

## European and International Standards Related to Psychosocial Risks at Work

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### Introduction

Work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm. They are often linked to problems such as work-related stress and workplace violence, harassment and bullying. Work-related stress is among the most commonly reported causes of illness by workers (European Foundation, 2007) affecting more than 40 million individuals across the European Union. The same survey showed that 6% of the workforce had been exposed to threats of physical violence, 4% to violence by other people and 5% to bullying and/or harassment at work over the past 12 months. Despite the large scale of these problems and their impact on health and productivity, standards directly referring to the concept of psychosocial risk, and specific ones referring to the concepts of work-related stress, workplace violence, harassment and bullying have only been formulated in very few countries.

### Aim

The aim of this factsheet is to present a short overview of the most important standards concerning psychosocial risks at work, including harassment and violence, that are commonly accepted at the European and international levels. It quotes standards that refer directly to the concepts of psychosocial risk, stress, harassment and violence, as well as important standards of indirect concern to these issues. The overview is addressed to enterprises and social partners and indicates key reference points in terms of legislation and guidance that can be of help when undertaking actions aimed at preventing and managing psychosocial risks at the workplace.

### Standards Directly Referring to the Concepts of: Psychosocial Risk, Stress, Harassment and Violence

#### *European Commission guidance on work-related stress*

It defines stress as "a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organisation and work environment."

The following are outlined among the main causes of stress: over- and underload; no recognition, no opportunity to voice complaints; many responsibilities, but little authority; lack of a clear job description, uncooperative or unsupportive superiors, co-workers or subordinates; no control; job insecurity; exposure to prejudice regarding age, gender, etc.; exposure to violence, threats, or bullying; unpleasant or hazardous physical work conditions; no opportunity to utilize personal abilities.

Organisational improvements ought to be considered in stress preventive measures, above all in the following areas: work schedule (to avoid work-life conflict), participation/control, workload (to ensure compatibility with the capabilities and resources of the worker), task content (to provide meaning, stimulation, an opportunity to use skills), roles (their clarity), social environment (to provide social support), future perspectives (to reduce job insecurity).

The document outlines the following prevention steps:

1. Identification of work-related stress factors, their causes and health consequences
2. Analyzing the characteristics of exposures in relation to the outcomes found
3. Design and implementation of a package of interventions by stakeholders
4. Evaluation of short- and long-term outcomes of the interventions.

#### *Framework agreement on work-related stress*

It defines stress as "a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunctions and which results from individuals feeling unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them."



The agreement does not provide an exhaustive list of potential stress indicators. It does point out, however, that "high absenteeism or staff turnover, frequent interpersonal conflicts or complaints by workers are some of the signs that may indicate a problem of work-related stress."

The agreement contains a reminder that "all employers have a legal obligation to protect the occupational safety and health of workers. This duty also applies to problems of work related stress in so far as they entail a risk to health and safety."

Examples of anti-stress measures are given in the document: "management and communication measures such as clarifying the company's objectives and the role of individual workers, ensuring adequate management support for individuals and teams, matching responsibility and control over work, improving work organisation and processes, working conditions and environment; training managers and workers to raise awareness and understanding of stress; provision of information to and consultation with workers."

#### *Framework agreement on harassment and violence at work*

According to the agreement, "Violence [at work] occurs when one or more worker or manager are assaulted in circumstances relating to work," and "harassment [at work] occurs when one or more worker or manager are repeatedly and deliberately abused, threatened and/or humiliated in circumstances relating to work."

Raising awareness and appropriate training of managers and workers can reduce the likelihood of harassment and violence at work. Preventive procedures should be underpinned by, but not confined to, the following:

- discretion to protect the dignity and privacy of all
- no disclosure of information to parties not involved in the case
- investigation and enactment upon complaints without undue delay
- backing up complaints by detailed information
- involvement of all parties to get an impartial hearing and fair treatment
- consultation with workers
- no toleration of false accusations that may result in disciplinary action
- external assistance as appropriate.

#### *Ergonomic principles related to mental workload (European standard: EN ISO 10075)*

Mental stress is defined as: "The total of all assessable influences impinging upon a human being from external sources and affecting it mentally."

Situational influences on mental stress include: task requirements (e.g. sustained concentration, responsibility for others), physical conditions (e.g. lighting, noise), social and organisational factors (e.g. control structure, communication structure, organisational environment), social factors, external to the organisation (e.g. economic situation).

