

The right to speak up and the channels for doing so

A comparative study of Denmark, England, Ireland and Norway – methodology

In 2021, the Research Council of Norway funded the project entitled “Workers’ voice and the right to manage – the case of whistleblowing in a comparative context”. Given the lack of knowledge about how employers facilitate and handle freedom of speech and whistleblowing reports across countries and the absence of comparative information, the researchers aim to identify and explain observed conformity or tensions in organisations and the impact of different employment systems on outcome. In the study, we conducted a survey of workers in Denmark, England, Ireland and Norway across sectors and industries. As far as we know, this has not been done before.

In this brief, we explain the methodology used in the survey. The main findings from our empirical research will be presented in two subsequent briefs, respectively entitled: “The right to speak up and channels for doing so” and “Empirical research on the whistleblowing process.”

The survey

During the spring of 2022, an international survey was conducted. The survey was commissioned by Fafo and carried out by TNS Kantar. The survey was

distributed among a sample of workers between the ages of 18 and 65 across sectors and industries in the four countries (see Table 1).

The samples vary between the countries owing to different data collection processes. In all countries, Kantar’s access panel was used as a starting point for recruiting respondents. In Norway, this is a pre-recruited, random sample of people over the age of 18 who are willing to participate in surveys (currently around 40.000 people). A total of 14.700 invitations were sent out and contact was made with 3959 people. This resulted in 3364 completed responses, a response rate of 23% for the invitations and 85% for the people Kantar made contact with. In the other three countries, the respondents were recruited from Kantar Profile’s access panel, which recruits from various sub-panels in the respective countries. Since surveys are continuously published in a “shop”, where the respondents themselves choose which surveys they want to participate in, we have no information about the response rate.

Sample and biases

A key element in terms of sample size is to capture a minimum number of respondents with experience of wrongdoing in the workplace, so that these can be analysed separately with reasonable precision. In Norway, previous studies have indicated that between 16% and 19% of employees state that they have witnessed, discovered and/or experienced wrongdoing in the workplace in the preceding 12 months. About half of these report the wrongdoing. Thus, in a sample of 1,000 respondents, about 160 workers will have experience with wrongdoing and 80 will have reported the issue.

Table 1. Sample sizes – target and actual numbers.

Country	Target	Actual
Denmark	1800	1800
England	3000	3001
Ireland	1000	1000
Norway	3000	3364
Total	8800	9165

Managers are recruited as part of our samples. Respondents who confirm they are in a management position are asked questions in which freedom of speech and whistleblowing are viewed from the managements’ perspective.

We have compared our sample with available data for gender, completed level of education, sector and union membership rate. Information on gender and education are from Eurostat’s database from 2019. Sector affiliation is collected from national statistics for the four countries, while the figure for unionised workers is from the OECD.

The Danish and Norwegian samples are somewhat skewed when it comes to the proportion of workers with low education and in the private/public sector. Workers in the public sector are overrepresented, while we have too few respondents with a low level of education compared to the workforce. We also have a higher share of unionised workers in our sample than in the data from the OECD.

There are often discrepancies between surveys and data on education in the official statistics. The definitions used can vary somewhat between official statistics and surveys, and the respondents may find it difficult to place themselves in relation to the official” criteria. There is also a tendency that respondents over-report their level of education, particularly in relation to short courses beyond upper secondary school.

We have considered whether the samples should be weighted to adjust for some of the biases but decided against this. We will instead comment on differences in responses that may be influenced by the biases. In addition, variables such as sector, gender and education, which were considered as possible weighting variables, will be included as control variables in the regressions.

Table 2. Employed persons and sample, gender, education, sector and trade union membership.

	Denmark		England		Ireland		Norway	
	Population	Sample	Population	Sample	Population	Sample	Population	Sample
Women*	49	52	47	49	46	65	47	51
Education: low	14	6	18	23	11	9	14	3
Education: medium	45	52	43	36	38	31	39	45
Education: high	41	41	39	41	51	60	47	52
Private sector	68	62	84	80	76	83	68	59
Public sector	32	38	17**	20	14	17	32	41
Unionised***	67	77	24	25	26	29	50	67
Total#	2.637.000	1800	30.393.000	3001	2.174.000	1000	2.534.000	3364

* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSI_EMP_A/default/table?lang=en, 2019

** <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05635/SN05635.pdf>

*** Nergaard, K. (2022, p. 48). Organisasjonsgrader, tariffavtaledekning og arbeidskonflikter 2020 og 2021, Fafo-notat, use data from OECD.

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSI_EMP_A/default/table?lang=en, 2019

Key questions

The survey includes questions on freedom of speech and whistleblowing and allows us to analyse the responses across countries and sectors.

Freedom of speech

We ask how much scope the recipients think workers **should have** and how much scope they **actually have** to speak publicly, including on social media, about: i) working conditions, ii) professional issues related to their work, iii) economic priorities at their workplace, and iv) restructuring/reorganisation at their workplace. We emphasised that recipients should exclude issues subject to confidentiality.

