

## Sexually harassed at work

A brief overview of the research in the Nordic countries





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Sexual harassment is a major social problem in working life in the Nordic countries, which the #MeToo calls for action in autumn 2017 demonstrated in particular. Since then, the Nordic countries have highlighted the issue of sexual harassment at the national and international levels. But even though the issue has been in focus in recent years, the problem remains. People continue to be subjected to sexual harassment in workplaces throughout the Nordic countries.

In 2019, the Nordic Council of Ministers initiated a research initiative intended to boost knowledge about sexual harassment in the Nordic countries. The Nordic Council of Ministers' cooperative body for gender issues, Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), was commissioned to produce a research overview that would form the basis for this research initiative. The report *Sexually harassed at work – An overview of the research in the Nordic countries* is based on a systematic review of the research literature from the Nordic countries in the period 2014–2019. The report outlines our current knowledge about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries and identifies key knowledge gaps where more research is needed to resolutely address the problem.

The report charts how sexual harassment takes different forms in the workplace depending on the occupation. By bringing together studies from different occupations, industries and sectors this research overview contributes insights into the specific contexts of different occupations but also contributes a cross-sectoral picture of sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries.

Regardless of the industry investigated, the consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace are devastating for both individuals and organisations. Some common consequences are mental ill-health, sickness absence, diminished career opportunities, and burdensome staff turnover as a result of terminations.

But vulnerability to sexual harassment varies depending on who you are and where you work. The report highlights, among other things, the need for more knowledge about how your vulnerability to sexual harassment is affected by being a woman with a migrant background or by being functionally diverse. However, in the Nordic context, the intersectional perspective is often lacking in the analyses.

Similar gaps in knowledge exist concerning which occupational groups are most often impacted. Over the past year, the Nordic countries, like the rest of the world, have tried in various ways to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. One way has been to draw up lists of health, communication, and management functions that are particularly important during a pandemic. These included occupational groups within health and social care, education, and healthcare professionals in the front line. In many of these female-dominated occupational groups, vulnerability to sexual harassment is also great. In an international study that included the Nordic countries, one third of all nurses responded that they had been sexually harassed. What else don't we know about sexual harassment in different groups and industries?

This publication is a shorter version of the report *Sexually harassed at work – An overview of the research in the Nordic countries*. The purpose of this publication is to briefly present the current knowledge about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries, while also making apparent the gaps in that knowledge.

# What do we know about sexual harassment?

The research shows that sexual harassment is a comprehensive and cross-sectoral problem within the workplace. In 2017, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted a large-scale, comparative interview study with 42,000 women between the ages of 18 and 74 in 28 EU countries. The overall results show that 55 per cent of women had experienced sexual harassment at some time during their lives, with 21 per cent having experienced sexual harassment in the last twelve months. While the study did not relate specifically to the workplace, it does give an indication of the extent of the problem. Women in Sweden, Denmark and Finland reported the highest prevalence. At the same time, under-reporting and a culture of silence in workplaces make it difficult to know how prevalent the phenomenon is.

Research shows that it is women who are most often sexually harassed. Younger women are more often sexually harassed than older women. The perpetrators are mostly men. The identity of the perpetrator varies depending on the industry or occupation.

In industries such as the performing arts, sports, the forest industry, and the professional armed forces, most often the perpetrator is a superior or colleague. In health and care occupations and in the hospitality sector, it is most often patients or customers or guests, but superiors and colleagues also do figure among the perpetrators. In occupations in public administration, such as the

police force and the teaching profession, it is citizens, clients, superiors, and colleagues. In academia and organisational occupations, sexual harassment is perpetrated by students, colleagues and superiors including supervisors.

This is important knowledge to have when designing and developing preventive efforts, and because the consequences for the victim can be different depending on the perpetrator's position – a colleague or manager, patient, customer, or client.

## Different systems of power may act simultaneously

Sexual harassment is often explained as being about superiority or inferiority within an organisational hierarchy, men's domination of women, and the prevailing masculinity and femininity norms within the society. The research field focuses on patriarchal structures, heteronormativity, and masculinity norms.

