



# Same-same or different? Nordic policy responses to the exploitation of migrant workers

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## Abstract

Taking a historical perspective, this article compares the four Nordic states of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden with respect to the following question: How have problem representations developed the Nordic region's policy response to the exploitation of migrant workers? We demonstrate that parallel and competing problem representations, defined in government policy as 'human trafficking', 'forced labour', 'work-related crime' and 'social dumping', have emerged and manifested themselves across the Nordic countries. We conclude by reflecting on the consequences of these policy responses to exploited migrant workers and argue that, of the four nation states studied, Finland's policy response to labour exploitation has been the most comprehensive, since it addresses both the exploitative employer and the victim of exploitation.

## Keywords

labour migration, exploitation, human trafficking, discourse policy analysis, crime, Nordic

## Introduction

The growing political awareness of the exploitation of migrant workers in the Nordic region is reflected across the policy fields of anti-trafficking, migration and the labour market in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. At the beginning of the millennium, these nation states enacted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons,

Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the EU Council Framework Decision on Trafficking in Human Beings, and included the crime of human trafficking in their Penal Code.<sup>1</sup> This enactment was the starting point of the development of anti-trafficking policies in the Nordic countries. At the same time, the question of labour migration and its control was raised, especially in the context of the enlargement of the European Union (Eðvarðsson et al., 2007). Parallel with this development of anti-trafficking and migration policies, the labour market policy fields in the Nordic region have addressed labour migration and the issue of exploitation. In particular, this has occurred through the concept of ‘social dumping’, calling attention to the avoidance of tripartite bargaining agreements and the need to protect national labour markets (Friberg et al., 2014). Other policy responses reflect a perception of violations of working rights as criminality articulated as ‘extortionate work discrimination’ or ‘work-related crime’.

Drawing on post-structuralist thinking offered by Michel Foucault (2008, 1994/1976), we argue that this Nordic policy development reflects specific logics that produce distinct ways of problematising the exploitation of migrant workers across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Thus, in this article we explore political articulations and concepts as contested notions, since they are established through discourses. This means that political concepts are ascribed different meanings depending on the context (Bacchi, 2009; Kantola, 2005). Moreover, according to post-structuralist feminist scholar Carol Lee Bacchi (2016, 2009), a policy implicitly contains a certain problem representation that it claims to address.

Taking up this perspective, this article draws attention to the underlying assumptions that condition the articulations and the concepts of ‘human trafficking’, ‘social dumping’, ‘extortionate work discrimination’ and ‘work-related crime’ by comparing the policy development from 2000 to 2022 across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Through this comparison, we seek to understand how the Nordic nation states address and intend to tackle exploitation, hold perpetrators accountable and ultimately govern the rights of victims and the mobility of migrant workers. To do so, this article asks: How have problem representations developed the Nordic region’s policy response to the exploitation of migrant workers?

Our analysis compares the articulations of ‘human trafficking’, ‘social dumping’, ‘extortionate work discrimination’ and ‘work-related crime’ as ways to explore how different and similar policy responses to labour exploitation cut across the above-mentioned Nordic nation states. We begin by briefly outlining our contribution to the literature on anti-trafficking and labour exploitation, before moving on to discuss the theoretical framework offered by Bacchi and then describing our methodology. Based on a historical overview of the policy responses in the Nordic region, the third section analyses how the problem representations have changed from 2000 to 2022 in each of the four countries, taking a starting point in anti-trafficking policies. The fourth and final section focuses on the concepts of ‘social dumping’, ‘extortionate work discrimination’ and ‘work-related crime’. In this analysis section, we demonstrate how ‘social dumping’ is ascribed different meanings in Denmark and Norway, respectively, as the articulations attached to social dumping are established through different discourses. We also analyse how the concepts of ‘extortionate work discrimination’ and ‘work-related crime’ have travelled between Finland, Norway and Sweden. We conclude with a brief discussion of the potential effects of such policy responses.

## **Anti-trafficking and labour exploitation**

Over the last two decades, the field of critical studies on anti-trafficking related to the sex industry has expanded (see e.g. FitzGerald, 2016; Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Spanger, 2011).

This field of inquiry has focused in particular on how states are eager to ‘rescue’ victims of human trafficking while at the same time approaching those same migrants as ‘illegal’, resulting in stricter extraterritorial border controls and deportation programmes. Parallel to these studies on migrants working in the sex industry, studies have also focused on anti-trafficking in relation to the formal labour market. In particular, this burgeoning branch of anti-trafficking literature studies the link between human trafficking and labour exploitation (Ford, 2015; Marks & Olsen, 2015; Andrijasevic, 2021). It does so by paying attention to the blurring boundaries between the concepts of ‘human trafficking’, ‘exploitation’ and ‘slavery’ (Piper et al., 2015, p. 2; Quirk, 2011) or discussing the concept of unfree labour in relation to the concept of human trafficking (O’Connell Davidson, 2016). Finally, a number of studies apply the political categories of human trafficking, forced labour, social dumping and slavery as analytical concepts assessed in a continuum. Doing so, this literature discusses the conceptual boundaries between exploitation and human trafficking or uses these concepts to study the working conditions of migrant workers (see e.g. Ollus, 2016; Ford, 2015; Piper et al., 2015).

