



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality


## Preventing sexual harassment

Denmark, 22-23 September 2022

### Summary Report



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## Introduction

Denmark and the Netherlands were joint hosts of the seminar on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Copenhagen on 22-23 September 2022. Thirteen other Member States took part: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden, together with the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

Welcoming the participants, the Danish Minister for Equal Opportunities Trine Bramsen said no country in Europe has yet achieved true gender equality. However, working together across borders to share knowledge and change laws, structures and culture can strengthen action. She called for a society with equal rights and respect, in which the next generation can grow up without gender inequality.

Kira Appel, Deputy Head of the Danish Department for Gender Equality, emphasised that sexual harassment is a global problem. It forms part of a broad spectrum ranging from sexism, sexual abuse and transgression to sexual and gender-based violence. The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention defines sexual harassment specifically as "any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person..." Legislation, guidelines, helplines and raising awareness are all part of the response, but more action is required to change a culture based on gender stereotypes and bias. The #MeToo movement has raised the public debate but also sparked a backlash, especially among young men afraid of losing their privileges.

Bianca Faragau from the European Commission's Gender Equality Unit pointed out that while one in two women in the EU say they have experienced sexual harassment, most cases are not reported. The #MeToo movement has drawn attention to the extent of sexism in society and empowered women to speak out. The EU 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy includes a strong commitment to combat all forms of gender violence. She highlighted three initiatives:

- On 8 March 2022, the European Commission put forward a [proposal for a Directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence](#). The proposal takes a comprehensive approach to combat and prevent all forms of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, by improving protection and support of victims across the EU. It pursues the same objectives as the Istanbul Convention and supports the EU accession to the Convention.
- The Commission proposed in 2020 a Council decision authorising Member States to ratify, in the interest of the EU, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) [Convention 190](#) on Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.
- The [EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work \(2021-2027\)](#) highlights the negative impact of workplace harassment and supports awareness raising.

The Commission also provides funding for civil society under the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme. Since 2016, it has supported 15 projects to combat and prevent sexual harassment.

# 1. Danish good practice: Recent initiatives to prevent and combat sexual harassment

## 1.1 A brief history

The first #MeToo movement, launched primarily in the US in 2017, prompted a short-lived debate in Denmark. Government legislation was passed to increase the value of compensation and lift the emphasis on the workplace atmosphere. Yet three years later in 2020, the personal revelation of sexual harassment in the media industry by Zulu Award TV show presenter Sofie Linde provoked public outrage, generating a much stronger #MeToo reaction nationally. The government launched several initiatives to support victims and commenced tripartite negotiations (social dialogue) on steps to combat sexual harassment in the workplace and in society at large. An agreement was reached between the social partners and the Government on 17 initiatives to combat sexual harassment, including compensation by the perpetrator in the Equal Treatment Act, and the establishment of the Alliance against Sexual Harassment.

## 1.2 The Alliance against Sexual Harassment

The goal of the Alliance is to promote lasting cultural change by maintaining the focus on the prevention of sexual harassment and anti-harassment initiatives. Its mandate goes beyond the workplace, to address society at large. The Minister for Gender Equality chairs the meetings of the Alliance that are twice a year and are organised by the Department for Equal Opportunities, thus ensuring high-level political commitment. Membership is open to all interested organisations that commit to take action to promote cultural change, share knowledge and engage in joint projects. The current 28 members include employer organisations and trade unions (the social partners), the Danish Youth Council, education and student bodies, sports and youth associations, the Danish Institute for Human Rights and KVINFO (knowledge centre for gender and equality).

### Focus areas

In phase one (2022-2024), the Alliance focuses on areas with less funding and awareness: young people; sports, community and volunteer work. In phase two (2024-2026), the approach may be broadened. The Alliance has a funding line for concrete projects. Members can apply for funding for sector-specific tools and materials, and/or awareness-raising activities such as campaigns, conferences and events. A joint campaign of the Alliance is planned to create awareness about sexual harassment as a societal issue and how bystanders, employers and colleagues can respond. A study on attitudes is also foreseen to gather evidence and inform future work. At the end of phase one, a conference will take stock of progress. The [website](#) already serves as a hub for knowledge and experience.

