



Working conditions and sustainable work

Adverse social behaviour at work:

Background note

[Working conditions in the time of COVID-19:](#)
[Implications for the future](#)

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Contents

Evidence on adverse social behaviour at work from the 2021 European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS)	1
Introduction.....	1
European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS) data	1
Adverse social behaviour at work by gender and age groups	1
Adverse social behaviour at work by country	2
Adverse social behaviour at work by presence of customers	3
Adverse social behaviour at work by place of work	4
Adverse social behaviour at work by sector	4
Adverse social behaviour at work by occupation.....	5
Adverse social behaviour at work and health outcomes.....	6
Adverse social behaviour at work and job demands and resources	6
Summary	8

Evidence on adverse social behaviour at work from the 2021 European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS)

Introduction

This background note was prepared for the Multisectoral social dialogue conference on third-party violence and harassment at work which took place on 25 November 2022 in Madrid. It sheds light on workers' exposure to adverse social behaviour – verbal abuse or threats; bullying, harassment, violence; unwanted sexual attention – in 2021, more than a decade after the social partners in health, education, local and regional government, commerce, and private security agreed on multi-sectoral guidelines on tackling work-related third-party violence. The results are shown by gender, age groups, presence of customers, place of work, by country, and for specific sectors and occupations in the EU. The background note also investigates the link between exposure to adverse social behaviour at work and negative health outcomes, as well as job demands and resources.

European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS) data

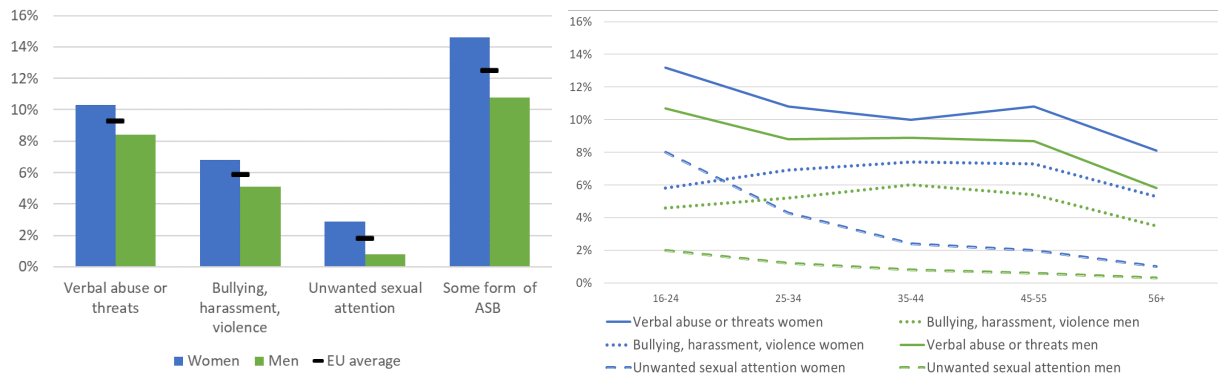
Figures provided in the background note come from the [EWCTS](#), which is a high quality, probability-based survey, covering over 70,000 interviews in 36 countries. It was conducted between February and November 2021 and therefore provides a snapshot of the situation of the European working population in 2021. Comparability with previous waves of the European Working Conditions Survey, running from 1990, is limited due to the mode change (from face-to-face to telephone interviews) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021 EWCTS, workers' exposure to adverse social behaviour (ASB) is captured by asking three questions: i) "over the last month, during the course of your work have you been subjected to *verbal abuse or threats*?"; ii) "... to *unwanted sexual attention*?"; iii) "over the past 12 months, during the course of your work have you been subjected to *bullying, harassment, violence*?"

Adverse social behaviour at work by gender and age groups

During the pandemic, bullying, harassment, violence, verbal abuse, verbal threats, and unwanted sexual attention remained part of the experience of many workers. The 2021 data show that 12.5% of workers in the EU experienced some form of adverse social behaviour. 9.3% of workers were exposed to verbal abuse or threats, 5.9% reported exposure to bullying, harassment or violence, and 1.8% reported receiving unwanted sexual attention (Figure 1). The share of women experiencing adverse social behaviour at work was consistently higher than that of men. 10% of women and 8% men were subject to verbal abuse or threats, 7% of women and 5% men were bullied, harassed or experienced violence, while the share of unwanted sexual attention was 3 times higher for women compared to men (1% and 3%, respectively).

