



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

## Preventing sexual harassment

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# Measures against sexual harassment in Sweden

**Karin Sandell**

The National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women

Uppsala University

## Abstract

Just like in Denmark and the Netherlands, sexual violence and harassment is a serious problem in Sweden. The #metoo movement had a great impact on Swedish society and highlighted the fact that sexual violence is still frequent, in spite of the efforts made to combat and prevent violence against women during the last decades. Furthermore, the debate had impact on the political agenda, and several agencies were assigned governmental commissions to improve their work.

The legislation regulating sexual harassment in Sweden includes the Discrimination Act, the Work Environment Act and for the most serious forms of abuse the Criminal Code. Employers and education providers have far-reaching responsibilities to prevent, monitor and follow up sexual harassment. The aims for Sweden's work against sexual violence are formulated in the governmental Gender Policy Goals and a ten-year strategy launched in 2017.

To change attitudes close cooperation between different agencies, NGOs and the civil society is desirable. In the long perspective it is necessary to emphasise the school sector's role to combat and prevent harassment and to discuss values and rights. For a more immediate effect, increased knowledge and training of professionals is crucial. Moreover, it is of significant importance that politicians, leaders and role models from different sectors of society prioritise the issue and take a clear stand against sexual violence. In addition, such initiatives will strengthen and encourage those who are already working hard to combat sexual harassment.

## 1. Sexual harassment in Sweden

### 1.1 #metoo in Sweden

As pointed out in the discussion paper from Denmark, the #metoo movement had great impact on Swedish society. It changed the debate on violence against women. More people became aware of how widespread violence against women is, and that many women of all ages and from all parts of society have experienced various types of sexual violence. Almost every profession or sector had its own hashtag. All of a sudden, facts and figures from prevalence studies were no longer questioned the way they often were before. The new insight challenged the general image of "Gender Equal Sweden".

The #metoo movement also had an impact on the political agenda.<sup>1</sup> The Consent Act, recognising sex without consent as rape, entered into force in July 2018. As a result of appeals from seven groups in a vulnerable position a governmental commission was given to the Gender Equality Agency. It resulted among other actions in a conference and seven short films meant for raising awareness and training of professionals, in particular in social services.<sup>2</sup>

In the report on Sweden in 2019, GREVIO wrote that they believed that measures initiated by the Swedish Government had helped to put the spotlight on prevention and adequate follow-up by the employment sector. However, they emphasised that this must be followed by the full implementation of the Work Environment Act.<sup>3</sup>

The #metoo debate highlighted not only sexual harassment and abuse, but also other forms of violence against women. The change in attitudes might have contributed to the great increase of calls to the helpline Kvinnofridslinjen, run by the National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women at Uppsala University and Uppsala University Hospital. In 2021, the helpline answered 116 calls a day, compared to 86 calls a day in 2016.<sup>4</sup> The Centre has also seen an increased demand for training, and an e-learning course has reached more than 100 000 users in six years.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Laws and regulations

### 1.2.1 Gender Equality Policy Goals

The overall goal of Sweden's Gender Equality Policy is that women and men shall have the same power to shape society and their own lives. Six sub-goals have been specified in the policy. The sixth goal concerns stopping and preventing men's violence against women, including sexual violence and harassment:

*"Men's violence against women must stop. Women and men, girls and boys, must have the same right and access to physical integrity."*<sup>6</sup>

In 2017, a ten-year national strategy for preventing and combating men's violence against women and protecting and supporting women and children subjected to violence went into effect. The strategy includes four objectives: expanded and

<sup>1</sup> Askanius, T., & Hartley, J. M. (2019). Framing Gender Justice: A comparative analysis of the media coverage of #metoo in Denmark and Sweden. *Nordicom Review*, 40(2), pp. 19-36.

<sup>2</sup> Swedish Equality Agency. *Stories from the metoo movement*.

<https://swedishgenderequalityagency.se/men-s-violence-against-women/metoo/> (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe (2019). *GREVIO Baseline report on Sweden*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

<sup>4</sup> National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women. *Many called Kvinnofridslinjen in December*. [In Swedish]. <https://nck.uu.se/nyhetsarkiv/nyhetsvisningssida/?tarContentId=990070> (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>5</sup> National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women. *100 000 have taken online course on violence in close relationships*. [In Swedish]

<https://nck.uu.se/nyhetsarkiv/nyhetsvisningssida/?tarContentId=980408> (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Employment (2020). *Gender Equality Policy in Sweden. A feminist government*. Stockholm: Government offices of Sweden.

preventive measures; improved detection and stronger protection for women and children subjected to violence; more effective law enforcement; and improved knowledge and method development.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2.2 Legislation

#### *The Discrimination Act and the Work Environment Act*

Three Swedish laws are relevant when it comes to sexual harassment, the *Discrimination Act*<sup>8</sup>, the *Work Environment Act*<sup>9</sup>, and the *Criminal Code*<sup>10</sup>.

