



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Awareness raising activities to fight violence against women and girls

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Comments paper – Belgium

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Awareness raising campaigns on family-related violence

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1. Introduction

National action plans

Since 2001, Belgium has had a tradition of adopting action plans to fight violence against women and men. These plans were first adopted at federal level but since 2006 have been endorsed at all levels (federal, regional and community).¹ They are key tools in raising awareness on the issue of family-related violence and combating it in all of its forms. While the first plan was broad in its scope, in 2004, for the sake of efficiency, it was limited to violence between partners, and it now focuses on all forms of family-related violence.

The current plan for 2010-2014 is structured as follows:

- First strand: violence between partners (and ex-partners)
 - Develop knowledge and improve understanding of the issue (data, studies);
 - Inform and heighten public awareness of the issue of violence between partners;
 - Prevent and detect such violence;
 - Assist victims and give an adequate support to perpetrators through, for example, therapy;
 - Ensure an appropriate response from the police and the judiciary.
- Second strand: other forms of family-related violence
 - Forced marriages;
 - Honour killings;
 - Female genital mutilation.

Legislation and actions

In Belgium, actions regarding violence first focused on specialised support for women victims and legal reforms to offer them better protection. Following the adoption of guidelines for the police and the judiciary on actions to take in case of forms of violence between partners, campaigns and specialised training (i.e. for police and judiciary) have been organised. Legislation regarding forced marriage, honour killing², female genital mutilation and stalking have been adopted in Belgium and some specific support services are available for women victims. However, specific services in these domains are mainly provided by NGOs and either not operating in the whole country or not available on a 24 hours base. The Flemish government intend to open this year a

¹ This is particularly important in Belgium where different levels of power are competent. For example, policies relating to police work and follow-up of judiciary measures towards perpetrators of violence are the competence of the federal level, while assistance to victims and support on a voluntary basis of violent persons are managed by federated entities. The coming institutional reform will have an impact on the issue, hopefully by creating more coherence.

² A court ruling has recently sentenced members of a family for an honour crime towards their daughter/sister Sadia.

new crisis hotline for all victims of violence (including forced marriage, honour killing etc.).

More recently, attention is also dedicated to the situation of children as witnesses of violence and indirect victims of violence between partners.

While the situation is far from perfect, and in part due to the active watchdog role of associations, regular attention is paid to improving the services and protection of victims of family-related violence.

One important step in fighting violence against women was the adoption in 2006 of guidelines for public prosecutors.³ These guidelines had a major effect in terms of:

- awareness raising of professionals (police and justice staff in particular);
- improved understanding of ways in which different actors operate and the constraints on them;
- collaboration between actors, for example between organisations running shelters for women and giving support to perpetrators;
- institutional set-up: nomination of a reference person for violence against women in the police and in the public prosecution services at the local level (arrondissement);
- exchange of information: working group on intra-familial violence composed of representatives from the different federal ministries led by a high representative of the public prosecution service. This group meets regularly at the initiative of the Public Prosecutor's representative.

The guidelines also define “violence between partners”, i.e. that within an intimate relationship. It is “to be understood as any behaviour, act, attitudes from one partner or former partner that aims to control and dominate the other. It comprises attacks, threats, physical, verbal, sexual, moral or economic constraints that are repeated or tend to be repeated, are detrimental to the integrity of the other and even to her/his socio-professional integration”.

Awareness raising and prevention campaigns

In Belgium, awareness raising campaigns are understood as being part of primary and secondary prevention. Prevention is about preventing acts of violence and promoting more equalitarian lifestyles but also giving the tools to professionals to identify violence and provide adequate support to victims.⁴

From Belgium's experience, there is a close link between public awareness and attitudes to reporting violence. For example, the recent campaign in Wallonia on psychological violence (Fred and Marie) led to a large increase in calls to the hot line for violence between partners. Figures relating to reporting violence to the police are also consistently rising in Belgium, showing that victims do file claims and that public authorities do register the incidents. There has been an increase of 12% over 4 years

³ Collège des Procureurs Généraux, Circular no. 3/2006, 1 March 2006. Highest level in the hierarchy of the public prosecution service – Judiciary system.

⁴ See the classification of prevention from Godenzi in Wave report *Prevention of domestic violence against women*, 2000, page 5.

in cases reported. While police figures relating to violence have limited relevance in terms of the incidence of the phenomenon, they offer some clues as to the level of awareness of the problem among the population and the reporting attitude in the country.⁵

Awareness raising programmes have targeted the population at large, men, professionals (police, judiciary, health, education), specific risk groups and young people. In view of practices in the UK and Greece, some examples are presented below as illustrations.

