



# **INVOLVEMENT OF COMPANIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

## **National study for Belgium**

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# Executive summary

In 2014, the 2010 Belgian National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Intimate Partner Violence and Other Forms of Domestic Violence was nominated for the “Future Policy Award” attributed each year by the World Future Council to a policy creating better living conditions for current and coming generations<sup>1</sup>. While the Belgian NAP did not receive the award, the nomination testifies to its quality<sup>2</sup>.

Yet the number of victims of gender-based violence (GBV) in Belgium exceeds all the European averages: since the age of 15, 24% of Belgian women have experienced, at least once, an act of physical and/or sexual violence by their current and/or their previous partner, compared with 22% of women in the EU-28. If we consider the rates for the last 12 months, 6% of women experienced GBV in Belgium compared with an average of 4% in the EU-28<sup>3</sup>.

These astonishing figures do impact the corporate sphere. While no data are available regarding the number of working victims or perpetrators, many reports have already pointed out the disruptive impact GBV has on enterprises, both in terms of well-being at work and profitability. On the basis of the results found for France, a French non-profit company, Psytel, estimated that in Belgium, partner violence alone costs 439 million euros a year, of which 288 million euros constitute production losses due to work interruptions, absenteeism, etc. Yet again, while several policies and campaigns are underway to combat violence against women, none of them consider the potential role companies could play within the framework of their corporate social responsibility.

In 2015, we conducted a qualitative field research project with a sample constituted of about 25 different stakeholders, comprising different kinds of enterprises, trade unions, international and local NGOs, researchers, public bodies and business networks. On this basis, we discovered that the legislation for well-being at work provided for several measures employers could use to support female victims of male abuse. However, these tools were never understood as potential tools to fight GBV. Rare companies did participate in the campaigns, but none of them carried a strong and clear message that might help victims to disclose their situation.

Several reasons can explain the total absence of involvement of companies in the fight against GBV. First of all, companies are being excluded from awareness-raising campaigns - the lack of information on this social issue is blatant. The lack of statistical information regarding the economic impact GBV

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/fpa\\_20140.html](http://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/fpa_20140.html) (23/10/15).

<sup>2</sup> HANSEN, V. February 2015. *Les violences envers les femmes en Belgique: législations, acteurs, données chiffrées*. Note d'analyse POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ. P. 6.

<sup>3</sup> EUROPEAN UNION AGENCY FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS. 2014. *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. PP. 21-54.

has on enterprises also contributes to the disinterest of companies for the topic. A series of additional barriers arise from this lack of awareness. Corporate stakeholders who could actually support victims or perpetrators are neither trained to detect these persons, nor to assist them in their search for a solution. Finally, the privacy issue also came up during interviews as one of the main obstacles justifying the inaction of companies. Unlike alcoholism, corporate actors (from most of the trade unions to the decision-makers) are not aware of the risks GBV represents, very basically, in terms of occupational health and safety. Therefore both employers and trade unions are of the view that fighting GBV should not be a professional issue.

On the basis of these results, as well as thanks to the fruitful exchanges that resulted from the national participative workshop organized on 27 October 2015 in Brussels<sup>4</sup>, we drew up a list of the best practices that were identified, as well as recommendations to take a step further in involving companies in the tackling of violence against women committed outside the workplace.

We wish you interesting reading!

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<sup>4</sup> For further information regarding the 27 October workshop, visit the following links:  
<http://www.pourlasolidarite.eu/fr/event/violence-envers-les-femmes-seminaire-national-du-projet-carve> (event page)  
<http://www.pourlasolidarite.eu/fr/news/lutte-contre-les-violences-faites-aux-femmes-les-entreprises-et-associations-belges-discutent> (feedback from the event) (02/11/15).

# Introduction

“CARVE – Companies against gender violence” is one of the first European projects addressing the role of companies in the fight against gender-based violence committed outside the workplace. One of the main activities of the CARVE project consists in carrying out national qualitative studies that aim at presenting the legal and social background as well as the way violence committed against women is treated in each partner country. The results of this field investigation are looked at against the national cultural, historical and political contexts that came into play in each country.

In this national study, we focus on the policy framework likely to influence the fight against gender-based violence. Further to the few reports published by European and Belgian public institutes, research centres and civil society organizations, this research aims at improving knowledge about the involvement of companies in the GBV issue in Belgium. The CARVE project partnership decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders involved in the fight against GBV as the method for collecting data. In the end, we interviewed a sample of stakeholders composed of enterprises (public, private, social and conventional ones), trade unions, international and local NGOs, researchers, public bodies and business networks.

The basic premise of this work was that employers are directly concerned by this widespread issue, since domestic violence has a cost for company productivity: tardiness, paid sick leave, absenteeism, harassing phone calls and so on. Companies and the workplace are considered not only as a place to discuss societal issues within the framework of a widely promoted CSR policy - in practice, they can also be a field for experimentation, including the fight against discrimination. The goal of this study is therefore to display the state of play in companies in respect of the GBV issue (What are the companies' opportunities to engage? What are the obstacles enterprises face?) and suggest potential answers for companies to take action.

In order to fulfil this goal, the first contextual part of the study analyses the policy framework in which the various stakeholders who were interviewed operate. Then we turn to the corporate level, by showing how the interviewed enterprises react to opportunities and barriers to their involvement. This section also presents concrete actions as tools that can be transposed in other companies. The best examples detected during our research work are gathered and detailed in a third section, dedicated to best practices to involve companies in the fight against GBV. Finally, the last section concludes the study with recommendations resulting from both our research work and an additional national participative workshop.

# Overview of the national state of play

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global social problem with many issues for modern societies. Indeed, such practices have negative impacts leading to substantial social and economic costs. As it is a common matter impacting every level of society, it is relevant for companies to participate in the prevention of GBV as well as in the protection and reintegration of victims.

## Facts and figures

### *Definitions of gender-based violence*

Gender-based violence (GBV) is defined as a violence that is directed against a person on the basis of gender. It constitutes a breach of the fundamental right to life, liberty, security, dignity, equality between women and men, non-discrimination and physical and mental integrity. Gender-based violence and violence against women are often used interchangeably, as most gender-based violence is inflicted by men on women and girls.

Most women who are victims of violence are more likely to suffer it from someone they know, usually a domestic partner or ex-partner. Hence, the project will focus on domestic violence, which includes any form of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence between members of a same family, regardless of their age<sup>5</sup>. Gender-based violence in the workplace is excluded from the project's scope, as well as LGBT discriminations. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Belgium defines the different kinds of gender-based violence as follows:

- **Intimate partner violence** is defined as any form of physical (e.g. intentional assault and battery), sexual (indecent assault and rape), psychological (stalking and insults) or economic violence (e.g. desertion of one's family) between spouses or persons who live together or have lived together and who share or have shared a stable emotional and sexual relationship<sup>6</sup>.
- **Rape** is defined as any act of sexual penetration, regardless of its nature and by whatever means, committed against a non-consenting person. Consent is not considered to have been given if the act is committed through violence, coercion or deceit, or is made possible by the infirmity or physical or mental impairment of the victim<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/legal-definitions?page=1> (23/10/15).

<sup>6</sup> 24 November 1997 law.

<sup>7</sup> Criminal Code, Article 375.



- **Stalking** is defined as repeatedly pursuing, watching or harassing a person who perceives it to be disturbing, worrying or tormenting<sup>8</sup>.

Since a 2006 memorandum<sup>9</sup>, domestic violence is also defined in Belgium as any form of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence between the members of a same family. This common definition is to be used by police officers and magistrates to identify and register cases.