### 1.3 Tools for sharing good practices

Lederne, the Danish Association of Managers and Executives, is a member of the Alliance. It has more than 133,000 members primarily in the private sector, and cultivates sustainable leadership in the social, economic and environmental spheres. After the award show, Sofie Linde received support from 1,615 women in the media industry. Within a few days, 3,200 managers had signed Lederne's zero-tolerance pledge (overall some 6,000) and coverage appeared in numerous media.

Lederne developed a free training course for company managers and executives with four modules which offers information on legislation, staff policy for prevention and how to deal with harassment cases, plus the need for long-term cultural change. The training course is online and includes self-tests. Managers *must lead action* within organisations, as role models – it is not enough to say simply “my door is open.” Eleven companies have participated so far, and 1,500 managers invited for training. As a result, 82% of HR managers have revised their companies' policies on sexual harassment in the last two years (2020-2022).

Raising awareness is also key. Lederne CEO took the lead in launching a dedicated anti-harassment campaign on 8 March 2021 which other managers promoted on their own social media posts. Change is underway. According to a YouGov poll, 33% of women and 24% of men say it is now easier to stand up against sexual harassment in the workplace. The biggest achievement is having a language to express the problem and tools to deal with it.

### 1.4 Analysis of the Danish approach to preventing sexual harassment, presented by KVINFO<sup>1</sup>

Since 2017, sexism and sexual harassment has been one of three priority areas of KVINFO, a Danish knowledge center for gender and equality. It put forward three main principles to guide the Alliance and organisations:

- Base policies on knowledge and data rather than assumptions about sexual harassment
- Study culture, patterns and structures
- Acknowledge the link between sexism and sexual harassment.

In the past, national surveys have obscured the extent of sexual harassment because they asked only one inadequate question. Individuals or groups experiencing sexual harassment should not be responsible for getting the issue recognised, but instead sexual harassment should be seen as a structural problem that needs to be addressed by the entire society. Obtaining accurate knowledge by means of a shared understanding and language allows for tailored recommendations to specific contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> KVINFO works to produce and disseminate knowledge, develop tools and do advocacy – for instance among politicians – in support of a free and gender-equal society.

KVINFO does not recommend 'zero tolerance' within organisations because the fear of serious consequences can prevent victims to come forward and removing one individual does not solve underlying problems. Instead, it adopts a sociological approach and studies patterns and working practices which may tolerate sexual harassment within, for example, media organisations or trade unions, in order to identify effective prevention measures.

Research shows that when sexist attitudes are 'normalised', this increases the likelihood of more transgressive behaviour and hampers women's ability to advance. This is the case for example in male-dominated IT workplaces, where sexist jargon and devaluation of women's competences are common.

KVINFO pointed out that gender, age and position within an organisation are all risk factors. Precariousness not only makes people more vulnerable but also hinders their ability to report abuse. More than twice as many women in atypical jobs (part-time, or fixed-term contracts), compared with those in secure employment, report demands for sex from a superior. Although initiatives have been launched in areas like media and academia, in other sectors at risk there has been little progress, such as in universities, research and innovation, IT and care sectors.

## **2. Dutch good practice: Recent measures to tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Netherlands carries out studies on sexual health every four to five years. The latest, in 2017, found that more than half of women and almost one fifth of men had experienced sexually transgressive behaviour, such as unwanted sexual touching or kissing. Although a number of organisations work to tackle sexual violence, the approach was fragmented, with responsibility divided among a number of government ministries including health, education, justice, social affairs and employment. As a result, the impact was inadequate. Sexual violence is estimated to cost the government €2 billion a year.

In January 2022, the YouTube channel BOOS broadcasted a documentary revealing sexual abuse of participants on the TV show The Voice of Holland. This triggered an immediate public reaction and a revival of the #MeToo movement. The government announced that it will develop a National Action Plan (NAP) by end of 2022 to combat sexual transgressive behaviour and sexual violence. A Government Commissioner was appointed to oversee it and to consult stakeholders and engage citizens. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Robbert Dijkgraaf, now coordinates action, through the Directorate for gender and LGBTQI+ equality.