Figure 1 Shares of workers experiencing adverse social behaviour, by gender (on the left) and by age group and gender (on the right) in the EU, %



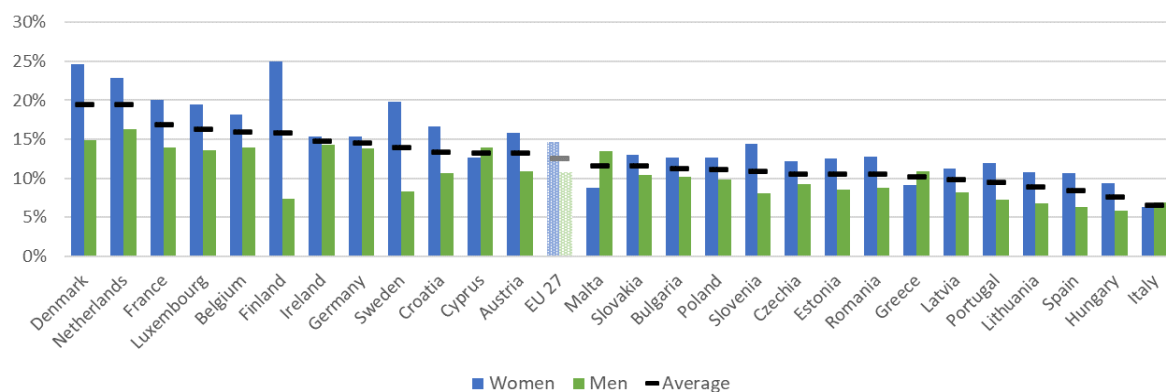
Source: EWCTS 2021

The share of workers experiencing adverse social behaviour vary with age. The share of women and men exposed to verbal abuse or threats was highest in the youngest age group (16–24) and decreased with age. The same pattern was observed for workers experiencing unwanted sexual attention. Here, the gender gap is particularly striking. Whereas 8% of 16–24-year-old women and 4.3% of 25–34-year-old women reported receiving unwanted sexual attention, this was the case for 2% and 1.2% of men of the respective age groups. The shares of workers who reported being exposed to either bullying, harassment or violence varied less across the age groups and was the highest for the 35–44-year-old group for both for women and men.

Adverse social behaviour at work by country

When comparing countries across the EU, the shares of women and men who reported being subject to adverse social behaviour differed substantially, ranging from 6% in Italy to 25% in Denmark (Figure 2). However, these figures need to be interpreted with caution. The differences might be partly the result of the awareness about this kind of behaviours and/or cultural differences. For example, the tolerance of undesired behaviours may be different from one country to another, so could be the issue of underreporting. Consequently, the numbers depicted reflect the levels of awareness and reporting (absence of a victim-blaming culture), among other things, in a country.

Figure 2 Shares of women and men subject to adverse social behaviour by country, %



Source: EWCTS 2021

What remains the rule across the countries is that more women than men were subject to adverse social behaviour at work in 2021. The notable exception is Cyprus, Malta, Greece, and Italy, where more men than women reported being subject to adverse social behaviour. This was driven by the gender gaps in verbal abuse or threats (especially in Malta and Cyprus) and bullying, harassment, and violence (especially in Greece). Cyprus was the only country where the same share of working women and men reported receiving unwanted sexual attention.