### ***Figures of gender-based violence and impact for companies***<sup>10</sup>

According to many reports, among which the last Institute for the Equality of Women and Men study on violence (2010), verbal and psychological violence is undeniably the most widespread kind of violence. Women are mainly victims of partner violence, whereas male victims tend to be subjected to one-time events committed by anonymous perpetrators<sup>11</sup>. In terms of figures, the very recent FRA study dedicated to violence against women (2014)<sup>12</sup> estimates that 24% of women in Belgium have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their current and/or previous partner since the age of 15. The EU-28 average is 22% of women. When it comes to measuring the rates of physical and sexual violence by a partner or ex-partner in the last 12 months, 6% of women are affected in Belgium, compared to an average of 4% in the whole EU-28.

No aggregated data allows one to measure the ratio of women victims of GBV with an occupation. However, a preliminary work by the IEWM in 2014 gave an overview of the economic impact of GBV on companies, based on several studies carried out in other countries<sup>13</sup>. One of the telling figures of this work came from a 2009 Danish study, which estimated that 83% of abused female workers experienced after-effects of the violence which made it difficult for them to keep a job. Thirty-five per cent of the abused women who were interviewed experienced difficulty in achieving their professional objectives as a result of the violence. Many reasons can be mentioned: loss of concentration, fatigue, depression, irritability, post-traumatic stress disorder, paranoia, anxiety... all these factors lead to a loss of productivity, the demotivation of colleagues and third parties, a higher rate of absenteeism increasing the risk that the victim will stop working. These after-effects are even more direct in the case of 77% of the women who experienced extended abuse from the perpetrator at work, for example in the form of putting down their work, jealousy, control of wages and abuse in the workplace<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> 30 October 1998 law.

<sup>9</sup> Federal memorandum n° COL3/2006, Brussels, 01/03/2006.

<sup>10</sup> Depending on the source, figures can be slightly different. We choose here to use the figures of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights that are first of all the latest data on the topic and will facilitate the European comparison.

<sup>11</sup> INSTITUTE FOR EQUALITY BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN (IEWM). 2010. *Les expériences des femmes et des hommes en matière de violences psychologique, physique et sexuelle*. Brussels. P. 168.

<sup>12</sup> EUROPEAN UNION AGENCY FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS. 2014. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>13</sup> IEWM. 2014. *Aandacht voor partnergeweld in ondernemingen*. Slide 5.

<sup>14</sup> DANISH NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL SERVICES. 2009. *Voldsramte Kvinders Arbejdsliv*. PP. 20-21.

As for perpetrators, in a study by the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence, 80% of respondents said that their abuse had had a negative impact on their efficiency at work. Seventy-five per cent found it difficult to concentrate, which had caused or almost caused a work accident due to inadvertence in 19% of cases<sup>15</sup>.

As for costs related to GBV, these represent around 1% of the national GDP per year<sup>16</sup> due to medical and legal expenses as well as loss of productivity. On the basis of the results found for France, a French non-profit company, Psytel, estimated that in 2006 in Belgium, partner violence alone cost 439.45 million euros a year, of which 288.10 million euros were production losses because of work interruptions, absenteeism, etc. Accounting for the remainder of the cost were direct medical expenses (53.58 million euros), judicial and police activities (81.47 million euros) and social protection expenses such as emergency shelters and various allowances (16.30 million euros)<sup>17</sup>. At the time of the research, partner violence was costing 16 billion euros per year in the EU-25<sup>18</sup>.

These considerable figures led the Federal Council for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women to publish an opinion on 9 December 2011 regarding the public cost of partner violence. The opinion invited the Federal Government to conduct socioeconomic research work to make up for the lack of basic studies and comparable figures enabling an estimation of the cost of partner violence in Belgium. The Council hoped such works would reveal the economic impact of partner violence, prompting further involvement by employers concerned about the loss of productivity attributable to partner violence<sup>19</sup>.

## Competent authorities and stakeholders

GBV became a political issue in 1987, at the initiative of Miet Smet, a member of parliament of the Flemish Christian-Democrat party<sup>20</sup>. According to the Smet report published at the time, 50% of Belgian women were victims of GBV. Miet Smet alerted officials and public opinion of the issue, which led to the adoption of the European directive on the prevention of domestic abuses<sup>21</sup> in 1992.

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<sup>15</sup> VERMONT COUNCIL ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. 2012. *Effects of Domestic Violence on the Workplace. A Vermont survey of male offenders enrolled in batterer intervention programs*. P. 5.

<sup>16</sup> INSTITUTO ANDALUZ DE LA MUJER. 2004. *Los Costes Sociales y Económicos de la Violencia Contra las Mujeres en Andalucía* and NECTOUX M., MUGNIER C., BAFFERT S., et al. 2010/07-08. « Évaluation économique des violences faites aux femmes », *Santé Publique*, vol. 22, n° 4. PP. 405-416.

<sup>17</sup> PSYTEL. 2009. « Estimation du coût des violences conjugales en Europe » - IPV EU\_Cost. Projet n° JLS/DAP/06-1/073/WY. Rapport administratif. P. 31: <http://www.psytel.eu/violences.php> (30/10/15).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* P. 7.

<sup>19</sup> COUNCIL FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN. Avis n° 132 du 9 décembre 2011 sur le coût public de la violence entre partenaires. PP. 4-5: <http://www.conseildelegalite.be/fr/publications/avis> (30/10/15).

<sup>20</sup> HANSEN V. February 2015. *Op. cit.* and COUNCIL OF EUROPE. 2009. *Législation dans les États-membres du Conseil de l'Europe en matière de violence à l'égard des femmes. Belgique, France, Luxembourg, Suisse*. Strasbourg.

<sup>21</sup> Recommendation 92/131/CEE.

A few years later, international stakeholders also focused on the matter in order to find global solutions to fight GBV. In 1995 the UN organized the fourth world conference on women – commonly named the Beijing Conference – to find strategic solutions for gender equality, focusing on twelve critical areas of concern, gender-based violence being one of them. This conference resulted in a declaration and a platform for action adopted by 189 countries across the world, including Belgium<sup>22</sup>.

Created in 2003, the **Institute for Equality between Women and Men** (IEWM) is the main actor of the fight against gender-based violence in Belgium. Reporting to the Federal State, it is responsible for providing data concerning the situation of women in Belgium. It promotes gender equality in the professional sphere, as well as combating violence and discrimination. Among its eight fields of action, the IEWM coordinates the National Action Plan against gender-based violence.

Given the federal organization of Belgium, several levels of governance are involved in the fight against gender-based violence. There are three main levels of governance in Belgium: the federal level, the federated level and the local level (the cities).

- The **federal level** is represented by the Belgian State; as a signatory of the Istanbul Convention against domestic violence, harassment and rape, the Belgian Government is committed to ensuring the protection of rape victims and victims of domestic violence. As the convention will impact both federal and federated competencies, the regions and communities were to ratify the Convention first, before the Federal State could ratify it. The Common Community Commission was the last federated entity to give its approval in July 2015<sup>23</sup>, thereby allowing the Federal State to ratify the text for Belgium<sup>24</sup>.

The Belgian Senate also worked on the topic recently. A new resolution voted in 2014 concerning the fight against GBV encourages public administrations and local authorities to implement international resolutions, especially the action plan of Beijing and the Istanbul Convention<sup>25</sup>. Since the 1970s however, several constitutional reforms reduced the number of competences falling under the responsibility of the Federal State, to the benefit of federated entities.

- The **federated level** is subdivided into two kinds of players: the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region) and the communities (the Flemish, the French and the German one). The communities handle education, social and cultural policies while the

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<sup>22</sup> UNITED NATIONS. 4-15 September 1995. Rapport de la quatrième conférence pour les femmes.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.legalworld.be/legalworld/content.aspx?id=86842&LangType=2060> (08/10/15).

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/convention-violence/default\\_FR.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/convention-violence/default_FR.asp) (06/06/15).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.senate.be/www/?MIval=/publications/viewPub.html&COLL=S&LEG=5&NR=2016&VOLGNR=5&LANG=fr> (06/06/15).

regions deal with economic, employment, territorial development and housing issues.