### **The Government Commissioner**

The newly appointed Commissioner, Mariette Hamer, started work in April 2022 with a three-year mandate and government funding. Her role is to give independent advice to government aimed at driving cultural change and creating a society where everyone feels safe, with an emphasis on prevention of sexual harassment and sexual violence. A close connection to people and organisations is key. The Commissioner intends to build networks of allies and ambassadors to engage and promote dialogue in society at all levels, as well as supporting survivors.

### **Co-creating a National Action Plan**

The NAP is being developed through consultation with 150 stakeholders and a survey of existing measures. It should be ready by the end of 2022. The plan takes an integrated approach, covering inter alia the role of bystanders, hotlines and emergency services, and care for victims and perpetrators programmes, to be implemented through a package of interventions including public campaigns and debates.

## **2.2 Analysis of the Dutch approach, presented by Rutgers<sup>2</sup>**

The last sexual health monitor in 2017 found 53% of women and 19% of men had experienced sexual harassment at least once in their life. The figures for sexual violence were 22% for women and 6% for men. A one-year survey in 2020 on monitoring prevalence of domestic and sexual violence showed that young women, bisexual and lesbian women and gay men are most at risk. A number of organisations are responding to the problem including men's groups (Emancipator), counselling centres for victims of sexual violence (open 24/7, available across the country, interdisciplinary team of doctors, nurses, social services etc.) and local authorities. The partnership on combating sexual violence brings them together twice a year.

Research shows that effective prevention of sexual harassment must be:

- Comprehensive
- Appropriately timed (education starts at four-years-old)
- Repeated
- Offered by well-trained staff
- Include men
- Theory-driven and evidence based
- Take a positive approach e.g., not merely telling young people what not to do
- Driven by government policy

Rutgers does not promote self-defence for girls, but responsibility and positive behaviour for all. It supports capacity-building of professionals, intervention for at-risk groups for example in sports and youth clubs, research, advocacy and systematic

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<sup>2</sup> Rutgers is the Dutch expertise centre on sexuality, Prevention of sexual violence is one of its priorities.

sexuality education. It carries out campaigns, such as 'Are you okay?' aimed at bystanders. In March 2021, it pushed for the topic to be included in the programme of the new Dutch government and called for a National Action Plan on the issue.

More action is still needed to prioritise prevention and increase funding. To this end, Rutgers launched a petition that was supported by civil society and social media influencers. It held roundtable discussions with politicians to promote its #uptohere campaign. Following the Voice of Holland revelations, the government has acted, but Rutgers is critical of the limited budget and sustainability of actions as per draft NAP and will discuss it with the Government Commissioner.

### 3. The situation in the other participating countries

**Austria's** criminal law punishes "sexual harassment and public sexual acts", including sex-related touching and violation of the person's dignity, as well as rape and online hate crime. Verbal and non-verbal harassment is not covered, but within the workplace and other areas (e.g. access to and supply of goods and services) is prohibited under the Equal Treatment Act. There is no National Action Plan. The #MeToo debate intensified in 2022 when Austrian film director Katharina Mückstein revealed countless stories of sexism in the cultural industries, and sexual harassment took place during the Austrian Grand Prix race. One outcome was the **vera** Confidence Centre for Victims of Violence, Harassment and Abuse of Power in the Arts, Culture and Sports, which started work in September 2022.

In **Belgium**, 81% of women and 48% of men report having been sexually harassed at least once in their lives. Abuse continues into old age (affecting 9% of women and 8% of men aged over 70 years) and is especially prevalent among LGBTQI people and asylum-seekers. A new Belgian National Action Plan on gender-based violence (2021-2025), containing 200 actions, was drawn up in collaboration with civil society organisations and agreed by all six Belgian governments from federal level and communities, although it is too early to evaluate results. Belgium has a federal Secretary of State for gender equality, equal opportunities and diversity. The Institute for Equality between Women and Men supports victims of gender discrimination, and trade unions are also active in this field.

