

# Preventive work against sexual harassment in Swedish and Nordic working life

A summary

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## Summary

This research overview is a summary of a Swedish report. It summarizes and analyses research on preventive work against sexual harassment in the workplace, in Sweden and the other Nordic countries. The full report in Swedish can be found on the website of Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, University of Gothenburg. The purpose of the research overview is to collect research-based knowledge about how the occurrence and consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace can be prevented. Due to the relative scarcity of relevant research data regarding Swedish and Nordic working life, complementary studies have been included in the research overview. These studies are more immediately focused on preventive measures, and are either sourced from the field of education, or from geographical contexts beyond the Nordic area. In the research overview, they are presented in a Best practice segment. The core results of the research overview are summarized below, followed by a brief reflection.

## Preventive work against sexual harassment in Swedish and Nordic working life

The most striking result of this research overview, is the abject lack of research focusing mainly on preventive work against sexual harassment in Swedish and Nordic working life. Instead, prevention of sexual harassment is frequently a subordinate issue in relation to the main focus of any studies. Studies that directly investigate the effects of preventive methods or working methods are virtually absent. This corresponds to the state of international research, despite the presence of a more established, international research field. Definitions of sexual harassment and similar concepts tend to be brief, and the use of such concepts in the studies is often vaguely defined. This causes difficulty in making generalized conclusions about results and effects. Preventive work is rarely subject to any in-depth description, which in turn leads to obscurity about what to actually prevent, or how to do it. This, too, obstructs the drawing of general conclusions about results and effects.

Recommendations regarding preventive measures are more frequently issued on an organizational level than on an individual level, but the meaning of any suggested efforts frequently remains relatively unclear, since the efforts are not described in any greater detail. Policy is mentioned repeatedly in several studies, but the descriptions vary a great deal, from effective to ineffective, and also negative. Several studies show that women develop strategies in order to avoid sexual harassment in the

workplace, including social isolation, complete avoidance of certain social gatherings, or by actively abstaining from certain options regarding their chosen line of work.

## Bystander programs in North America and preventive work in Swedish schools

In the publications that have undergone close reading, there are studies showing that students taking part in bystander programs are less likely to sympathise with any values that endorse sexual violence, and have less tendency to display acceptance for abuse in relationships. Studies also show that students at universities offering bystander programs have reported a lesser amount of exposure to sexual harassment and stalking. Manual-based methods failing to draw on any analysis of local circumstances and needs have proven ineffective in anti-bullying efforts undertaken in Swedish schools. It is suggested, instead, that preventive working methods used by individual schools are built on local observations and analyses of needs, based on gender, among other factors.

## Organizational perspectives

There is research-based indications suggesting that preventive work must be based on in-depth understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, and that any methods used should be adapted depending on their purpose. Lectures may be used to expand knowledge, but in order to alter behaviours and skills, more interactive approaches are suggested. Instead of targeting individuals with analyses and solutions, it is proposed that the organizational level is included in both analysis and solution, starting from a wide-angle description of problems, taking into account factors that potentially contribute to a favourable organizational environment, such as HR processes and practices, leadership, reward systems, transparency, and any stratifications in status. Studies also show that leadership is vital in preventive work, and that supportive leadership has an effect on motivation within any transformative work.

## Summary reflection

The conclusion of the research overview is that the studies included, focusing on preventive work in Swedish and Nordic working life, should rather be considered to form the outline of a research gap. The lack of any direct examinations of the prevention of sexual harassment in Swedish and Nordic working life is striking, and suggests a great need for additional, research-based knowledge. The recommendations for preventive work highlighted by existing studies are rarely specific or comprehensive, which indicates the need for future studies to explicitly investigate the effects of various strategies and working methods, preferably involving a comparative perspective, in order to establish scientific evidence of the possibilities of preventing sexual harassment in the workplace. The current, research-based knowledge about preventive work in Swedish and Nordic working life, therefore, is ambiguous. For example, policy is touched upon by several studies, but there is no unambiguous idea of the merits of policy. Rather, various aspects of the use of policy within working life are problematized, highlighting positive and negative aspects and effects alike. One conclusion to make is that policy in itself is not enough as a preventive measure. Instead, policy should be established with the greatest possible thought and care.

The studies included in the overview offer insight into the terms of working life and sexual harassment as phenomena, which may be used to augment the understanding of sexual harassment, thereby laying a foundation for preventive work in the field. Knowledge about different strategies used by women to avoid sexual harassment is important, for instance in order to create an understanding of what is required to establish equal opportunity in the workplace. Knowing the importance of leadership in this matter is important when designing leadership training. Knowledge about the far-reaching effects of normalization processes connected to the nature of the work and the workplace culture on the occurrence of sexual harassment is important in the developing of working methods. Despite the obvious need for additional, research-based knowledge within this field, the studies in the segment on Best practice, along with the studies in the chapter on preventive work in Swedish and Nordic working life contribute vital research-based knowledge to the preventive work against sexual harassment in the workplace.



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