Adverse social behaviour at work by presence of customers

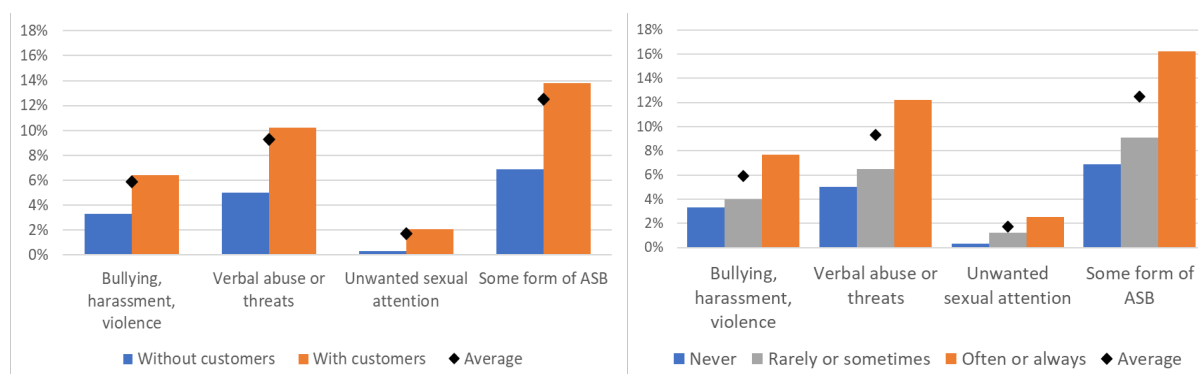
Although the survey asked workers if they experienced any form of adverse social behaviour, it is not further clarified if the source of intimidation was a co-worker, a supervisor or a third-party.

However, a question on how often their main job included dealing directly with people who are not employees at their workplace such as customers, passengers, pupils, patients, etc., may provide an insight about the potential prevalence of third-party violence at work.

At the EU level, 7% of workers who never worked with customers reported being subject to adverse social behaviour (verbal abuse; bullying harassment; violence or unwanted sexual attention) (Figure 3). This share is twofold (14%) for workers who had to deal with customers (rarely, sometimes, often or always) in their working environment. In case of unwanted sexual attention, the share was seven times higher for workers with customers compared to workers who never worked with customers (0.3% and 2.1%, respectively).

What is important, however, is not only whether a worker was working with customers or not, but also how often they had to interact with them. Having to work with customers rarely or sometimes increased the share of workers reporting adverse social behaviour by 20-30%, except for unwanted sexual attention, which increased 4 times. However, having to work with customers often or always doubled the share of workers experiencing adverse social behaviour compared to those who were working with customers less frequently (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Prevalence of adverse social behaviour by presence of customers (on the left) and by frequency of interaction with customers (on the right) in the EU, %



Source: EWCTS 2021

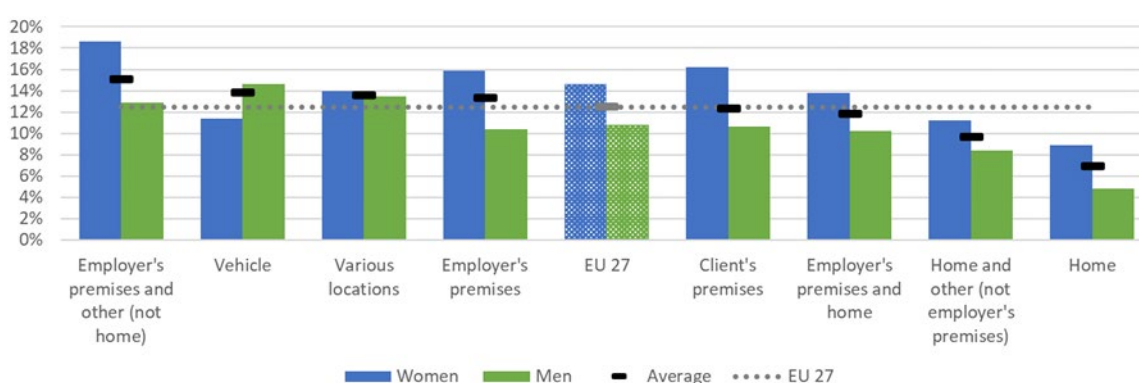
Working with third parties was a reality for most EU workers. Overall, 81% of workers worked with customers, pupils or patients and more than half of workers (53.5%) did so often or always. The share very much depends on sector and occupation. Around a third of workers in manufacturing, mining and quarrying, and information and communication sectors, but only 7% in human health

and education sectors had no interaction with third parties. More than half of stationary plant and machine operators and around 40% of agricultural, forestry and fishery labourers, labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport, and information and communications technology professionals did not work with customers, compared to only 4-5% of health or teaching professionals and sales workers.