In contrast, we focus on the multiple articulations, conceptualisations and representations in national policies that turn human trafficking into a policy problem that needs to be addressed by government. By paying attention to such articulations in national policies, this article aims to explore how Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden respond to the exploitation of migrant workers through government policies. A number of studies of Nordic countries have shown how labour exploitation of migrants can be understood as a problem of human trafficking (see e.g. Jokinen et al., 2023; Spanger, 2022). Others have shown how labour exploitation is also understood as a crime in working life categorised as ‘work-related crime’ (Jahnsen, 2014) or corporate crime (Davies & Ollus, 2019). This study contributes to this existing body of literature by bringing in a Nordic comparison to the discussions of exploitation, human trafficking and work-life crime.

## Methodology

To compare how the problem representations constitute the policy responses that differ and/or align across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden from 2000 to the present, we draw on Bacchi’s (2009, 2016) ‘What is the Problem Represented to be?’ (WPR) discourse analysis approach. Bacchi’s framework is informed by Michel Foucault’s theorisation of governmentality, focusing on (national) processes of constructing and legitimating specific policy problem representations, their underlying assumptions about the problem to be solved and the effects produced by policy formulations (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Bacchi’s (2009) methodology breaks with the idea of policies as reactions to societal problems and instead suggests that policies are created through representation of “problems” produced through discourses.

Guided by the questions Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 20ff) pose to policies in the WPR approach, we formulated three working questions: 1) How have the ‘problem’ representations of labour exploitation developed over the period between 2000 and 2022 within the Nordic region? and 2) What presuppositions underpin these representations of the ‘problem’ of labour exploitation in the Nordic countries? These working questions have guided our analysis and enabled us to examine how parallel and competing representations evolving around the concepts of ‘social dumping’, ‘human trafficking’, ‘extortionate work discrimination’ and ‘work-related crime’ have emerged and manifested themselves across the Nordic. Finally, we pose a third question: 3) What effects are produced by these

representations of the ‘problem’? This last question guides our conclusion, in which we briefly discuss the potential effects.

The body of empirical material that has been selected reflects meanings and power stratifications that constitute the policy field shaped by human trafficking and other forms of crime related to the labour market that together reflect Nordic states’ policy responses to the exploitation of migrant workers. In addition, discussing potential effects of the policy representations relies on secondary sources in the form of other scholarly work. The articulations of the exploitation of migrant workers across the four nation states termed ‘human trafficking’, ‘social dumping’, ‘extortionate work discrimination’ and ‘work-related crime’, guided the identification and selection of the various empirical material we draw on. This material consists of national government policy documents, national strategies, annual reports, evaluations, action plans, white papers and legislative work, etc.

For Denmark, we draw on national action plans and evaluations related to human trafficking, supplemented with policy briefs, reports and legislative work on exploitation, social dumping and human trafficking. For Norway, we look at action plans on human trafficking and social dumping, government programmes, strategies and reports related not just to human trafficking and social dumping, but also to work-related crime. For Finland, the documents similarly include national anti-trafficking and other government policy programmes related to economic crime control. In Sweden, because of the lack of particular action plans on human trafficking for forced labour, we have used a variety of policy documents, including commission of inquiry documents, appropriation directions from the government to authorities, materials from government commissions, and government bills. This empirical material has been supplemented with scholarly literature on human trafficking, social dumping and work-related crime. Using this material, we mapped out policy developments of the state responses to exploitation of migrant workers from 2000 to 2022 across the four Nordic nation states. Through this mapping, and the theoretical framework provided by Bacchi, we identified changes in the way the Nordic states have articulated labour exploitation as a problem. Our analysis identifies the representations raised in these documents through the discourses portrayed in them and uses these representations to describe and explain how the exploitation of migrant workers has emerged in the Nordic countries.

### **Human trafficking as a starting point**

The starting point for combatting human trafficking occurred at almost the same time across all four. In 2002, Denmark and Sweden became the first of the four to criminalise human trafficking, followed by Norway in 2003 and Finland in 2004. Sweden’s 2002 legislation initially only criminalised trafficking for sexual exploitation, but in 2004 the law was expanded to include other forms of exploitation. Simultaneously with its 2004 trafficking provision, Finland launched a law on extortionate work discrimination aimed at ensuring the equal treatment of (migrant) workers in the labour market. Nonetheless, comparing the four, the development in how human trafficking and the exploitation of migrant workers have been tackled over the past 20 years is rather uneven, as shown in Table 1.

The early international obligations focused on women and children but also included a variety of other forms of exploitation. As a result, in Nordic anti-trafficking policies in the early 2000s, human trafficking was almost exclusively seen as being related to the issue of prostitution or articulated as human trafficking for sexual purposes. This problem

representation was established through the particular gendered assumption that trafficking concerned mostly women (Aradau, 2008) and that migrant women entering into prostitution were mostly coerced into doing so (Sanghera, 2005, p. 5), but also through the assumption that trafficking was by default linked to organised crime and illegal entry (Lee, 2011). Thus, the dichotomy of forced versus voluntary and the assumption of highly organised criminality and illegality produced the problem representation on human trafficking around the turn of the millennium.

