

# NATIONAL REPORT ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

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45% of people who most often experience sexual harassment at work do not respond in any way



Among those ones who do not respond, 50% think that nothing can be done about it



56% of those who do respond state that nothing happened afterwards



**SAVEZ  
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## IMPRESSUM

**Publishers:**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Savez samostalnih sindikata Hrvatske

**For publishers:**

Sonja Schirmbeck  
Mladen Novosel

**Language editing:**

Calvin Allen

**Layout:**

Bestias

**Place and year of publication:**

Zagreb, 2024.

**ISBN (SSSH)** 978-953-6176-62-5 (print edition)

**ISBN (SSSH)** 978-953-6176-63-2 (electronic edition)

**ISBN (FES)** 978-953-8376-27-6 (print edition)

**ISBN (FES)** 978-953-8376-28-3 (electronic edition)

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It does not necessarily reflect the views of FES, SSSH or the organisation in which the authors are employed.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full text
FG	Focus group
IDI	Individual interview
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PRS	Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova (Gender Equality Ombudsperson)
SH	Sexual harassment
SHW	Sexual harassment in the workplace
SSSH	Savez samostalnih sindikata Hrvatske (Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (SSSH) and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Zagreb conducted research into the sexual harassment (SH) of workers with the aim of developing recommendations for improving the legal framework and practice in this area in order to reduce instances of sexual harassment in the workplace (SHW). The research was coordinated by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Zagreb and the Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI) and, in addition to Croatia, the research is being carried out in other European countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Hungary and Slovakia.

The research design involved the following methods: desk research, a survey research; interviews with workers who had experienced SH; and a focus group with stakeholder representatives.

Some of the key findings of the research include:

- Workers who experienced SH most often did not respond in any way (44.7%). The main reason was the perception that nothing could be done about it (50.3%), which was also the prevailing opinion among those interviewed for the project.
  - Among those who did respond to SHW, in 56.1% of cases nothing happened as a result and in only 26.6% of cases did the harassment stop.
  - About half of the respondents (49.7%) were unaware whether their employer had any regulations in place regarding SH.
  - Respondents acknowledged that trade unions should play a role in the prevention of SH, in policy formulation and in providing support to the affected workers.
- Among the recommendations arising from the research and the relevant literature are the following:
- Legally require employers to adopt proactive measures for prevention, develop in-house regulations addressing SH, conduct training and ensure that workers are informed about organisational policies covering SH.
  - Investigate and analyse the reasons behind the low number of reported cases of SHW and develop measures specifically aimed at addressing the causes of underreporting and at encouraging individuals to come forward with reports.
  - Implement zero tolerance policies for any form of harassment in the workplace and strengthen trust in the formal reporting process for SHW; develop company/organisation-level procedures, make them transparent and accessible, and continuously inform and remind employees about them.
  - Incorporate into collective agreements preventive measures and provisions for handling SH complaints, and actively inform workers about their rights and the reporting procedures in SH cases.
  - Implement ongoing educational programmes on SH, integrated into both the education system and organisational/company structures, to promote efforts at continuous prevention.

The research deepens understanding and provides new findings regarding the current state of affairs in regard to the prevention, detection and prosecution of SH.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The study is aimed at obtaining data on SHW in Croatia as part of a larger international project intended to gather information, verify knowledge and experience regarding SHW (including worker vulnerability factors) and provide a basis for trade unions for social dialogue, advocacy, and activities and programmes to raise awareness and protect workers from violence and harassment in the world of work. The purpose of the project is to develop evidence-based policy recommendations as well as recommendations for education and training aimed at works councils/trade union representatives in companies.

This project understands SWH according to Directive 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence (EC, 2024: point 65 of the preamble)<sup>1</sup> as ‘a form of discrimination on the grounds of sex [under] Directives 2004/113/EC<sup>2</sup>, 2006/54/EC<sup>3</sup> and 2010/41/EU<sup>4</sup>, defined 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, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment’.

The report is structured as follows: after a brief methodological note, a literature review covers previous research in Croatia and Croatia’s legal framework; the core part of the report brings the research findings; and the concluding chapter develops policy recommendations for stakeholders and for the development of the upcoming training programme.

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1 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L\\_202401385](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L_202401385)  
2 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32004L0113>  
3 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32006L0054>  
4 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32010L0041>



## 2

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A mixed methodology encompassing both quantitative and qualitative research methods was applied. The research was designed to answer the following research questions: *What are the most common forms of sexual harassment? How familiar are those who have experienced sexual harassment and all other respondents with worker protection mechanisms? What were the consequences of exposure to sexual harassment? How did those who experienced sexual harassment react/cope with this? What are the channels for informing them about the protective mechanisms that exist?*

The quantitative research segment involved an online survey which used a non-probabilistic sampling method, specifically a convenience sample. The questionnaire was designed by CELSI and the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (Savez samostalnih sindikata Hrvatske (SSSH)), i.e. the author DŠ of this report), and translated into the languages of all the participating countries. The survey link was distributed between June 10 and July 18, 2024, primarily via email but also other communication channels managed by SSSH such as social media and the trade union magazine, bulletin and websites; while Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Zagreb, as well as other civil society partner organisations, also helped disseminate the link within their networks. After data cleaning, the final survey sample included 1,060 participants. For data analysis, the software programmes Stata and Microsoft Excel were used.

Upon completion of the survey research, the process of recruiting participants and conducting interviews commenced, lasting until October 17, 2024. The qualitative part of the research comprised semi-structured interviews, conducted according to a pre-prepared instrument. These interviews were held with 9 individuals who had experienced SHW. Some of them had provided their contact information via the survey, while additional participants were recruited through other methods, such as outreach

via social media and personal networks, as well as through snowballing via existing participants. The interviews were transcribed and analysed in MAXQDA24 software. A focus group was also organised, consisting of 7 experts from different stakeholder representatives. These experts commented on the findings from earlier phases of the research and contributed to identifying the key issues. They also helped to formulate the recommendations for legislative and policy frameworks at national level, as well as for employers and trade unions, and in regard to training activities.

## 3

## CURRENT SITUATION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

### 3.1 KNOWLEDGE IN RELATION TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE IN CROATIA

Despite various legislative, advocacy-based and other efforts, SH remains widespread. Although SH has been under-researched – most surveys have been conducted on convenience samples, and especially scant is research covering all sectors and occupations – the available data and recent studies have begun to shed light on this phenomenon and how it is being addressed.

The report of the Gender Equality Ombudsperson (Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova (PRS); PRS, 2021: 53) warns of the ‘significant jump’ in the number of reported cases, as evident from the number of complaints received in 2021 which increased by more than 100% compared to the previous year. This trend has been confirmed by official data from the Ministry of the Interior which shows that the number of reported cases almost quadrupled in the previous five years (PRS, 2021: 54).

Various studies conducted to date enable similar insights. According to the study by PRS and SSSH in 2005 (reported in Ljubičić & Petrović, 2011) and the study by Bonacci Skenderović (2021), more than 70% of surveyed women have either been personally exposed to or have witnessed SHW during their careers. Importantly, data shows that instances of SH are not individual and isolated cases: according to Eurostat (2023), 17.0% of women in Croatia have repeatedly experienced SH. This is corroborated by national research findings: a high proportion of respondents (e.g. 82% in Bonacci Skenderović, 2021) report experiencing several forms of harassment (e.g. 7 on average by women and 5.9 by men, as found in Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021) and that they experienced them from more than one person.

Forms of harassment range from verbal abuse, such as sexually suggestive remarks (by far the most frequent type of harassment reported in studies), to physical acts including unwanted gestures, touching and even more extreme forms such as sexual coercion and rape (Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Ljubičić & Petrović, 2011; Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021).

Research shows that women are disproportionately affected by SH, particularly young women and those in subordinate positions (Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Ljubičić & Petrović, 2011; Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021). Eurostat (2023) figures for 2021 show that 50.5% of women aged 18-29 and 46.0% of those from the 30-44 age group have experienced SHW. While men are also subject to unwanted physical contact (mostly of physical violence), they report harassment far less frequently or not at all (Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Kuna, 2024; Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021); this was also acknowledged in the PRS reports (2021). Furthermore, Rodik and Ostojčić (2021) also found that those with direct contact with third parties (clients) experience harassment more frequently than other categories of workers. These findings corroborate the results of research in the Croatian healthcare sector, where a high incidence of SH is reported among nurses and medical technicians and where third parties (i.e. patients) are the most frequent perpetrators (Krajnović et al., 2007; Kuna, 2024).