Adverse social behaviour at work by place of work

On average, 7% of workers who worked from home exclusively reported being exposed to adverse social behaviour. This share was double for those working at the employer's premises and other locations but not from home (15%). It was 14% for those working from a vehicle, and also for those working from various locations (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Prevalence of adverse social behaviour by place of work in the EU, %

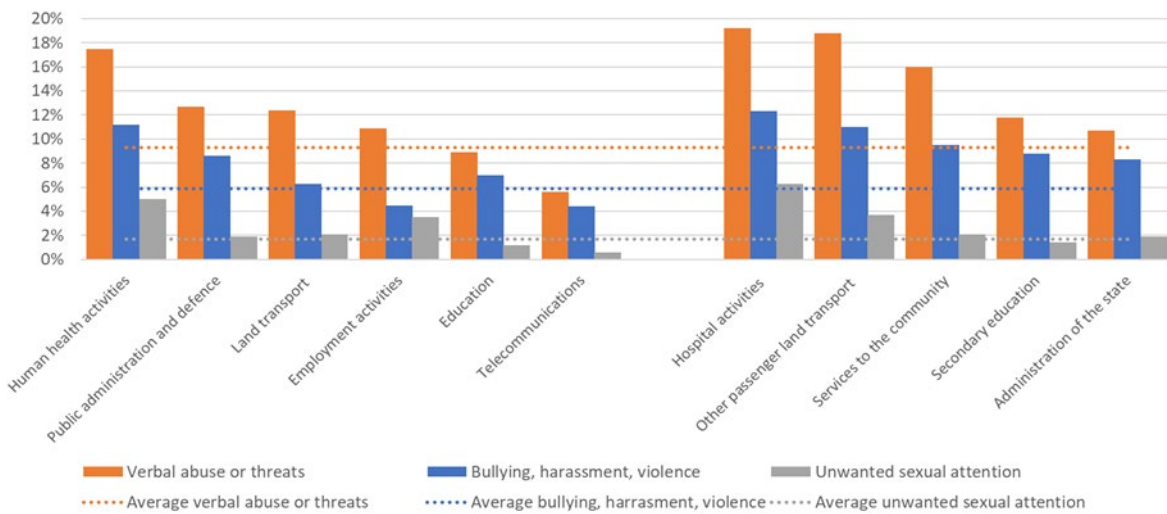


Source: EWCTS 2021

It is important to note the gender divide. Although working from home, on average, relates to lower exposure to adverse social behaviour, it was a safer working place for men than for women as women's share reporting exposure to adverse social behaviour was almost double the share of men (9% and 5%, respectively). Important gender differences are observed for those working from employer's premises (various combinations). The only workplace, where more men than women reported being exposed to adverse social behaviour was working from vehicle (15% and 11%, respectively).

Adverse social behaviour at work by sector

Figure 5 provides a more detailed look at the sectoral level (NACE 2-digit and NACE 3-digit levels), comparing selected sectors with the EU average. Workers from hospital activities and 'other passenger land transport' (which includes urban and suburban passenger land transport) reported experiencing verbal abuse or threats, and bullying, harassment and violence twice as often as the EU average. The share of workers in hospital activities who reported receiving unwanted sexual attention was three times higher than the EU average. Workers from the employment activities sector reported double the verbal abuse or threats and unwanted sexual attention, but less bullying, harassment and violence than the EU average. Although the share of verbal abuse or threats in the education sector was below the EU average, it was higher in the secondary education activities. For comparison, low levels of any form of adverse social behaviour were reported in the telecommunications sector.

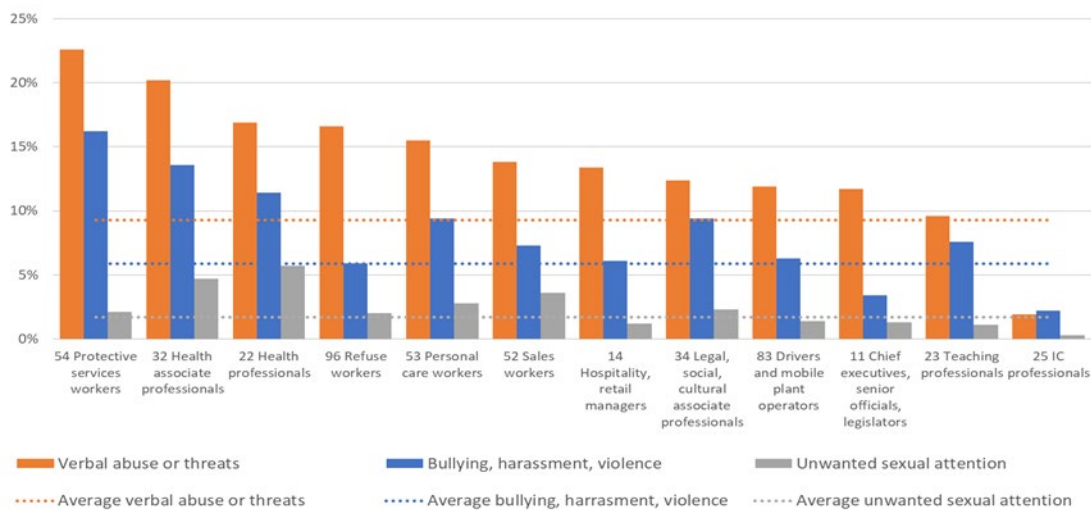
Figure 5 Shares of workers experiencing adverse social behaviour in selected sub-sectors in the EU, %

