

The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Combatting sexism – with a focus on the workplace

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Combating sexism on the workplace in Belgium

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Abstract

Belgium has an important and encompassing legal framework regarding different forms of gender-based violence. It has been even more strengthened through the reform of the Penal Code and the adoption of the Act recognising "Femicide" in 2023.

Sexism is addressed through several laws and action plans to aim at non-discrimination between women and men and well-being at work. The law on workplace violence, that includes sexism, makes employers responsible for taking prevention measures and sets out sanctions to encourage lasting structural change.

Since 2014, sexism in public space has also been legally defined in the federal Act on equality and non-discrimination between women and men.

Over the years, Belgian authorities (at federal, regional, or community level) as well as civil society and feminist organisations have developed practical awareness-raising tools to prevent and combat sexism including in the workplace.

However, due to the institutional framework, the different languages and possible tensions between the different level of power and thematic responsibilities, the actions remain scattered and cross learning limited. The example of the Alliance in Germany is useful to have a more holistic approach and organise dialogue between authorities, social partners and civil society.

1. Relevant country context

1.1 Legislation and action plans

In Belgium, the issue of sexism and other forms of gender-based violence is addressed by several pieces of legislation as well as action plans.

The antidiscrimination laws are defining harassment and sexual harassment in line with the European Law. In addition, the Gender Equality Act contains a definition of sexism which states that : "*Sexism shall be understood as any act or behaviour which,*

*under the circumstances referred to in Article 444 of the Penal Code¹, is manifestly intended to express contempt toward a person on the basis of their sex, or to regard them, for the same reason, as inferior or reduced essentially to their sexual dimension, and which results in a serious violation of their dignity."*²

However, this law has limited effects as it does not cover online sexism. A large share of sexist behaviour, in particular written sexist messages, is not punishable under the law because it is classified as a 'press offence,' over which only the Court of Assizes has jurisdiction.³ In practice, however, almost no press offences are brought before the Court of Assizes.

Regarding sexism in the workplace, it is recognised as a form of workplace violence or harassment. This is regulated by the Act on Well-being at Work and the Code of Well-being, which address not only safety and health but also the overall quality of working conditions. The Well-being Act establishes both informal and formal procedures for workers who experience harassment or other forms of workplace violence. It also emphasises the employer's responsibility to ensure a safe and secure working environment through preventive measures.

National Action Plans and sexism

Since 2001, Belgium has been structuring and implementing its policy on gender-based violence through National Action Plans (NAPs). The main objectives of these NAPs include prevention, protection and support for victims, appropriate care for perpetrators, and the implementation of an effective criminal justice policy.

The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men leads the follow-up, coordination and evaluation of the NAPs. It works closely with an Interdepartmental Coordination Group that brings together representatives from the federal, community and regional authorities. This group serves as a platform for sharing information and driving joint action, ensuring that all actors collaborate to put the NAP into practice. Since September 2022, this framework has been reinforced by a National Platform uniting Belgian civil society. Its role is to amplify the voice of grassroots organisations, involve frontline actors more actively, and provide independent oversight of the implementation of the 2021–2025 NAP on gender-based violence.

It should be noted, however, that while this plan addresses various forms of gender-based violence, it does not specifically target workplace violence, nor does it include social partners in the consultation process. Workplace issues are instead addressed

¹ An act is punishable under Article 444 if it occurs in any of the following situations: (1) in public meetings or in public places; (2) in the presence of several persons, in a non-public place that is accessible to a number of people who are entitled to meet there or frequent the place; (3) at any place, provided it is in the presence of the offended person and before witnesses, (4) by writings (printed or unprinted), images or symbols which are displayed, distributed or sold, offered for sale, or exposed to public view; (5) by writings not made public, but which are addressed to or communicated to several persons. Article 444 Penal Code.

² 22 May 2014, Act to Combat Sexism in Public Space and Amending the Act of 10 May 2007 to Combat Discrimination between Women and Men in Order to Criminalize the Act of Discrimination

³ Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes (2024), [Evaluation de la loi sexisme](#), available in French and Dutch on the Institute website.

in the National Action Plan to Improve Workers' Well-being (2022–2027). A key objective of this plan is to prevent and address health problems related to work, such as workplace accidents and psychosocial risks. Under this framework, Belgium ratified ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment in the workplace (2023). Nevertheless, gender-based violence is not treated as a distinct issue in this plan; rather, the emphasis is placed on the prevention of all work-related risks and on the responsibilities of employers and prevention actors.