The above studies show that perpetrators are typically male and in supervisory roles or positions of power over their target harassment occurring most frequently on the premises of the employer), i.e. are predominantly those who abuse their position of authority to intimidate or manipulate people, creating a hostile work environment (see Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; also Bauer, 2023).

Despite the high incidence of SH, it often goes unreported (Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Juretić et al., 2017; Kuna, 2024; Ljubičić & Petrović, 2012; PRS, 2015, 2016, 2020, 2021; Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021). The leading reason for non-reporting is mistrust in institutional mechanisms and justice – exemplified by only 20.5% of cases being reported to an official body in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023) – as well as the lack of societal sanctions. This includes inadequate responses from employers and/or because (of the belief that) many cases either go unresolved or result in no action being taken against the harasser (or when action even makes the situation worse), further discouraging people from coming forward (Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Eurofound, 2015; Kuna, 2024; PRS, 2020, 2021; Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021). Rodik and Ostojčić (2021) in that regard

report a high degree of dissatisfaction with the process, i.e. its duration, efficiency and outcome, and with the response (or lack thereof) from those responsible for workplace health and safety in their workplace.

Among other key reasons which discourage persons from disclosing incidents of harassment are the fear of retaliation and/or stigmatisation and concerns about job security, fear of returning to the same workplace, and financial reasons and concerns about the duration and outcome of the process (Ljubičić & Petrović, 2012; Vasiljević, 2018). For instance, Bogadi-Šare and Zavalic (2009: 34) argue that harassment, including SH (classified in their study under 'psychological' factors of occupational hazards), is under-reported because of the fear of reporting such 'very unpleasant situations', even though their study found that as much as 82.8% of workers are exposed to some form of psychosocial hazards. Available data also shows that important reasons include lack of information and knowledge of the competent authorities/responsible persons or of the legal rules and reporting procedures and what they entail, or recognising and knowing what SH is (e.g. in Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Kuna, 2024; Ljubičić & Petrović, 2012; PRS 2016, 2018; cf. Rodik & Ostojić, 2021; see also Eurofound, 2015). This worrying result of the correlation between a lack of information, knowledge and/or awareness and the lack of action in response corresponds with the findings of other recent studies exploring the effect of the level of being informed on workers' agency in the context of their rights at work (e.g. Šobota & Špiranec, 2022a, 2022b).

### 3.2 LAWS, POLICIES AND ACTORS RELATED TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

Croatia's legal framework is shaped by international, EU and national laws comprising numerous regulations and laws of a different character.<sup>5</sup> While Croatia has yet to ratify the recent International Labour Organization Convention No. 190, the first global legal instrument on violence and harassment in the workplace, the country is bound by other international and European regulations. The harmonisation of the Croatian national legislation with the *acquis communautaire* and the transposition of EU directives into the Croatian legal framework – in particular 2006/54/EC Directive mandating equal treatment and prohibiting discrimination based on gender, including SH; and 2000/78/EC Directive on equal treatment in employment and occupation – has led to the introduction in national labour law of the terms and institutes relating to SHW, worker

dignity protection and the prohibition of discrimination (Vinković, 2018). Different laws and regulations at national level regulate SHW: the Croatian Constitution (Article 3); the Labour Law (Official Gazette No. 64/23, Article 134); the Gender Equality Act (Official Gazette No. 69/17, Article 8); the Anti-discrimination Act (Official Gazette No. 112/12, Article 3); and the Criminal Code (Official Gazette No. 114/22, Article 156). On top of that, there are also a number of bylaws and regulations, collective agreements, agreements between works councils and employers, and other autonomous general normative acts that regulate issues in regard to harassment in the world of work.

Nevertheless, the legal protection of those experiencing SH in practice is still insufficient and deficient. The reasons include conceptual and terminological overlap, ambiguity, confusion and the gaps in defining key terms and forms of harassment created by the different pieces of legislation, such as *violence, harassment, sexual harassment and gender-based harassment, discrimination, mobbing and poor working conditions*, with mobbing frequently used as a common denominator for all forms of violence and harassment, while itself lacking legal definition (Grgurev, 2021; Independent Road Workers Union (NCS), 2022: 13; Potočnjak, 2021). In particular, the drafting of the closed list of unwanted behaviours stipulated by the Anti-discrimination Act prevents people from seeking protection (or stopping work if they feel at risk) when experiencing behaviours which are not based on its listed grounds for discrimination (Vinković, 2018: 23; Gović Penić, 2018b: 47). Furthermore, legal protection is also hampered due to insufficiently regulated out-of-court procedures for the protection of workers' dignity and the short period for the statute of limitations (three months) for reporting incidents of SH (Špadina, 2021). On the other hand, the time needed to take measures, including receiving a court ruling, is excessively long and the outcome is often unknowable (Bonacci Skenderović, 2021; Kuna, 2024; PRS, 2020). Relatedly, another deficiency of the current framework is the very low sanctions on offer, i.e. the fine for SH as stipulated in the Anti-discrimination Act (Article 26) – of an amount below the average monthly wage – is little more than a price (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000), which has a major impact on access to justice and the prevention of SH. At the same time, the damages which may be awarded in a harassment claim are not stipulated, the amount varying from case to case (Gović Penić, 2018a).

Croatian (labour) law mandates companies to protect workers' dignity, i.e. to have procedures in place to address harassment via works rules, if no such provisions exist in a collective agreement, and to designate workplace dignity officers – in cases of companies employing at least

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see e.g. Učur (2022: 867, footnote 18).

20 workers – to handle harassment complaints. Positive examples include companies that actively train staff on harassment issues and have clear reporting mechanisms and in-house policies, including codes of conduct/codes of ethics, etc. (e.g. Juretić et al., 2017).

However, as research shows, compliance varies and these mechanisms are often underutilised as many companies, especially small ones and those operating in the private sector, have neither effective in-house processes or formal policies for handling complaints nor collective agreements. Alternatively, even where agreements have been concluded, they often do not contain provisions on harassment and discrimination, or simply copy those already contained in the law, as evidenced by the largest union's database of collective agreements (SSSH, 2024) or by PRS (PRS, 2009; see also Juretić et al., 2017; cf. Ljubičić & Petrović, 2012). Research also shows that employers tend to ignore or actively discourage people from reporting harassment (Vinković, 2018: 24), do not provide adequate information and training to employees about their rights and SH, and do not have dignity officers/confidential counsellors and policies in place or appropriate reporting procedures (e.g. Bonacci Skenđerović, 2021; Juretić et al., 2017; Ljubičić & Petrović, 2012; Rodik & Ostojić, 2021; Šiljak et al., 2022). This limits awareness and understanding of what constitutes harassment and hinders workers' agency and reporting as well as the preventive effect of the existence of such policies and regulations (Eurofound, 2015; OECD, 2017); on top of that, many employers themselves, or their designated dignity officers, do not understand harassment or their legal obligations (e.g. Juretić et al., 2017).

# 4

## LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

In this chapter, we present the findings from the survey, interviews and the focus group that formed the core of the project’s research phase.

### 4.1 OCCURRENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

When asked their opinion about how common is SHW (see Figure 1), respondents estimate it to be more common in their country than in their current workplace. This discrepancy might suggest that they are aware of the issue in more general terms but underestimate its frequency or perhaps are unsure whether particular behaviours around them should be labelled as SH. Other research findings support the latter conclusion, especially in connection with the frequency of and permissiveness towards ‘less serious’ forms of SH like unwanted remarks or visual contact (staring) (see Table 1).