We examine whether managers and workers assessed issues related to freedom of expression differently, and we look for variation across sectors and nations. Freedom of expression is a constitutional right in Denmark, Ireland and Norway but not in England.

Whistleblowing

We use validated questions from previous studies (Miceli & Near 2002; Skivenes & Trygstad 2010) to survey the whistleblowing activity. Our first step is to collect information about workers' experiences of wrongdoing. We posed the question:

“During the last 12 months, have you witnessed, discovered or experienced wrongdoing that should have been rectified at your workplace? By wrongdoing we mean unethical and/or illegal incidents, occurrences or practices. Examples include financial fraud, theft, destruction of property, violation of health and safety regulations, harassment, bullying, neglect and mistreatment of users or customers.”

Those who gave an affirmative answer were presented with a list of 19 different examples of possible wrongdoing, all of which are violations of laws in the four countries, or breaches of ethical guidelines, as

well as an “other” category where the respondents could enter the relevant issues.

In step 2, we mapped the whistleblowing activity, i.e. how many of those who have experienced wrongdoing notified someone with the authority to take action. Our starting point is the standard definition of whistleblowing: “the disclosure by organisation members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organisations that may be able to effect action” We posed the question:

“Did you report the wrongdoing? By reporting, we mean whether you raised a concern with someone who had the authority/means to do something about it (e.g. a manager, safety representative, shop steward, whistleblowing channel, public inspectorate or media)?”

Since some respondents may have reported more than one case of wrongdoing, we asked them to base their subsequent answers on the most recent wrongdoing that they reported.

In step 3, we outlined the outcome of the whistleblowing process. We use Near and Miceli's definition of effectiveness of whistleblowing: “the extent to which the questionable or wrongful practice (or omission) is terminated at least partly because of whistleblowing and within a reasonable time frame” (Miceli & Near, 2002). In our survey, we explored whether the misconduct report resulted in any changes. We simply asked:

“After you reported the most recent wrongdoing, what happened? (i) The wrongdoing was rectified, (ii) there was a clear improvement, (iii) there was some improvement, (iv) no significant changes, (v) there was some deterioration, (vi) there was a clear deterioration, (vii) too little time has passed to conclude, (viii) not sure.”

In relation to reactions, the recipients were asked:

“Did you experience any kind of reaction at the workplace after you reported the most recent wrongdoing? (i) only positive reactions, (ii) mostly positive reactions, (iii) mixed reactions, both positive and negative reactions, (iv) mostly negative reactions, (v) only negative reactions, (vi) no reactions, (vii) not sure.”

Whistleblowing recipients

In the survey, we treat managers, trade union representatives and safety representatives as potential recipients of wrongdoing reports. We asked, based on their position as a manager (with personnel responsibilities), trade union representative/shop steward and or safety representative:

“Given your position, can workers raise a concern with you?” (Yes/No)

Those who answered yes were given follow-up questions about the receipt of notifications/reports about wrongdoing at their workplace during the last 12 months. We used the same definition as above. We also asked if they shared the whistleblower’s concern about the wrongdoing, and how the person with whom the report was shared acted.

Vignettes

In the survey, we have used the vignette method (Wilks, 2004). The respondents were presented with identical case scenarios and asked the same questions. The vignettes provide sufficient information for the respondents to identify factors that may or may not be of relevance for them, e.g. does the wrongdoer’s position have any significance on their willingness to report?

In order to shed light on possible explanations of variations in views about employer-worker conflicts, we have manipulated one variable, the responsible person. We asked respondents whether they agreed with the following statement:

“If I discover that a [colleague or superior manager] is responsible for serious wrongdoing, I can safely report this.”

Half of the sample received the vignette where the colleague was responsible, while the other half got the one where the superior manager was to blame. The options that were given were: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Partly disagree, 3= Neither agree or disagree, 4= Partly agree, 5= Totally agree and 6= Not sure.

References

- Kantar Public use the Gallup Panel from Kantar AS. The Gallup Panel has been put together with representativeness in mind, and the goal is that the Gallup Panel reflects the entire country’s population.
- Wilks, T. (2004). The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research into Social Work Values Qualitative Social Work. Sage Publications. Vol. 3(1), 78-87.
- Skivenes, M. & S.C. Trygstad (2010), When Whistle-blowing works; The Norwegian case. In Human Relations. 63(7) 1071-1097
- Miceli, M. P. & Near, J. P (2002) What makes whistle-blowers effective? Three field studies. Human Relations, 55:4, 455-479.

More in this series

This brief is part of a series of three:

1. [The right to speak up and the channels for doing so \(methodology\)](#)
2. [The right to speak up and the channels for doing so](#)
3. [Empirical research on the whistleblowing process in Denmark, England, Ireland and Norway.](#)

In this Fafo brief we have given a short presentation of our survey data as well as some key variables from our analysis. You will find more information about, and publications from, the project “[Workers’ voice and the right to manage – the case of whistleblowing in a comparative context](#)”.

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