1.2 Prevalence of sexism in Belgium

There is growing attention to capturing the prevalence of gender-based violence in Belgium in general, towards specific groups or in specific domains.⁴

In terms of the **prevalence of sexual harassment in Belgium**, the number of women who have experienced it at work is comparable to the German situation. Nearly one in four people - 24.9% - have experienced sexual harassment at work at least once in their lifetime. The prevalence is higher among women (32.9%) than among men (17.5%) (IWEPS 2024). According to the FRA study in 2024, 6% of women have experienced sexual harassment at work during the past 12 months.⁵

Some sectors are presenting particularly alarming level of violence. This is the case in the **defence** sector: the prevalence of non-physical sexual harassment is 36.1% over the last 12 months and 64.4% over the course of a career. Physical sexual harassment has the prevalence of 16.1% and 43.4%.⁶ Sexism was also very much present during the last **elections** (2024): for example, on social media, female politicians receive more comments related to their physical appearance (31% of sexist reactions directed at candidates), as well as sexist insults (29%), and this violence is amplified for younger candidates and candidates of racialised backgrounds.⁷

2. Policy debate

For years, discussions and actions on gender equality and gender-based violence have focused on implementing the Istanbul Convention, with intrafamily/domestic

⁴ In 2020, the Institute for the Equality between Women and Men organised a major survey on the experiences and opinions of Belgians regarding sexism in various fields. This survey was called #YouToo? (by analogy with the #MeToo movement). The results of the survey were published in separate thematic reports: on revenge porn and other forms of cyberbullying; the gender identity of Belgians; street harassment; sexual harassment in the workplace, etc. The survey on sexual harassment at work notes that while there are different mechanisms in place for reporting and supporting victims, they are failures in terms of implementation. Sexual harassment as a type of discrimination is not enough taken into consideration in the well-being policy. See also the study commissioned by the French-Speaking Community, 2024, *BEHAVES : enquête sur le bien-être, le harcèlement et les discriminations dans l'enseignement supérieur*, Brussels, available at <http://www.enseignement.be/public/docs/behaves-rapport-2024.pdf>.

⁵ FRA, EIGE, EUROSTAT, EU gender-based violence survey - Key results. Experiences of women in the EU-27. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, table 5, pg 37.

⁶ Buyse K, Goorts K, Peeters D, *et al*, 2023, Sexual harassment at work within Belgian Defence: a prevalence study in *BMJ Mil Heath* 2023;169:397-402.

⁷ Institute for the Equality of Women and Men. (2024). *Candidate ≠ Candidate: Study on sexism during the June 2024 electoral period in Belgium*. Policy Brief in English at <https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/documentation/candidate-candidat-etude-relative-au-sexisme-durant-la-periode-electorale-de-juin>.

violence receiving particular attention, as reflected in the successive National Action Plans (NAPs).

More recently, efforts have been dedicated to the creation of [Sexual Assault Care Centres](#) located in hospitals with 10 Centres distributed across the country. They provide comprehensive, victim-centred support to victims of sexual violence. They bring together medical, psychological and forensic care in one location, available 24/7 and free of charge. Victims may choose whether or not to file a police complaint immediately. They are designed to reduce secondary victimisation and to ensure coordinated care between healthcare services, police and judicial authorities.

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Finally, Belgium has overhauled its **Penal Code** to better protect against gender-based violence. Reforms include modernising sexual offences law, requiring explicit consent, criminalising non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and a law is recognising ‘femicide,’ and strengthening data collection on femicide.”

3. Good practice examples

Belgium has implemented various good practices aimed at protecting victims and raising awareness of what constitutes sexism. These initiatives target different groups – such as the general public, pupils, students, and employers – and use a variety of tools, including manuals, handbooks, games, and online resources.⁸ A few relevant in the context of this mutual learning exchange are presented.

A few examples particularly relevant for this mutual learning exchange are presented below.”

- The Belgian Institute for the Equality of Women and Men has launched “[Together Against Transgressive Sexual Behaviour and Online Sexual Violence](#)”, a practical online tool to raise awareness, clarify legal boundaries, and guide responses to harmful behaviours such as non-consensual image sharing, sextortion, and AI-generated sexual abuse. Through 21 real-life scenarios, the

⁸ Some examples, the new website of the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, genderatwork.be that provides to organisations and companies, information on legal obligations, examples of good practices, and concrete, inspiring resources to strengthen at work gender equality policies. Cliniques universitaires Saint-Luc, 2024. *Sexist and sexual behaviour: It's my concern too*. Brussels available at <https://www.saintluc.be/sites/default/files/2024-08/Agissements-HarcelementSexuel-Brochure.pdf>. VLIR, 2018, *Higher education charter – transgressive behaviour: ten generic instructions to strengthen the policy of Flemish colleges and higher schools*, available in Dutch at <https://vlir.be/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Actueel-charter-GO-gedrag-charter-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-hoger-onderwijs-maart-2018-1.pdf>

platform provides clear information for victims, witnesses, employers, and the general public on what is acceptable, what is illegal, and how to act. By addressing both traditional and emerging forms of digital sexual violence, the initiative fosters a culture of respect, prevention, and shared responsibility in online spaces.