In each province (subdivisions of the regions) and community, administrative bodies (known as the “provincial coordinators”), such as the Equal Opportunities and Diversity Unit (“*Cellule égalité des chances et diversité*”) of the Brussels-Capital Region, are in charge of promoting equal opportunities and fighting GBV. The actions they implement are set out in the multi-year national action plans that they contribute to elaborate.

Amnesty International however underlines the great regional disparities that exist in the provision of services to victims. Indeed, the objectives set by the Council of Europe are only achieved thanks to the high number of beds available in the shelters in Flanders that compensate for the places that are still lacking in Wallonia<sup>26</sup>.

- At the **local level**, since 2009 the municipalities are in charge of coordinating the local policies of GBV prevention. They also play a great role in providing financial support to associations fighting GBV or offering them premises where they can safely accommodate women.

Besides these decision-making bodies, consultative organizations emerged as gender equality and equal opportunities issues arose within the public debate<sup>27</sup>. Hence since 2013, the Brussels-Capital Region has been advised by the Brussels Council for Equality between Women and Men (“*Conseil bruxellois de l’Égalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes*”)<sup>28</sup>. These bodies have been created to advise and be consulted by the decision-makers when needed.

This ecosystem of stakeholders would not be complete without mentioning the major role played by civil society organizations. In the fight against GBV, NGOs and associations have played a huge role since the 1970s. At the time, the State did not provide any assistance to the victims of violence. These organizations developed assistance services that still exist today. They have been running shelters for battered women since 1977, providing “on call” services for victims and organizing psychological support<sup>29</sup>. As for perpetrators, the non-profit organization Praxis ASBL runs empowerment groups as well as offering information sessions and training for professionals.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.amnesty.be/doc/agir-2009/nos-campagnes/droits-des-femmes-2137/les-violations-des-droits-des/violence-conjugale-2148/article/nouvel-article-20087> (08/10/15).

<sup>27</sup> For a list of Belgian consultative bodies dealing with gender equality issues, see Annex 3: [http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/national\\_reviews/belgium\\_annexes\\_beijing\\_20.ashx?v=1&d=20140917T100718](http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/national_reviews/belgium_annexes_beijing_20.ashx?v=1&d=20140917T100718) (30/10/15).

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.florainfo.be/rubriques/actualites-et-analyses/article/lancement-du-conseil-bruxellois> (08/10/15).

<sup>29</sup> DELEPINE, A. 2003. *1978-2003: 25 ans de projets pour les femmes*, CVFE and IEWM, *Où trouver de l’aide?* : [http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/Adressen%20hulpverlening\\_fr.pdf](http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/Adressen%20hulpverlening_fr.pdf) (08/10/15).

## Relevant legislation and procedures

There is no specific legislation that encourages companies to get involved in the prevention, the protection or the reintegration of victims of GBV. The fight for the eradication of GBV is mainly governed by the aforementioned Istanbul Convention, signed, but not yet ratified, by Belgium. At national level, several laws condemn rape between spouses (law of 4 July 1989), sexual and moral harassment (law of 28 February 2014 amending the law of 4 August 1996), violence between partners (law of 24 November 1997), genital mutilation (law of 28 November 2000) and forced marriage (law of 25 April 2007)<sup>30</sup>. Since 2012, a new law has made it possible for persons who are bound by professional confidentiality, such as doctors, lawyers or police officers, to inform the legal authorities when they are faced with situations of partner violence (23 February 2012)<sup>31</sup>.

The various laws relating to the protection of women in Belgium do not directly involve private companies in the fight against GBV. However it is worth mentioning a couple of laws which, since the 1990s, have aimed at improving the working conditions and the well-being of workers.

- Thus the law of **4 August 1996**<sup>32</sup> included a specific section concerning the recognition of sexual harassment in the workplace: any kind of sexual harassment has since then been banned. It also introduced prevention advisors within Belgian companies (article 42): these are responsible for assessing risks within the workplace and managing the implementation of the law concerning working conditions. Advisors are however not trained to detect and deal with cases of GBV.
- The law of **28 February 2014**<sup>33</sup> further widened the definition of the psychosocial risks to be prevented by employers, since the law applies to any suffering that might have been caused by the organization of work, the content of work, working conditions or interpersonal relations at the workplace. Even though this legislation only refers to professional factors, it is as good as understood that links often exist between work and the worker's private life.

Although a legislative framework was established to prevent sexual harassment and to promote well-being at work, no incentives have been provided for GBV prevention. GBV remains perceived as part of the private sphere.

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<sup>30</sup> COUNCIL OF EUROPE. 2009. *Op. cit.* PP. 7-23.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.legalworld.be/legalworld/levee-du-secret-professionnel-en-cas-de-violence-domestique.html?LangType=2060> (09/10/15).

<sup>32</sup> 4 August 1996 law.

<sup>33</sup> 28 February 2014 law.

## Particular policies

The platform for action born out of the Beijing conference influenced Belgian prevention plans, the first of which was launched in 2001. There have since been four successive National Action Plans (NAP). Each lasted between two and four years, depending on the governments. These plans aim to coordinate prevention and action campaigns against domestic violence. The last plan, for 2010-2014, was nominated for the "Future Policy Award" attributed each year to a policy which improves the quality of life for current and future generations<sup>34</sup>. Even though the Belgian NAP did not receive the award, the nomination testifies to its quality. The 2010-2014 NAP had four main goals<sup>35</sup>:

- Developing knowledge and gaining a better understanding of domestic violence by collecting data;
- Heightening the awareness of populations about domestic violence;
- Preventing and detecting partner violence, particularly thanks to prevention work by police officers;
- Ensuring assistance to victims and psychosocial follow-up for perpetrators<sup>36</sup>.

A fifth National Action Plan is currently being prepared by the communities and the regions under the coordination of the IEWM. This new NAP is expected to focus on violence between partners, sexual violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and honour-related violence. The implementation as well as the evaluation of the NAP will be monitored by the IEWM<sup>37</sup>.

After the publication of the Miet Smet report, and to an even greater extent since NAPs were introduced, public campaigns against GBV were launched in Belgium. The first one, entitled "*Violence voulue?!*" (Intended Violence?!)<sup>38</sup>, was launched in 1987 by the Belgian administration in order to provide information on domestic violence and physical abuse for associations and social workers operating in the field. Another public campaign, named "*À qui profite le viol?*" (Who benefits from rape?), was set up a year later to spread information and to raise public awareness about rape<sup>39</sup>. In the 2000s, many awareness-raising campaigns were launched, although none of them directly targeted companies.

- In 2007, the government financed the campaign "*Rien que pour toi*" (Only for you), a TV spot against domestic violence.

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<sup>34</sup> IEWM. 15 October 2014. *La Belgique, bonne élève dans sa politique de lutte contre la violence à l'égard des femmes*.

<sup>35</sup> [http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/binaries/101123-PAN%20FR\\_tcm337-113078.pdf](http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/binaries/101123-PAN%20FR_tcm337-113078.pdf) (09/10/15).

<sup>36</sup> FEDERAL STATE. 11 May 2001. *Plan national d'action contre la violence à l'égard des femmes*, Note.

<sup>37</sup> [http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/domaines\\_action/violence/proces\\_sadia](http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/domaines_action/violence/proces_sadia) (09/10/15).

<sup>38</sup> COCKX, R. 2009. *Miet Smet: Trois décennies de politiques d'égalité des chances*, P. 91.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* P. 92.

- In November 2012, the IEWM launched a campaign with six male celebrities, "*Les hommes osent dire non aux violences faites aux femmes*" (Men say no to violence against women). Radio and TV spots encouraging men to get engaged against domestic violence were broadcasted and booklets were distributed.
- In November 2013, the campaign "8 couples" was launched by the IEWM in partnership with the Belgian administration. Radio and TV spots were broadcasted and a website was created. The video showed eight apparently normal couples, and people had to guess in which one domestic violence was occurring.
- In November 2014, the campaign "*La violence verbale aussi ça fait mal*" (Verbal violence is painful too) was launched by the IEWM, with TV spots broadcasted on Belgian TV to sensitize people to the dangers of verbal violence.