The Discrimination Act aims to combat discrimination and to promote equal rights and opportunities in other ways. Under this act, sexual harassment is one out of six forms of discrimination. Sexual harassment is conduct of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity. Besides comments and words, this could involve unwanted touching or leering, unwelcome compliments, insinuations, text messages and images of a sexual nature.

The Work Environment Act aims to prevent ill health and accidents at work, and to achieve a good working environment. Sexual harassment is regulated under this act.

The Discrimination Act and the Work Environment Act both require that employers must have written regulations and guidelines for prevention and handling of sexual harassment. The regulations and guidelines must be well known by everyone at the workplace. Moreover, the guidelines must be monitored and followed up by the employer. According to the Discrimination Act, education providers have the same responsibilities as employers.

Regarding the burden of proof, the Discrimination Act has an important difference compared to the Swedish Criminal Code. According to the Discrimination Act, if the plaintiff has established before a court facts from which it may be presumed that there has been direct or indirect discrimination, it shall be for the respondent to prove that there has been no breach of the principle of equal treatment.

#### *The Swedish Criminal Code*

The most serious forms of harassment, abuse and other forms of sexual violence are regulated in The Swedish Criminal Code, SFS 1962:700. An important milestone in Sweden's work against sexual violence was the new Sexual Offences Legislation in 2018, "The Consent Act". It marks that sex must be voluntary, and that sex without

<sup>7</sup> Government offices of Sweden (2016). Factsheet: National strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women. Stockholm: Government offices of Sweden.

<sup>8</sup> Swedish Discrimination Act (2008:567).

[https://www.government.se/contentassets/6732121a2cb54ee3b21da9c628b6bdc7/oversattning-diskrimineringslagen\\_eng.pdf](https://www.government.se/contentassets/6732121a2cb54ee3b21da9c628b6bdc7/oversattning-diskrimineringslagen_eng.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Swedish Work Environment Act (SFS 1977:1160).

<https://www.government.se/4ac754/contentassets/86e9091526644e90b78d2ff937318530/sfs-19771160-work-environment-act>

<sup>10</sup> The Swedish Criminal Code (SFS 1962:700). <https://www.government.se/government-policy/judicial-system/the-swedish-criminal-code/>

consent is rape, even if there are no threats or violence involved. According to a review conducted by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet, "Brå") there has been a marked increase in the number of prosecutions and convictions since the law was changed<sup>11</sup>.

### 1.2.3 Prevalence

#### *National studies*

In 2014, a national prevalence study conducted by the National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women (NCK) at Uppsala University published the report "Violence and Health in Sweden". 44 % of women and 12 % of men reported experiencing sexual harassment prior to the age of 18. Moreover, 38 % of women and 12 % of men had been subjected to sexual harassment at some point as adults.<sup>12</sup>

The Swedish Public Health Agency presented a large national population-based study on sexual and reproductive health and rights in 2019. The study shows that women are more often victimised than men (42 % compared to 9 %), LGBT persons are more often victimised than the general population, and younger people are more often exposed than older. 57 % of young women in the 16–29 age group responded that they have been victims of sexual harassment at some point.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Surveys on certain sectors*

In 2021, The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) asked elected representatives at local, regional and national level to respond to questions concerning self-reported victimisation during 2020. The result was presented in The Politician's Safety Survey 2021. 25 % of the elected representatives stated that they had been the victim of some form of threat or harassment as a result of their elected position in the last year. 7 % of this group stated that there had been some verbal, written or physical attack of a sexual nature in conjunction with the incident or one of the incidents.<sup>14</sup>

A national research study on gender-based violence and sexual harassment in academia has been carried out by Karolinska Institute, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Malmö University and the University of Gothenburg. It addressed

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<sup>11</sup> Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå). *The new consent law in practice 2020:6. An updated review of the changes in 2018 to the legal rules concerning rape*. English summary of Brå report 2020:6. Stockholm: Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention.

<sup>12</sup> National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women (2014). *Violence and Health in Sweden*. Uppsala: National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women, Uppsala University.

<sup>13</sup> Public Health Agency of Sweden (2019) Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Sweden 2017 – Results from the population-based survey SRHR2017. Solna: Public Health Agency of Sweden.