The majority of survey respondents (61.1%) had no experience of particular SH behaviours in their current workplace. Among those who did, most respondents had experienced either indecent sexual jokes or offensive remarks about their bodies or private lives (21.9%), or inappropriate staring or leering that made them feel uncomfortable (21.3%), followed by unsolicited physical contact (12%). Other types of experiences were less frequent, as can be seen in Table 1. The proportion of individuals who have experienced one or more forms of SH in the workplace does not differ based on whether they are union members or not, or whether there is a union or some form of worker representation at their workplace or not.

### 4.2 FORMS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The unwanted behaviours which were experienced most commonly were inappropriate staring or leering, indecent sexual jokes or offensive remarks, and unsolicited physical

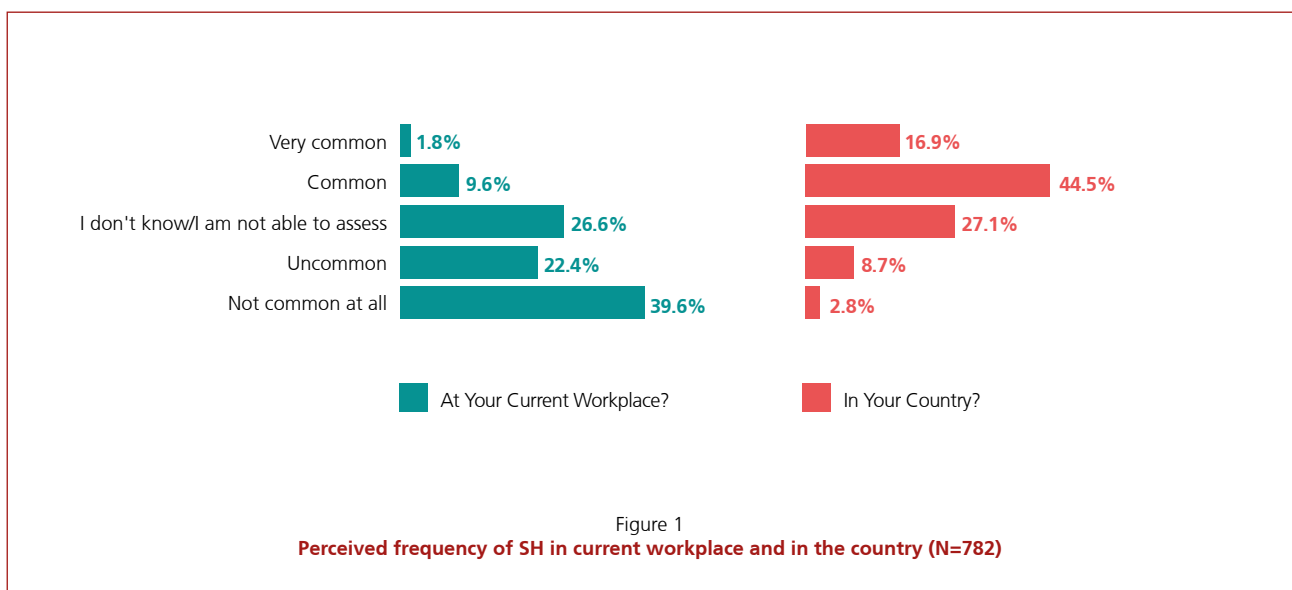


Table 1  
**Experiences of unwanted behaviours in current workplace (N=1060; multiple choice question)**

No experience with such behaviours	61.1%
Indecent sexual jokes or offensive remarks about your body or private life	21.9%
Inappropriate staring or leering that made you feel uncomfortable	21.3%
Unsolicited physical contact, e.g. close proximity, touching body parts, kisses/hugs or something else that you did not want	12.0%
Inappropriate suggestions to go out on a date, which made you feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated	6.0%
Other similar behaviour with a sexual connotation at work which made you feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated	5.7%
Inappropriate suggestions for any sexual activity	5.7%
Inappropriate advances on social networking websites	4.2%
Exposure to sexually explicit images or videos that made you feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated	2.9%
Inappropriate sexually explicit emails or text messages	2.3%
Don't know	1.3%
Somebody blackmailed you with firing or stopping your career progression if you refused sexual proposals or advances	0.9%
Prefer not to answer	0.7%
Somebody has blackmailed you with not getting the job if you refused sexual proposals or advances	0.5%

Table 2  
**Relative commonality of unwanted behaviours in current workplace (N=369); (scale: 1 – never; 5 – all the time)**

FACT	AVERAGE
Inappropriate staring or leering that made you feel uncomfortable	2.72
Indecent sexual jokes or offensive remarks about your body or private life	2.63
Unsolicited physical contact, e.g. close proximity, touching body parts, kisses/hugs or something else that you did not want	1.92
Other unwanted behaviour with sexual connotation towards you	1.67
Inappropriate suggestions to go out on a date, which made you feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated	1.58
Inappropriate suggestions for any sexual activity	1.50
Inappropriate advances on social networking websites	1.47
Exposure to sexually explicit images or videos that made you feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated	1.37
Inappropriate sexually explicit emails or text messages	1.30
Somebody blackmailed you with firing or stopping your career progression if you refused sexual proposals or advances	1.12
Somebody has blackmailed you with not getting the job if you refused sexual proposals or advances	1.11

contact (see Table 2). We asked those who had experienced SHW about the details of the incidents. As others who participated in the survey did not answer these questions, the number of respondents throughout this section is lower (N=412, with some attrition across the whole questionnaire).

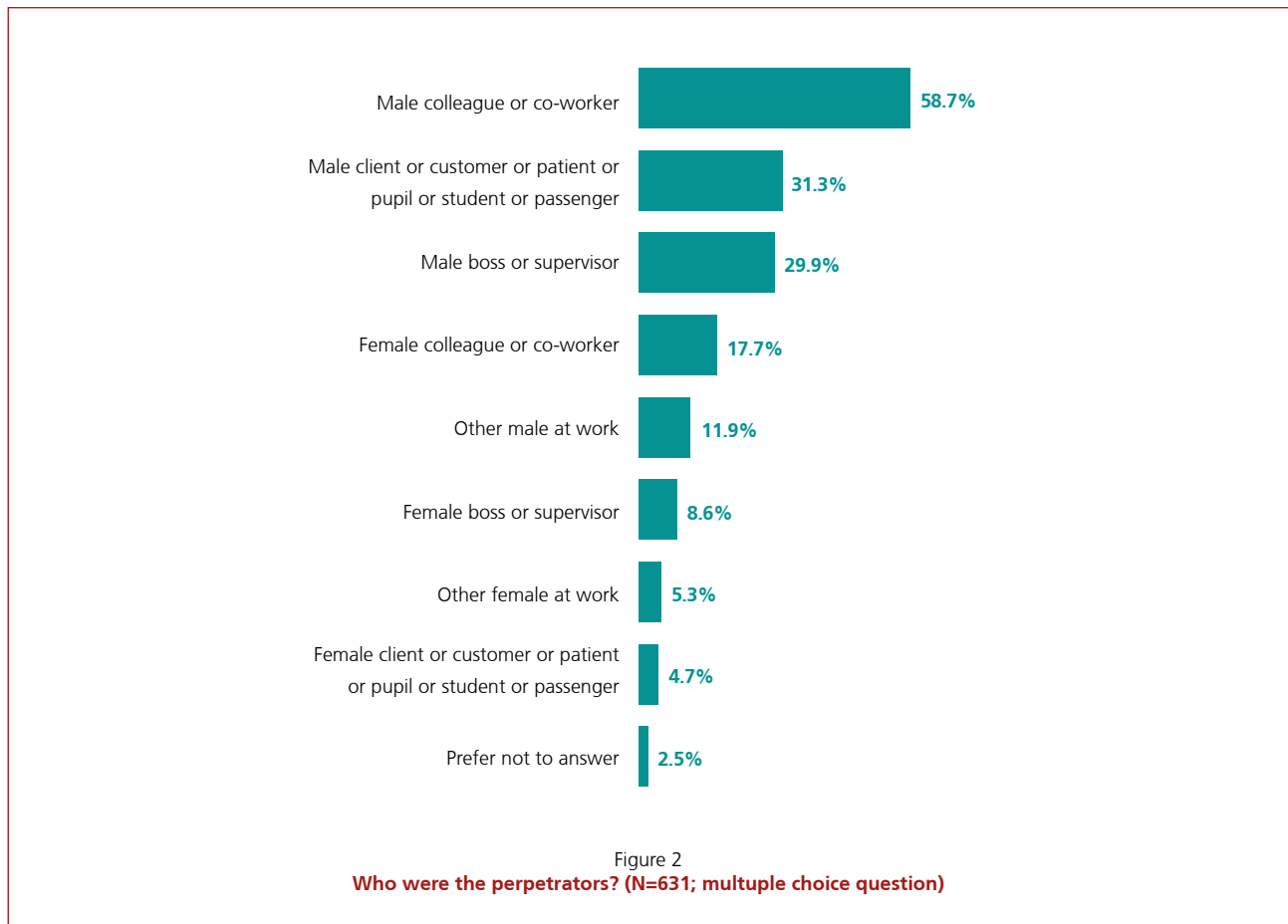
From the interviews, we conclude that SH cases are rarely isolated incidents. They typically involve repeated patterns of behaviour, most often by male supervisors. The workplace environment is such that it frequently recognises that the perpetrator has crossed the boundaries of appropriate behaviour, but accepts or dismisses it with statements like ‘it’s nothing’. For instance, one interviewee recalled sharing her experience with her friend who was also an ex-colleague and who knew the perpetrator. The friend agreed the perpetrator’s behaviour was inappropriate, but ‘she was also saying things like, “you know him”, “why do you pay attention to it?”, “he joked with me like that”, and all that’ (IDI1). Another interviewee mentioned that the perpetrator often insulted other colleagues but they ‘were saying that he was fine when he wasn’t drunk’ (IDI3). This climate of acceptance of ‘less serious’ harassment behaviour skews the evaluation scale, resulting in working environments where only extreme behaviours with criminal elements are recognised as SH.

