented measures to combat sexual harassment in the workplace. This means that almost one in five companies have no prevention or intervention measures in place. Around two-thirds of these companies inform employees about these specific measures; the remaining third has no specific in-house communication in this regard.

More than half of companies make available in-house or external persons of confidence and support services (56%), have adopted a zero-tolerance approach toward sexual harassment in their company policy or regulations (54%) or have rules governing procedure in the event of complaints/reports (51%). Less frequent measures are training for superiors, executives and the HR department (37%), awareness raising among employees (31%), regulations on protection measures after an incident has been investigated (30%) or the availability of specific information material (leaflets and brochures, etc.) on the subject (29%). A good quarter of companies have adopted the other two measures included in the survey (spatial measures and monitoring).

In companies in Ticino, measures to combat sexual harassment are overall less frequent than in the other **language regions**. Awareness-raising measures among employees and training of superiors, managers or personnel officers are more common in companies in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland than in German-speaking Switzerland.

Figure 3: Company measures



Source: Employer survey

The rate of companies with measures varies considerably by **company size and sector**. Three-quarters of companies with 10-19 employees (75%), and all companies with over 200 employees have at least one specific company measure to combat sexual harassment in the workplace. Nursing homes and hospitals (97%) and public administration (91%) are

the sectors in which company measures are most widely found. At 64%, the construction sector has the lowest percentage of companies with measures.

Knowledge of legal obligations

Employers assessed a series of statements about the rights and obligations related to sexual harassment in the workplace. Nine in ten employers are aware of the general duty of care and the protection of employees in the event of a report of sexual harassment. A large majority of employers (87%) also know of the obligation to intervene immediately when sexual harassment is reported. Around four in five companies (81%) know that the intentions of the perpetrator of sexual harassment are irrelevant. 70% of employers also know that they are obliged to protect employees from harassment by people outside of the company. Only half as many (34%) are aware that they may also be responsible in the event of sexual harassment in the context of employees' private contacts. Just under two-thirds of employers (63%) realise that they must be able to prove that they have fulfilled their duty of prevention in the event of legal proceedings. A minority of employers (15%) assessed all statements correctly. This means that 85% of employers lack knowledge in at least one of the items covered by the survey on the rights and duties relating to sexual harassment in the workplace.

As far as the **language regions** are concerned, employers in French-speaking Switzerland are better informed on almost all items than employers from German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. With one exception, companies in the latter region are less aware of the legal framework than those in German-speaking Switzerland.

With regard to the **economic sectors**, knowledge of most of the legal provisions is well below average in the construction sector. In manufacturing and industry, the proportion of companies with such knowledge is also often below the sector average. Knowledge about many aspects of the legal situation is also below average in the education sector. Sectors with above-average knowledge are banks, insurance companies, real estate, public administration and the health sector in nursing homes and hospitals.

Knowledge also varies by **company size**. Employers from larger companies assessed all of the statements on the legal framework correctly. Furthermore, the legal bases were better known if respondents had already encountered reports of sexual harassment or if they worked in companies with measures to combat sexual harassment in the workplace.

Closing remarks

The extent, type and progression of sexual harassment in the workplace

To gather information about sexual harassment in the workplace, **three approaches** were used: potentially harassing behaviour, subjective harassment and the third-person perspective. These give rise to varying prevalence rates and answer different questions, while remaining related to one another.

From a legal point of view, **subjective harassment** is the relevant yardstick for the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace. At the same time, it is irrelevant whether the person concerned labelled sexist or sexual behaviours as sexual harassment or whether they experienced them as unpleasant/intrusive. From this perspective, around a third of employees (30%) had already been affected once in their working life by sexual harassment in the workplace, women (43.8%) much more often than men (17.3%). Regarding the previous 12 months, this figure was 12% (women: 17%, men: 7.2%).

Prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace is relevant not only to subjective harassment but also to the prevalence of **potentially harassing behaviour**. Potentially harassing behaviour is more prevalent than subjective harassment. According to this perspective, more than half (52%) of those surveyed have experienced at least one of the sexist or sexual behaviours in question in their entire working life to date. Here too, women (58.8%) are affected more often than men (45.9%). In the past 12 months, around a third of respondents (30.3%) have experienced at least one of the sexist or sexual behaviours surveyed; among women 34.5% and among men 26.5%. Unwanted sexist and sexual behaviours have a far-reaching impact on the work environment and job satisfaction and are a risk factor for sexual harassment in the legal sense. The experience of potentially harassing behaviour can have negative consequences for many employees. It often leads to deterioration of the work environment with employees frequently saying that they wish to resign. More than half of employees who experience sexist or sexual behaviours rate them as harassing or unpleasant/intrusive and are therefore affected by sexual harassment in workplace in the legal sense.