Note: sectors at NACE 2-digit (on the left) and NACE 3-digit (on the right) levels

Source: EWCTS 2021

Adverse social behaviour at work by occupation

Figure 6 shows the occupations with the highest prevalence of exposure to adverse social behaviour (verbal abuse; bullying harassment, violence; or unwanted sexual attention). More than 20% of protective services workers (this includes fire-fighters, police officers, prison guards and security guards) and health associate professional reported being subject to verbal abuse or threats. These occupations reported also the highest levels of bullying, harassment and violence (2-3 times higher than the 5.9% EU average). Health professionals and health associate professionals reported up to 3 times higher levels of unwanted sexual attention compared to the EU average (around 5% and 1.8%, respectively). For comparison, 2% of information and communication professionals reported verbal abuse and bullying, harassment, violence and 0.3% unwanted sexual attention.

Figure 6 Share of workers experiencing adverse social behaviour in selected occupations in the EU, %

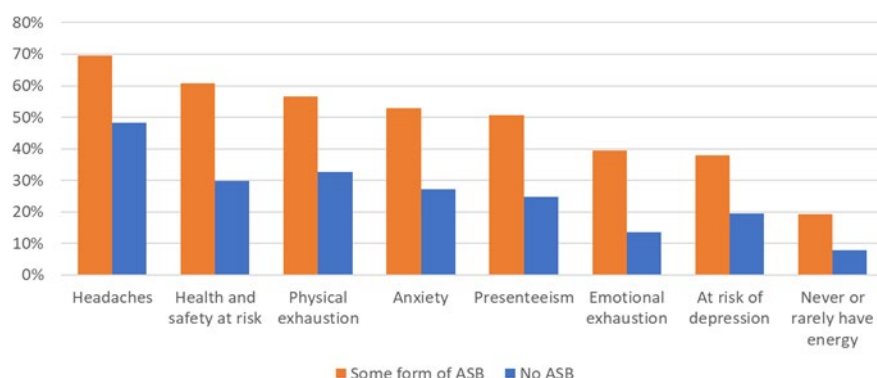
Note: occupations at ISCO group 3 level

Source: EWCTS 2021

Adverse social behaviour at work and health outcomes

There is a clear link between adverse social behaviour and the share of workers reporting negative health outcomes. Two times more workers who were subject to some form of adverse social behaviour compared to their counterparts who were not exposed to adverse social behaviour reported suffering from emotional exhaustion (40% and 14%, respectively), anxiety (53% and 27%, respectively), were at risk of depression (38% and 20%, respectively) or complained that they never or rarely have energy (19% and 8%, respectively) or their health and safety is at risk (61% and 30%, respectively) (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Shares of workers reporting negative health outcomes by (non)expose to adverse social behaviour in the EU, %

