

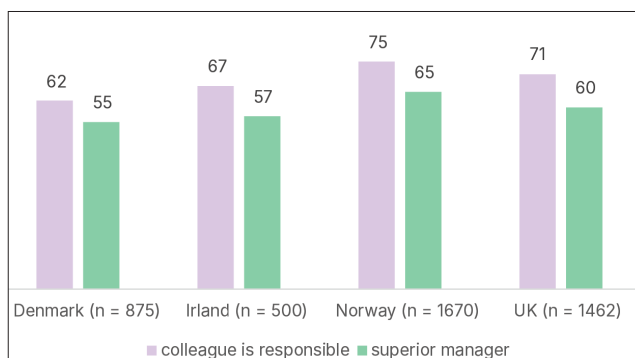
Empirical research on the whistleblowing process in Denmark, England, Ireland and Norway

In this brief, we present results from workers who have observed wrongdoing and their actions and experiences thereafter. The results are part of a study entitled 'Workers' voice and the right to manage – the case of whistleblowing in a comparative context'.¹ At the time that our research was conducted, whistleblowing was protected by general legislation in England, Ireland and Norway, but not in Denmark. The EU Directive on Whistleblowing (2019/1937) has subsequently been transposed into Danish and Irish national law.

A case scenario

Our respondents were introduced to a case scenario (vignette). In order to shed light on what might explain variations in views about employer-worker conflicts, respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree 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.

Figure 1. Does the wrongdoer's position have any significance on their willingness to report? Those who answered partly/totally agree that they can safely report. Responses in percentages.



As regards raising a concern where a colleague is the alleged wrongdoer, 75% of Norwegian respondents indicated that they partly/totally agreed that they can safely report, but where a superior manager is the alleged wrongdoer the figure is about 10% lower (65%). Nevertheless, the number of workers who respond that they can safely report a superior manager is significantly higher than in the other countries. The difference between Denmark and the other countries might be explained by the different legislative frameworks and experiences in relation to whistleblowing (the difference between Denmark and Ireland when it comes to superior manager is not significant). In the next section, we focus on workers' experiences with whistleblowing.

Observed wrongdoing and workers' actions

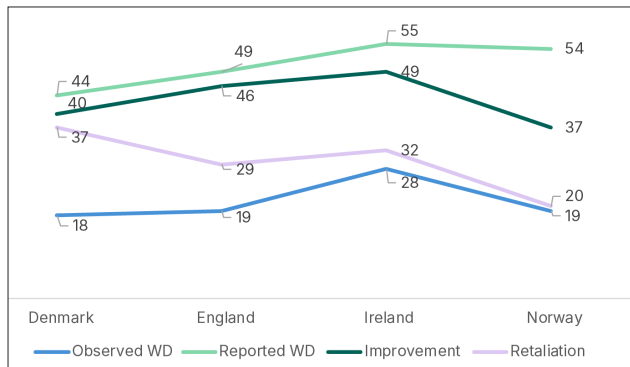
What constitutes wrongdoing can vary within and between organisations and countries, so defining wrongdoing is potentially controversial (Brown et al. 2014). In this study, we define wrongdoing as the violation of laws, agreements and ethical guidelines set by the companies or organisations in the four countries studied. Miceli et al. (2012) note that organisational wrongdoing has a negative impact on those who observe it. Their analysis shows that if the wrongdoing is corrected or is perceived to have been corrected, the negative effects of having observed it may be minimised or eliminated (ibid.).

In our study, wrongdoing was observed most frequently in Ireland (28%), with the other countries recording either 19% or 18%. We then recorded whether or not respondents reported the observed wrongdoing and, if so, whether or not the wrongdoing was dealt with. Lastly, we were interested in the

¹For Methodology, see brief 1, entitled: *The right to speak up and the channels for doing so: Methodology.*

kind of reactions the whistleblower received after reporting the issue. In Figure 1, negative reactions indicate retaliation.

Figure 2. The whistleblowing process. Responses in percentages.



While the Danes are less likely to report wrongdoing, the Irish and Norwegian respondents are at the other end of the scale. The Irish also seem to be more successful when reporting wrongdoing, with 49% of respondents indicating that the situation was improved. The corresponding figure for Norwegian respondents is 37%.