Mental strain is an immediate effect of mental stress. The impairing (short term) effects of mental strain are: mental fatigue and "fatigue-like states" (i.e.: monotony, reduced vigilance, satiation). The document lists 29 task features that influence the intensity of mental workload and are sources of fatigue (e.g. ambiguity of task goals, complexity of task requirements, adequacy of information, ambiguity of information, signal discrimination).

#### *Council Directive 90/270/EEC on the minimum safety and health requirements for work with display screen equipment*

It states that employers are obliged to perform an analysis of workstations in order to evaluate safety and health conditions, particularly as regards possible risks to eyesight, physical problems and problems of mental stress.

## Key Standards in the Field of Occupational Health and Safety Referring to the Concept of Risk in General

*Council Directive 89/391/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work*

According to the Directive, employers have “a duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to work.” They have to develop “a coherent overall prevention policy.” Some important principles are: “avoiding risks”, “combating the risks at source”, “adapting the work to the individual.”

*European Commission guidance on risk assessment at work*

It states that “Risk assessment is the process of evaluating risks to workers’ safety and health from workplace hazards”. The five-step approach to risk assessment is promoted: (1) identifying hazards and those at risk, (2) evaluating and prioritising risks, (3) deciding on preventive action, (4) taking action, (5) monitoring and reviewing.

*ILO-OSH 2001 guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems*

The document provides guidance on the development occupational health

and safety (OSH) management systems of both national and organisational levels. It states that the OSH management systems should contain the following elements: policy, organizing, planning and implementing, evaluation and action for improvements. An employer, in consultation with workers, should set out in writing an OSH policy. Hazards and risks to workers’ safety and health should be identified and assessed on an ongoing basis. Preventive measures should be implemented in the following order of priority: eliminate the hazard/risk, control hazard/risk at source, minimise the hazard/risk.

*ILO Convention 187: Convention concerning the promotional framework for occupational safety and health*

“In formulating its national policy, each Member, (...) in consultation with the most representative organisations of employers and workers, shall promote basic principles such as assessing occupational risks or hazards; combating occupational risks or hazards at source; and developing a national preventative safety and health culture that includes information, consultation and training.” “(...) the principle of prevention is accorded the highest priority.”

Psychosocial issues	Type of document
<i>Working time</i>	<p><b>Directive 93/104/EC</b> concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time C175 Part-time Work Convention (ILO), 1994.</p> <p><b>Directive 97/81/EC</b> concerning the framework agreement on part-time work.</p> <p><b>Directive 99/70/EC</b> concerning the framework agreement on fixed-term work.</p> <p><b>Directive 2002/15/EC</b> on the organisation of working time of persons performing mobile road transport activities.</p> <p><b>Directive 2003/88/EC</b> concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time.</p>
<i>Discrimination</i>	<p><b>Directive 2000/43/EC and 2000/78/EC</b> prohibiting direct or indirect discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.</p>
<i>Equal treatment for men and women</i>	<p><b>Directive 76/207/EEC and Directive 2002/73/EC</b> on equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions.</p> <p><b>Directive 2006/54/EC</b> on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation.</p>
<i>Young people at work</i>	<p><b>Directive 94/33/EC</b> on the protection of young people at work.</p>
<i>Maternity and related issues</i>	<p><b>C 183</b> Maternity Protection Convention (ILO), 2000.</p> <p><b>Directive 92/85/EC</b> on pregnant workers, women who have recently given birth, or are breast-feeding.</p> <p><b>Directive 96/34/EC</b> on parental leave.</p>
<i>Informing and consulting employees</i>	<p><b>Directive 2002/14/EC</b> establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees in the European Community</p>

## Standards Indirectly Related to Psychosocial Risks

The following additional standards are of relevance to psychosocial risk management and should also be taken into consideration by stakeholders as non-adherence to those regulations can create psychosocial problems at the workplace.

### More Information

[www.prima-ef.org](http://www.prima-ef.org)

LEKA, S., COX, T. (Eds.). The European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management: PRIMA-EF. I-WHO Publications, Nottingham, 2008. ISBN 978-0-9554365-2-9.

LEKA, S., COX, T. (Eds.). PRIMA-EF: Guidance on the European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management. WHO, Geneva, 2008.

Available at: [www.prima-ef.org](http://www.prima-ef.org)

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