However, the thorny aspect of harassment, where power and privilege seem to operate simultaneously, is that they can be expressed in many different ways. However, the international research field indicates that how harassment, power and privilege are described is relatively static, which is indicative of how knowledge about sexual harassment is formulated and reformulated. A western, white, middle-class and academic gender-based understanding of systems of power takes precedence. It's just about gender, age, and educational back-

ground. There are often no perspectives that render homophobia, racism, disablism and other power hierarchies visible, even though these also affect workplace cultures and the risks of being sexually harassed.

Research in the Nordic countries shows that

homophobia, racism, disablism, hate and threats against religious minorities and other forms of repression are significant for how people are perceived and treated in the workplace. In a Norwegian study of the hospitality sector, immigrant women and men are highlighted as some of the most frequently harassed sexually in the workplace, but there has been no development of knowledge around this fact. Instead, there is a striking silence in the research field and a 'colour blindness' concerning different categories of women and men, their backgrounds, and whether any grounds of discrimination besides gender and age apply to them. Studies of sexual harassment include predominantly white men and women and those that fall outside these categories are described as "other groups" with "other rates of harassment" than the majority population. This masks who these other groups are in the workplace in the Nordic countries, the prevalence of sexual harassment for them, and how sexual harassment is experienced from the perspectives of these individuals and groups.

### Sexual harassment - a form of violence

Sexual harassment is an aspect of sexual violence and an effect of the gendered power structure, The effects of sexual harassment can be physical and psychological. A Finnish study explored sexual harassment as emotional violence. It identified work-related violence as often emotional in nature and involving feelings of shame among victims. For example, it is common for victims to blame themselves and internalise a negative self-image based on the behaviour of the perpetrator.

Other aspects, such as consent, are rarely problematised in the research on sexual harassment.

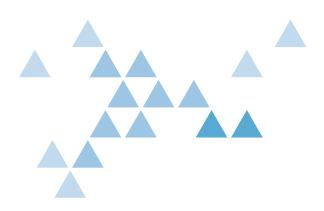
According to some studies, consent is more multi-layered than a yes or a no, since sexual harassment is often a process of trust-building, frequent contact, and transgressions of boundaries. It is often difficult to prove that sexual harassment has occurred or is occurring, because the words and actions of the perpetrator are subtle.

## The importance of the workplace culture

Today, responsibility for preventing and combating sexual harassment in the workplace lies with management and employers. According to the legislation in the Nordic countries, it is their responsibility to ensure that employees are not subjected to sexual harassment and, if it does occur, to act. But what actually does occur in organisation and workplace cultures in the Nordic countries is a relatively unexplored area. The studies that exist show that the structures which make sexual harassment possible within organisations tend to make individuals, rather than the organisation, responsible for the harassment. There are also studies which show that sexual harassment policies within organisations are there to protect the organisation rather than individuals.

In the research, responsibility is written about much more than just that employers and leaders of organisations have employer responsibilities.

Management and employers, however, easily become vague terms that do not make it apparent that it is in fact individuals who are responsible for



the workplaces they manage. Consequently, who is to take responsibility when it comes to sexual harassment, and what that responsibility is for, is rarely enlarged upon.

There are rarely policies in workplaces for how to deal with perpetrators or what the nature of support structures for victims should be like. International research shows that a workplace culture that is permissive in relation to sexual harassment can have a greater impact on employee attitudes and behaviours than the organisation's formal rules and guidelines. Therefore, a ban on sexual harassment does not necessarily mean that changes will occur in practice. However, international research shows that bystanders - people who witness when others, such as colleagues, are sexually harassed - can have an important role to play in reducing the incidence of sexual harassment. However this is conditional on access to education, known as bystander programmes, which aim to get witnesses to intervene when sexual harassment occurs.



## Examples from industries

The industry, the individual's tasks and working conditions play a role in what form sexual harassment takes place. This has been demonstrated by studies of different industries in the Nordic countries. The conditions are different depending on whether the body and the physical work of the employee are the main tools used, whether social relationships feature strongly in the work, or whether the work is less physical and tied more to office tasks.

## **Physical work**

In certain occupations, the body and physical work are the main tools of work; examples are the theatre, performing arts and sports. In these occupations, the body is what creates the aesthetics and the strength that are essential to the performance of the work. In these industries, physical contact is normalised and the prevalence of sexual harassment is high since the tasks often involve going beyond the physical boundaries of professional relationships. A big Norwegian study that investigated the incidence of sexual harassment in the film, television, performing arts, music and computer games industries shows that one third of the respondents (4752 actors in the industries) have been subjected to sexual harassment during their careers. Women are more often harassed than men, but men are also sexually harassed. The perpetrators are men in leadership positions or colleagues. Dancers, actors and set designers are the groups most frequently harassed.

Seven out of ten do not report the incidents for fear that it will impact their work situation negatively.

In the world of sport, the perpetrator is usually a coach and male, and also very often older than the victim. The relationship between coach and athlete therefore constitutes a risk factor. The relationship can be formal and superficial but also personal and intimate, and this constitutes a risk factor when the coach uses their expertise to instruct the athlete in directly physical ways and the boundaries between a focus on the body and body contact become blurred. According to these studies, consent is more complex than a yes or no, and sexual harassment often constitutes a process of trust-building over time, more frequent contact and ultimately boundary crossing.

### Work with client contact

Police, teachers and social workers are examples of occupations in the public sector where employees are in a kind of in-between position. They have some form of bureaucratic responsibility and influence over their clients, while also being in direct contact with them.

The research shows that in social services, which is traditionally a sector dominated by female employees, the male norm may still be predominant and risk undermining the credibility of women who are sexually harassed and report it. An analysis of the testimonies that were part of the

Swedish #MeToo call for action #orosanmälan for social workers shows how young women's bodies are objectified by primarily older men's sexualised practices. In the police force, men instead dominate among employees. An Icelandic study shows that it is ten times more common for women to be subjected to sexual harassment than men in the police force in Iceland. The perpetrators were men who were the victims' supervisors. A violent environment can normalise violent behaviour. such as in the police force, where violence is part of the job, and the boundaries between exclusion mechanisms such as bullying and sexual harassment become blurred. The study claims that the organisational violence that exists within the police force remains in order to exclude women and include men.

### Work with patient/customer contact

Both international and Nordic research shows that care work entails a high risk of being subjected to unwelcome sexual behaviours. Nursing is a particularly high-risk occupation for sexual harassment. An international research review which includes 136 studies of exposure to violence in the nursing profession worldwide, including the Nordic countries, shows that roughly one in three nurses have been subjected to sexual harassment. The perpetrators are usually patients who subject nurses to physical violence, and colleagues who harass nurses verbally and sexually. The research review shows that harassment is most widespread in psychiatry, and secondly in hospitals.

Three Norwegian studies based on surveys of members of different trade unions show that employees in the health and care sector suffer more sexual harassment than those in other sectors. A range of factors affect vulnerability, one of which is the overriding logic that patient/client satisfaction comes first. If the patient is mentally ill, boundaries can easily be crossed. In the words of a health and care employee: "Men with dementia who have a sex fixation and want to have sex with young girls

in the evening/at bedtime. Men who masturbate in the shower when we are helping them wash. Kisses on the cheek. Holding us tight and hugging."

In work that is based on social relations, the place where harassment occurs may also be a risk factor and influence how behaviour is perceived. In home help services, the employee is often at the patient's home, and it may then be difficult to pinpoint where the boundary is between inappropriate sexual behaviour by a patient and the professional responsibility of the care worker.

Another vulnerable group is employees in the hospitality sector. Just like in health and care occupations, employees in this sector state that sexual harassment is part of the culture at work, which has resulted in job dissatisfaction and various psycho-social consequences. In both sectors there is a high proportion of workers with an ethnic minority background. An intersectional approach is needed to study harassment that is also based on ethnicity and skin colour. A Norwegian study of trade union members in both the health and care sector and the hospitality sector shows this.

However, there are a few significant differences between the sectors. Employees in the health and care sector have a relatively high average age in comparison with employees in the hospitality sector, who have a low average age. In addition, alcohol and intoxicated persons are part of the risk factors of the work in the hospitality sector.



## Academic and organisational occupations

In academic and organisational occupations, the work is characterised by non-physical tasks and the body has no great importance for being able to perform the tasks involved in the job. On the other hand, the body can be objectified within such occupations and be the object of ideals in terms of functionality/disability, aesthetics and beauty in a specific sector or a particular profession.

In academia, outdated gendered hierarchies are common, in which men hold higher positions than women and women are not admitted to the collaborations that could further their careers. For doctoral students, a good relationship with their supervisor may be one of the most important investments for success in their studies, but the power imbalance in the relationship may also constitute a risk factor. Studies also show that sexual harassment may be the reason why young people do not want to pursue a career in academia.

## What are the sources of our knowledge?

Our knowledge about sexual harassment is largely based on prevalence studies. These are studies that have measured how prevalent and widespread sexual harassment is at a certain point in time. However, there are also interview studies that give an in-depth picture of the victims' perspectives. Both types of studies are needed for breadth and variety in our knowledge. In both prevalence studies and interview studies, women constitute a bigger share of the samples, and the evidence is remarkably homogeneous with regard to the grounds of discrimination of 'gender' and 'age'.

In studies that use testimonies from the #MeToo movement as their empirical basis, it is apparent that personal stories contribute a richness of detail and provide a broader empirical foundation. These testimonies function as a window on the concrete expressions of sexual harassment in people's working lives in different sectors. These kinds of studies reveal what lies behind the behaviours that are clustered into categories in prevalence studies.

In the research field, there is in general an imbalance in what occupations, industries and sectors have been investigated. One observation is that occupations in certain industries in the public sector are studied more frequently and that occupations in industries in the private sector are investigated less frequently. There is also a focus in the research on vulnerable individuals and groups, while there are virtually no studies of perpetrators, or the individuals who witness others being harassed, so called bystanders.

### **Definitions of terms**

Research on sexual harassment has its origins in the law and in American feminism in the 1970s, as a means for women themselves to formulate the problem of men's economic and sexual dominance over women. In the Nordic countries, the term has been used since the 1980s. The legislation in each country contains definitions of sexual harassment, focuses on the employer's responsibility to create a work environment that is free from sexual harassment, and sets out the employer's obligation to actively combat discrimination and to promote equal rights.

One challenge in the research field, which also has an impact on our knowledge, is the lack of a common definition of sexual harassment. This is due in part because the focus of studies oscillates between the victim's experience of unwelcome sexual attention, the perpetrator's behaviour, and the legal criteria. Examples of behaviour can range from requests to socialise to insults, ridicule, threats, sexual propositions, and physical assault. There are also no clear boundaries in relation to other phenomena such as violence, bullying and harassment more generally; violence directed against persons on the basis of normative ideas of femininity and masculinity; sexual violence and lack of consent; and gender inequality in the labour market. These phenomena often intersect each other rather than exist side by side, which is rarely reflected in the research field.

There is no common definition, but that does not mean there is no common understanding of what sexual harassment is in certain circumstances. An early definition was formulated by MacKinnon in 1979: "the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power". Another common definition, based on the legislation in the EU and in the Nordic countries is "... any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature".

Common to the definitions is that certain types of conduct are unwelcome, but the fact that the formulations are so general allows great scope for interpretation. For example, neither of the definitions above list any specific behaviours. None of these definitions cover the structural aspects of potential causes of why sexual harassment occurs.

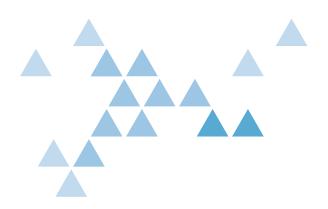
The problem with an overly general definition of sexual harassment is that the results of different studies then become difficult to compare. On the other hand, too precise a definition risks diminishing the effects of words and actions that are interpreted and perceived as sexual harassment, but which do not fit into the legal definitions of the term. All in all, how we define sexual harassment affects our knowledge of the phenomenon. The existing definitions can therefore be seen as important springboards and opportunities for the development of the term.

### Binary understanding of gender

The research field is characterised by a binary understanding of gender and power, and the collective knowledge internationally is that women are most often the victims and men are the perpetrators and that young women are sexually harassed more often than older women.

In the research field, these patterns are often described in terms of men's power and women's vulnerability linked to the grounds of discrimination of sex and age. The reasons for this phenomenon are also explained by the concept of gender, which makes it clear that there may be norms within organisations and workplace cultures that permit men's insulting treatment of women.

This binary understanding of gender is also expressed in the studies being based on the existence of only two genders. Women and men are often portrayed in a traditional and unproblematised way, with heterosexuality as the norm. For example, women and men are divided into two complementary categories, and are assumed to be sexually attracted to each other. The assumption is that men harass women, and that both parties are heterosexual. In such a context, sexual harassment of people who do not conform to the heterosexual norm, such as LGBTQI people, is rendered invisible.



## What do we need to know more about?

The report Sexually harassed at work – An overview of the research in the Nordic countries identifies a number of knowledge gaps – areas where we need to know more in order to get to the bottom of the problem of sexual harassment. These are:

Under-reporting and a culture of silence A culture of silence and under-reporting are recurring problems when it comes to sexual harassment. This is despite the fact that prevalence studies – and the #MeToo calls for action – so clearly show the magnitude of the phenomenon.

Under-reporting affects the knowledge that we have. If only a few of those who are sexually harassed report it, the number of unreported cases is necessarily large and such a large number compromises the overall figures. More knowledge is needed here because we cannot make assumptions about what this silence and non-reporting of cases actually signifies.

According to international research, fewer reports of sexual harassment are made within small organisations, which may exemplify that employees in such organisations feel insecure and thus do not report this harassment, and this poses challenges for organisations in terms of confidentiality and privacy. The silence of sexually harassed individuals may also be an expression of women's resistance strategies and an expression of a lack of confidence in systems that are purported to protect victims, but which in practice do not. The culture of silence and under-reporting also applies to the fact that men are not only perpetrators. There are

also men who are sexually harassed at work, and there are also women and men who are harassed by a member of the same sex.

### Prevention and preventive efforts

There is currently no research on prevention and efforts to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. One aspect of this lack of knowledge about preventive efforts is that there is some uncertainty concerning how sexual harassment ought to be defined and interpreted, and this in turn can lead to attempts to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace remaining feeble.

Knowledge about concrete proposals for preventive efforts that promote gender equality and bring to light discriminatory actions that pass under the radar in the workplace is also needed. Based on the research that exists, we know that this is key since workplaces with systematic work environment management have a greater capacity to change women's working lives in practice than legal documents and policies have. Concrete suggestions for preventive efforts today constitute a knowledge gap within the research field.

## Perpetrators and bystanders

The research focuses on individuals' victimisation and on vulnerability factors in the workplace.

Norms, values and power imbalances in specific occupations and sectors/industries are described, as are situations where individuals describe experiences of being sexually harassed in the

workplace. However, there is a lack of studies about perpetrators, and therefore we risk not finding out about what factors might lead to sexual harassment.

Some of the studies indicate if the perpetrator is a superior, colleague or patient/client/customer. However there are few analyses that deepen our understanding of who the perpetrator is otherwise, for example, based on variables that usually describe the victim, such as age, sex, and ethnicity.

There is also a lack of studies of bystanders, that is, those who see others being harassed. Bystanders may have different reactions and different functions. They may be people who can intervene when sexual harassment occurs, or provide support; they may be traumatised by witnessing sexual harassment; or they may be people who directly or indirectly provide support to perpetrators. Bystanders can also be harassed if they tell others about what they have witnessed. Bystander programmes in the form of training courses which seek to encourage witnesses to intervene when sexual harassment occurs are, according to international research, an effective way to reduce the incidence of sexual harassment.

Knowledge about perpetrators and bystanders can contribute more multifaceted knowledge about the incidence of sexual harassment. With very little knowledge about perpetrators and about bystanders, those who suffer sexual harassment appear in the research to be alone throughout the whole process, and this knowledge risks becoming one-sided. Studies of perpetrators and of bystanders could contribute more perspectives on sexual harassment as interpersonal acts and about the motives behind such acts, as well as about the structures that enable the phenomenon. They therefore represent a major and important knowledge gap in the field of research.

## Working conditions and terms of employment as risk factors for harassment

The risks of being subjected to sexual harassment as a result of one's terms of employment and working conditions need to be investigated more. Short-term and temporary contracts – forms of employment that are currently common in many industries – are examples of risk factors that create dependency relationships and power imbalances between employees, employers, and clients.