The proportion that has experienced retaliation is the issue that varies most between the countries. There is a difference of 17 percentage points between Denmark (highest) and Norway (lowest). For some reason that is hard to explain, the difference between the share that has reported wrongdoing

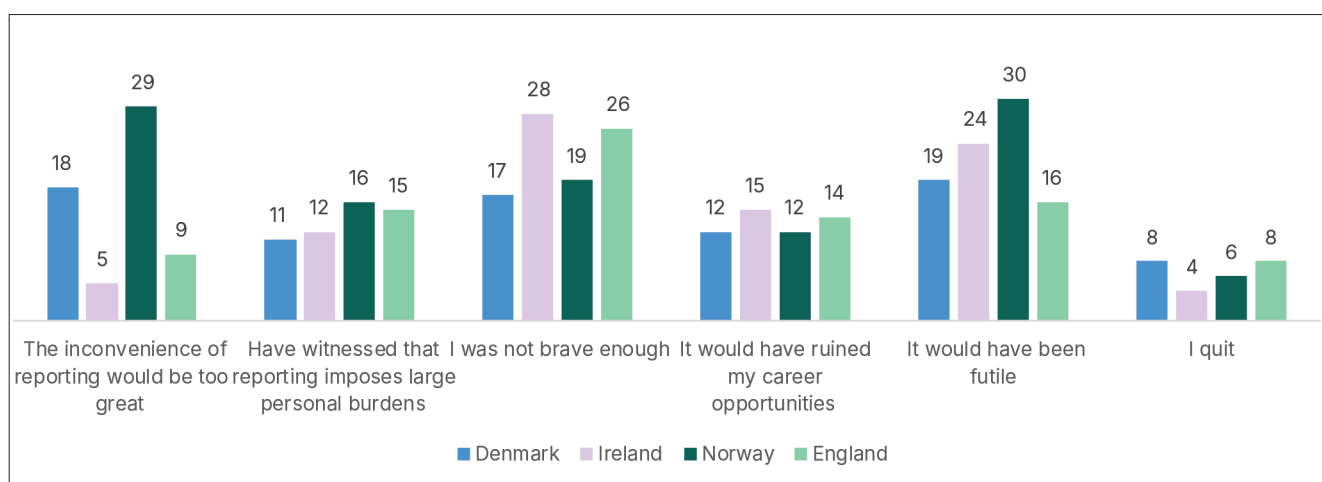
and the share that has experienced retaliation is only 7 percentage points in Denmark.

Why do workers not report wrongdoing?

Between 44% and 53% of those who have observed wrongdoing in the past year did not report it to someone with the authority to do something about it. Sixteen possible reasons for not reporting wrongdoing were offered to respondents for their consideration. In Figure 3, we present six of them. One of the reasons presented to the respondents was that the issue resolved itself without the need to blow the whistle. In total, 18 per cent gave this response (not shown). The reasons shown (Figure 3) illustrate the discomfort associated with whistleblowing, which are consistent with global research to the effect that the main reasons for not reporting are fear of retaliation and a belief that the wrongdoing would not be rectified.²

“It would have been futile” responses range from 30% (in Norway) to 16% (in England). In descending order of frequency, the other reasons given were: “The inconvenience of reporting would be too great” (ranging from 29% in Norway to 5% in Ireland); “have witnessed that reporting imposes large personal burdens” (ranging from 16% in Norway to 11% in Denmark). Next was “it would have ruined my career opportunities” (ranging from 15% in Norway to 12% in both Denmark and Nor-

Figure 3. Why workers chose not to report wrongdoing. Responses in percentages.



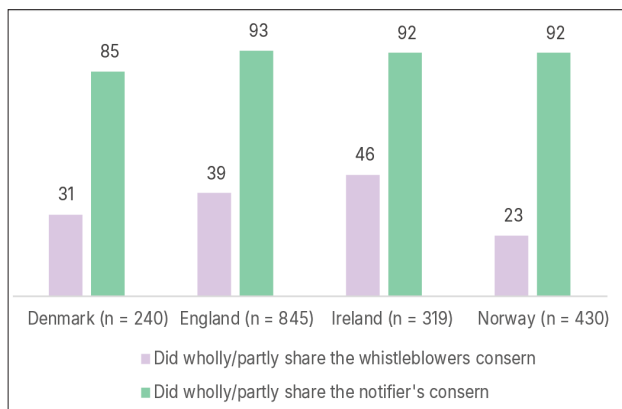
² See Brown et al. “International Handbook on Whistleblowing Research”. 2014. Edward Elgar.

way). The least frequently selected option was “I quit” (ranging from 8% in Denmark and England to 4% in Ireland). The fact that both Danish and Norwegian respondents were least likely to select both “I was not brave enough” and “it would have ruined my career opportunities” may, to some extent, stem from greater feelings of job security in these countries.

Recipients of concerns

Figure 4 shows the proportion of managers that received whistleblowing reports during the last 12 months and the proportion who shared the whistleblower’s concern.

Figure 4. If managers received reports and those who shared the whistleblower’s concern.



Norwegian managers received fewer whistleblowing reports than the others, while the Irish managers

received most. One explanation may be that Norwegian workers often report wrongdoing to shop stewards and/or safety representatives. When asked if they shared the whistleblower’s concern, the majority of managers wholly or partly shared the concern, which suggests that credible reports were being made in these countries.

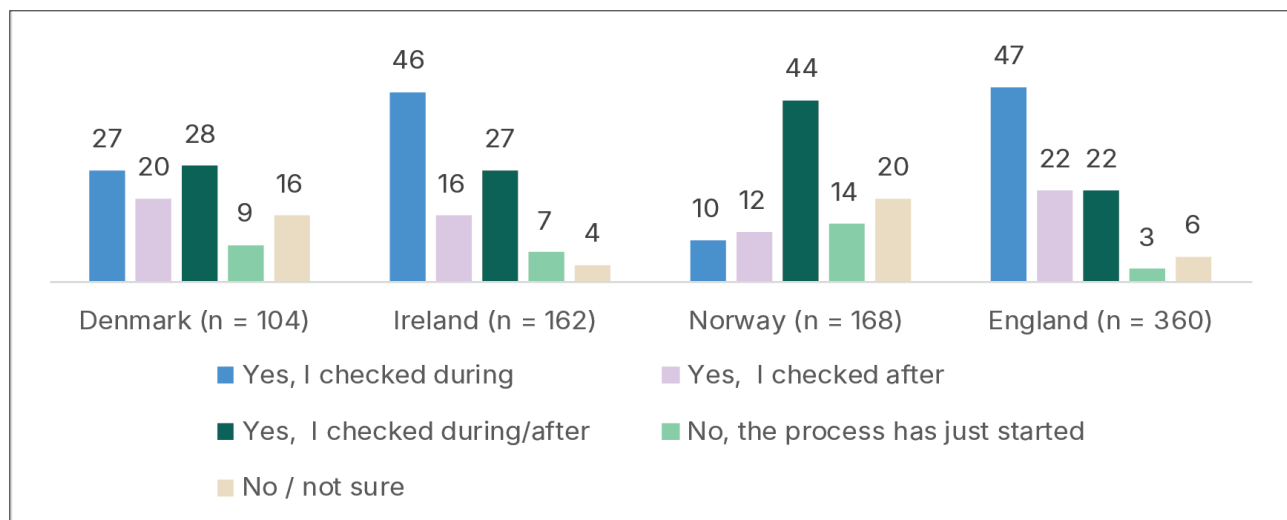
However, there is a difference of 8 percentage points between the Danish and the English managers.

Furthermore, the recipients were asked how they handled the reported issue. Between 11% (Norway) and 25% (Ireland) indicated that they waited, because they were unsure whether or not wrongdoing had taken place. The most common reaction seems to be for a manager to handle the concern by himself/herself (47% in Denmark compared to 29% in England and Ireland). The second most common reaction is to forward the concern to another manager (36% in Norway compared to 18% in Denmark).

Another question was whether the recipients of concerns checked during or after the reporting process if the whistleblower was subjected to sanctions.

Most checked during the process (ranging from

Figure 5. Did the recipients check if the whistleblower was subject to sanctions? Responses in percentages.



47% in England to 10% in Norway), but fewer only checked afterwards (ranging from 22% in England to 12% in Norway). However, Norway recorded the highest percentage for checking both during and afterwards (44%). Those who had not checked because the process had just started ranged from 14% in Norway down to 3% in England. Significant numbers indicated "no/ not sure", ranging from 20% in Norway to 4% in Ireland.

Overall, most checking took place in England and Ireland and least checking in Denmark and Norway. This does not sit comfortably with the finding above that retaliation was most likely to be experienced among workers in Denmark.

Do you want to read more?

In this brief we have presented some findings from our survey on whistleblowing. If you want to read more, you will find information here:

[Workers' voice and the right to manage – the case of whistleblowing in a comparative context.](#)

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 present some key findings on whistleblowing from our comparative survey. 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](#)".

Sissel C. Trygstad is a Head of Research and Project Manager at Fafo.