### 4.3 TARGETS AND PERPETRATORS

The perpetrators of unwanted behaviours were most often male colleagues/co-workers (58.7%), male clients/customers/patients/pupils/students/passengers (31.3%) or male bosses/supervisors (29.9%). Other types were perpetrators less frequently (see Figure 2).

When asked about their perception of the perpetrator’s motivation, most often the respondents identified it was their sex (68.2%) or age (38.0%). Other less frequent answers were financial status (4.5%), sexual orientation (3.4%), nationality (3.1%), religion (1.7%), gender identity (1.4%), race or ethnicity (1.4%) and disability (1.4%). Some 22.6% of respondents replied that none of the listed characteristics were behind the perpetrator’s motivation.

At the time of the harassment, 56.2% of respondents were not trade union members, 38.2% were members and 5.6% didn’t know/remember. We tested whether unionisation mattered with respect to survivors’ responses and their awareness and attitudes about prevention and regulation, but no difference was found between those who were union members and those who were not.



From the interviews, we identified several patterns of perpetrator behaviour. Listed by their frequency, these are: a) escalation of the behaviour over time (e.g. from remarks to more explicit verbal abuse and then to physical abuse); b) retaliation when faced with assertive resistance or a formal complaint; and c) similar treatment of other women in the workplace. All three features do not have to be present in each case. For instance, there were cases where the perpetrator used verbal SH towards many female colleagues but escalated to physical abuse towards only one. Nevertheless, some perpetrators simultaneously target multiple women with physical harassment or serial propositions of quid pro quo offers. One participant proposed a classification of perpetrators as ‘malignant’ and ‘less malignant’ (those who do not repeat or do not retaliate). She also remarked: ‘I think of the amount of casualties among these people. It is happening on a daily basis’ (ID18).

#### 4.4 CONSEQUENCES OF EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

When asked about the consequences they have felt, most respondents reported feeling uncomfortable in the work-

place (64.0%) while 28.2% reported no consequences. One quarter (25.9%) of respondents said they considered leaving work and 25.7% avoided socialising with people at work. Other less frequent consequences are shown in Figure 3.

The interviews confirmed that those who experience SHW often exhibit various reactions including avoidance behaviours and diverse stress responses. An additional finding was that some of them experience self-doubt. One participant shared: ‘I wondered if it was because I don’t have a husband and children, so he had extra courage’ (ID13). This finding is consistent with the results of the survey showing that single individuals are statistically significantly more likely to be exposed to SHW.

#### 4.5 SURVIVORS’ RESPONSES TO SHW

While those who had experienced SHW most often didn’t make any sort of response (44.7%), about a third of them (32.8%) confronted the perpetrator(s) and/or told co-workers (32.8%), while 26.3% told a friend or fami-

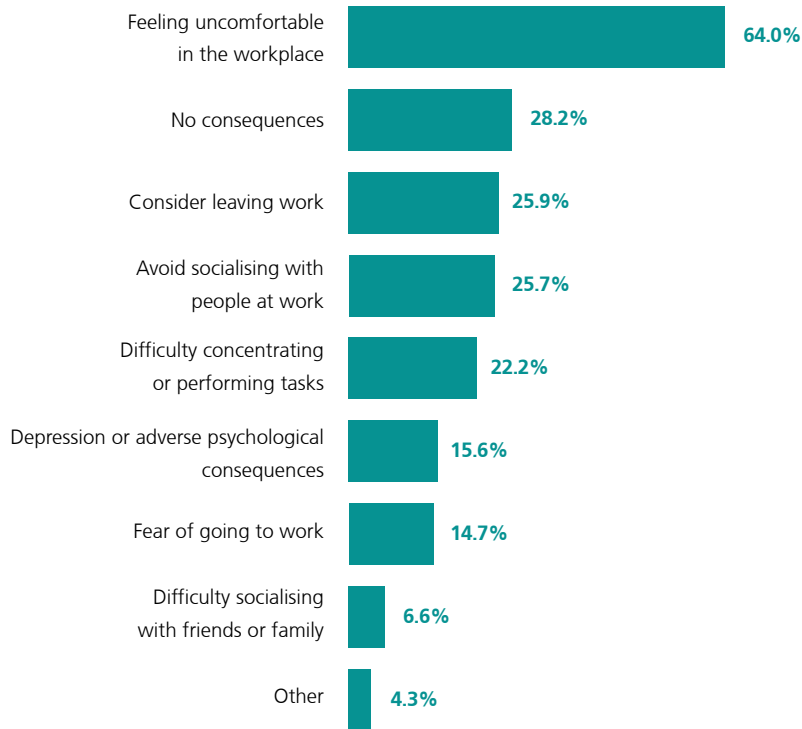


Figure 3  
Consequences of the experience of SH (N=347; multiple choice question)