In the **Czech Republic**, 600 cases of rape are reported every year, but the actual number is probably around 12,000 yet underreported. Almost 55% of women have experienced sexual violence and/or harassment at least once in their lives. There is a shortage of data on sexual harassment, which is prohibited under the Anti-Discrimination Act. In 2021, several high-profile cases of sexual violence and harassment were uncovered in the fields of higher education, medicine and sports. The Czech Republic has a Government Commissioner for Human Rights, but without direct access to government.

In **Finland**, physical sexual harassment has been a crime since 2014. Moreover, a recent Criminal Law amendment recognised all forms of sexual harassment as a



violation of privacy and integrity. Implementation of the Istanbul Convention is central to government policies to end violence against women including sexual harassment. Since the 1980s, Finland has managed to improve gender equality in many areas of life. Yet the Gender Equality Barometer in 2017 found 39% of women and 17% of men had experienced sexual harassment. Reaction to the #MeToo movement was limited, partly due to the #lääppijä (#doctor) campaign already in place since 2015, but some high-profile cases of sexual harassment have featured in the media.

In a 2020 survey in **France**, 81% of women reported suffering sexual harassment in a public place. It is also prevalent in the workplace, but research showed only 5% of complaints led to any kind of legal action. The crime of sexual harassment was introduced into the French penal code in 1992, with a further law in 2012 focusing more on the facts of the harassment than on the intentionality of the aggressor. In 2018, efforts to address specifically the problem of street harassment led to new legislation that introduced the offence of “outrage sexiste” (sexist insult). The same law also reinforced sanctions against harassment on digital and social media platforms. To counter sexual harassment in the workplace, an article was introduced into the employment law in 2015 concerning “agissement sexiste” (sexist behaviour). In 2018, another law on the freedom to choose one’s professional future required companies to have a focal point on sexual harassment and sexist behaviour in their workplace representative committees (CSE). Various initiatives have also been put in place at local and municipal level. The #MeToo movement was taken up in France under the hashtag #balancetonporc. However there has been some backlash - in 2019 several journalists were sacked for online sexual harassment using the hashtag #liguedulol. There is also a risk that the issue can be exploited to promote racist and xenophobic discourses already present in political and public life. An Action Plan against Sexual Harassment was adopted in 2020 and put in place a new network of “safe places”.

In **Greece**, Olympic sailing champion Sofia Bekatorou’s revelations in January 2021 that she had been sexually assaulted by a member of the Hellenic Sailing Federation led to the launch of the #MeTooGreece platform, to educate citizens about sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual violence by people in authority. The General Secretariat on Demographic and Family Policy and Gender Equality announced a new national action plan for gender equality for 2021-2025, referring among other to the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the 190 ILO Convention. The first pillar focuses on preventing and combating gender-based violence and domestic violence, including sexual harassment. Regarding sexual harassment in the workplace, the national action plan refers to strengthening the role of the Labour Inspectorate, involving companies and piloting initiatives in universities.

**Italian** data show a high rate of sexual harassment and low rate of reporting cases. Stereotypes and prejudices remain widespread. The #MeToo movement did not receive much attention and public denunciations by victims backfired. Sexual harassment in the workplace is addressed as a form of discrimination by the Equal Opportunities Law. A 2016 framework agreement with trade unions was renewed in 2020 and union representatives have played an important role in implementing measures at local level. A new Gender Equality Certificate is available on voluntary

basis to private enterprises with 50 or more employees. The certificate incentivises companies to take steps to reduce gender gaps by offering tax relief, technical assistance and help to obtain EU funding. Funding of at least €50 million will be available in 2023. Some 100 companies should be certified by the end of 2022 and must submit annual reports that also cover handling of sexual harassment cases.