<sup>14</sup> Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2021). *The Politician's Safety Survey 2021*. Brå report 2021:13. Stockholm: Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention.

employees, PhD students and other students at 38 universities. The researchers estimate that 4 % have been subjected to sexual harassment during the last year.<sup>15</sup>

In 2020, two authorities published studies focused on the situation at schools. In a study conducted by Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) 21 % of girls and 6 % of boys in the ninth grade (15–16 years old) respond that they have been subjected to physical sexual abuse or being forced to sexual acts.<sup>16</sup> In a study titled “It will only get worse if I tell”, published by Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) and based on a national youth survey (age 16-25), 60 % of girls and 18 % of boys respond that they have been subjected to sexual harassment at least once. Many of them do not know where to turn to report abuse, and they often worry for the consequences if others would know what happened.<sup>17</sup>

## 1.3 Authorities and NGOs

### 1.3.1 Authorities

A large number of Swedish authorities are involved in the work against sexual violence and harassment. The following list presents some of the key authorities:

- *The Equality Ombudsman (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen)*<sup>18</sup>

The Equality Ombudsman is to supervise compliance with the Discrimination Act. When the agency investigates a complaint they assess whether the situation complained about is prohibited by law. If needed, they can initiate a legal proceeding.

- *The Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket)*<sup>19</sup>

The Swedish Work Environment Authority is a regulatory authority. It has the mandate to see that the laws about work environment and working hours are followed.

- *The Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten)*<sup>20</sup>

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency was established in 2018 to contribute to effective implementation of the Swedish Gender Equality Policy.

- *Swedish Crime Victim Authority*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Karolinska Institutet, Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan, Malmö universitet & Nationella sekretariatet för genusforskning, Göteborgs universitet (2022). Enkätstudie om genusbaserad utsatthet och sexuella trakasserier i svensk högskolesektor. [In Swedish]

<sup>16</sup> Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2020). *School Survey on Crime 2019*. Brå report 2020:11. Stockholm: Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention.

<sup>17</sup> Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (2020) Det blir ju bara värre om jag berättar... Ungas erfarenheter av sexuella trakasserier i utbildningsmiljöer. [in Swedish] Stockholm: Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society.

<sup>18</sup> [www.do.se](http://www.do.se) (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>19</sup> [www.af.se](http://www.af.se) (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>20</sup> [www.jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se](http://www.jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se) (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>21</sup> [www.brottsoffermyndigheten.se](http://www.brottsoffermyndigheten.se) (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

The Swedish Crime Victim Authority is to look after the rights of all crime victims. It is responsible for criminal injuries compensation, recovery of payments, the Crime Victim Fund, and a Centre of Competence.

- *Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF)*<sup>22</sup>

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society produces and disseminates knowledge in those areas. The agency also distributes funds to the civil society.

- *The National Agency for Education (Skolverket)*<sup>23</sup>

The National Agency for Education is the central administrative authority for the public school system, publicly organised preschooling, school-age childcare and adult education. The agency has developed a web tool to support principals, school leaders and school staff in their work against sexual harassment.<sup>24</sup>

- *The National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women (NCK), Uppsala University*

The National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence against Women is a knowledge and resource centre based at Uppsala University. It has been commissioned by the Government to increase the knowledge of men's violence against women, to develop methods for treatment and care, and to run the national helpline Kvinnofridslinjen.

### 1.3.2 NGOs

Since the 1970's, the NGOs and especially the women's shelter's movement in Sweden have been vital in highlighting men's violence against women, including improving the support for women subjected to violence and changing attitudes. The Swedish Women's Lobby (Sveriges kvinnoorganisationer) is a politically and religiously independent umbrella organisation. It unites 47 member organisations with the mutual aim to improve the status of women in Swedish society. The organisation hosts an annual national equality conference with representation from authorities, NGOs, trade unions and the private sector.

## 2. Good practice examples

Several projects have been launched to combat and prevent sexual harassment in Sweden. The examples below focus on initiatives targeting the school sector.

### 2.1.1 The website and campaign "Av fri vilja" (Free will only)

In connection to the enactment of the Consent Act the Swedish Government commissioned the Swedish Crime Victim Authority to disseminate information about

<sup>22</sup> [www.mucl.se](http://www.mucl.se) (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>23</sup> [www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se) (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>24</sup> The National Agency for Education. "Koll på arbetet mot sexuella trakasserier" ("Check the work against sexual harassment"). <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/inspiration-och-stod-i-arbetet/stod-i-arbetet/koll-pa-sexuella-trakasserier> (Retrieved 2022-08-26)



the new legislation, primarily to young people. This resulted in a campaign called “Free will only” and a website. The website includes web-based education material and teacher’s guides and is translated into 15 languages.<sup>25</sup> The campaign was launched in 2018 and the target group was young people (age 18 - 25). A follow-up survey showed that the campaign reached 67 % in the target group. According to the survey, 47 % believed that the campaign made them more positive to the legislation and 28 % thought that the campaign had given them more knowledge.