In 2010-2011, a campaign promoted the French-speaking, free hotline dedicated to partner violence<sup>40</sup>. Established at the initiative of the French community, the Walloon region and the French Community Commission (COCOF), its main objective was to provide help to any person confronted with partner violence, whoever they may be (victims, perpetrators, professionals, witnesses)<sup>41</sup>. Each community also has Crisis situation help lines at its disposal (106 for Flemish-speaking people, 107 for French-speaking people and 108 for German-speaking people). The IEWM leaflet "Break the silence before it breaks you" lists all the numbers and practical information needed by victims of partner violence and is available in 17 different languages<sup>42</sup>. It is regularly updated; however, as both the interviews and the nation workshop we organised on 27 October showed, companies are not aware of the existence of such tools.

At the European level, the DAPHNE III strategy (2007-2013) was intended to ensure a better protection of victims of domestic violence and offer them assistance with reintegration. A provision of 1.9 million euros was made for associative projects within the framework of this strategy<sup>43</sup>. Belgian associations essentially worked on the effects of domestic violence on working life. As a matter of fact, the DAPHNE III strategy was supported by the Belgian association "*Femmes Socialistes Prévoyantes*" and the FGTB, with the methodological assistance of the IEWM<sup>44</sup>. The expected results of the project were to collect data on GBV and publish a report. The report revealed that 15% of women in Belgium suffered from domestic violence. They also pointed out the lack of training of trade union delegates in respect of GBV<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> Toll-free number: 0800 30 030 – Ecoute violence conjugale.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.amnesty.be/doc/agir-2099/nos-campagnes/droits-des-femmes-2137/les-violations-des-droits-des-violence-conjugale-2148/article/nouvel-article-20087> (08/10/15).

<sup>42</sup> [http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/publications/breek\\_de\\_stilte\\_voor\\_je\\_zelf\\_gebroken\\_bent](http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/fr/publications/breek_de_stilte_voor_je_zelf_gebroken_bent) (30/10/15).

<sup>43</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/funding/daphne3/call\\_10137/og\\_call\\_2007\\_fr.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/funding/daphne3/call_10137/og_call_2007_fr.pdf) (22/10/15).

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.coface-eu.org/fr/Projets/Projet-Daphne/-print/> (22/10/15).

<sup>45</sup> COFACE. 2011. *Quand les violences domestiques s'invitent sur le lieu de travail ou dans le processus d'insertion professionnelle*. P. 9.

## Sponsorship and philanthropic involvement

In Belgium, there appear to be no philanthropic programmes concerning the fight against gender-based violence. There are no initiatives financed by companies on the prevention, protection, or reintegration of victims or perpetrators. The existing initiatives mainly emanate from non-profit associations, like CVFE or Garance, and are supported by local administrations. Nor are there any initiatives for the reintegration of violent husbands in Belgium. Battered women shelters were initiated by feminist groups and are supported by local administrations. Companies do not participate or intervene, because as showed by the FGTB study, in most people's minds, GBV remains a private issue<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



# **Opportunities, barriers and tools for companies to take action against gender-based violence**

Over the summer 2015, we conducted a qualitative field research project based on semi-structured interviews with a sample constituted of over 20 different stakeholders comprising enterprises, trade unions, international and local NGOs, researchers, public bodies and business networks. The following section reports the main findings of this research.

## **The impact of national legislation and prevention measures on company policies**

In Belgium, the criminal law in respect of the fight against gender-based violence does not directly address companies as this is incumbent upon the State. Consequently, companies tend to have a poor understanding of the issue and of the relevant legal provisions. However gender-based violence is, to some extent, also covered by the labour law. As required by the 2007 European framework agreement on harassment and violence at work<sup>47</sup>, Belgium has a law binding employers to take action against moral and sexual harassment occurring in the workplace. Hence the labour law covers violence and situations of harassment between workers, by a third party towards a worker, or the reverse.

Such a legislative framework has existed since the 1980s. In the 1990s, greater reflection on moral harassment led to a new law in 2002. This rapidly gave rise to a wave of complaints from suffering workers, which however did not fit within the framework of the law. A first assessment of this legislation in 2004 brought out the need to deal with problems of conflicts that were qualified as “relational suffering at work”, and in 2007 the concept of psychosocial burden was enlarged to embrace a wide range of issues (stress, harassment, violence, conflict, etc.).

Since 2014, after a second assessment in 2010, a new law further broadened the scope of situations by considering any suffering that might have been caused by the organization of work, the content of work, working conditions or interpersonal relations at the workplace. Even though this last legislation only refers to professional factors, it is understood that links often exist between work and the worker’s private life. As a matter of fact, four times a year, prevention counsellors and support persons from different companies are

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<sup>47</sup> COM/2007/0686 final.

brought together by the Federal Public Service (FPS) for Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue for exchanges about their experiences and practices. The close links between professional and private life have already been formalized when it comes to the prevention of alcohol abuse: a collective labour agreement as well as the law compels employers to carry out a risk analysis. Should a dysfunction occur because a worker who has been drinking is putting him/herself and/or his/her colleagues at risk, it is the duty of the employer to take action.

When it comes to victims or perpetrators of gender-based violence, the legislation does not yet make any provisions. The various laws on well-being at work and the prevention of psychosocial risks do not make any explicit reference regarding the prevention, the protection or the reintegration of victims of gender-based violence. However, they definitely allow employers who are willing to join the fight against violence to interpret the law in an extensive way and include measures within their prevention plan.

## **The role of companies in the fight against GBV**

The Istanbul Convention requires from the private sector an effort to combat violence against women<sup>48</sup>. However it is not yet obvious from the interviews that companies should take action. Thus the coming section will present the reasons to get involved and the barriers that explain why most of them have still not done anything regarding this major issue.

### ***Opportunities for engagement***

All the interviewees concurred with the idea that violence against women was a violation of human rights and women's dignity; thus it should be condemned under any circumstances. This attachment of companies to human rights and values such as respect is undeniably a first argument for companies to engage against GBV. Indeed, many interviewees explained how, within the framework of a widened **corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy**, the company could take action against GBV. Such actions are all the more attractive for companies that work with a mainly feminised workforce or whose clients are mainly women. They would promote a positive image of the firm as involved in the well-being of either its workers or its customers.

Also, depending on the area of activity of the company, it would be hugely in the interest of some enterprises to engage against gender-based violence. Indeed, as explained by a prevention counsellor, working with some sectors of the public (mainly in the services sector: health, care, beauty, consultancy...) puts interpersonal relations at the heart of the business. The well-being of staff

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<sup>48</sup> Council of Europe Convention of 2011, so called "Istanbul Convention", art. 17.

members is then a core resource to **ensure good relations** with the public / the client. This is all the more true when it comes to institutions that welcome potential victims of violence, such as hospitals or family planning centres. For the interviewee, it was very difficult to imagine that a worker who herself was a victim of violence would not counterbalance this somehow by trying to be of particular help to these persons. The interviewee also described how some of the female workers of her institution who were victims of domestic violence had a much lower tolerance threshold, and thus experienced some situations as extremely painful because they felt they were being attacked, even verbally sometimes, and adopted defence responses.

Beyond this philanthropic argument lie many more reasons related to the interests of the firm. As a matter of fact, the companies that were interviewed underlined the fact that women victims of violence could not be as **efficient** at work. To a lesser extent, some interviewees also pointed out the threat gender-based violence represented for team cohesion, the work atmosphere and the general well-being at work, both for the employee herself and for her direct environment (superiors, colleagues, clients, suppliers, etc.).