**Luxembourg** addresses the prevention of sexual harassment in the broader context of sexual violence. Approximately 25% of women report experiencing at least one form of sexual violence in their lifetime. Combating domestic violence is one of seven priorities in the National Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men. Awareness-raising, training and education are the main types of actions. Since 1998, companies with 15 staff or more must have equality delegates, with compulsory government training. This system works well in large enterprises but is not so effective in small companies or sectors such as construction where employers fail to take the obligation seriously. Trade unions have been particularly active in this field. Information is available on the government's dedicated [website](#), which offers advice on how to react to sexual harassment and domestic violence.

**Malta** has a legal framework to deal with complaints of sexual harassment, but no comprehensive plan of action to prevent it. This work is mainly carried out by civil society NGOs and institutions on a project basis. The University of Malta, Department of Gender and Sexualities, recently participated in an EU Daphne-funded project on activating bystanders to prevent sexual harassment in schools. In 2020, inspired by #MeToo, the Women for Women Malta social media group received a wave of anonymous posts recounting women's experiences of sexual abuse and harassment.

Sexual harassment is not specifically covered in **Portugal's** Criminal Code. However, for decades it has been outlawed by the Labour Code – agreed through tripartite negotiations. Responsibility to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace lies with the employer. Compensation is foreseen but there is no provision for the protection of victims and their employment. People in the informal labour market - mainly women, young people and immigrants - have no protection. The National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination sets out measures to combat and prevent sexual harassment, but the governmental area for equality and non-discrimination sometimes has difficulties engaging other sectors. Domestic violence remains a serious problem despite the enormous development of structural response to support victims, numerous annual and sectorial campaigns, and the specific national plan to combat gender-based violence and violence against women.

but the Ministry for Gender Equality gets little cooperation from other ministries in the government. Domestic violence remains a serious problem.

In **Romania**, sexual harassment is sanctioned by Law 202/2002, and repeat offenders can be sentenced to up to one year in prison. In 2018, a "law of street harassment" came into effect to supplement previous legislation focused on workplace harassment and institutional settings. However, there is low public awareness of sexual harassment as a serious problem. Civil society actors have launched several

campaigns in recent years, for example: Hollaback Romania campaign against street harassment; ‘Hey, pisi!’ inspired by the ‘What were you wearing’ exhibition; ‘Who not to date’; and ‘Girl Up Romania’, started by girls in high schools. Online sexual harassment and sexual cyberbullying have received specific attention in the last decade.

**Spain** has developed a significant body of laws on equality and gender-based violence. The 2007 Equality Act defines sex-based and sexual harassment (also known as gender or sexist harassment) as discrimination. Prevention in the workplace also comes under the 1995 Occupational Safety and Health Act. The State Pact against Gender Violence represents a consensus across political parties and women’s organisations to tackle gender-based violence as a serious problem affecting the Spanish society. Protocols against sexual harassment exist in a range of sectors including Spanish universities (since 2007). La Manada case, in which a young woman was raped by five men, mobilised public opinion and led to mass demonstrations and stronger legislation on rape.

The #MeToo movement had a great impact in **Sweden** and highlighted the fact that sexual violence is still frequent, challenging the country’s image as a gender-equal society. As one result, the Consent Act, recognising sex without consent as rape, entered into force in July 2018, followed up by a website and information campaign *Av fri vilja* (Free will only). The sixth goal of the Gender Equality Policy is stopping and preventing male violence against women, including sexual violence and harassment, and a 10-year national strategy came into effect in 2017. Three laws are relevant to sexual harassment: the Discrimination Act, the Work Environment Act, and the Criminal Code. Various authorities and NGOs are also active in this field.

## 4. Key issues discussed during the seminar

Many delegates appreciated the **Danish Alliance against Sexual Harassment** and some suggested that such an initiative could be introduced in other EU countries. They wanted to know about the criteria for membership, what experience or training was required and what obligations members take on. They also discussed potential obstacles to participation and whether some economic sectors are more difficult to work with. Denmark intends to take stock of the Alliance’s impact in a couple of years.