This was reflected in the first Danish national action plan on combatting human trafficking which was launched in 2002 (The Danish Government, 2002), in the Swedish Government bill on trafficking in 2004 (Swedish Government Bill, 2004) and in the 2003 Norwegian action plan against “trade with women and children” (Ministry of Justice and Public, 2003). Both the Swedish and Danish governments launched a number of efforts within the police, social services and criminal justice system to combat human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Thus, the main problem representation of government efforts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden during this period focused on human trafficking for sexual purposes, as well as on women and children as victims of human trafficking (see also Spanger, 2011; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013).

This problematisation reflected an international development in the field of anti-trafficking (Kempadoo & Shih, 2022; Sanghera, 2005). The Finnish government, however, stood out when it came to when and how other forms of human trafficking were problematised. In 2004, the same year that Finland criminalised human trafficking, it also introduced the law on extortionate work discrimination. Similarly, to its Nordic neighbours, the first Finnish national action plan against human trafficking portrayed mainly an increasing threat from illegal entry and international organised crime (Ollus & Alvesalo-Kuusi, 2012). The action plan also mentioned the question of exploitation of migrant workers, for example in the construction sector. Thus, both sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation were articulated in the first Finnish action plan against human trafficking (Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005, p. 30).

Furthermore, over the 20-year period studied, various international obligations – mostly EU law but also treaties by the Council of Europe – have influenced Nordic policy responses. The 2011 EC Directive on trafficking in human beings strengthened victim support obligations and suggested the establishment of a National Rapporteur or similar mechanism in all Member States. There are also a number of other EU obligations (e.g. the Employers Sanctions Directive, policies on migration, employment and crime) which have been enacted over this period, but which are too extensive to cover in this article. The 2005 Council of Europe Convention on trafficking introduced a monitoring body, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), which through its recommendations influences national policy responses (Piotrowicz, 2017). Despite these common international norms that have informed the policies of the Nordic region, our analysis shows that the policy response internally in the Nordic region has varied from country to country, as the interpretations and implementation of the international policies differ (see Aaronson & Shaffer, 2021).

The table below provides an overview of the major developments in the policy responses of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, indicating how labour exploitation has been articulated as a problem since the early 2000s. The table is not exhaustive but provides a list of the main developments relevant to the following analytical sections. A vertical reading shows the historical development of each nation state, and a horizontal reading reflects the differences and similarities across the nation states in each year.

**Table 1.** Nordic policy responses to the exploitation of migrant workers

	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>2002</b>	Law on HT. First action plan against HT for sexual exploitation.			Law on HT for sexual exploitation.
<b>2003</b>			Law against HT. First action plan against HT.	
<b>2004</b>		Laws on HT and extortionate work discrimination; First internal security programme to control working conditions of migrant workers.		Law on other forms of HT, incl. forced labour.
<b>2005</b>		First action plan against HT, incl. actions against forced labour. Specialised labour inspectors.	Second action plan against HT mentions forced labour. Establishment of ROSA (manages and coordinates assistance and safe places for victims of HT.)	
<b>2006</b>	Second action plan against HT.	Establishment of a state system that assists victims of HT; migration policy programme on labour exploitation.	Third action plan against HT. First action plan social dumping (SD). Establishment of KOM. Establishment of national police competence team.	
<b>2007</b>	Establishment of CCM.	First court case on forced labour (acquittal). Law on assistance to HT victims. Act on contractors' liability.	Establishment of first police task force against HT under the organised crime unit in Oslo.	
<b>2008</b>		Independent National Rapporteur established. Second action plan on HT.	First court case on HT for forced labour (conviction). Second action plan on SD.	
<b>2009</b>			EXIT (special police task force against HT). Establishment of HT at the organised crime unit in Bergen.	
<b>2010</b>	Social dumping is mentioned in the collective agreements.	First parliamentary report by National Rapporteur.		First court case on HT for forced labour (acquittal). Amendments of the HT law - the so-called control prerequisite removed.
<b>2011</b>	The third action plan against HT (distinguishes between prostitution and the labour). CAHT reports on labour exploitation.	First HEUNI report on labour exploitation; first reference to HT included in Government programme.	Fourth action plan against HT (2011-2014).	