A last category of arguments depends on the long-term HR policy of the firm. Thus the manager of the prevention service we interviewed explained how taking action on private issues where the company is not obliged to intervene can create a strong **commitment to the company** because at a crucial moment, the company will have been able to give the right support.

### ***Barriers to engagement***

If none of the enterprises we met developed a sound policy to fight violence against women, it is because besides all these good reasons to get involved, many barriers remain. The main obstacle to their commitment is the lack of **awareness of the topic**, the concept in itself of gender-based violence and the figures linked to that issue. Most of the companies had never been sensitized nor questioned on what could be their role in this matter of public interest.

Very much linked to this lack of awareness is the feeling of incompetence most of the interviewees expressed. As they **never received any training**, even in the case of support persons or psychosocial counsellors, the interviewees underlined the need to be capable of reacting if cases arise. The only people who did not fear they would not know what to do were those who had been trained or who had had professional experience in the field before occupying their current post. This reaction reveals the taboo that is still attached to the issue, as much as people's fear to do something wrong since they do not understand the process of GBV.

When questioned about their absence of commitment, the enterprises either admitted they had never thought of setting up any activity and/or policy in the area, or hid behind arguments that vouch for the many difficulties companies

face with regard to this issue. First and foremost, enterprises highlighted how difficult it was for them to deal with a **private matter**. This position was also supported by several trade union representatives, who expressed concerns about the threat it could represent for employees if as victims of GBV, they were designated as vulnerable people.

In line with this difficulty to find the right way to take action, many interviewees expressed the fear that they may not to be heard and/or listened to by their management, which would make other strategic arbitrations and allocate human and financial resources to other policies. Most of them imagined that any response they would make to GBV would be **costly and time-consuming**, and what scared them even more was that committing to such a new policy may create a pull factor, especially in sectors where the workforce is much feminized.

Finally, an interviewee working in a company who had an extensive understanding of the legislation on psychosocial risks explained the difficulty in finding the right balance between helping people who had disclosed a serious private issue (GBV but also debt, alcoholism, etc.) and people with a similar issue but who had not (yet) expressed it. The interviewee explained the difficulty they had **not to discriminate** the one or the other by making a difference at work for a reason unrelated to work.

## **Detection of gender-based violence cases in companies**

All the companies interviewed had not formalized procedures to detect cases of gender-based violence, and thus not entered into a process of protection of the victim. Depending on the companies, some had never come across cases, while others explained they had already been approached after a victim, or a person from the company aware that someone else was a victim of GBV, had asked for a solution. Most of the time, only the support persons were aware of partner violence cases, or cases of violence from a son. Even though some interviewees admitted they might have women in their company who were victims of male violence, most of the time it was considered an isolated matter, which should be treated on a case-by-case basis.

One of the reasons for not detecting victims proactively is that interviewees **struggled to identify criteria symptomatic of GBV**. All the companies interviewed generally shared the view that someone who was in pain did send signals. Yet one interviewee explained how, during a coaching session for managers, the prevention counsellor – who also had a university degree in psychology – had identified a victim of GBV. Her attitudes and postures alerted the counsellor: the victim was actually reproducing as a manager the hold she was subjected to at home. The counsellor then went to the woman in question during the break to talk to her about her self-image. At the end of the coaching session, the participant came back to the counsellor of her own accord, to ask

for a face-to-face meeting. The counsellor explained that while there is no standard profile of a GBV victim, some symptoms can be quite telling. In this specific case, it was the low self-esteem of the victim that alerted the counsellor. More generally, when the quality of a person's work is decreasing and interpersonal relations with the line manager and the colleagues deteriorate, anyone can be "a good guard to identify the problem".

The psychological knowledge of the counsellor probably helped to identify this female manager as a victim. Indeed, most of the professionals supposed to be potential interlocutors of victims in the workplace (prevention counsellors, support persons, corporate doctors and psychologists, HR managers, well-being managers, etc.) **do not have background with regard to the issue of GBV**<sup>49</sup>. They have never been trained about the cycle of gender-based violence, on how to identify to victims, even less the perpetrators, etc.

As a well-being manager from another company explained, it was easier for a former alcoholic who is a support person in the company to identify workers with alcohol problems. Another interviewee explained how hard it was to find the time to review what was taught during the five-day initial training she had received when appointed as a support person. No follow-up training sessions are provided either, so there is no possibility to go deeper into some issues which could include violence against women. Since it is not possible to have a dedicated person trained to handle each issue that may arise, an interviewee suggested that a few symptoms should be listed to help identify potential victims of GBV, like they had received when they were trained to identify cases of burn out. In her view, many criteria used to identify burn out situations may be similar in case of GBV: absenteeism, the lack of efficiency, overwork, not taking holidays, spending too much time on a single file, being aggressive, not answering emails, etc.

Additionally, the **lack of widespread communication or a clear message** to the effect that gender-based violence situations occurring outside of the professional sphere can be addressed at work most likely prevents victims first, from identifying themselves as such, and second, from talking about it and looking for support in the workplace. This obstacle to talking about personal distress situations in the workplace does not only concern the GBV issue. However, we can assume that the obstacle is all the greater when it comes to gender issues, since women are the first victims of job insecurity and public austerity measures<sup>50</sup>. They may therefore be more reluctant to talk about personal issues that adversely affect their efficiency at work, out of fear of losing their job and becoming subjected to additional economic violence should they become financially dependent on their partner.

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.amnesty.be/doc/agir-2099/nos-campagnes/droits-des-femmes-2137/les-violations-des-droits-des/violence-conjugale-2148/article/nouvel-article-20087> (08/10/15).

<sup>50</sup> EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY. 2012. *The price of austerity. The impact on women's right and gender equality in Europe*: <http://www.womenlobby.org/spip.php?article4257&lang=en> (22/10/15).

## Concrete actions to support female employees

Several kind of response can be brought to the issue of gender-based violence. The following section presents the concrete actions taken by Belgian enterprises in three areas: the prevention of GBV, the protection of their female staff who were victims of GBV and their reintegration.

### **Prevention**

Most of the companies interviewed did not put in place any initiatives regarding the prevention of gender-based violence. A very small number of companies (mainly public ones) organized **information sessions** within the institution on the sensitization to moral and sexual harassment at work and psychosocial risks. On this occasion, trainers did take the opportunity to raise awareness of other types of domination and/or violence processes. A similar answer was given by an NGO dedicated to the fight against gender-based violence. The NGO in question was asked several times to organize one-shot training or information sessions on the cycle of violence. The trainer always took advantage of these occasions to sensitize the audience and the company to the wider issue of violence against women, including outside of the workplace.

In terms of awareness-raising campaigns, a few companies also participate from time to time in the **white ribbon campaign**. Almost systematically, companies took part in this campaign after having been invited to do so by an NGO. They were mostly big firms being targeted by international NGOs: thus, Amnesty International - Belgium, after having carried out a wide campaign on partner violence in 2009<sup>51</sup>, approached several Belgian companies and in partnership with the HR and/or the well-being departments, organised a day of sensitization within the enterprise: leaflets and flyers were distributed and posters were hung on the company premises. The NGO also came for a day to engage in discussions with the staff and give them further information. Similarly, a non-profit association in Wallonia managed to engage several enterprises in a common campaign against violence: each organization (sports clubs, companies, public institutions) was invited to take a picture of a team with a poster stating "We are opposed to violence against women. Are you?"<sup>52</sup>. They printed out the posters and made them available to all for free.

### **Protection**

When asked about the concrete actions they implemented to support GBV victims, company answers usually mentioned three steps, corresponding to the informal path they follow when they face a case of GBV among their staff. It

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<sup>51</sup> AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL – BELGIQUE. 2009. *À l'aide ! Un guide pratique pour sortir de la violence conjugale*: <http://www.amnestyinternational.be/doc/agir-2099/nos-campagnes/violences-contre-les-femmes-649/article/a-l-aide-un-guide-pratique-pour> (22/10/15).