### **2.1.2 New requirements in the school curricula**

Education on sexuality is mandatory in Sweden since 1955. From 1 July 2022 there have been changes to the curricula, and the name of the subject area previously named “Sex and cohabitation” has changed to “Sexuality, consent and relationships”. Schools shall also counteract various forms of intolerance, violence and oppression.<sup>26</sup>

### **2.1.3 First Weekend in June and Worst Summer Ever**

The National Centre for Knowledge on Men’s Violence Against Women at Uppsala University has published two booklets with graphic short stories about a teenage girl, highlighting the issue of sexual assault. The main objective is to make it easier to talk about sexual violence and to raise the questions of setting limits and showing respect for other persons. Since 2012, more than 100 000 copies have been distributed to schools all over Sweden. In 2019, a teacher’s guide was developed as a complement.

## **3. Transferability aspects and lessons learnt**

### **3.1.1 The Danish Alliance**

The Danish Alliance outlined in the discussion paper from Denmark is an initiative that will be very interesting to follow.

Sweden has a great number of initiatives on various levels, a national strategy, a rather recently established Gender Equality Agency and an umbrella organisation for NGOs focusing on gender equality and hosting annual conferences. However, the idea of involving not only employers from the public sector but also from the private sector and Employer’s Confederations in initiatives against sexual harassment and other forms of violence is worth considering. Experiences from initiatives and projects in Sweden show that it is of significant value that organisations and other stakeholders with power, impact and popularity clearly take stand for gender equality and against sexual violence of all sorts. If politicians from different parties, CEOs, sport profiles and union leaders come together and prioritise the issue, it can change attitudes. It also supports and encourages those who are already working hard to combat sexual harassment.

<sup>25</sup> Swedish Crime Victim Authority. <https://www.frivilligtsex.se/> (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

<sup>26</sup> The National Agency for Education <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/aktuella-forandringar-pa-grundskoleniva/andrade-laroplaner-och-kursplaner-hosten-2022> (Retrieved 2022-08-26)

### 3.1.2 A Government Commissioner and a National Action Plan

During the last decades, Swedish governments have assigned several inquiries and coordinators on different aspects of combating and preventing men's violence against women, however not the kind of commissioner outlined in the discussion paper from the Netherlands. Again, the example is an important signal from the government that sexual violence is an urgent issue that must be prioritised and can give a solid foundation for forming a national strategy. An important aspect is that it is valuable if the strategy aims to apply for several years, and that proper funding is allocated.

In 2020, The Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) evaluated the agencies' work during the first three years of the national ten-year strategy. The agency assesses that the strategy has contributed to a more effective work. The authorities involved have been more active and the cooperation has been improved. However, those factors still need further improvement. The evaluation emphasises the importance of governance and that the roles and responsibilities of different agencies need to be clarified. There is a risk that several agencies get very similar commissions. In Sweden, there has been great focus on developing and spreading knowledge and less on implementing it in practical work.<sup>27</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

Even though Europe and Sweden have come far in many respects concerning gender equality and combating violence against women, sexual violence and harassment are still frequent. Progressive legislation and national strategies are essential, but obviously not enough. As highlighted in the discussion papers from Denmark and the Netherlands, we must increase knowledge and change the attitudes and norms that allow sexual harassment to continue. There are numerous signs of a backlash against equality and women's rights in Sweden as in the rest of the world.

However, there are good reasons to be optimistic. Prevalence studies and the #metoo movement have contributed to a more widespread awareness of the magnitude of the problem. Many young people discuss the subject and are better informed than previous generations. More people dare to report abuse. National agencies, the health care services and social services all over Sweden are involved in commissions to combat violence and improve the support for victims. Employers are implementing new routines. University courses on violence have more applicants than ever.

Moreover, the initiatives outlined in the discussion papers from Denmark and the Netherlands are inspiring examples of positive changes in their countries. This gives hope for the continuing work towards the goal that women and men, girls and boys, must have the same right and access to physical integrity.

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<sup>27</sup> The Swedish Agency for Public Management (2021). *Mäns våld mot kvinnor En analys av myndigheternas arbete med den nationella strategin 2021:3*. Stockholm: The Swedish Agency for Public Management