	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
<b>2012</b>	CAHT expands the collaboration with the authorities.	First official instruction for the police on HT investigations.		
<b>2013</b>		Second HEUNI report on labour exploitation (restaurant and cleaning industries).	Third action plan on SD.	National Coordinator against prostitution and HT mandate broadened to include all forms of HT.
<b>2014</b>	First court case of HT for forced labour (acquittal).	Amendments to the law on HT. Establishment of position of national coordinator on HT.	First formal multi-agency team against WRC in Bergen (pilot project).	
<b>2015</b>	Fourth action plan on HT.	Specialised NGO services for victims of labour exploitation established (Victim Support Finland). Amendments to law on assistance to victims of HT.	First action plan against WRC. National multi-agency collaboration against WRC established, incl. four local teams.	Work Environment Authority is assigned to combat “unhealthy competition” [ <i>osund konkurrens</i> ] and to monitor migrant workers in the agricultural industry in particular.
<b>2016</b>		Third action plan on HT.	Action plan against HT. NTAES (a specialised intelligence agency on financial crime, incl. WRC). First evaluation of multi-agency collab against WRC. National audit office, audits efforts on WRC.	
<b>2017</b>	CAHT starts collaborating with the trade union.		Second revised action plan against WRC.	Multi-agency collaboration on efforts to combat fraud, breach of rules and crime in working life.
<b>2018</b>				Amendments of the HT law to solve implementation issues. Human exploitation law introduced in the penal code. First national action plan on HT that includes forced labour.
<b>2019</b>	Fifth action plan on HT.	HT included in the new Government Programme. Media attention (first major investigative article on labour exploitation in ethnic restaurants in the main daily newspaper).	Third revised action plan against WRC.	

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
2020		Updated official instruction for the police on HT investigations: Eighth action plan for tackling the grey economy and economic crime	NTEAS reports Labour exploitation and tax evasion as the most common forms of WRC	
2021		Fourth action plan on HT; special police unit on HT established; HT included in the mandate of labour inspections. Amendment to Aliens Act providing employment rights to victims of labour exploitation.	Fourth revised strategy against WRC	New directives on work-life criminality: stronger emphasis on victims of labour exploitation. National delegation on WRC
2022	Amendment of HT law: Exploitation of human beings.	Several legislative proposals related to victims of HT and exploitation.	New action plan against SD and WRC. Action plan against social dumping in transportation industry. New provisions on wage theft.	Regional multi-agency centres against WRC

Note: HT = human trafficking. WRC = work-related crime.

## Problem representations from 2000 to 2022

The phenomena of human trafficking and labour exploitation were rather new to the Nordic states at the beginning of the 2000s. Although the policy fields of anti-trafficking related to forced labour and anti-trafficking related to labour exploitation are today seen as part of the same phenomenon, this was not the case at the beginning of this period. The following sub-section outlines how the policy responses have developed in the four Nordic nation states.

### Finland: The pioneer of the Nordics

Finland was the first of the four nation states to articulate exploitation of migrant workers as a problem in the period between 2004 and 2010, taking up an institutionalised approach that differed from those of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Conceptualised as the crime of ‘extortionate work discrimination’, the rationale behind the introduction of this labour offence was to prevent the discrimination and exploitation of migrant workers. Several government policies also articulated this problem. The first Finnish Internal Security Programme of 2004 raised the need for more effective control of the terms of employment of foreign labour, although the need to control ‘foreign labour’ was mainly articulated as a question of preventing tax evasion and the grey economy (Ministry of Interior 2004, pp. 48–49) (see table). Trafficking was addressed in the programme only in the context of prostitution. The first National Action Plan against Human Trafficking in 2005 raised the issue of the threat of organised crime (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005, p. 29). There was also recognition of trafficking for labour exploitation as being linked to the construction, cleaning and restaurant sectors and the requirement that it should be monitored by the authorities, including by labour inspectors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005, pp. 15, 29, 52). The plan emphasised that labour inspectors have an obligation to report cases of exploitation to the police and can participate in joint raids, particularly in high-risk sectors



(Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005, pp. 15, 52–53). This reflects an early articulation of the need to oversee migrant workers and their labour conditions. This role was given largely to labour inspectors. The representation of economic crime as the overall framework for addressing the exploitation of migrant workers dominates the Finnish policy response in the early 2000s.

The Finnish Government Migration Policy Programme of 2006 articulates a strong link between “illegal employment of foreigners”, various economic crimes and violation of working conditions (Government of Finland, 2006, p. 39). It also makes an explicit link between exploitation of migrant labour and human trafficking as “exploitation in working life” (Government of Finland, 2006, p. 41) (see table). Also in 2006, the response to the problem of trafficking became formalised through the establishment of an official, government-financed system of assistance to victims of trafficking. The placement of the system under the Finnish Immigration Service reflects an understanding of trafficking as a concern mainly for the police and border authorities rather than the social and welfare authorities (Koskenoja et al., 2018, p. 30). The formalisation of the anti-trafficking response is reflected also in the establishment of the National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking in 2009 (see table).

Unlike in the other Nordic countries, the Finnish rapporteur is an independent authority which reports every four years to the Finnish Government and the Finnish Parliament.<sup>3</sup> In its first report to Parliament, the National Rapporteur criticised the lack of measures to counteract labour exploitation and trafficking in Finland (Finnish Minority Ombudsman, 2010). In addition, knowledge production on labour exploitation started earlier in Finland than in other Nordic countries, and even other European countries, documenting the forms, sectors, victims and perpetrators as well as developing indicators for human trafficking (Jokinen et al., 2023) (see table).