Participants highlighted the added value of the Danish approach in engaging private sector companies in preventing sexual harassment in the **workplace**. It was explained that the unique ‘**Danish model**’ of society is based on tripartite agreements between government and the social partners. The Alliance was set up within the social dialogue, so employers are already involved and are keen to learn how to handle the problem in their own organisations. The most recent tripartite negotiations, completed in March 2022, clarified employers’ responsibilities under the Equal Treatment Act, and employees’ duty to call out sexual harassment, as well as increasing the focus on sexual harassment in three-yearly mandatory workplace assessments.

Sexual harassment takes place in **many environments**, including workplaces, schools and universities, and the street. The care sector is one at-risk area. Sometimes different contexts require different prevention approaches. **Impact assessment** is vital: all measures need to be evaluated to see whether they are producing the desired results. Sexism and sexual harassment in the police and armed forces, aggravated by risk situations, is unacceptable and must be stamped out.

**Discussion focused on education. It was emphasised that education** at a very early age is key to preventing sexual harassment through wider **cultural change** and progress towards a gender-equal society. In Sweden, the school curriculum has been revised in 2021 to include 'Sexuality, consent and relationships'. Teachers need appropriate training and resources. Graphic stories are popular, and **gaming sites** have been used to reach boys. But some participants reported parental opposition to compulsory sex education for their children.

Some participants noted the distinction between **sexual violence**, e.g. rape, which is a criminal act punished by law, and **sexual harassment** that is a form of discrimination and usually regulated by equal opportunities legislation. However, the roots are the same and harassment is part of a continuum that erodes dignity and respect and can lead to violence. Unequal **power relations** often lie at the root of sexual harassment. For example, several hundred instances of abuse were uncovered among interns and young assistants in the European Parliament. Gender segregation and 'glass ceilings' in some occupations and professions maintain this imbalance. Prevention measures must address workplaces where few women are employed. Legal status is a further risk factor, especially in the case of trafficked women. Mandatory training both in companies and in public services was overwhelmingly supported by the participating delegates.

Some organisations apply a **zero-tolerance** principle to prevent sexual harassment, but participants raised concerns whether this approach could discourage reporting by victims and reinforce attitudes among offenders. Some victims take time to come to terms with and report incidents or might be reluctant to make a complaint that would lead to the firing of a colleague. They simply want the behaviour to stop. In this respect, some legal flexibility can offer the option of a warning complemented by organisational behaviour change processes ('fix it from inside'). The crucial factor, which is highly personal, is whether the behaviour is perceived as violating the dignity of the addressee, either in purpose or by effect.

Delegates agreed that sexual harassment is a structural and institutional problem, not an individual problem. Removing one person from a workplace does not resolve underlying tensions or change the organisational culture. Learning from the Danish good practice, managers and employers need to adopt proactive prevention strategies rather than merely an 'open door' policy on reporting since many obstacles exist in the way of victims coming forward. In instances of "my word against his" there is a high risk that the victim will be further penalised or leave the workplace, especially if companies are afraid of being sued for wrongful dismissal.

Employers should appoint an **external counsellor** to deal with cases of sexual harassment, as required in the Commission's proposal for a Directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence. The Netherlands has a system of independent 'confidantes' in schools and companies who are trained to support victims. However, prevention measures and monitoring are more challenging in small companies. Delegates saw an important role in breaking the silence not just for the victims but also for the bystanders, for example 'enablers' who stay silent when colleagues offend.

Delegates agreed that **bystanders**, as well as friends and family, have an important role to play, for example in distracting the offender and supporting the victim. Training bystanders in schools and workplaces to recognise sexual harassment, and encouraging third parties to call out transgressive behaviour, is a useful and important tool, since speaking up comes at a high social cost for victims themselves. Boundaries are key: whereas 'flirting' may be normal among young people, it can go too far. Denmark is carrying out a study on the role of bystanders and their readiness to act. The European Commission is already funding projects under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme to support civil society initiatives to train and empower bystanders to take action and help victims.

