

## FIEC POSITION PAPER

# How to approach Mental Health in the Construction industry

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FIEC recognises that mental health<sup>1</sup> is an important societal issue that affects many citizens, from a very young age, in all Member States. Mental health is “*conditioned by personal and external factors*”<sup>2</sup> such as the state of the world, the economic crisis, family-related issues and changes in society. The notion of mental health shouldn't be confused with the one of psychosocial risk. As defined by Eurofound, psychosocial risks are “*aspects of the design and management of work, and its social and organisational contexts, that have the potential to cause psychological or physical harm*”.

The challenges posed by psychosocial risks have been recognised and addressed by the construction employers for already many years. Ensuring safe workplaces is important for the attractiveness of the sector, particularly in a context of labour shortages.

In June 2023, the European Commission published a Communication on mental health which includes a specific section on “Tackling psychosocial risks at work”. Mental health is also one of the priorities in Ursula Von der Leyen's Guidelines for 2024-2029 and in the mission letter of the European Commission Executive Vice-President, Roxana Mînzatu.

In this context, FIEC would like to share the following messages and recommendations:

- **Mental health is a societal issue**, influenced by **several factors and dimensions**, that go **beyond the work-related ones**.
- **FIEC doesn't see the need for a specific European legislation** on mental health at work, as it is already covered by the existing legislative framework. Tools, guidelines or recommendations adapted to the particularities of the construction sector would be better suited to respond to the challenges posed by mental health.
- Many initiatives have been put in place at company level and by social partners. **A bottom-up approach**, taking into account existing initiatives and **involving the sectoral social partners** at all stage, must be adopted.
- **Support to employers**, and in particular SMEs, through specific guidance and funding is necessary to reinforce the prevention of psychosocial risks at work.

<sup>1</sup> Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”

<sup>2</sup> [Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health](#), COM(2023) 298, European Commission, 7.06.2023

## Psychosocial risks factors in the construction industry

Without drawing up an exhaustive list, FIEC recognises the existence of several psychosocial risk factors in the construction industry.

First, the construction industry, as all productive sectors, is vulnerable to economic crises and demand fluctuations. This can lead to uncertainty for workers and employers and affect their well-being as well as their job satisfaction and income security. In addition, the sector is characterised by a complex work organisation with multiple stakeholders and high mobility. According to the EU-OSHA, poor cooperation and communication in construction companies is also a prevalent psychosocial risks factors for the workforce<sup>3</sup>. Workers and employers in the construction industry also have to cope with client pressure, work overload and tight deadlines which can lead sometimes to long working hour. These risks have been identified and addressed by employers for already many years.

*In 2020, the Irish Construction Industry Federation published a [report](#) on “Mental health in the Construction sector”. The Federation, recognising the importance of mental well-being in the construction sector, did a research with employers to explore their experience of managing staff and the key issues they face with regards to mental health. The report is accompanied by a set of recommendations for companies, industry and government.*

*The report identifies the following work-related reasons for mental health issues: work related stress (44%), unrealistic work targets (29%), long working hours (22%), a macho work culture where employees are uncomfortable seeking help (16%), a bullying culture (15%) and poor communication between management and staff (9%).*

## Challenges in addressing mental health at the workplace

As highlighted in FIEC and EFBWW joint project on mental health, “*the fact that mental health is defined by a multitude of factors linked to the personal, professional and societal environment makes the challenge of addressing its risks at workplace level especially difficult*”<sup>4</sup>. Mental health is a multifactorial and multidimensional issue.

Additionally, FIEC recognises that employers can face obstacle in managing mental health in the workplace:

- There is still a **lack of understanding and knowledge about mental health**. There is no clear definition. To better understand the issue and therefore take the necessary measures, it is essential to improve data collection and better understand the impact of work on mental health.
- The construction sector, by its own nature, has a series of characteristics that makes it different from others and that can't change: each work takes place in a different location, there are a lot of surrounding factors, the work with machines,....
- The sector is fragmented with many **SMEs** that don't always have the necessary resources and tools (human and/or financial).
- There can be many different cultures on a construction site.
- Mental health is a very personal and sensitive issue. This is not always easy for an employer to assess the well-being of their employees. **Indeed, employees do not always want to share their mental health problems with their employer.**
- Distinguish between the work-related factors and possible external ones is not easy.

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<sup>3</sup> [Mental health in the construction sector: preventing and managing psychosocial risks in the workplace](#), EU-OSHA, 14.11.2024

<sup>4</sup> [Mental health in the construction industry](#), Report from the joint EFBWW and FIEC project, 2019

- A shortage of mental healthcare in some Member States.

FIEC therefore proposes to:

- Adopt a sectoral approach to make sure that the particularities of each sectors are taking into account.
- Improve the collection of information and data on mental health at national and European level.
- Improve support to employers, and in particular SMEs, through specific guidance and funding.
- Launch national campaigns to raise awareness on mental health issues and to tackle stigma and stereotypes, so that people feel free to talk about their mental wellbeing.

## Measures to tackle mental health in the construction industry: The need for a holistic approach

As mentioned above, one of the main challenge in addressing mental health is its multifactorial nature. It is therefore not easy to identify the factors responsible for a lack of mental health wellbeing in the workplace. In this respect, **any actions needs to deal with mental health in a holistic approach**. Supporting the improvement of mental health and the prevention of mental health problems requires **multidisciplinary and sustained cooperation** between different actors, at all levels. It is important to define the responsibilities of all actors involved and to take into account that **an employer cannot control everything**.