Subsequent Finnish policies have systematically and explicitly defined and represented labour exploitation as a crime closely linked to human trafficking and as something that should be controlled and tackled by government actors. Between 2019 and 2022, several legislative changes were introduced, and a broad action plan for tackling the grey economy and economic crime (Government of Finland, 2020) was developed, as was a plan to combat trafficking in human beings (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2021). In both plans, labour exploitation was prominent.

### Norway: Introducing work-related crime in the Nordics

In the early 2000s, neither Norwegian labour unions nor the government framed the issue of exploitation of migrant workers within the context of human trafficking, and explicit policy responses to the exploitation of migrant workers were largely absent. Instead, wage discrimination and exploitation were primarily conceptualized as ‘social dumping’, a term encapsulating practices that contravene labour standards through unfair employment conditions (Friberg et al., 2014; Jahnsen & Skilbrei, 2015). The discourse on social dumping has been instrumental in driving several policy actions over the last two decades in Norway, with the generalisation of collective agreements and the strengthening of the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority’s control capacities generally recognised as the most significant (Brunovskis & Ødegård, 2019, p. 47).

Similarly to Denmark, Norway’s initial action plans against human trafficking only briefly mentioned the exploitation of migrant workers, indicating a lack of dedicated policy development and revealing an approach that focused on changing prostitution policies (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2003; 2006). However, the term

‘social dumping’ is mentioned in the second action plan (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2005, p. 27), while the third action plan attempts to connect the notion of ‘forced labour’ with the then-newly developed national strategy against social dumping (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2006, pp. 6, 20). The original definition of social dumping, derived from a Report to Parliament (Norwegian Ministry of Finance, 2006, p. 63) and included in the action plan against human trafficking, defined it as a phenomenon “characterized by breaches of health, environmental, and safety regulations, including regulations relating to working hours, and unacceptably low wages”. To distinguish between social dumping and human trafficking for forced labour, the action plan clarifies that “despite potential grey areas, social dumping does not typically involve coercion or deprivation of liberty” (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2006, p. 6). This statement establishes a distinction between forms of labour exploitation that are punishable under penal law and those with a more ambiguous legal status, such as cases where coercion and deprivation of liberty cannot be proven.

Around 2013–2014, the representation of the problem in Norway shifted, as ‘work-related crime’ became the predominant term for addressing labour exploitation. ‘Work-related crime’ is a generic term covering “acts that violate Norwegian laws on pay and employment conditions, benefits, and taxes, often in an organized form, that exploit workers or distort competition and undermine the social structure” (Norwegian Ministries, 2022, p. 3). This definition includes money laundering, financial infidelity, tax evasion, benefit fraud and violations of the immigration code by employing workers without the necessary permits, and also incorporates labour exploitation, of which human trafficking is considered the most serious form (Norwegian Ministries, 2022, pp. 3–4). This shift, from 2014 onwards, was reflected in the establishment of so-called A-Krim centres – multi-agency teams comprising police, tax, labour and welfare authorities. These teams were tasked with addressing a spectrum of labour violations and collaborating with police units specialising in human trafficking to identify and respond to cases of labour exploitation.

#### Denmark: Anti-trafficking as a one-track policy response

Unlike in Finland, Sweden and Norway, the Danish state’s response to the exploitation of migrant workers is largely carried out and organised by a single actor, the Centre Against Human Trafficking (CAHT). CAHT represents an anti-trafficking approach that originally stems from the policy field of prostitution (Spanger, 2011). The first two Danish national action plans on human trafficking, launched in 2002 and 2007 (see table), articulate trafficking as a problem solely related to sexual exploitation of women. The question of labour exploitation was not a concern, as is indicated by the explicit statement in the second action plan that “[p]ersons trafficked into forced labour, as of January 1, 2007 is not a known problem in Denmark” (Danish Government, 2007, p. 22). The plan posits that should forced labour become a reality in Denmark, similar efforts to those regarding “children and women who have been trafficked into prostitution” would be made, and that potential cases of forced labour would likely come to the attention of the labour market parties and the labour inspectors (Danish Government, 2007, p. 22).

Before 2010, CAHT primarily articulated human trafficking as a problem within the sex industry, and this perception was also reflected in social work practices. Around 2010, a shift in the problem representation took place, which is reflected both in the policy actions of CAHT and the action plans of 2011, 2015 and 2019 (Spanger, 2022) (see table). The articulation of migrant workers as potential victims of human trafficking appears in the action plan of 2011: “Experience from other European countries indicates that trafficking

for forced labour [...] takes place to an extent that we have no knowledge of in Denmark” (Danish Government, 2011, p. 7). Around the same time, in 2010–2011, three reports produced by CAHT documented the existence of exploitation of migrants within the sectors of cleaning, agriculture and greenhouses, and *au pair* work (Lisborg, 2011, p. 18–19) (see table).

The CAHT reports draw on the idea of a continuum of exploitation (from exploitation to human trafficking). Based on this logic, the migrant workers in the reports were categorised as ‘exploited’ but not as victims of human trafficking. Despite the conclusion of the reports, CAHT established a “work group preventing forced labour” (Danish Government, 2011, p. 7). Thus, CAHT distinguished between ‘exploitation of migrant workers’ and ‘human trafficking’, which was primarily linked to migrants selling sex. This problem representation was also reflected in the proposed activities, as these were targeting trafficking for prostitution. This distinction between exploitation of migrant workers and human trafficking was maintained also in the fourth action plan (2015–2018), which stated: “The primary target group will remain women trafficked into prostitution, but efforts will also be directed towards victims trafficked into forced labour and other forms of exploitation” (Danish Government, 2015, p. 9). Collaboration with trade unions, employers’ associations and the Danish Working Environment Authority was adopted by CAHT as a means of accessing what it terms ‘potential victims’ within the formal labour market<sup>4</sup> (Spanger & Hvalkof, 2020). For instance, from 2012, CAHT has invited labour market representatives into their network to share experiences (see table). Such actions represent a new problematisation, namely that human trafficking did not just involve women selling sex, but that labour migrants in other industries could also be potential victims of human trafficking. Through reaching out to representatives of the labour market, CAHT aimed to create awareness that human trafficking also takes place in the labour market, and to encourage those representatives to collaborate in identifying victims of human trafficking.

#### Sweden: Late to the game... and eventually mimicking Norway

Sweden’s representation of labour exploitation has fluctuated. Despite the incorporation of forced labour into the human trafficking legalisation in 2004, relative to the other four Nordic countries the Swedish state paid little attention to the exploitation of migrant workers in the form of concrete actions until the late 2010s and early 2020s. The first Swedish action plan to combat human trafficking from 2008 focused exclusively on trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Swedish Government, 2008a). At the same time, the Swedish government prepared a proposed action plan to combat labour trafficking and other forms of exploitation (Swedish Government, 2008b). However, this detailed action plan to combat labour trafficking was not approved, nor were the suggested actions enacted. The labour migration policy for citizens from non-EU countries, on the other hand, underwent a major reform in 2008, which made it the most liberal policy among the OECD countries (OECD, 2011, p. 11). The shift in 2008 meant that the government’s efforts focused on simplifying and increasing labour migration from countries outside of the European Union (Swedish Government, 2007), without responding to or implementing actions specifically to combat labour exploitation. Issues were raised regarding the risk of social dumping, but social dumping was mostly articulated by the government as a problem of undeclared work that could be combatted with mandatory staff ledgers in particular sectors and unannounced inspections by the Tax Authority (Swedish Ministry of Finance, 2009). Thus, neither human trafficking for forced labour nor social dumping constituted a predominating problem representation in Sweden during this time.

In the meantime, Sweden went through similar developments to Denmark in the early part of the period of study, representing human trafficking primarily as a sexual exploitation problem. Yet, from 2015 the government instructed the Swedish Work Environment Authority to strengthen inspections of companies that violate workplace regulations to gain competitive advantages (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2014) (see table). The problem was articulated as “unhealthy competition” and not as a labour exploitation problem (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2015). However, in 2017 the government assigned eight authorities to develop methods for joint inspections of workplaces with the aim of combatting fraud, breach of rules and crime in working life, in which labour exploitation and human trafficking were listed among a number of violations that should be targeted (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2017) (see table). The following year, Sweden introduced the law on human exploitation, represented as a solution to the growing problem of labour exploitation and the insufficiency in criminal law protection provided by the human trafficking legislation (Swedish Government Bill, 2018).

Since 2018, the concept of ‘crime in working life’ or ‘work-related crime’ (*arbetslivskriminalitet*) has dominated the Swedish policy responses to labour exploitation. The government increased its focus on labour exploitation in 2021 by setting up a national delegation against work-related crime, with representatives from authorities, employers’ organisations and trade unions (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2021). In 2022, the government introduced regional centres against work-related crime and permanent government cooperation (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2022).<sup>5</sup> Following the Norwegian problem representation, the current predominating articulation of the Swedish state is to understand human exploitation and human trafficking as particularly complex and systematic forms of ‘work-related crime’ (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2022) (see table).

### **Divergent and convergent policy responses and their adoption**

In this section, we compare the four Nordic nation states regarding how they diverge from or converge with each other, and the ways in which they have adopted each other’s policy responses towards exploitation of migrant workers. To do so, we take our point of departure in the policy concepts of ‘human trafficking’ and ‘extortionate work discrimination’ which precede the concepts of ‘social dumping’ and ‘work-related crime’. Together, these concepts represent the different problem representations. The historical development is also reflected in how the policy responses were institutionalised from 2002 to 2022, i.e., over the course of two decades. On the one hand, although human trafficking began from the same premises in all four countries, the individual countries’ responses differ, as did the presuppositions that informed the problematisations. On the other hand, across all four countries, the presuppositions relating to the labour market and to perceived criminality have in different ways and at different times played a role in how labour exploitation has been articulated and addressed. This is reflected in the concepts of ‘human trafficking’, ‘extortionate work discrimination’, ‘social dumping’ and/or ‘work-related crime’. Thus, this section compares the problem representations across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, highlighting the presuppositions that underpin these policy representations as well as how the individual countries have influenced each other in terms of their adoption of policy responses and policy practices.

In Finland and Norway, the predominating problematisations of the exploitation of migrant workers were established through a focus on the labour market and risks related to economic crime and abuse of the system that hamper the functioning of the market. Despite the two nation states responding to labour exploitation more or less simultaneously,

namely through the first Finnish action plan that included actions against forced labour in 2005 and the Norwegian second action plan that mentions forced labour in 2006 (see table), the articulations of what the problem was represented to be were different. In both Finland and Norway, the articulation of exploitation of migrant workers as ‘illegal labour’, i.e., as a problem of the ‘grey economy’, can be understood as a response to the free movement of labour from East to West in relation to the enlargement of the European Union – specifically, a fear that unscrupulous employers and criminal actors would abuse national labour markets and violate labour regulations and immigration provisions by employing migrant workers without residence or work permits. The Finnish criminalisation of ‘extortionate work discrimination’ which came into effect in 2004 adds the dimension of a recognition of migrant workers as *victims* of crime, for instance victims of discrimination. Thus, already at the beginning of the millennium the terminology implied an attempt to sanction or criminalise exploitative employers and recognition of exploited migrant workers as victims of crime. However, the predominating assumption underpinning the problem representation in the early Finnish policy documents is the idea that the main victim was the state, since grey economic activities diminish tax and other revenues of the state. The problem representations of economic crime, discrimination and human trafficking merged in Finland around the 2010s when research, practice and policy began to connect the forms of exploitation as a continuum of less to more serious forms of exploitation – including human trafficking – that needed to be addressed more systematically. This merging was strengthened by the reports and recommendations of the independent National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking and the reports of the research and policy-making institute HEUNI from 2011 onwards (see table; see also Jokinen et al., 2011).

In contrast to the Finnish state, Norway initially problematised the exploitation of migrant workers as ‘social dumping’, emphasising a concern about the risk of negative wage competition and deteriorating working conditions. This policy response articulated as social dumping is reflected in the first Norwegian national action plan on social dumping from 2006 (see table). Like Denmark, this policy development in Norway can be seen as a response to the rapid rise of migrant workers travelling from East to West following the 2004 EEA enlargement and concerns over deteriorating working conditions, as well as ‘unhealthy’ and ‘unfair competition’ between companies. Much later, in 2015, Sweden launched a similar response, ‘unhealthy competition.’ The later conceptualisation of ‘work-related crime’ in Norway seems to incorporate previous understandings of both social dumping and human trafficking. In 2022, ‘wage theft’ was introduced in the law in Norway to enable the penalisation of employers’ violations of minimum salaries. Thus, the definition of ‘work-related crime’ as encompassing social dumping and human trafficking was established through the assumption that this form of (organised) crime undermines and threatens the Norwegian welfare state by exploiting migrants working in Norway. Thus, Norway resembles Finland in the sense that it has problematised exploitation of migrant workers as a labour policy – and criminality – issue, which is reflected in the practices of the state.

Unlike both Finland and Norway, the concept of work-related crime did not exist in the policy response to the exploitation of migrant workers in Denmark during the two decades. Thus, the articulation of migrants being exposed to labour exploitation as, for instance, ‘a work-related crime’ has neither been a part the policy response nor adopted into the legal system in Denmark in the last decades. Despite this, the trade union included social dumping in the collective bargaining approach in 2010 due to a fear that migrants engaged in temporary work in Denmark would undermine national wages and working conditions.

Social dumping has been articulated through a national discourse as the need to protect the ‘Danish labour market model’ and the ‘Danish labour force’, rather than as a means to address the exploitation of migrant workers per se. This national discourse dominates not just the labour market in Denmark, but also the country’s anti-trafficking policies and actions (Spanger, 2022). A clear definition of social dumping does not exist in Denmark as it does in Norway (Andersen & Pedersen, 2010). Furthermore, contrary to Norway, social dumping has never been closely and systematically connected to human trafficking in Denmark, nor has it been problematised as a question of discrimination of migrant workers like in Finland.

The representations of the problem of human trafficking in both Denmark and Sweden have had a strong focus on sexual exploitation in human trafficking. However, in Denmark and Sweden, labour exploitation was not articulated as a form of trafficking until relatively recently. Inspired by the Norwegian authorities, a change took place around 2018 in Sweden when the concept of ‘work-related crime’ was adopted (see table). Although labour exploitation and human trafficking are mentioned in the first Swedish government directive on work-life criminality covering 2018–2020, there is an observable difference between this and the problem representation in the subsequent 2021 directive. In the latter, there is a stronger emphasis on victims of labour exploitation in Sweden (Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2021). This problem representation differs even more from the previous assumption of unfair competition (“*osund konkurrens*”) which did not pay attention to the victims of crimes in the workplaces and how those victims should be supported.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have compared the ways in which Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have responded to the exploitation of migrant workers. Our analysis demonstrates that, while the policy field of anti-trafficking had the same point of departure in all four nation states, multiple problem representations, such as human trafficking, extortionate work discrimination, social dumping and work-related crime, have at different times resulted in different policy responses to the exploitation of migrant workers in each country. In the following, we will take a final step in the analysis strategy provided by Bacchi (2009), reflecting on the effects produced by these representations.

In both Norway and Finland, human trafficking was in the early policy documents linked not only to sexual exploitation, but also to labour exploitation and forced labour. At the same time, Denmark and Sweden exclusively focused on sexual exploitation in their human trafficking policies and actions. When the predominating problem representation remains focused on human trafficking related to sexual exploitation of women and children, as in Denmark, it eclipses the recognition of exploitation experienced by migrant workers, especially male workers. Simultaneously, both Norway and Denmark engaged in a parallel policy development against social dumping, where the existence of low-paid migrant workers was recognised, but first and foremost within the context of protecting national labour markets. While the problem representation of social dumping was in some respects closely connected to human trafficking and forced labour in Norway, it was less clearly articulated in Denmark.

In the parallel problem representation in Finland, articulated as extortionate work discrimination, the problem is represented to be that of labour discrimination in the ‘grey economy’ as a form of economic crime against the state, but it also recognises migrant workers as victims of crime. More than ten years later, Swedish policies towards “unhealthy competition” were represented as a response to labour exploitation among other problems in the labour market. In contrast to the Finnish “extortionate work discrimination”, the Swedish

articulation of “unhealthy competition” places the focus on the companies (healthy and unhealthy) and free functioning of the market, and not on victims of labour exploitation.

The problem representation of labour market criminality, first developed in Norway and thereafter adopted by Sweden, places the focus on the criminal actor (in particular, the fraudulent companies) and their effect on the welfare states and de-emphasises victims of labour exploitation. The Council of Europe oversight body GRETA (2022) has, for example, warned against situations where potential victims of human trafficking are handled through administrative measures rather than through criminal proceedings in the Norwegian case. As a result, victims of labour exploitation may have been exposed to rapid deportations without screening for possible victimisation by human trafficking and are thus deprived of access to assistance measures and legal aid. Still, compared to the problem presentation of unhealthy competition, there is an observable difference when it comes to the emphasis on victims of labour exploitation within the problem representation of labour market criminality, which also connects crime in the labour market with human trafficking and human exploitation (see e.g. Swedish Ministry of Labour, 2021). Still, the government policies pertaining to labour market criminality do not seem to recognise the inherent conflict between more control of workplaces and the risk of expulsion of victims of crime.

In parallel with the representation of labour market criminality, the Swedish government recognised that migrant workers needed a stronger criminal law protection and introduced the provision on human exploitation. In practice, however, the legislation on human exploitation has not had any significant effect on the legal protection of victims of labour exploitation (Schoultz & Muhire, 2023). The criminalisation of the exploitation of migrant workers has been absent in the development of Danish policy beyond the legislation on human trafficking for forced labourers. The only recent change that has taken place in Denmark is the introduction of the new law on human exploitation in 2022 (Danish Ministry of Justice, 2022). This change reflects how Denmark has moved in the same direction as Sweden.

Finally, of the four Nordic nation states studied, Finland is the one with the most comprehensive policy response, since it addresses both the exploitative employer and the victim of exploitation. The Finnish policy response is underpinned by the broad problem representation of exploitation as also including human trafficking. Victim assistance, multiagency cooperation, oversight (such as labour inspectors and police) and criminal provisions address exploitation overall, rather than only as human trafficking, or only as economic crimes, or only as social dumping. This has resulted in more convictions for trafficking for forced labour in Finland as compared to the other Nordic countries (Schoultz et al., 2023). On the other hand, in Norway, the articulation of work-related crime from 2014 to the present creates space for a broad policy response, but the question remains as to whether it sufficiently targets the exploitation of migrant workers, and in particular, the rights of migrant workers. Following the path of Norway, it remains to be seen whether the Swedish adoption of the articulation of labour exploitation as work-related crime will sufficiently recognise the rights of exploited workers. We can conclude that while there is a normative consensus that labour trafficking and the exploitation of migrant workers should be addressed in Nordic societies, in practice there are substantial differences in the policy responses applied across these countries.

## Funding

The research presented in this article is funded by Nordic Research Council for Criminology, project number 20200055, and the Norwegian Research Council, grant number 325188.

## Notes

1. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also sometimes referred to as the Palermo Protocol, was adopted in 2000. Link: [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18&clang=en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18&clang=en). EU legislation ACT: Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA of 19 July 2002 on combating trafficking in human beings. Link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/combating-trafficking-in-human-beings.html>.
2. Following Foucault (1972, p. 121), a discourse is a delimited, coherent system of thought that structures and sets the limitation for what is possible to speak, think and act about particular subjects or objects. In this article, a policy field is approached as a discursive battlefield constituted by discourses that align and/or conflict (Spanger et al., 2017; Dahl, 2012).
3. Non-Discrimination Ombudsman is Finland's National Rapporteur on trafficking in human beings.
4. Interview with an employee from CAHT.
5. Today, 2023, the Swedish regional centers against work-related crime are established by the Swedish Work Environment Authority, the Police Authority, the Swedish Tax Agency and other cooperating authorities (the Swedish Public Employment Service, the Swedish Economic Crime Authority, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the Swedish Gender Equality Agency and the Swedish Migration Agency).

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