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.maisonplurielle.be/outils-pedagogiques/> (22/10/15).

first consists in **listening** to the victim who discloses her situation to a staff member of the firm. The company then usually offers first **internal support** by either putting the victim in touch with a prevention counsellor or a corporate psychologist (if any) in order to give her initial psychological support. In the third step, companies tend to **externalize** the protection of the victim by asking associations dedicated to the topic of violence against women to look after the victim and ensure appropriate follow-up.

Depending on the companies and their internal resources, the different steps take more or less time. In companies where the prevention service is well established and where there is a sound relationship of trust with staff, the company may give considerable support in the first instance, which may sometimes even include temporary professional arrangements that will give the victim time to tackle her personal situation. These arrangements could be flexible working hours, or mediation with the management should the victim not have met her professional objectives. This mediation is usually carried out by the prevention service, which ensures tolerance on the part of management as well as the professional recovery of the victim.

In smaller companies with no internal prevention service, or in companies where prevention plans have not been thoroughly implemented (which is the case of many of them), the victim will be more rapidly redirected to an association dedicated to the support of victims. This redirection, however, is a step as important as internal support, since victims often cannot go freely to assistance organizations outside of their working hours. It is therefore essential to possess a detailed and up-to-date directory allowing company staff to redirect the victims to an organization which is close to the workplace and able to welcome the victim during working hours.

The main limit of such externalized solutions is the absence of a formalized reaction system that could embed protection actions into a wider gender equality or well-being policy. The follow-up of the situation was never mentioned in interviews, suggesting that it was non-existent. Consequently, it is not very surprising to hear that very few cases of GBV were disclosed in the companies.

As a matter of fact, the aforementioned measures were never identified as potential supportive solutions for perpetrators or victims of GBV. The promotional leaflet and communication tools of the Employee Assistance Programme are, to this extent, quite telling, as none of them mention the issue of gender-based violence as a potential issue to be addressed. The communication around these solutions is all the more difficult in that the message is usually disseminated by HR services, attached to the company's management. The trust inspired by these potential solutions is then undermined for as long as the staff member is not guaranteed that the confidentiality of her/his situation will be guaranteed.

## ***Reintegration***

Nevertheless, companies give very poor consideration to the reintegration of GBV victims. Only a few enterprises, mainly public ones, are starting to develop cross-cutting reintegration policies after long-term absences. One of the interviewees mentioned that such a policy was to be integrated into their next strategic prevention plan. In 2016, the organization will start implementing a procedure aimed at preparing the person her/himself, the manager and the team for the return to work. The policy does not provide for explicitly long-term absences due to GBV.

## **Stakeholders involved in the fight against GBV and relevant supporting actors**

Tackling violence against women is obviously not the number-one priority of companies. However many existing stakeholders are in a position to support women victims or men perpetrators of GBV. If companies can play a role in the fight against GBV, they can lean on a wide range of external stakeholders who are already active in the field.

### ***Internally***

In the company, no specific stakeholders are involved in the prevention of GBV, the protection and/or the reintegration of victims. **Labour unions**, of course, play an important role in the promotion of gender equality in companies. In 2004, the three biggest Belgian labour unions (FGTB, CGSLB and CSC) signed a "gender mainstreaming charter". In this document, they committed themselves to instituting gender mainstreaming policies in their organizations. As workers' advocates, they also widely participate in the implementation of the Belgian legislation regarding well-being, the prevention of psychosocial risk, occupational health and safety and so on. However, they also remain very careful when it comes to the protection of workers' private lives and tend to be rather timorous when asked about the possibility of companies engaging against GBV.

Besides the labour unions, many actors can be identified as relevant stakeholders to intervene in cases of GBV. These have been instituted thanks to various Belgian social laws. In the 1980 and 1990s, after the law forbidding sexual harassment at work was passed, **prevention counsellors**<sup>53</sup> were appointed to give advice on all matters referring to the well-being of workers and to support the victims of psychosocial issues, sexual and moral harassment. The prevention counsellors belong to an internal service of prevention and protection of work.

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<sup>53</sup> [http://www.emploi.belgique.be/detailA\\_Z.aspx?id=934](http://www.emploi.belgique.be/detailA_Z.aspx?id=934) (22/10/15).



They are accompanied in this duty by **support persons**<sup>54</sup> who were introduced in companies to enable any staff member to talk about situations of harassment to other staff members who belong neither to HR services nor management. Both the prevention counsellors and the support persons are bound to privacy. If the company employs fewer than 50 people, it does not have to appoint internal prevention counsellors but must call on an external prevention service<sup>55</sup>.

Some companies have hired a **corporate psychologist** dedicated to private issues as aforementioned. It is quite rare though, as many organizations tend to believe that many stakeholders, including corporate doctors, are already available to support staff members in these issues. However, it should be noted that all these existing stakeholders are almost never chosen on a basis of their psychological knowledge, even less because of a specialization in GBV, and that this knowledge is barely developed on the occasion of training.

To a lesser extent, **HR and well-being services, diversity managers** as well as **team leaders** can identify GBV victims and participate in their protection. However, given their role in the assessment and the promotion process of employees, their role is mainly focused on global prevention activities dealing with the well-being of staff and the management of diversity through gender equality policies. As they report to management though, they present a higher risk of (positive or negative) discrimination towards the victim if confidentiality is not guaranteed.

## **Externally**

Further to external prevention services for small businesses, external players are mainly supporting authorities. The most institutional one is without doubt the Institute for Equality between Men and Women. In addition to the wide range of studies it makes available for free and its campaigns to raise awareness of GBV, it manages a database<sup>56</sup> of best practices established by companies to support gender equality inside and outside the workplace. Launched in 2006 and updated in 2014, this database unfortunately does not yet contain practices regarding companies involved in the fight against GBV.

Various non-profit associations and NGOs are relevant supporting authorities. Some of them are regularly in contact with companies that require training courses on sexual and moral harassment or violence<sup>57</sup>. These NGOs are the first external contact point companies get in touch with when they need to refer a victim to specialized organizations.

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<sup>54</sup> [http://www.emploi.belgique.be/detailA\\_Z.aspx?id=1366](http://www.emploi.belgique.be/detailA_Z.aspx?id=1366) (22/10/15).

<sup>55</sup> FEDERAL PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYMENT. November 2008. *Le bien être des travailleurs lors de l'exécution de leur travail*. P. 19 : <http://www.emploi.belgique.be/publicationDefault.aspx?id=4292> (22/10/15).

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.iefh-action.be/> (22/15/15).

<sup>57</sup> For instance: <http://www.garance.be/cms/?-Clients-> (22/10/15).

# Best practices examples

No real, specific programmes seem to have been implemented within Belgian companies to prevent gender-based violence. Nevertheless, some actions taken in the field should be mentioned as best practices able to inspire other stakeholders willing to take action.

## Initiatives from companies

### *Prevention*

At the initiative of Amnesty International – Belgium (AIB), in November 2012 a mass-distribution company hosted a training session to raise the awareness of its staff (especially those from the HR department) about partner violence. The session covered topics such as the consequences of partner violence. On the occasion of this training session, AIB published an article in the corporate newspaper, displayed a poster in resting areas and distributed leaflets with contact numbers for associations and women’s shelters. On 25 November, the NGO also distributed white ribbons and information flyers. The main challenge for AIB was to convince companies there would be a positive impact for them if they took action<sup>58</sup>.

A similar campaign was organized in a big consultants company. Once a year, AIB organises a campaign day on the premises of this company. In 2012, AIB was carrying out a campaign on partner violence. In this framework, the NGO distributed folders and displayed posters on the corporate premises. On this particular year, it also invited the employees to take part in a marathon of sensitization against domestic violence. The participants were to distribute free practical guides designed for victims or potential victims of partner violence. In return, the company donated 1 Euro per guide distributed to finance the AIB « Stop Domestic Violence » campaign. In the end, 13 employees took part in this sensitization activity in the framework of what the company called a societal team-building activity.

### *Protection*

Since the new law of 28 February 2014 dealing with psychosocial risks at work, enterprises must have a global prevention plan for risks that arise from working conditions, the content of the work duties, and the organization of work or interpersonal relations at work. Being convinced of the impact personal issues can have on staff’s work, an organization decided, together with other partner

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.garance.be/cms/?Les-violences-conjugales#nh1> (22/10/15).

institutions, to set up a common service based on extensive prevention plans in order to help workers to identify solutions to these personal issues.

As mentioned earlier, the second stage of support companies can offer internally consists in putting the victim in touch with a prevention counsellor or a corporate psychologist (if any), in order to give the victim first psychological support. In this organization, support for the workers is divided between two kinds of stakeholders. Some (a corporate psychologist) take care of private matters and redirect other matters to outside specialized organizations (the prevention counsellors), who, in a neutral way, seek professional solutions for the management, which does not need to know about the private issue the worker is facing but needs to be sensitized to the fact that the woman in question is going through a difficult period that will require toleration.

The practice of having an internal corporate psychologist and a mutualised prevention service was initiated by the senior executives of the different institutions. It was a response to the needs identified by the organizations' social services, psychosocial counsellors and occupational doctors. Indeed, the latter had been facing cases of workers who had to deal with private issues that were impacting their professional duties. Before the common prevention plan was developed, the psychosocial counsellors would seek the social service's support for patients; as demand grew, the social service developed a parallel service for the workers, giving them information in case of financial difficulties, alcoholism, divorce, domestic violence, etc. It engaged a reflexion on the need for workers to get support at work for private issues. The mutualisation of the prevention and protection services now allows the consortium partners to share best practices on issues they may have faced with regard to the well-being of their workers. It helps to open up the perspectives of each organization in its reflexion on "how far to go?" in its prevention to ensure well-being at work.

In most of the companies encountered, however, the procedure is rather to externalize private matters thanks to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). Available in several companies we interviewed, the EAP is a service offered to companies' staff, who can ring a general number 24/7, where the caller will be offered an appointment with a psychologist specialized in his/her issue (alcohol, drugs, sexual harassment, domestic violence, lack of confidence, etc.). Depending on the company's contract with the EAP-provider, the staff member asking for help can have several appointments with a psychologist which will be paid by the company. The company will receive an anonymized annual report with a very general assessment covering the number of calls received by the programme and the ratio of professional and private issues.

## **Initiatives from trade unions**

Since the late 2000s, trade unions have made some attempts to integrate the fight against GBV into their prerogatives. In preparation of the 2008 social

elections, the liberal trade union (CGSLB) in Wallonia organised a week of training for all female and male candidates. Françoise Goffinet, sociologist at the IEWM, was invited as a trainer for a day dedicated to gender issues. Half of this one-day training was dedicated to partner violence. As underlined by Françoise Goffinet herself<sup>59</sup>, it is still very complicated to include the fight against GBV in the training courses given by trade union organizations, be they public or private. The preparation of the social elections happened to be a good opportunity to integrate the topic into the training received by future delegates.

In 2009, the socialist labour union (FGBT) also tried to strengthen awareness of domestic violence. It organized a workshop in Liège, Wallonia for trade union delegates on the prevention of gender-based violence<sup>60</sup>. In 2011, further to this workshop, the FGTB also carried out a study on gender-based issues among trade union delegates. The results showed that 89% of delegates interviewed considered GBV as a vast social issue which should be the object of a public debate. However, only 5.75% of them considered that their labour union should be directly involved by providing resources to support GBV victims<sup>61</sup>.

## Initiatives from associations

Associations are mainly active with regard to the protection of GBV victims. Yet one of them is getting involved into reintegration activities. As a matter of fact, La Maison Plurielle<sup>62</sup> based in Charleroi, Wallonia will offer from the end of 2015 on series of workshops dedicated to the socio-professional insertion of GBV victims. Three types of collective workshops will focus respectively on gender-stereotypes, self-esteem and the tools to get back to work. Groups of 15 trainees will be given both theoretical and practical instructions. If companies are not yet involved in this initiative from La Maison Plurielle, the association does not exclude to build partnerships with enterprises or to progressively invite professionals to intervene on the occasion of some workshops.

## Initiatives from public bodies

Many public bodies are also major employers. For the last couple of years, the Walloon public service for employment and training (FOREM) has carried out a wide sensitization campaign with the support of the IEWM. The FOREM disseminated the IEWM leaflet, "Violence, how to get away from it?" ("*Violence, comment s'en sortir?*"), both physically and on the intranet. The leaflet comprised all the relevant stakeholders according to the language spoken.

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<sup>59</sup> Extract from the speech given by Françoise Goffinet to close the 27 October 2015 workshop held in Brussels.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.fgtb-liege.be/admin/uploads/agenda/affiche.pdf> (22/10/15).

<sup>61</sup> COFACE. 2011. *Op. cit.* P. 7.

<sup>62</sup> <http://maisonplurielle.be/> (17/11/15).

# Conclusions and recommendations

While several companies are already taking action in Belgium as well as in neighbouring countries, gender-based violence committed outside the workplace is still not considered as a serious issue companies should tackle. In order to take a step further in the involvement of companies, this section gathers recommendations made by various corporate players, civil society organizations and public body representatives. The following recommendations are classified according to the stakeholders for whom they are intended.

## Companies

Even though we are urging companies to take action, they are not expected to solve the problem of GBV on their own. Both the field research and the participative workshop we organized revealed that companies had the potential to be a relevant partner of specialized associations and public bodies in the fight against gender-based violence. Most of the following recommendations are easy-to-implement and financially realistic tips, in line with the idea of building partnerships with civil society organizations and public administrations.

### ***1. Giving a clear message against GBV***

If the topic of GBV is so hard to apprehend in companies, it is mainly because it is not given any visibility within the workplace. For the victims of violence as well as for potential helpers, companies are not identified as spaces where support can be found. On the contrary, the risk of losing one's job or of being side-lined at work should the situation be disclosed rather invites the victims to keep quiet. Yet if the enterprise had a clear message, expressing a consistent position against all kinds of male violence towards women, it would be a first step to raise awareness among staff members, offer opportunities to talk about the issue and reassure employees willing to talk that the company will not make them bear the burden of having disclosed their situation. Practically, companies dispose of several tools. It can be as simple as wearing a "white-ribbon" (a sort of lapel pin) on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The information could also be circulated through the following channels: leaving leaflets and posters containing emergency and shelter numbers in the corporate restaurant, near the coffee machines, in the women's toilets, posting them on the intranet, etc.

### ***2. Organizing spaces at work to disclose GBV situations***

Besides clear communication against GBV, and since one of the core issues of GBV is the isolation of victims, spaces should be provided at work where good

relationships can be forged within work teams and personal issues can be discussed informally. This is all the more necessary for people who tend to work individually. Again, this can be easily implemented by organizing quiet coffee spaces or rest rooms, initiating staff meetings among small working teams where they do not exist, organizing team-building activities. Along with these spaces that will invite the disclosure of a situation to a colleague, it is also important to organize work (the premises, but also the working hours, for instance) in such a way that it is possible for a victim to discreetly disclose her situation, either to a trustworthy colleague or to a support person among the staff who has been identified as a relevant stakeholder in the firm. In this regard, an association dedicated to the prevention of GBV explained how important it is in companies where someone has been trained or is used to working on the issue for them to be able to pass on their knowledge regarding GBV.

### ***3. Formalizing a procedure with identified support actors***

Both the victim and the support actors are often totally lost when it comes to finding professionals able to support the victim. Therefore, properly identifying the corporate stakeholders that will be able to provide operational support to the victim, to help her to better reconcile her professional duties with her prevailing personal issue, is also a core stake of the detection and protection of GBV victims in the workplace. These persons, such as the prevention counsellors, the corporate psychologist, and the support person should be known by all staff members likely to come into contact with a victim of GBV. This identification process is particularly crucial in small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) where no dedicated services are provided. This identification process should also be conducted for external stakeholders (associations, public bodies, psychologists and so on). Identifying such persons will enable the company to define how far it will go to support the victim with regard to her personal issue and what should be left to external stakeholders. Setting up a procedure with identified support actors will also help the enterprise to pinpoint who is able to deal with such matters and who should receive training on the issue.

### ***4. Offering training to relevant stakeholders***

Even though many resources are already available (especially within the framework of the 2014 legislation on the prevention of psychosocial risks), it is necessary to equip all staff members with at least a few necessary tips in case a situation of GBV should arise. When it comes to colleagues, trade union delegates and administrative services, a basic awareness-raising seminar should aim at lifting the taboos surrounding the issue and at offering an opportunity to debate it. To avoid overloading scheduled training sessions and sensitization-days, which can already be rather numerous, the topic of GBV could be included in general training sessions on moral and sexual harassment at work, gender

equality policies or work-family reconciliation. When it comes to workers dedicated to the support of victims, though, further training should be considered to approach such questions as, what is the cycle of violence, what are the main risks, how to escape, where to get help outside the workplace, what to do once the victim escapes... Along with a better understanding of the issue, such training sessions should provide the dedicated workers with answers, to enable them to help the victim in finding solutions both outside the workplace (accommodation, psychological support, etc.) and within the company (for her to keep her position).

## ***5. Preparing the reintegration of former victims***

Some companies are currently designing policies to support a return to work after long-term absences. Those cross-cutting policies often consider the reintegration of workers after maternity leave, burn outs or long-term convalescence. When a GBV victim is forced to abandon her position for a while (because she had to flee from home or to recover from injuries, for instance), it is essential that measures be put in place to support her return to work and prevent her from losing her job and becoming financially dependent on a former perpetrator. Preparing the return of former victims does not mean that one should wait for a formalized policy though, nor that there should be communication as to the reason of the worker's absence. As for cases of burn out, it is important that the team manager, the team itself and the HR department (if any) cooperate when the workload has to be reorganized during the worker's absence and progressively reorganized when she comes back, so as not to create tension among the team workers. It is also very important to keep in contact with the worker, so that she knows she is still considered as a staff member.

## **Public bodies and decision-makers**

While public policies in Belgium dedicated to the fight against GBV have received positive assessments, none include companies in this fight. Therefore, since public bodies are in charge of coordinating the actions taken, it should be up to them to organize the participation of companies by speaking to them and offering them support.

### ***1. Availability of reliable data on the costs of GBV***

One of the main obstacles to getting enterprises involved is the lack of data on the economic cost of gender-based violence for enterprises. Even though companies willingly admit GBV may have an impact on the victims' efficiency at work, they do not feel concerned as long as it cannot be proven that there may also be victims working in their own firm. The stereotypes regarding the profile

of the victims (often pictured, incorrectly, as underprivileged women) prevent employers from seeing the impact on their own business. Therefore, the availability of reliable data regarding the number of victims and perpetrators of GBV working in Belgian companies, the number of victims having lost/left their job because of GBV and the financial losses due to GBV would be a first and sound signal sent to companies.

## ***2. Aiming campaigns at companies***

With data on the costs of GBV, campaigns aimed at companies could be carried out. Such campaigns could easily highlight that tackling such issues is in the companies' interest, both in terms of image and of finance. While taboos prevent victims or perpetrators from talking about such issues, the embarrassment can also be felt on the part of companies' representatives and trade unions delegates, who do not consider they have a role when it comes to private issues. Campaigns directed at companies could aim to make clear where the role of the company lies and how it can take action without intervening in a paternalistic or intrusive way. The first companies to take action often did so after having been approached by a civil society organization working on the topic.

## ***3. Including enterprises in the next NAPs***

Most of the companies interviewed felt disconcerted when questioned about GBV. Therefore, to secure the participation of companies and ensure that their ability to act as intermediaries does not remain untapped, it would be important to include enterprises in the next National Action Plan that is under preparation. Integrating companies within a wider national policy would allow support to be given to companies that take action, and enable the development of networks of companies involved in the fight against GBV to exchange best practices. In a second phase, with the actions of companies enshrined in a NAP, their needs in terms of training or information, for instance, could be determined and the procedures for enterprises yet to engage against GBV would be facilitated.

## ***4. Building partnerships with NGOs and public bodies***

While companies can be precious intermediaries to help victims escape from violence, they will not be the ones taking care of the psychological support of the victim or her accommodation. Many civil society organizations, with the support of public bodies, employ professionals dedicated to victim and offender support. The role of public institutions will therefore be to put enterprises which identify situations of GBV in contact with victim support workers. Building such bridges will be all the more important since it will reassure enterprises that they can refer to professionals situations that they would not be able to handle internally.



## **5. Promoting companies that take action**

In order to stimulate the participation of enterprises in the fight against GBV, organizing promotion spaces for companies that take action would be welcome. It could take the form of a best practices platform as already exists for equal opportunity measures<sup>63</sup>. This platform, managed by the IEWM, aims at promoting the most diverse possible range of initiatives, solutions and programmes relating to equal opportunity policies, thereby constituting a source of inspiration for other organisations. Similarly, diversity labels already exist in Belgium; they do not include the issue of violence against women though. Setting up promotional tools for companies would be a great incentive as well as a precious pool of policies for enterprises looking for concrete responses.

## **6. Taking into account all kind of enterprises**

Much diversity is covered by the term of "enterprise". The size and the economic model obviously impact the means the enterprise has at its disposal to implement new policies. When developing public policies such as NAP, campaigns or tools to fight GBV, public bodies will have to ensure these measures can be implemented in all kinds of enterprises. While sensitization tools (posters, flyers, phone books...) can easily be displayed in all companies, it can become more complicated when it comes to having trained and identified workers able to support the victim internally and redirect her towards the right organization.

While small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) constitute the vast majority of employers in Belgium<sup>64</sup>, it is important to consider the fact that they are not composed of the same services and professionals. As was done by AGEFOS PME in France for professional equality between women and men<sup>65</sup>, some measures could be pooled among enterprises in a common area that are interested, for instance, in organizing an awareness-raising seminar for their employees, or in sharing the cost of hiring an inter-enterprises delegate dedicated to the reconciliation of work and family life.

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.iefh-action.be/> (02/11/15).

<sup>64</sup> SPF ECONOMIE. 2013. Panorama de l'Économie belge en 2012. P. 199: [http://economie.fgov.be/fr/binaries/Panorama\\_2012\\_FR\\_TOT\\_tcm326-228508.pdf](http://economie.fgov.be/fr/binaries/Panorama_2012_FR_TOT_tcm326-228508.pdf) (02/11/15).

<sup>65</sup> Accord-cadre régional pour le développement de l'égalité professionnelle entre les femmes et les hommes dans les TPE et les PME par la formation tout au long de la vie. 18 May 2015. Caen: [http://www.basse-normandie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Accord\\_cadre\\_regional\\_Etat\\_CRBN\\_AGEFOS\\_PME\\_CGPME\\_2015-2020.pdf](http://www.basse-normandie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Accord_cadre_regional_Etat_CRBN_AGEFOS_PME_CGPME_2015-2020.pdf) (02/11/15).

# Abbreviations

COCOF – French community commission

COCOM – Common community commission

COCON / VGC – Flemish community commission

CSR – Corporate social responsibility

EIGE – European Institute for Gender Equality

GBV – Gender-based violence

IEWM – Institute for Equality between Women and Men

LGBT – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

NAP – Nation Action Plan

VAW – Violence against women

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