- The [Flemish Reporting Centre for Transgressive Behaviour](#) ("Vlaams Meldpunt Grensoverschrijdend Gedrag") was launched on 25 September 2023 and is a point of contact for anyone who has experienced transgressive behaviour in an organisation or knows someone who has experienced it. It is a confidential service in Flanders where people can report behaviour that crosses personal boundaries – whether experienced directly or witnessed. Such behaviour may include psychological or physical violence, bullying, harassment, unwanted sexual behaviour, abuse of power, or stalking, among others. The centre can be contacted in an anonymous way and all reports are handled confidentially. It was set up to offer a point of contact, especially in cases where people feel their reports were not properly handled internally or when they do not trust internal reporting mechanisms. To date, there is no information on the centre's operation, activities, or results.
- The "**violentomètre**" is an awareness-raising and self-assessment tool that has been applied to different contexts of violence. The Free University of Brussels (ULB) is [using the one specifically design for the academic and scientific context](#).⁹ This tool makes often minimised or normalised violence visible, support victims and witnesses, and mobilise the academic community towards greater safety in higher education. The tool classifies a range of gender-based violent behaviours by severity and contextualise them within the academic journey. This tricolour (Green, Orange and Red) scheme allows individuals to evaluate their academic environments, identify where they stand on the continuum of violence, and thus take action or seek help as needed. It can be easily displayed, e.g. in toilets.
- The **e-learning on sexual and gender-based harassment at the workplace** has been developed as part of the [Set The Tone](#) EU project and aims to support the improvement of competences of employers and employees in prevention and reporting of cases of sexual harassment in the workplaces. The training contains modules on inclusive language, prejudices, bias, stereotypes and norms that encourage or condone sexual harassment at the workplace.

4. Transferability aspects

Germany and Belgium being both federal states, the practice presented is interesting as it is working truly with all political levels and actors. In Belgium, as mentioned, coordination efforts on prevention and addressing gender-based violence exist but the NAP on gender-based violence is more a collection of measures to be adopted or

⁹ It was developed by Giorgia Magni (PhD candidate) within the G-RIRE research group (Genre–Rapports Intersectionnels, Relation Éducative) at the University of Geneva, in collaboration with the Fondation L'Oréal, following a global IPSOS survey revealing that 1 in 2 women scientists had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. It is widely used in French Universities.

implemented by the different entities than a shared strategy with common objectives and expected results. It would be useful to obtain more information on how the Alliance is working with labour market actors, and specifically with social partners and employers of small/very small enterprises.

Training of future professionals is also a key feature. Such actions are included in the GBV-NAP, but not specifically for prevention actors. The difficulty here lies in the fact that, while well-being at work is a federal matter, education is a community competence, so it requires coordinated efforts across federal and federate entities.

Impact assessment indicators for measures taken are also rather unusual in Belgium; evaluation reports tend to focus more on the implementation of measures than on their effectiveness or their contribution to structural change. Another key aspect is the integration of user feedback mechanisms into existing tools.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Belgium has developed a range of instruments to address discrimination and gender-based violence. Yet, in the workplace, violence and sexism are primarily dealt with under well-being at work legislation rather than anti-discrimination law. Recent case law has clarified and reinforced employers' responsibility to prevent gender-based violence and sexism, but further integration into well-being policies remains necessary. This requires moving beyond an understanding of such incidents as isolated interpersonal conflicts and addressing them as structural issues. The German example of the 'Alliance Together Against Sexism' could inspire similar initiatives.

Strengthening dialogue and exchange between institutional and grassroots actors is also essential to improve support and awareness-raising mechanisms. Recognising and naming sexism as a structural driver of gender inequality in the workplace remains a crucial step forward.

Recommendations

In Belgium, as in Europe, occupational health, safety, and well-being policies should more systematically integrate a gender perspective on workplace violence. Harassment, sexism, and violence must be recognised not only as individual incidents but also as structural mechanisms that reinforce gender norms and roles and thereby sustaining gender inequalities.

At the same time, policies on gender-based violence should more effectively address workplace violence, with particular attention to groups exposed to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as workers on precarious contracts or with a migrant background. The recently adopted Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence illustrates these gaps. Inspiration can also be drawn from the work of DG Research and the European Research Area programmes *Horizon* and *Horizon Europe*, which support projects on structural change and gender-based violence in academia and research-performing

organisations. These initiatives can provide valuable lessons for other work environments.

In Belgium, a nationwide awareness-raising campaign on sexism and workplace violence would be instrumental in making visible the structural and sexist dimensions of certain behaviours and attitudes. Surveys show that many people still do not recognise some behaviours as sexist – such as sexist jokes or exposure to sexualised material – highlighting the need for greater public awareness and cultural change. Strengthening action in this field is also necessary to ensure Belgium fully meets its obligations under the Istanbul Convention and ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment.