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# Best practices in Belgium

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## Abstract

Belgium has a long-standing, civil-society-led commitment to combating domestic violence, and significant progress has been made in policy, legal reforms and service provisions to victims and perpetrators since the 1970s. However, its unique institutional structure and political tensions across language lines hinder the development of a coordinated, integrated and coherent approach to effectively end domestic violence. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the GREVIO baseline report have played a key role in further improving policies and programming. A number of good practices have been identified that can give guidance for the implementation of the good practices in the process of being implemented in Romania in terms of methodology and the role of women's specialist services in a coordinated, integrated response to domestic violence. They also may inspire additional action, in particular in the field of primary prevention and collaboration with women's specialised services. On EU level, additional action is needed to support efforts on the national level and allow WSS to play their key role in advocacy and service provision.

## 1. Relevant Belgian context

Domestic violence (DV) has been a policy issue in Belgium since the mid-1970s when the women's movement started raising public awareness about the issue, e.g. at the 1976 International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels. Feminist volunteers founded and ran the first women's shelter in 1977 in Brussels, soon followed by similar initiatives in other large cities. From the mid-1980s, public authorities started recognising and funding these women's specialist services (WSS), leading to a professionalisation of the sector. Perpetrator work started in 2000 and domestic violence hotlines in 2012/2014. Major legal milestones in combatting DV were the law of 24/11/97 (voted in 1998) criminalising DV; the law of 15/05/12, since reformed, allowing the police to remove the violent partner from the conjugal residence; and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2016.

On the policy level, the fight against DV is hindered by the complex structure of the Belgian federal state that divides DV-relevant competences over seven entities. Regions and communities develop their policies autonomously, and political and linguistic tensions further jeopardise a coordinated, integrated approach. This may be the reason why policy making lagged behind WSS efforts to combat DV. The first national action plan (NAP) to combat violence against women was adopted in 2001, followed by other NAPs, as well as action plans for regions and communities. The Flemish government does not have a DV action plan to this date. The biggest impact

on policy making has been observed due to the monitoring process of the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Since GREVIO's baseline report in 2020, considerable progress has been made on several issues concerning DV:

- improved consultation and cooperation with WSS and increased funding opportunities;
- the creation of an inter-ministerial conference on women's rights to better coordinate policies and programming across Belgium;
- a substantial increase of shelter places in Brussels and Wallonia, among other extensions of services;
- inclusion of tech-assisted violence in the penal code (e.g. revenge porn) and a draft law on femicide;
- training for professionals, including judges;
- improved accessibility of services for women with disabilities.

## 2. Policy debates

Due to its institutional structure, Belgium is still at the very beginning of a better coordination of the federated entities' efforts to combat DV. Admittedly, a recent budget increase for the national gender equality body strengthens its coordination role, but progress, or even the maintenance of the status quo, depends on committed individual policy makers and fragile political coalitions.

We see an ongoing disparity in access to rights and services depending on one's residence (the "postcode lottery"). In particular Flemish institutions apply a gender-neutral approach to DV that is not in line with the Istanbul Convention. It is concerning that the Flemish government consistently hinders national coordination efforts or withdraws from them altogether to not be accountable to gender-sensitive standards.

In addition to these structural challenges and evolutions and despite the promising progress made since the GREVIO baseline report, several major problems are a policy priority:

- The primary prevention of domestic violence remains the poor parent of anti-violence policy: no specific budget line in Belgium is allocated to this issue, WSS active in the field cannot secure structural funding and there is no coordinated planning or evaluation.
- Undocumented women and women with a precarious administrative status do not have access to the same rights and services as other Belgian residents, a clear infringement on the principles of the Istanbul Convention; restrictive migration policies further increase migrant women's vulnerability to DV and exploitation.
- The official zero tolerance policy exists on paper only; a 2016 evaluation has shown that courts close 70% of all DV cases with no further action, the significant

disparities between judicial districts illustrating a rather random policy implementation.

- DV is not sufficiently taken into account in child custody proceedings and in child protection services, exposing children and their mothers to further violence by the violent (ex-)partner.

### 3. Good practices

Belgian public authorities have recognised WSS as reliable experts and key partners in combatting domestic violence. Since the mid-1980s, structural and project funding is available in increasing amounts for strengthening the action of WSS and helping them to advocate for improving policy making, based on their observations and experiences in the field. WSS have a privileged position for identifying policy shortcomings and needed improvements, as they are confronted on a day-to-day basis with the material and practical consequences of policy gaps for women and their children.

While the primary prevention of gender-based violence remains underfunded and marginalised in the overall policy efforts, considerable progress has been made in making additional project funding available for this issue. These initiatives seem particularly commendable in this field:

- The Flag System is a method to help professionals evaluate sexual behaviour in their beneficiaries (children, young people; adults in the health, residential care or disability sector) on the basis of objective criteria; this allows professionals to identify sexually transgressive behaviour early on and to intervene in a pedagogically impactful manner. The Flag System also allows to draw up organisational policies on the prevention of sexual violence.
- The French-speaking governments have cooperated for an in-depth overhaul of the funding and curricula for mandatory relational, affective and sex education in schools that include the primary prevention of violence in intimate relationships. This programme will extend age-appropriate prevention training on gender equality, consent and respect in relationships to all schools.
- Feminist empowerment self-defence has been recognised in several action plans as an effective means for the primary prevention of gender-based violence, including DV. Additional funds have been allocated to the training of more trainers for women and girls and reaching out to particularly vulnerable groups such as women with disabilities.

In the fields of secondary and tertiary prevention, we'd like to point out the following best practices:

- Women's shelters use a rights-based, intersectoral methodology focused not only on the victims' individual protection, but on their empowerment and a critical understanding of the root causes of DV. They are particularly committed to including children into their prevention work to protect them from direct violence

and from the negative impacts of witnessing DV, thereby disrupting the intergenerational reproduction of violence. Women's shelters are at the forefront of DV advocacy, cooperate closely with organisations providing good-quality perpetrator work (see below) and have co-created a state-of-the-art training programme on DV for other professionals.

- In French-speaking Belgium, perpetrator work is grounded in a gendered analysis of DV and is coordinated with WSS supporting the victims of the perpetrators. This allows professionals working with perpetrators to put the victims' safety at the centre of their interventions and to warn their partner organisations when the risk of reoffending increases.
- Since 2019, a pilot project tests a Bluetooth alarm button for high-risk victims of DV. The alarm button is installed on the victims' mobile and allows them to send an alert with their GPS coordinates to the police wherever they may be contacted by their ex-partners. This measure aims to prevent reoffending, and in particular femicide.
- The NAP on combating gender-based violence includes a provision to train all existent and future judges and prosecutors on DV. The curriculum includes contributions from WSS to ensure the quality of the training. The NAP further stipulates that legal professionals need to be made aware of the lack of any scientific basis for the concept of parental alienation syndrome.
- Several WSS have started a Ukrainian hotline on DV and provide prevention and support services to displaced survivors residing in Belgium. Their methodology is based on WSS best practices in empowerment counselling.

## 4. Transferability aspects

Romania's good practices can be compared to Belgian practices, highlighting transferability aspects that go both ways:

**Venus project:** A decentralised provision of shelter places for survivors of DV is an important part of any larger policy to combat DV. As in Belgium's provinces, there is at least one shelter per Romanian county to ensure a better geographic spread; however, in both countries, shelters remain concentrated in larger cities, making them less accessible to women in rural areas. To maximise the positive impact of a stay at a shelter, the shelter needs to be accessible for women AND their children, independently of their former place of residence, undocumented women and women with a precarious migration status, women with disabilities or trans women who would otherwise be excluded. WSS-run shelters tend to have a better methodology (rights-based, intersectional) than government-run shelters, and they also are cheaper in creation and maintenance and less vulnerable to changes in the government orientation. Finally, confidence building and a proactive outreach to other actors (health system, schools, police, NGOs...) are key to ensure that survivors find their way to the shelter and dare break the cycle of violence and access the services.

**Sexual violence referral centres:** Both Belgium and Romania have created a network of sexual violence referral centres, which are an important link in service provision to survivors of sexual violence. Belgium extended its network to ensure that survivors do not have to travel longer than an hour to the next referral centre. Also a good practice is that centre staff are well trained in applying a rights-based, intersectional methodology and receive support to prevent burnout (supervision). These are features of the Belgian practice that might be interesting to include in the Romanian experience. In addition, both countries need to make additional efforts to provide an equally good network of specialised long-term support services for survivors of sexual violence.

**Perpetrator work:** To reduce men's inclination to violent behaviour, a profound change of their attitudes, beliefs around gender and power need to be challenged and they need to develop pro-social, equality-promoting behaviours. Such a change is only possible in a long-term, collective approach based on critically challenging traditional gender norms and taking into account the intersections of power relationships. Perpetrator work exists in Belgium, but only one NGO provides services with this type of methodology, and their interventions are probably too short-term for an optimal outcome, due to limitations in funding. However, it does not seem that the Romanian perpetrator services fare much better, and probably both countries need to review their policy and programming on this issue.

**Protection and inclusion of Ukrainian refugees:** While Romania makes admirable efforts to meet Ukrainian refugees' needs, the policy and its implementation does not seem to include specific measures to prevent violence against women in refugee centres or to proactively identify at-risk women and girls, e.g. for trafficking into begging networks. Providing information and services in Ukrainian and reaching out to survivors proactively are key elements of combating violence against Ukrainian refugees. In addition, it is important to prevent the discrimination against Ukrainian Roma women in service provision. A particular attention should go to Ukrainian women in relationships with Romanian men, as they may be particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Funding for and cooperating with WSS that are already doing this type of work could help the Romanian government in fulfilling its international obligations.

## 5. Conclusions

Given the previous observations, the following points should be central to any policy effort to combat DV:

- a coordinated, integrated and coherent approach based on empirical evidence and a gender-transformative analysis of DV;
- a central role of the primary prevention of DV to safeguard women's and their children's rights and dignity and avoid the human and economic costs of DV;
- to this end, quantifiable goals not only on service provision, but on reduced victimisation and offending rates;

- a close cooperation between WSS and public authorities as partners on equal footing, including the recognition of and appreciation for WSS's political independence, sufficient structural funding and transparent consultation processes.

For the Romanian case, we add these specific recommendations:

- the establishment of gender-based violence as a policy priority mainstreamed through all government policies and programming;
- a thorough evaluation and feedback system that ensures that all actors actually implement the existing laws and policies, if necessary, by making decision makers personally responsible for failures in their due diligence;
- the creation of a harmonised data collection tool on gender-based violence that makes it possible to track individual cases across multiple agencies and services, on the model of HIV-related data collection already in place;
- a particular attention to the impact of the war against Ukraine and the displacement of its citizens, as international agencies, public and private donors have a tendency to concentrate funding on this emergent crisis while neglecting the funding of WSS's core services to Romanian survivors;
- to increase the opportunities for good-quality training across agencies so that staff can get to know other services and actors during these trainings and develop a shared understanding of gender-based violence.

On the European level, we see the following priorities:

- the immediate ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU;
- the adoption of the draft directive on violence against women and domestic violence;
- an increase in project funding and the creation of structural funding for WSS combating DV that takes into account the national contexts (e.g. no co-funding requested for WSS in countries where national governments are hostile to EU values and gender equality) – regranting programmes should never replace individual project grants (see current developments in CERV granting);
- the attribution of specific funding for DV research, including research on primary prevention, in the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.