### At European level

The Framework Directive 89/391/EEC<sup>5</sup> sets out the employers' obligation to ensure the safety and health of workers at the workplace. Employers have the obligation to carry out a comprehensive risk assessment, for all types of risks including psychosocial risks.

The EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027<sup>6</sup> mentions psychosocial risks and initiatives taken by the European Commission to tackle hazards to psychosocial wellbeing. This is further developed in the Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health presented in June 2023. In addition, the EU-OSHA is preparing an EU-wide campaign on psychosocial risks and mental health at work for 2026-2028. Here, **FIEC recalls that such campaign should focus on good practices, practical guides, support for employers and workers and should adopt a constructive approach**.

### The importance of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue

*In their joint Work Programme for 2024-2027, FIEC and EFBWW, the European sectoral social partners for the construction industry, commit to discuss on how to better address mental health at work and to promote best practices and prevention measures among employers and workers.*

*In 2019, FIEC and EFBWW concluded a EU-funded [project](#) on psychosocial risks in construction. This project facilitated the exchange of best practices and examples between Member States to evaluate working conditions, their evolution and to take measures to reduce psychosocial risks. A sector-specific guide has been published, focusing directly on the needs at workplace level. Guidance is provided for the risk assessment for construction work and to help companies to identify measures to reduce individual load factors.*

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<sup>5</sup> [Council Directive](#) 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work

<sup>6</sup> Communication on EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work, [COM/2021/323 final](#), 28.06.2021

## At national level

Mental health should be a public health priority with adequate funding and resources. Education, information and awareness-raising campaigns and the provision of better medical care should be a priority at the national level.

However, these public health policies should not be based on mistrust of the world of work. As stated by the World Health Organization, decent work supports good mental health giving people purposes and achievements, inclusion, positive relationships, ....<sup>7</sup>

## At company level

Poor mental health can lead to poor physical health, absenteeism and burnout. This is therefore in the interests of society and employers to ensure that citizens, workers, have good mental health.

In this regards, much has been done by employers in the construction sector to prevent, promote and manage the mental health and to improve workers' health and safety. OSH legislation requires employers to perform impact assessment of all risks in the workplace, including psychosocial risks, and to adopt adequate prevention strategies. Where they exist, health and safety coordinators or managers have an important role to play in providing advices and ensuring that psychosocial risks are addressed. The involvement of the sectoral social partners is also key to deliver effective and efficient measures and support to workers and companies.

*In the Netherlands, several companies are working together and organise every year a week around mental health and well-being at work. This "[Hee, ben jijoké?](#)" is about social safety, diversity and inclusivity in the construction, infrastructure and installation sector.*

*Also in the Netherlands, [Vollandis](#), a non-profit organisation set up by the social partners in the construction industry, has developed several tools to reduce stress and workload (e.g. guide on "Getting started with workload in the construction sector").*

*A large Austrian company is having discussion on working time to allow workers to spend more days at home between two periods of work. They have also improved the working clothes and personal protective equipment (PPE). Finally, they have put in place children camps when the schools are closed to reduce stress around child care.*

*The [report](#) of the Irish Construction Industry Federation states that 98% of companies in the construction industry recognise the importance of employee wellbeing and that the mental health of employees has important safety implications*

*This report presents also **a set of recommendations for companies and the industry.***

*For **companies**, it is recommended to prioritise the project management and supervision of each job to establish and maintain realistic deadlines, clear communication and healthy work hours and work period. They recommend also to improve communication and teamwork, to introduce an open and confidential process whereby employees can report a mental health issue, to inform and promote good mental health, ...*

*For the **industry**, it is recommended to develop best practice policies guidelines and procedures for managing mental health that can be adapted for small and large companies alike, to promote a range of accredited mental health training courses, ...*

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work>

The **project Women Can Build**, led by Fundación Laboral de la Construcción (Spain) and involving seven other organisation from the construction industry, aimed at **promoting gender equality** in the construction sector and **improve the social conditions** of the sector. One of the phase of the project was to elaborate an Action Plan for construction companies to address the horizontal and vertical segregation of gender in the construction industry.

**The role of paritarian institutions** – Paritarian institutions play a big role in the construction sector when it comes to health and safety at work. These institutions are established and managed by employers and trade unions on a joint basis within the framework of collective agreements.

In Belgium, **Constructiv** has several resources and publications targeting mental health and well-being:

- A dossier on psychosocial risks to help SMEs to detect and deal with psychosocial risks inside their organisation.
- A brochure for employers with a step-by-step plan on how to address the issue of stress systematically in the company.
- A brochure for workers to help them to recognise the symptoms of stress and to set what employers are required to do.
- A dossier on prevention in relation to alcohol and drugs in the construction industry.

Finally, Constructiv visits construction sites and can produce advices on mental health.

In Spain, **Fundación Laboral de la Construcción** through its service Línea Prevención, offers several information and resources about prevention of psychosocial risks.

## Conclusion

**FIEC doesn't see the need for a specific European legislation on mental health at work.** Such legislation would be difficult to implement in practice and would not be tailored to every national practices and sector specificities. Mental health and psychosocial risks are already covered by the existing legislative framework. Therefore tools, guidelines or recommendations would be better suited to respond to the challenges posed by mental health. Before taking any initiatives at EU level, a thorough assessment of existing legislation and instruments should be completed. **The construction industry having its own particularities, a sectoral approach to mental health at work, build on what already exists and on the dissemination of these tools, is crucial.** One solution can not fit to the specificities of all sectors. This requires a bottom-up approach, taking into account existing initiatives and involving the sectoral social partners. The role of the social partners in the process of introducing and implementing any measures is fundamental. Their involvement at national and European level is desirable so that they can actively participate in the decision-making process.

