

The role of social partners in preventing third-party violence and harassment



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Report of webinar 1: Setting the scene

This was the first of seven webinars, held on 15 June 2021, under the auspices of the new project on social partner responses to third-party violence and harassment.

The webinar was attended by 99 participants from 27 European countries, as representatives of employers and trade unions.

The first presentation by Jane Pillinger, research consultant to the project, provided an overview of the state of play on third-party violence and harassment in the EU and in national laws and practice. Evidence was given of both the changing

workforce composition and rising rates of third-party violence and harassment. In several EU Member States, third-party violence and harassment is addressed through a combination of labour, health and safety and gender equality/anti-discrimination law.

As the 2010 European Multi-Sectoral Guidelines on Preventing Third-Party Violence and Harassment at Work have shown, the social partners must address the problem through a multi-faceted approach covering prevention, risk assessment, complaints measures, partnerships with the public authorities, and support for victims/survivors of third-party violence and harassment.

An important question for the project is the relevance of the guidelines after ten years and whether they need updating. It was reminded that the guidelines are not legally binding. It is up to national sectoral social partners to implement them and to the EU social partners to assess their effective implementation.

Based on an initial overview, the guidelines have triggered interesting initiatives at the national level through awareness-raising, safety and security measures, and training as well as some examples of collective bargaining.

In only two countries, Denmark, and the Netherlands, have sectoral social partners, in local government for the former and healthcare for the latter, implemented the guidelines through sectoral agreements. In other countries the guidelines have prompted workshops and discussions which, however, did not lead to formal endorsement of the guidelines at national level.

To note, there is not one single EU Member State where the national social partners have signed a multisectoral agreement reflecting the multi-sectoral signatories of the EU guideline. It remains therefore to be seen whether such a multisectoral approach at EU level can be reciprocated at national level.

Domestic violence is a further important dimension of workplace violence that also needs to be addressed in the workplace context, not least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which forced many workers to work from home. In this respect, the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206 provide a framework for an integrated, comprehensive and gender-responsive approach to ending violence and harassment in the world of work, with a focus on psychosocial risks, third-party violence and harassment and domestic violence.

Preventing and addressing third-party violence and harassment also requires to adopt a gender-responsive approach since women are disproportionately affected and because many women work in direct contact with clients, customers, patients, students etc. An intersectional approach that takes account of multiple forms of discrimination is also critical.

Finally, the presentation gave a brief overview of the research to be carried out during the project. The research is being carried out in ten countries and seven sectors (secondary schools, hospitals, prisons, employment services, urban public transport, front desk services in local and regional government and telecommunications). This will include an online survey addressed to the social partners to be launched shortly (the EN translation has already been launched pending translations in nine languages). Interviews and the collection of more detailed case studies will also be carried out.

The second presentation by Agnes Parent Thirion, Eurofound, gave evidence from the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) about the prevalence of different forms of violence and harassment at work, the impact at work, and the link between job quality, work organisation and violence at work. Overall, the EWCS shows that workers working with customers or service users are substantially more exposed to violence and harassment, particularly in public administration, health, education and transport.

In addition, women workers are disproportionately affected. EWCS data shows big differences between Member States in the prevalence of violence and harassment. Five countries - Slovakia, Estonia, France, Denmark and the Netherlands - report a 25% prevalence of third-party violence and harassment. This is compared to an EU-average prevalence of 20%. Higher prevalence could, however, be related to the greater awareness of the problem, which may lead to higher reporting. Overall, violence and harassment impacts negatively on health and wellbeing and productivity. Finally, job quality, captured at the workplace level, is also linked to exposure to violence. Using this framework, factors closely connected to risks of violence and harassment from third parties include the social environment at work, work intensity, the quality of working time, and workers' representation, amongst other areas. Between 2010 and 2015, there was an increase in the proportion of workers reporting that they have dealt with angry clients. A special edition of the EWCS focusing on the impact of COVID-19 will be completed in 2021. This will also

provide some valuable evidence of the effects of the pandemic on workers in essential front-line services such as health, education, public administration and transport. However, as the pending survey will not be based on the same questionnaire as in 2015, it will be difficult to assess from a longitudinal perspective the extent to which the phenomenon of third-party violence and harassment is increasing or not.

Webinar participants made the following key points during the discussion:

- Even where protocols and protections have been established, more practical guidance to support implementation is needed. Examples include the French “protection fonctionnelle” a framework providing protection and support for civil servants who are victims of abuse from third parties. Similar protocols cover public administration and prisons in Spain.
- From a trade union perspective, reductions in staffing levels and austerity measures are critical additional risks that have led to rising third-party violence and harassment levels. Trade union participants cited this problem in health, prisons, public administration, local government and transport sectors.
- Third-party violence and harassment is increasingly being experienced by hospital workers. In Finland, for example, a recent survey showed that 69% of health workers had experienced workplace violence from third parties; the most common forms are psychological violence and verbal aggression.
- Many workers do not report third-party violence and harassment because they see it as being “part of the job”. It is essential to have complaints systems that workers trust and that safe spaces are opened up for people to talk about violence and harassment, including domestic violence. It was underlined that even prisons do not have to be a violent environment either for the staff or the inmates.
- Further risk factors include a greater incidence of workers working alone. As well as this, more workers are dealing with members of the public who face mental health difficulties and who present complex problems. The impact is greater levels of burnout and suicide amongst some workers who are not trained to cope with mental health issues, for example, police and prison workers.

- Particularly in male-dominated workplaces, women workers often tend to not report sexual harassment because it is viewed as part of the culture of the job. Relationships of power need to be addressed in this context, and more training is needed to ensure that certain management styles (such as authoritarian or sexist) change.
- Better systems for investigating and monitoring complaints are needed alongside improved statistical data to learn from complaints and how they were handled. Having common indicators on data collection may be a helpful way forward.

The [next project webinar will take place on Friday 24 September](#) and will cover gender-based violence and harassment.

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