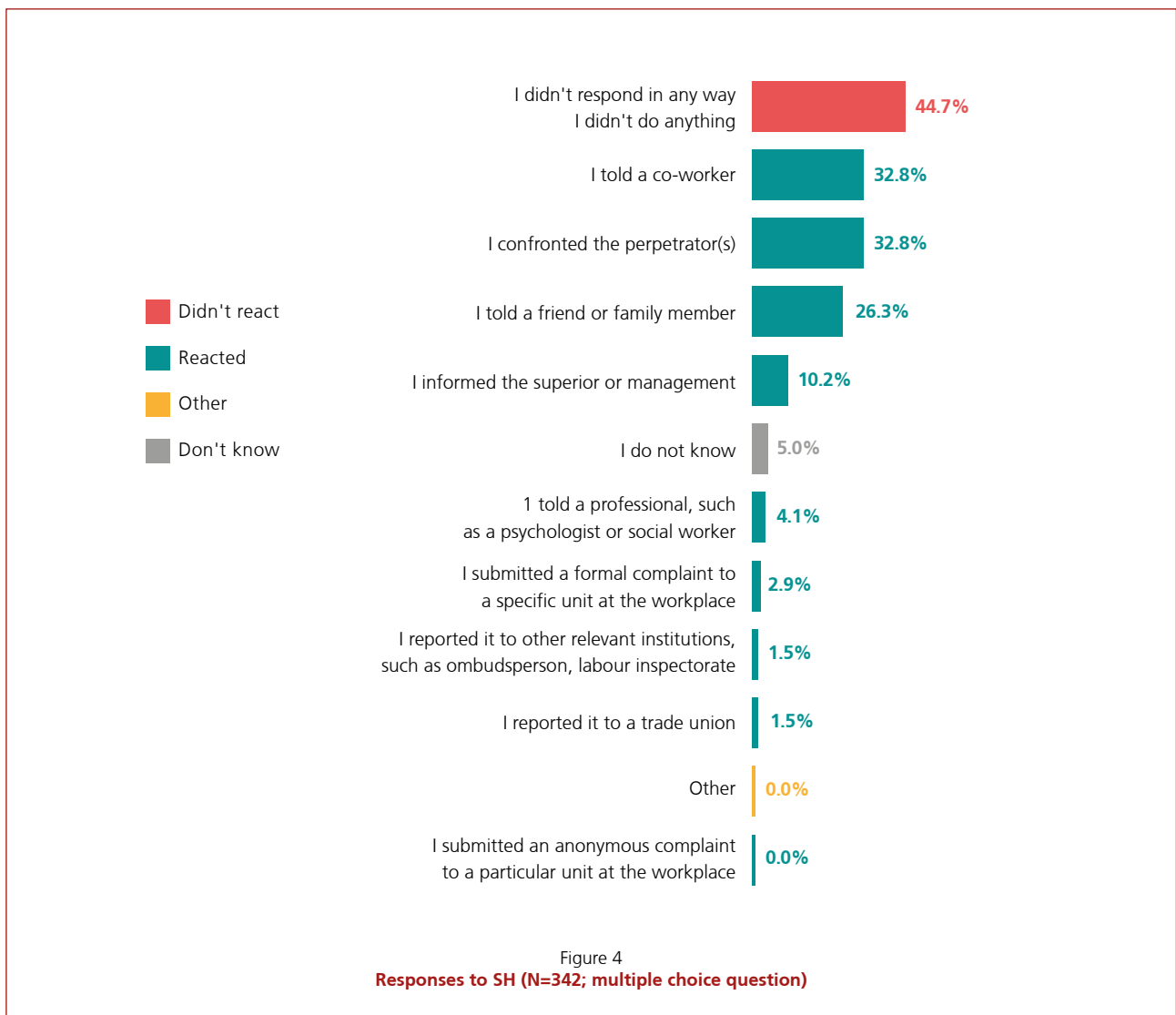


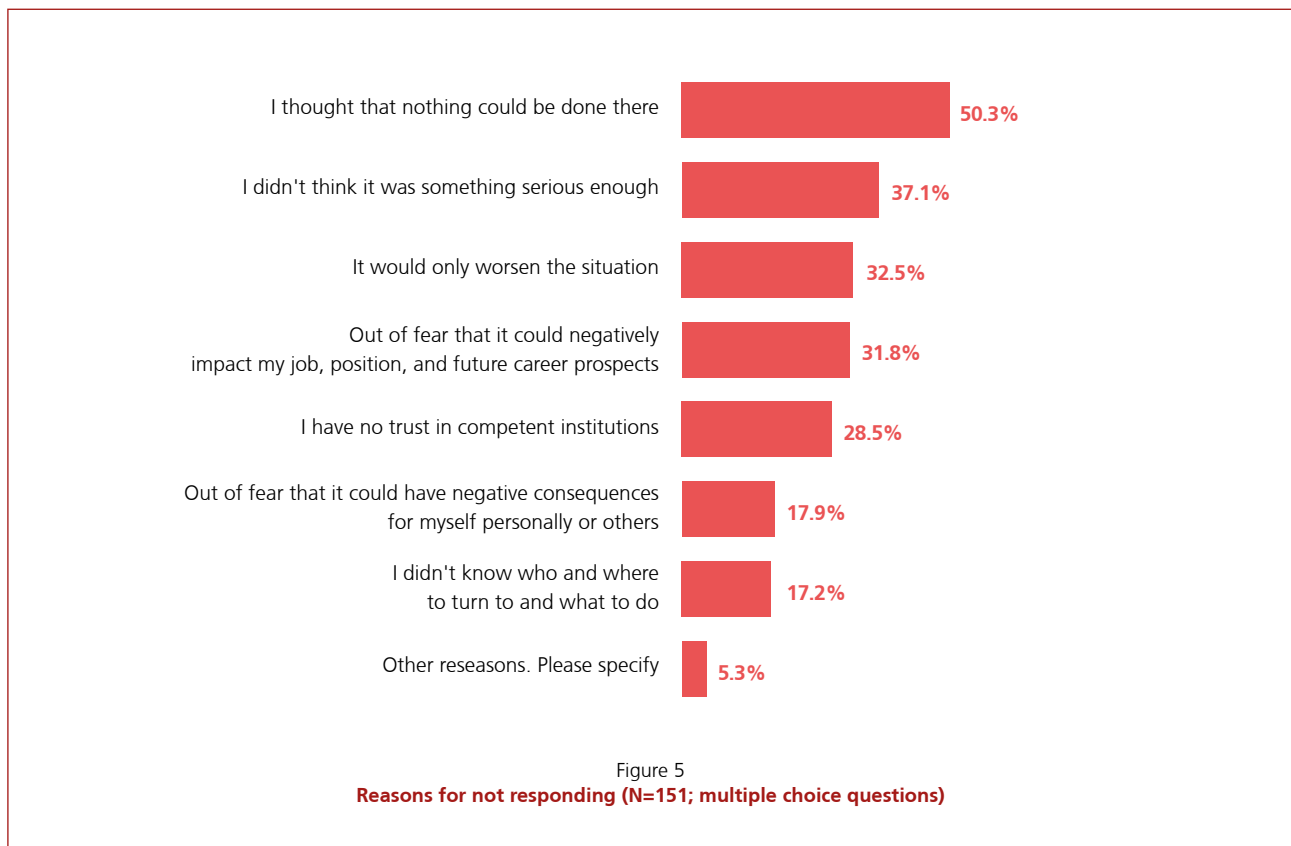
ly member. However, only 10.2% informed superiors or management (see Figure 4).

We asked those who didn't respond in any way the reason for not doing so. Most common was the perception that nothing could be done (50.3%), while quite often they didn't think it was sufficiently serious (37.1%). About a third of respondents thought that responding would only worsen the situation (32.5%) or feared there would be negative job-related consequences (31.8%). The distribution of other responses is shown in Figure 5.

The majority of those interviewed for the project reported seeking help and advice from independent organisations and institutions outside of their workplace (e.g. NGOs, lawyers, PRS). Most considered reporting the SH officially but often decided against it due to fear of retaliation, mistrust in the system of reporting at their workplace, mis-

trust in the judicial system and/or concerns about personal and professional consequences. In the words of one interviewee: 'Apart from commenting with my colleagues, I didn't do anything. I honestly don't know how to position myself without jeopardising the future of my employment' (ID19). Another expressed fear of retaliation: 'If you are in a slightly higher position, you know exactly what they are doing, how they would turn on you, how it would leak out, how they would make your life hell. Because if you accidentally dared to seek some rights, that is what is done to you, exactly that' (ID15). Some didn't consider reporting due to being able to confront the perpetrator, because they perceived SH as so ubiquitous that nothing could be done or were unaware of their legal rights. As one interviewee recollected: 'Besides the omnipresence of it all, I simply didn't think; primarily, I was shocked. So I didn't even know, honestly, I didn't even know my rights, or to whom, or what [to report]' (ID18).





Perpetrators typically respond to confrontation or reporting with revenge, escalation of abuse, threats and denial of their actions. Concerning the reactions of work colleagues, most interviewees noted a lack of support. Sometimes colleagues actively turn against those who report harassment. One interviewee said: 'I think it is necessary to react, but I was not aware how much all my colleagues would turn their backs and that I would be left deserted like an abandoned dog' (IDI4). Another recollected: 'This reaction of mine in most cases caused ridicule and contempt, both in male and female colleagues' (IDI7).

#### 4.6 SATISFACTION WITH THE CASE(S) OUTCOMES AFTER RESPONDING TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

We asked those who did make a response to tell us what happened after their reaction. Unfortunately, in 56.1% of cases, nothing happened although in 26.6% the harassment stopped. See Figure 6 for other responses. Out of all who responded (N=172), 23.3% filed a formal or anonymous complaint. Their complaint submission improved the situation in 30.5% of cases. In contrast, for 27.9% who filed complaints it didn't change the situation while for

some (14.0%) it even made it worse. Additionally, about one in five (20.9%) didn't know what happened after they had filed a complaint, which indicates the need for improvements in SHW complaint processing and transparency (see Figure 7).

Concerns identified in the interviews include slow and weak protection for victims, lenient or non-existent punishment for perpetrators, and employers attempting to handle matters internally or declaring a lack of authority over the matter. One interviewee said: 'The investigation was reduced to interviews with me and the perpetrator. Nothing. It ended up being good gossip and entertainment for the whole institution' (IDI4). Predominantly, interviewees who reported incidences received no support from management and colleagues, or only a minimal amount. 'I expected the director of the institution to understand this when I reported, but I learned from him that this is something that directors trade with' (IDI2). In some cases where official reports ended in punitive action from the employer, the perpetrator was transferred to another work position, while the interviews included one judicial case which was still ongoing. Among the interviewees, there were just two examples of an employer's anti-SHW action, one being only a cosmetic intervention and the other the introduction of more substantial anti-SHW policies: 'After



Figure 6  
**Consequences of respondents' reactions (N=173; multiple choice question)**

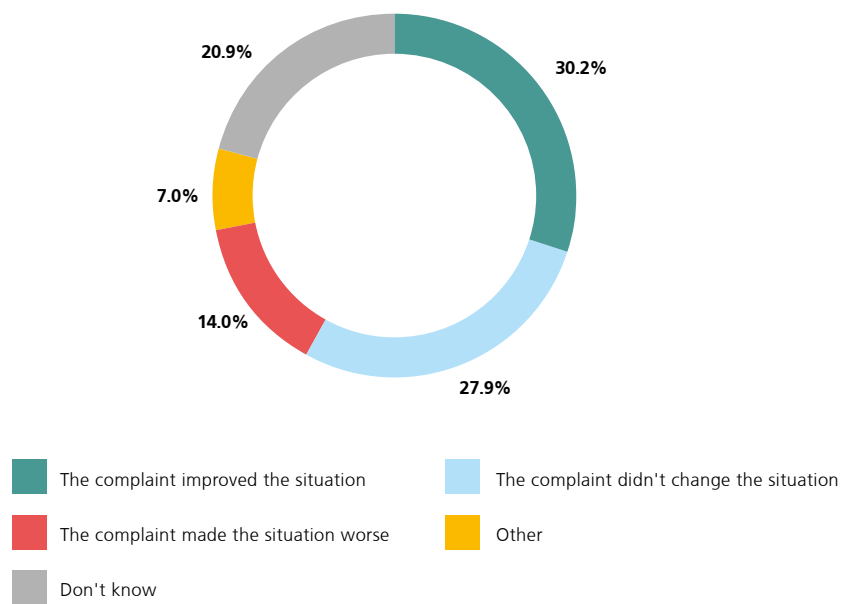


Figure 7  
**Outcomes of the formal complaints (N=43)**

I filed the complaint, the employer adopted a new works rulebook and detailed all forms of abuse and emphasised the zero tolerance rate for any form of sexual abuse’ (ID13).

#### 4.7 KNOWLEDGE OF THE RULES AND ATTITUDES TO EXISTING FORMS OF PROTECTION AGAINST SHW

We asked respondents whether their current employer was taking action to prevent and sanction SHW. Out of four actions offered (see Table 3), education about SHW was identified most often as the area where employers should do more, which is corroborated by the result that only 1.5% of respondents were aware of regular training being provided on SWH (see Figure 8). The lack of knowledge of the employer’s actions can be additionally underlined by the proportion of respondents remarking ‘don’t know’ in relation to whether their employer had any regulations on SHW (49.7%). Those respondents who knew about the presence of a regulation most often reported that their employer had an ethical code/code of conduct (23.4%). All other types of regulation were identified by less than 15% of respondents, while quite a small share (12.0%) was sure there was nothing at all.

Moreover, the survey responses indicate that there is a lack of proactive information-seeking on behalf of employees themselves (Figure 9). It is quite unsettling that just 15.9% of respondents would seek information on SHW regulations and procedures only if they personally experienced it. This might stem from the broader problem of the lack of trust in formal SHW reporting procedures, already identified in previous research (e.g. Rodik & Ostojčić, 2021).

Interviewees identified issues with employers’ prevention responses, including a lack of awareness of ongoing issues, a failure to sanction violations of existing regulations,

appointing biased individuals to dignity officer roles and breaches of confidentiality during complaint procedures. One interviewee highlighted a general lack of effort: ‘Not one of my employers so far, out of a total of four, has even mentioned this topic as if it doesn’t exist at all’ (ID16). The problem of a lack of confidentiality was mentioned by several interviewees. One commented that their workplace dignity officer was a person ‘who knew how to come to the office and spread gossip about everyone’ (ID11).

Suggestions for employers include implementing and communicating a zero tolerance policy, enforcing existing laws (‘If they at least applied the minimum legal regulations, that would be a big improvement’ (ID12)), providing education on professional relations and SH, ensuring confidentiality in complaint procedures, introducing harsher punishments for perpetrators and offering support to victims. One interviewee from the public sector thought that either the ‘order of the ministry’ or high fines would make employers introduce some measures.

An additional point made in relation to the problem of support from colleagues often being lacking was that employers should make an effort to raise awareness about SH so more people would react to unacceptable behaviours. She said: ‘I don’t know, [I think about a proposition] “let’s make bullies aware”. Well, they know that it’s violence. I mean, I guess they know. Somehow, this strengthening of the collective makes more sense to me [...] because maybe then others would be aware, and they might have the right to say: “Well, he exaggerated, or she exaggerated”, [the gender] is irrelevant’ (ID11).

Table 3  
Satisfaction with employers’ actions against SHW (N=978)

Do you think that your current employer is doing enough to:	Yes	No	Don't know
Educate about sexual harassment at the workplace	20.6%	51.8%	27.6%
Keep track of sexual harassment	20.4%	43.7%	36.0%
Prevent sexual harassment	23.8%	41.1%	35.1%
Sanction sexual harassment	21.9%	38.0%	40.1%

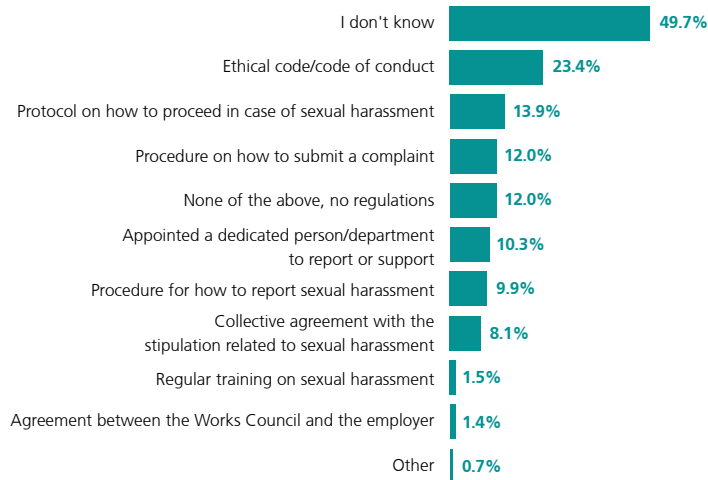


Figure 8  
**Awareness of the existence of SHW-related regulations in current workplace (N=932; multiple choice question)**

#### 4.8 ROLE OF THE TRADE UNIONS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS IN SHW POLICIES

Respondents acknowledged that trade unions should play a role in SHW prevention, in policy formulation and in providing support to affected workers (Table 4).

Suggestions for trade union roles in SHW policies include providing information and education, raising awareness, working on regulations and law implementation, addressing the problem through collective agreements, addressing all forms of SH, not only physical, and providing legal and psychological assistance. Specific expectations of the trade unions when it comes to improving workplace-level regulations were: insist that employers’ regulations have good and specific definitions, clarify precisely what SH is,

Table 4  
**Expected roles trade unions should have with respect to SHW prevention, policies and support for affected workers (N=833); (scale: 1 - strongly disagree; 5 - strongly agree)**

FACT	AVERAGE
Trade unions should support the affected workers	4.40
Trade unions should provide information on the existing regulations	4.37
Trade unions should report non-compliance with regulations to the labour inspectorate	4.36
Trade unions should demand the adoption of regulations related to sexual harassment in the workplace	4.33
Trade unions should check compliance with regulations	4.19
Trade unions should provide regular training	4.05
Trade unions should bargain and conclude a collective agreement addressing sexual harassment	4.03
None of that; unions should play no part	2.49

distinguish the gravity of the act and introduce regulations that ensure the perpetrators can get fired; advocate that works rules address online forms of SH; and cooperate with the workplace dignity officer.

Most of the interviewees had not approached their unions for help, citing reasons such as lack of awareness, low expectations of proactive union involvement, mistrust over confidentiality and problematic union representatives. Overall, union reactions in response were inconsistent, varying from completely inadequate to highly supportive. One interviewee bitterly said: 'I didn't even call my union, because they just gossip all day long. [...] I have no reason to make my case and ask for help from such people. In the end, I don't know why I even joined that union, I guess I'm deceiving myself that they would help me if needed' (IDI4). On the other side of the spectrum of trade union reactions was one interviewee who did ask the headquarters of the trade union she was affiliated with for help, and subsequently received meaningful support.

Interviewees expressed a high degree of mistrust towards institutions, which supports the previous research findings discussed in Chapter 3.1. For instance, one interviewee said, 'I don't trust institutions. Literally, I don't trust them at all because we know how they work. If I had a really traumatic experience, I would approach an NGO' (IDI6).

## 4.9 EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CURRENT REGULATIONS AND THE NEXT STEPS

Respondents' uncertainty about the existence of regulations doesn't necessarily mean that there aren't any. In other words, there might be more regulations than the responses presented in Figure 8 suggest, which is something we cannot know from the survey data we have. It is, however, definitively insufficient to have a regulation if there is then a lack of effort in informing employees and of awareness raising about its existence. Combined with the very few respondents who experienced SHW who go on to file a formal complaint, this suggests that current regulations do not ensure sufficient prevention or efficient protection after experiencing SHW. Findings from the interviews presented in the previous sections corroborate this conclusion.

We asked survey respondents what types of support they would appreciate after experiencing SH.<sup>6</sup> The answers to this question indicate the priorities are protection against further SH and retaliation (58.8%), legal support for reporting (54.6%) and information from the responsible persons/institutions on how to proceed in cases of SH (41.5%). Other less frequent answers can be seen in Figure 10.



Figure 9  
**When would respondents seek information on SHW-related regulations, procedures and measures (N=868; multiple choice question)**

6 This was put to all respondents, not just those who had experienced SHW (therefore the phrasing was in a conditional/hypothetical form).

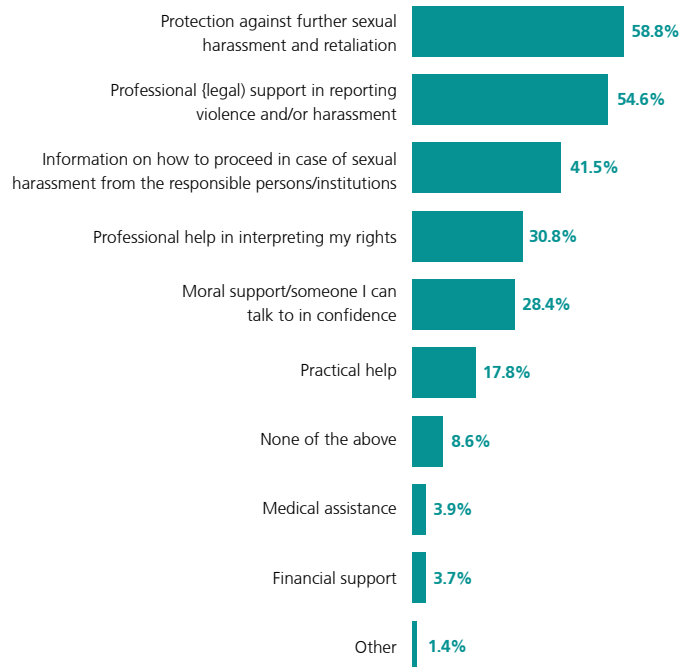


Figure 10  
**Information and support that would be appreciated after experiencing SH**  
 (N = 932; multiple choice question)

Along these lines, suggestions for improvements that were collected from interviewees include raising awareness that reacting to inappropriate behaviour is normal, developing a culture where SHW is unacceptable, introducing stricter penalties, providing clear legal interpretations and guidelines, and offering stronger institutional support for those who experience SHW. In the words of one interviewee: ‘It means that something needs to be done at national level, to know exactly what is what. Because it is very difficult to find one’s way in the forest. [...] I mean, we do not have accurate guidelines for what to do, how to do it, or what will happen to the person who did it. So, as an individual, one engages in this struggle [for getting legal protection]. Generally, in my opinion, Croatia is undereducated and has a high tolerance of violence’ (ID18). Besides this high tolerance of violence, interviewees identified other concerns that stem from the wider social context, including intergenerational patterns of objectification and patriarchy, cultural issues related to respect for privacy and distance, weak legal protection against violence towards women and ridicule of the topic of SHW in public<sup>7</sup> and workplace discussions.

One interviewee proposed mandatory education for both employers and employees (‘If I am obliged to pass an exam on occupational health and safety, then this should also be introduced’ (ID14)). Several others suggested that preventive measures should start at elementary school and that they should cover legal rights and simplify the regulations into clear steps for action. Employers, union stewards and individuals in dignity officer roles should receive more in-depth training on management, employee rights, impartiality and the relevant laws and regulations. The professionals dealing with the consequences (psychologists, physicians) should also be better trained in the issues of SHW and trauma. There should be preventive actions as, currently, ‘[l]aw and justice come into play when the consequences are already severe and the damage has been done’ (ID17).

Ultimately, we can conclude that the results indicate that the way forward is to address the issues of: a) the lack of awareness about what behaviours can be identified as SHW; b) the lack of information on regulations, reporting procedures and legal rights; and c) the lack of protection and support for those who experience SHW.

<sup>7</sup> Negative reactions to social media posts putting out calls for participation in this research (surveys and interviews) provide additional evidence for this claim.

# 5

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Below are the recommendations that stem primarily from the research, including the survey, interviews and focus group, carried out as part of this project but also from previous studies on the topic of SH and the relevant literature mentioned in Chapter 3.1 of this report. The recommendations are categorised according to those to whom they are addressed: the national policy level; the role of employers; the role of trade unions; and for future education and training programmes.

### 5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL POLICY LEVEL

- Introduce a national-level body responsible for tripartite coordination in the planning of an overarching policy and, in particular, proactive measures for prevention and raising awareness about the issue of SHW. The research results, particularly the focus group discussion, indicate there are uneven practices, ambiguities and inconsistencies in both the legal framework and its implementation.
- Introduce national-level legislative measures which keep up with evolving international standards. In this vein, Croatia should ratify and properly implement ILO Convention No. 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work and its accompanying Recommendation 206. Legislation should require employers to establish policies on SHW. Given that the survey results demonstrate there is inadequate awareness and a lack of information about already existing policies and workers' rights, the Ministry of Labour should provide employers with clear guidelines on the creation and implementation of in-house policies.
- Before implementing legal amendments, those responsible for drafting them should conduct analyses of existing research and, if necessary, make additional studies on the issue. Legislative changes should be based on factually established data rather than introduced ad

hoc, as has been the case in Croatia, as pointed by the focus group participants.

- Investigate and analyse in depth the reasons behind the low number of reported cases of SHW. The current body of knowledge, including this and previous research, identifies that the low number of complaints stems from mistrust in the existing system of processing reported SH cases. Decision-makers should develop policy measures specifically aimed at addressing the causes of underreporting and at encouraging individuals to come forward with reports.

### 5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

- From this and previous research, we conclude that employers' initiatives are inadequate, inconsistent and reactive rather than proactive. Employers should implement meaningful zero tolerance policies for any form of harassment in the workplace; in particular, they should develop in-house rules that regulate SHW and other forms of harassment.
- Strengthen trust in the formal reporting process for SHW: develop company/organisation-level procedures, make them transparent and accessible, and continuously inform and remind employees of their existence. Both this and previous research have found a very high mistrust in reporting procedures. In this research, we additionally identify an issue of mistrust of those responsible for implementing existing workplace-level policies related to the protection of workers' dignity. Therefore, we further propose that employers organise training for the individuals involved in committees or bodies responsible for in-house SH regulations and the processing of complaints.
- Protect individuals who have experienced SHW after incidents and safeguard them against retaliation, and provide legal and psychological assistance. To demonstrate



their commitment to in-house SH policies, employers should address any form of harassment in the workplace according to their own procedures, regardless of the potential criminal liability associated with such cases. If there is a potential criminal liability, employers should take responsibility for reporting the case to the State Attorney's Office for a criminal investigation. The experts participating in the focus group highlighted that current legislation allows employers to do this, independently of any internal disciplinary action for the offences committed. However, other findings (including accounts from interviewees) show that employers avoid taking part in reporting, leaving the initiative to the person experiencing SH.


### 5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRADE UNIONS

- Respondents demonstrated a quite high amount of expectation of trade unions, so we suggest a coordinated top-down approach. Namely, national trade union organisations should develop cooperation with the PRS and the NGOs working on this issue, including those providing legal or psychological assistance. This should be followed by guidelines for affiliated unions and union representatives/shop stewards on the implementation of SHW policies.
- At sectoral level, trade unions should bargain for the incorporation into collective agreements of preventive measures and provisions for handling SH complaints. To enhance trust in SH reporting, we propose they include specific provisions in agreements to enhance the transparency of complaints processing, for instance on the obligation on employers to provide periodic reports from the workplace dignity officer to the works council/union which contain statistics and the current status of complaints received regarding SHW.
- At workplace level, trade unions should participate in monitoring employer compliance with obligations related to cases of SH. They should insist on the requirement for the consent of the works council/union in the appointment process of the workplace dignity officer and ensure that, procedurally and with the involvement of the union, this person is someone that workers trust, as our results indicate that a part of the mistrust in reporting and processing stems from personal-level mistrust of those responsible for processing SH reports (e.g. directors, workplace dignity officers). Additionally, at workplace level, unions should actively work on informing and educating workers about their rights

and reporting procedures in cases of SHW, as well as co-organise and co-finance awareness and education campaigns.

### 5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES

- At national level, the responsible ministries (of education and labour) should establish continuous preventive education programmes on SH that would be integrated into the education system but also implemented at the level of companies/organisations. The focus of education should be on preventing SH – detecting its causes and addressing the root issues rather than focusing solely on the consequences or on punishment. Both this and previous research show that the most common forms of SH (e.g. unwanted verbal remarks) are often not recognised as problematic, although the existing legislative framework clearly identifies them as SH.
- At national level, the Ministry of Labour, in coordination with employer associations, should organise training that specifically focuses on employers' responsibilities in cases of SHW. Due to overlapping jurisdictions and multiple levels of punishment and accountability, employers often fail to address sexual harassment as a workplace violation. Instead, incidents are sometimes misclassified as criminal offences, which results in them remaining entirely unsanctioned.
- At workplace level, training programmes should target all levels of the hierarchy within companies/organisations and address institutional policies as well as individual rights and responsibilities. Employers should be legally required to conduct training and ensure that workers are informed of the internal policies that cover SH, as well as their rights and the procedures for reporting particular incidents. Employers and trade unions should collaboratively design, and implement where possible, training programmes and campaigns to raise awareness about all forms of harassment, increasing the recognition and understanding of all types of SH. Specifically, employers should be trained on the various levels of responsibility they hold for handling SHW cases. On top of that, they should also address the issue of the workplace climate and collegiate support, as the research establishes that those who report SH often find themselves unsupported and sometimes even ostracised.



Despite the research limitations, in particular in terms of the drawing of the sample, this research has provided important new insights into the current situation when it comes to SHW in Croatia. The findings can serve as a solid foundation for new research avenues which explore different aspects of the phenomenon in more detail and preferably on the basis of a representative sample. Conducting comprehensive representative survey research would complement the existing data and facilitate a more precise identification of the groups of workers at higher risk of SH, considering industry sector or worker characteristics. This would, in turn, provide a foundation for policy and other interventions, including the design of targeted measures for specific groups.

The complexity and multifaceted nature of the problem, as well as the individual and societal consequences of SH, require a systemic response and the concerted effort of a range of stakeholders. The above recommendations for policy interventions, for employers and trade unions, as well as for educators, provide a non-exhaustive yet useful point of departure to help create harassment-free workplaces.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Petra Rodik** is a freelance researcher, analyst and consultant specialising in data analytics. Her experience includes an academic career in sociology (Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb; and Trinity College Dublin) and working on applied research projects for clients, largely nonprofits.

**Jelena Ostojić** is a teaching assistant at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Her research interests focus on the sociology of labour and industrial relations. She is part of the national team for the implementation of the European Social Survey.

**Dijana Šobota** is an Executive Secretary at the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (SSSH) and a PhD candidate in the Department of Information and Communication Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Her research interests focus on critical information literacy in the workplace.

# ANNEXES

## 1. STRUCTURE OF THE SURVEY SAMPLE

Category	Number (N)	Percentage
Respondents	1060	100%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	893	84.3%
Male	154	14.5%
Other	13	1.2%
<b>Age categories</b>		
Under 30	57	5.4%
30 - 49	640	60.4%
50 and over	363	34.2%
<b>Trade union membership</b>		
Member of trade union	585	55.2%
Member of trade union at the time of experiencing SHW	136	38.2%

## 2. LIST OF INTERVIEWS

IDI code	Date	Description of the communication partners			
		Gender	Age	Sector	Member of trade union
IDI1	24.6.2024	F	30 - 49	Education	Y
IDI2	26.8.2024	F	Under 30	Human health and social work	N
IDI3	10.9.2024	F	30 - 49	Accommodation and food service	Y
IDI4	2.9.2024	F	30 - 49	Human health and social work	Y
IDI5	18.9.2024	F	30 - 49	Professional, scientific and technical activities	N
IDI6	25.9.2024	F	30 - 49	Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	N
IDI7	11.9.2024	F	50 and over	Manufacturing	N
IDI8	12.9.2024	F	50 and over	Human health and social work	Y
IDI9	17.10.2024	F	30 - 49	Financial and insurance activities	N

### 3. DESCRIPTION OF THE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

N.	Type of organisation represented by participant	Female	Male
1	Ombudsperson (Specialist Adviser on Legal Issues)		x
2	Employer organisation at national level	x	
3	Other – former member of Faculty SH Committee (public university)	x	
4	Trade union at national level	x	
5	Trade union at sectoral level	x	
6	Non-governmental organisation	x	
7	Individual expert/researcher in SHW	x	

Date of the FG:  
17.9.2024



This research on the sexual harassment of workers offers a series of recommendations to improve the legal framework and practice so as to reduce the number of sexual harassment cases arising in the workplace.

The recommendations resulting from this research entail legally obliging employers to adopt proactive measures for the prevention of sexual harassment, to develop in-house sexual harassment regulations, to carry out training and to ensure employees are informed of their organisation's sexual harassment policies. Furthermore, the research recommends investigating and analysing the reasons for the low number of reported cases of sexual harassment at work and that specific measures be taken not only to eliminate the causes of underreporting but also to encourage individuals to come forward and report sexual harassment at work. In addition, a zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of sexual harassment is recommended.

Recommendations on trade unions' approach to the problem of sexual harassment at work include supplying information and organising training, raising awareness, working on regulations and the implementation of legislation, addressing the problem in collective agreements and ensuring that workers have access to effective legal and psychological support.