There is a need to shift the focus from victim to perpetrator, to enable a move from reactive policies to proactive policies emphasising prevention. Governments need to develop strategies for **treating perpetrators**, who have sometimes suffered abuse themselves (e.g. as children witnesses of domestic violence), so as to avoid reoffending. In Belgium, 30% of offenders have been abused as children.

Many participants pointed out that **men also suffer** from sexual harassment – especially in the LGBTQI community – and should receive support. However, research shows that women are by far the largest majority of victims, and this can be related to gender stereotypes, men's sense of ownership of women's bodies and a culture of impunity. Specific measures targeting women should not be weakened.

Preventing **street harassment** is a priority in many countries. In France for example, in 2016, Paris carried out a campaign against street harassment using posters, social media and partnerships with restaurants, cafes and other places close to public spaces. The ['Angela'](#) plan creates a network of safe places where victims can easily turn to for immediate assistance. The plan is being replicated in other countries too, such as Belgium.

Participants referred to the additional risks facing women working in the **informal sector and digital platform work** – who have little if any opportunity to report sexual harassment. Authorities need to look at structures that create **marginalisation** and develop ways to help specific at-risk groups such as girls and women with disabilities, from ethnic minority and migrant groups, young and old (especially dementia sufferers), LGBTQI people, and Roma. Women with disabilities are often seen as asexual, and therefore not believed when they report harassment. In Austria, the NGO [Ninlil](#) provides empowerment for women with learning disabilities. In Malta, a project

to empower ethnic minority, LGBTQI and women with disabilities visited local communities to adapt materials to different needs.

Participants discussed the role of **media** in addressing sexual harassment, and the growing problem of online harassment, for instance of female journalists and politicians. In Sweden it is classed as an aggravating factor in court proceedings if a crime is committed against a politician in his or her official role. 'Normalisation' of male sexist behaviour among young women is a problem and should be resisted. Adding to the sense of impunity is the lack of awareness among law enforcers and judges. This could be resolved by **compulsory training**. Victims should not be subjected to harrowing legal interrogations.

**Language matters.** The more an issue is discussed in public opinion and on political agenda, the more society is aware of it and ready to address it. This can be done through research and surveys, media attention and awareness raising campaigns. Delegates also touched on sensitivities regarding **language** since terminology is complicated. For instance, when referring to 'cultural change' it should be remembered that words are also used in problematic contexts such as 'cancel culture'. The Netherlands refers to 'transgressive behaviour,' which relates primarily to the way the person experiencing the attention feels about it. Sexual violence is different but also comes within the scope of the Dutch National Action Plan since transgressive behaviour can lead to violence.

The meeting drew attention to the current **backlash** against women's rights in Europe and globally. Whereas in some countries, revelations by a famous personality have moved the debate forward, in others, like Romania, women have been ridiculed and 'gas-lighted'.

Action by **civil society NGOs** is very important in triggering change. The EU's Daphne strand of the CERV programme funds civil society projects to address gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. It also supports awareness raising campaigns. **Public awareness raising campaigns** for the general public are not effective, as per delegates' experiences, but more targeted campaigns can be effective if targeting specific groups. Target groups such as young people, should be involved in their development since solutions must be grounded in the experience of ordinary people.

**Men** should be involved in preventing and combating sexual harassment and opposing the backlash. [MenEngage Europe](#) is the umbrella organisation for men's groups and will meet in November in Berlin. The European Commission will organise a mutual learning seminar on the role of men and boys in promoting gender equality, hosted by Ireland and co-hosted by Austria in February 2023 in Dublin. Men should be encouraged to speak up against sexual harassment in men-only environments.

The ongoing, EU-funded [UniSAFE](#) project on ending gender-based violence in **academia** has already received 35,000 responses – which was discussed at a conference in Prague on 24-25 November 2022.