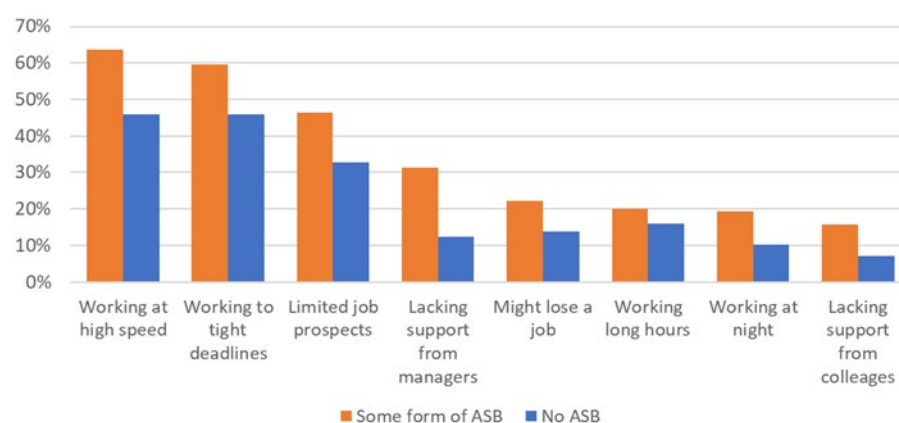


Source: EWCTS 2021

Adverse social behaviour at work and job demands and resources

More workers who were exposed to any form of adverse social behaviour reported having to always or often work at high speed and tight deadlines and work at night compared to workers who were not exposed to adverse social behaviour. They also tended to disagree or strongly disagree more frequently than those not reporting adverse social behaviour with the statement that they see good job prospects and were more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement that they might lose their job in the next 6 months (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Shares of workers reporting high job demands and lack of job resources by (non)expose to adverse social behaviour in the EU, %




Source: EWCTS 2021

The largest differences between the share of workers subject to adverse social behaviour and the ones not exposed to it were related to social support – either from colleagues or management. 16% of workers (19% men 13% women) exposed to adverse social behaviour reported that they never or rarely received support from their colleagues compared to 7% of women and men who were not exposed to it. More worryingly, the difference between the two groups was even higher when it came to support from management: close to a third of workers exposed to adverse social behaviour never or rarely received support from their management (more men than women, 34% and 29%, respectively), compared to 12% workers without exposure to adverse social behaviour.

Summary

- On average, 12.5% of workers in the EU experienced adverse social behaviour in 2021. Verbal abuse or threats was the most often reported form of adverse social behaviour – 9.3% of workers. 5.9% reported exposure to bullying, harassment or violence, and 1.8% reported receiving unwanted sexual attention.
- More women than men and more young workers (16–24-year-old) compared to other age groups were subject to verbal abuse or threats and unwanted sexual attention, the latter being as high as 8% for 16–24-year-old women.
- Working with customers makes a difference. Whereas 14% of workers working with customers reported being exposed to adverse social behaviour, only 7% of workers without customers did so. The share of workers exposed to unwanted sexual attention was seven times higher for workers working with customers compared to those without customers (0.3% and 2.1%, respectively).
- 7% of workers who worked from home exclusively reported being exposed to adverse social behaviour. However, women's share was almost double the share of men (9% and 5%, respectively). There were substantially more workers reporting exposure to adverse social behaviour among those working at the employer's premises and other locations but not from home (15%) and working from a vehicle (14%) or working from various locations (14%).
- There are important differences between sectors. Workers in hospital activities and in 'other passenger land transport' sectors were twice as likely to report exposure to verbal abuses and bullying, harassment or violence (19%) compared to the EU average; workers in hospital activities were three times more likely to report having received unwanted sexual attention (6%) compared to the EU average. Low levels of any form of adverse social behaviour were reported in the telecommunications sector.
- As regards occupations, more than 20% of protective services workers and health associate professional reported being subject to verbal abuse or threats. These occupations also reported the highest levels of bullying, harassment, violence (up to 3 times higher than the 5.9% EU average). Health (associate) professionals reported up to 3 times higher levels of unwanted sexual attention (around 5%) compared to the EU average (1.8%).
- Being exposed to adverse social behaviour is linked to the negative health outcomes. Two times more workers who were exposed to some form of ASB compared to those who were not, reported suffering from emotional exhaustion (40% and 14%, respectively), were at risk of depression (38% and 20%, respectively) and complained that their health and safety is at risk (61% and 30%, respectively).
- Workers exposed to adverse social behaviour more often reported having high job demands and lack of job resources compared to those not exposed to adverse social behaviour. Almost a third of workers exposed to adverse social behaviour never or rarely received support from their managers (more men than women, 34% and 29%, respectively), compared to 12% workers without exposure to any form of adverse social behaviour.



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