In recent decades, the status and form of the Nordic model has undergone changes, and has shifted from having large public sectors to the 1990's 'marketisation' of industries and sectors in the Nordic countries' welfare systems. In health care, for example, precarious employment in the form of temporary replacement jobs or temporary replacement by the hour, is commonplace. These forms of work, where the employee can be replaced at any time, create power imbalances. Another example of what is described today as a major problem for gender equality and a sense of security in the labour market is the gig economy. The gig economy is a rapidly growing form of very short-term precarious employment and availability of goods and services in the labour market.

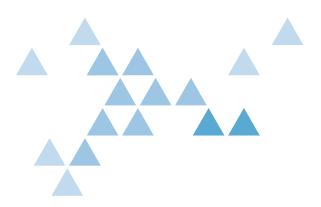
But even when the terms of employment are secure in some occupations, the working environment can be a precariousness factor due to the nature of the tasks. Working conditions and terms of employment are thus important aspects of sexual harassment victimisation that we need to learn more about.

## Intersectional perspectives

Statistical studies show that there are considerable differences between majority and minority population groups in the Nordic countries when it comes to access to the labour market, working conditions, and terms of employment. To focus solely on gender and age can therefore lead to a

fragmentation of knowledge about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries. To understand sexual harassment in the workplace, we need knowledge of how gender, age, ethnicity and skin colour, functionality, sexual identity and other systems of power interact. Today, this knowledge is very limited.

International research overviews show that thus far such perspectives are lacking in the research field of sexual harassment in the workplace – with a few exceptions. These exceptions are rarely connected to the Nordic context, but concern mainly minority groups in North America. Intersectional perspectives on harassment would add knowledge about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries.



## Concluding remarks

Sexual harassment is a widespread social problem that mainly affects women. It occurs daily in the workplace all over the Nordic countries: after the rehearsal of the play, in the meeting with the patient at the hospital, or in the supervision of academic studies. And the effects are devastating – for individuals and organisations alike.

We need knowledge in order to implement the right initiatives. The report Sexually harassed at work – An overview of the research in the Nordic countries is based on a systematic review of the research literature from the Nordic countries in the period 2014–2019. This report is highly topical: it deals with what remains a burning issue. It shows that victimisation varies according to industry, and gives insights into the specific problems of different occupational groups. The report also makes apparent the gaps in our knowledge.

Working conditions as well as terms of employment have an impact on the risk of sexual harassment, but to what extent? Further investigation is needed. In order to understand how sexual harassment affects people, we also need more knowledge about how different systems of power interact. What roles do ethnicity and skin colour, functionality, or sexual orientation play in vulnerability to sexual harassment? Today, this knowledge is very limited.

In the Nordic countries, it is the responsibility of the employer to take steps to prevent sexual harassment and take action when it occurs. However, today there is no research that provides concrete knowledge about how a workplace can go about preventing sexual harassment. Suggestions for hands-on methods to prevent sexual harassment

are needed. Another problem is the culture of silence and under-reporting. If only a few of all those who are harassed actually report it, the number of cases that go unreported must necessarily be large. This is where knowledge is needed to understand what this silence represents. There is also a lack of studies of perpetrators, and thus we risk not finding out what factors might lead to sexual harassment.

The Nordic countries give high priority to gender equality efforts. The work of these countries has yielded results. Decades of gender equality policy reforms, knowledge development, and a well-organised women's movement now mean that, in international comparisons, the Nordic countries are ranked as the most gender-equal in the world. Since the 2017 #MeToo movement, the Nordic countries have highlighted questions about sexual harassment at the national and international levels. Now it's time to take the next step. This publication shows that more research is needed to resolutely address the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace. With further knowledge, the Nordic countries can initiate further work - towards a gender-equal and sustainable working life where everyone can participate on equal terms.

Sexual harassment is a major social problem in working life in the Nordic countries, which the #MeToo calls for action in autumn 2017 demonstrated in particular. This publication is a shorter version of the report Sexually harassed at work – An overview of the research in the Nordic countries. The report is based on a systematic review of the research literature from the Nordic countries in the period 2014–2019.

The purpose of this publication is to briefly present the current knowledge about sexual harassment in the workplace in the Nordic countries, while also making apparent key knowledge gaps where more research is needed. The publication is produced by NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender.

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