It was stressed that more **research** is needed to assess the prevalence of sexual harassment in different countries, sectors and strata of society, not just based on reports to police but on actual number of cases. This means identifying the right questions to ask. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) already has a considerable amount of data on [gender-based violence](#) and sexual harassment and has developed methodological tools on measuring it.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

- Sexual harassment is deeply rooted into daily sexism and gender bias. Having laws in place to criminalise sexual harassment is necessary, but not enough to tackle this widespread problem. There is a need to shift the focus from victimisation to prevention. Preventing sexual harassment requires fundamental **cultural or societal change**. Despite some progress, more action is needed to introduce well-funded, proactive policies, embodied in a National Action Plan, and structural reforms where necessary. Action plans need indicators and reporting mechanisms to assess impact and evaluate effectiveness. Setting up alliances with employer organisations and trade unions is a good practice worth introducing. Another good practice is appointing a high-level Minister or Government Commissioner to take responsibility for citizen dialogue and coordinating partners and activities. The active participation of Ministers is important in guaranteeing high-level political commitment.
- **Reporting** of sexual harassment needs to be improved by ensuring reporting channels with lower thresholds for victims. Furthermore, **support for victims** is essential, for example through counselling and helplines, safe places, and an easily accessible one-stop-shop for assistance. However, **prevention is vital**. This means **educating** both boys and girls about relationships and respect from a very early age and raising awareness of population at large. School curricula should be adapted to include comprehensive, compulsory sexual education. Changing attitudes and breaking down gender stereotypes, sexism and gender bias is a gradual process and momentum must be sustained over the long term. **Public awareness campaigns** alone will not prevent sexual harassment, but they help to keep the issue high in the public opinion. Campaigns are most effective when they target the needs of specific audiences and target groups. **Supporting civil society** efforts is an effective way to complement public campaigns.
- Successful sexual harassment prevention requires **networking and collaboration** with the widest possible range of actors, including governmental bodies at all level from local to regional and national level, social partners (employers and trade unions), education and training providers, youth and volunteer sector, civil society and NGOs, especially feminist and human rights organisations. This can be organised on a top-down or bottom-up basis as appropriate. A network of ‘ambassadors’ might help to engage society at all levels and enhance cooperation between organisations. Men must be brought on board, and the Danish Alliance is an interesting model since many of the organisations

represented in the Alliance are led by men. The Dutch Commissioner is another good example of bringing together different partners and providing independent advice to government.

- Training and empowering **bystanders** to call out sexual harassment can be an effective approach, but they must also feel safe. Aiming for a zero-tolerance policy may be appropriate in some contexts, such as political parties, but less in others. Complaints should be assessed by independent, external counsellors. **Compulsory training** should be introduced both for public servants (lawmakers, judges and the legal profession), and for managers and executives in private sector as well as for teachers and trainers in education and universities, and youth organisers in sports, volunteer and other sectors.
- Prevention measures must reach marginalised groups and confront in a realistic and non-judgemental way the new challenges arising from **online harassment**, especially of young girls. Young people can be reached through innovative means such as influencers and gaming sites. Self-defence training can help to empower women, but the priority should be promoting respectful behaviour by all members of society.
- Cooperation with **media organisations** is also key and could produce guidelines for reporting of sexual harassment by journalists. Setting up an EU-wide database could provide broad access to research and training materials. Sexual harassment is harmful for the whole of society, including observers, so enhancing respect is good for everyone. There is a long way to go to prevent sexual harassment, but a lot of work has already been done. The priorities are upscaling, increased resources (budgets) and sustainability.
- All Member States should ratify **the [Istanbul Convention](#)** on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) **[Convention 190](#)** on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work.
- The European Commission will set up in 2023 a **network** for prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence, gathering Member States and relevant stakeholders to share knowledge and exchange good practices on regular basis. An EU-wide harmonised number for helplines for victims of violence against women will be announced in November 2022, with the participation of 15 Member States so far. A Commission Recommendation on prevention of harmful practices against women and girls is foreseen for 2023. Moreover, in February 2023, in Ireland, the Commission will organise a mutual learning seminar on the role of men and boys in promoting gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes. On the latter, an EU campaign on breaking stereotypes, aimed at young people, will be launched also in 2023. Finally, the EU's annual Gender Equality Report 2022 also includes a chapter on sexual harassment covering policy developments in all EU Member States.