The third approach to sexual harassment in the workplace – the **observation of potentially harassing incidents** – tends to show the lowest prevalence. Around a fifth of employees (21%) has observed relevant incidents towards male and female work colleagues at their current place of work. With regard to serious transgressions (sexual coercion or assault), a similar prevalence is seen for both

observed and personally experienced occurrences. Employees who have experienced potentially harassing behaviour themselves, are more likely (36%) to observe such incidents towards male and female colleagues than those who have not (5%). Conversely, 89% of employees who have observed potentially harassing situations in their company have had similar experiences themselves. The clear correlation between personally experienced and observed incidents could on the one hand be due to greater awareness of the persons concerned. On the other hand, it could be an indication of a sexualised work environment, in which certain ways of behaving are common and therefore affect a greater number of employees in the company.

To highlight any **changes over time**, the findings on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace were compared with the surveys from the 2007/08 (German- and French-speaking Switzerland, Strub & Schär Moser, 2008) and 2013 (Ticino, Strub et al., 2013). In this context it should be pointed out that the previous studies conducted telephone interviews, which are known to result in up to 50% lower prevalence rates (e.g. Laaksonen & Heiskanen, 2013; Guedj et al., 2022).

The analyses show that sexist and sexual behaviours in the workplace have tended to become less frequent when compared with previous years. However, such incidents are more likely to be experienced by employees as sexually harassing or unpleasant/intrusive. A change in the perception and interpretation of sexist and unwanted sexual behaviours would also explain why subjective harassment, despite a decline in potentially harassing incidents, is estimated to have remained constant and subjectively experienced sexual harassment has even increased. The strong correlation between the experience of sexist and sexual behaviours and a declining appreciation of the work environment could also indicate that a shift has taken place in the perception of and opinions on such incidents.

With regard to the likelihood of being affected according to various characteristics specific to the individual and to jobs, overall patterns have remained very similar. Women continue to be affected by sexual harassment in the workplace to a greater extent than men. However, harassment is also more frequent towards men. The same vulnerable groups of employees continue to be affected as are sectors with an above-average prevalence. Differences between language regions have tended to become more homogeneous.

Knowledge of rights and obligations and company measures

Both employees and employers display considerable gaps in their **knowledge of the legal framework** governing sexual harassment in the workplace. Gaps in the knowledge of employers are particularly relevant as they have a duty of care to fulfil. There is a need to raise awareness and provide information regarding what constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace as well as regarding employers' responsibilities. Employers' lack of knowledge should, however, also be addressed because in some circumstances, this may be preventing affected persons from taking action against harassment.

As was previously the case, one in five companies have no prevention or intervention measures in place with regard to sexual harassment in the workplace. Where company measures do exist, employees are often insufficiently informed about them, or the measures seem to be ineffective for some other reason. It is quite common for affected persons not to react to sexual harassment in the workplace. Potentially harassing incidents are seldom reported to superiors, personnel officers or support services. If a report is made, many affected persons feel the level of support is insufficient.

Recommendations

Recommendations have been made on the basis of the employee and employer surveys and have been clarified and validated by experts from research and practice. The recommendations concern three areas of action:

1) Prevention: For targeted prevention efforts, sexual harassment in the workplace needs to be recognised as a structural problem. There is a need for persons in positions of responsibility within the company to receive comprehensive training and awareness raising. Employers should adopt a clear-cut zero-tolerance policy, act by example and provide employees at all levels with information and training on an ongoing basis. Highly client-based sectors must also raise awareness among external people. The workplace culture should be a core component of prevention efforts. A broad alliance with trade unions, associations and the media strengthen prevention efforts. Lastly, it is recommended to take guidance from examples of good practice.

2) Intervention For effective intervention, structures should be created that enable affected persons to report incidents and receive support. It is important not to pass responsibility on to the affected person and not to individualise the problem.

Employers should put a clear framework in place and ensure that the people receiving reports are able to react appropriately and that perpetrators are held accountable. The focus should be on low-threshold interventions by prioritising internal investigations over formal procedures. Lastly, legal adjustments to alleviate the burden of proof and sanctions for breaches of regulations should be examined.

3) A need for research: For prevention and intervention efforts to be effective, additional insights in some areas would be useful. Needs assessments should be carried out particularly in SMEs, to identify specific requirements and to provide custom-built solutions to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace. Furthermore, existing regulations should be assessed and where necessary adapted to ensure their effectiveness. In-depth analysis of gender-specific and cultural differences is essential to better understand varying prevalence rates of sexual harassment in the workplace.

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