General campaigns: they signal that there is no room for violence in our society so victims will be supported and offenders prosecuted.

White Ribbon campaigns are organised every year around the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November). The campaign is organised locally in a number of towns in Belgium. Promoters vary in different towns and regions i.e. women's NGOs, local authorities and administrations, and provincial services are frequently involved. The goal is to mobilise and educate men for the purpose of adopting concrete measures to eliminate violence against women. The campaign is attracting increasing media attention owing to the mobilisation of well-known male figures such as members of sport teams, journalists, etc.

Targeted campaigns: Interesting preventive practices such as awareness raising campaigns targeting young people (i.e. in schools), specific groups at risk (i.e. girls at risk of genital mutilation or of forced marriage) exist in Belgium. Professional training is regularly organised for the police, social workers, family practitioners and judges on signs of violence and the cycle of violence between partners.

Professionals

Training hospital doctors to recognise the symptoms of violence and find an appropriate response. Different actors have been involved in pilot projects aiming to raise awareness among doctors/gynaecologists around their role in detecting violence and supporting victims.

An action research project was conducted by the Flemish organisation Domus Medica,⁶ an association supporting general practitioners. They published recommendations and set up an interactive website that supports general practitioners in dealing with violence among their patients, for example providing a protocol for general practitioners, country guidelines, reviews on training strategies, a platform for recording and quality assurance, etc. A general awareness raising campaigns targeting general practitioners is planned.

Young people

Campaigns in schools target young teenagers – boys and girls – to raise awareness about violent and abusive behaviour and the inappropriateness of violence between partners.⁷ The 2008 campaign *Aimer sans violence* ('Love without violence') involved a wide range of stakeholders; it followed the 2004 campaign *La violence nuit gravement*

⁵ Crepaldi, Samek and Corsi, *Violence against women and the role of gender equality, social inclusion and health strategies*, EGGSI network, European Commission, 2010, page 11.

⁶ <http://www.domusmedica.be/onderzoek/intrafamiliaal-geweld/international-exchange-project-on-family-violence.html>

⁷ <http://www.airesansviolence.be>

à l'amour ('Violence severely endangers love') and aimed to help teenagers to identify signs of abuse in their relationships, to deconstruct the myths associated with them, to collect the various manifestations of violence between partners, and to help them to understand its scope and its effects. The campaign was supported by a brochure and poster, a dedicated web site, a song created by a rap singer and a call for projects that co-financed 10 projects in the French-speaking community (i.e. Brussels and Wallonia). Art drama was also used as a way to make teenagers aware of inappropriate violent behaviours.

Specific risk groups

The federal Gender Institute has elaborated a leaflet "Break the silence" in 17 languages (French, Dutch, German, English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, Swahili, Lingala and Serbo-Croatian). Through this brochure, the Institute has launched an awareness campaign for victims of violence between partners from different ethnic and migrants groups in Belgium. These leaflets provide victims with information on what constitute partner violence and encourage them to discuss their situation with a third party. The leaflets have been translated⁸ in collaboration with volunteers / NGOs from different population groups and give each group help in their mother tongue.

GAMS⁹ produced a brochure on genital mutilation and a strip cartoon targeting young girls at risk living in Belgium. Since 2008, GAMS has carried out actions in order to prevent FGM of girls and women at risk living in Belgium. It takes care of girls and women suffering from FGM in a comprehensive way and coordinates the actions of various stakeholders in Belgium and at international level, as well as supporting programmes in Africa aiming at renouncing FGM.

2. Issues for debate

How to address men?

In Belgium, men are addressed positively by awareness raising campaigns. They are put in the forefront as actors for change. Campaigns such as white ribbons, or the recent bilingual song "Coup bas prends ça / Oost, west, thuis best" initiated by the Gender Institute are clear commitments by men to refuse violence against women and to be actors in ending it.

Studies and projects on masculinity and violence are not really on the agenda in Belgium. Some have been done but there is some resistance. First, because talking about violence within the family from the perspective of men is quickly seen as downgrading violence against women. Being able to discuss gender relations with men is however crucial to raising awareness of the phenomenon. Secondly, given that social initiatives receive limited resources, projects looking at violence from the point of view of men are seen as taking useful resources from women's organisations already working without adequate and structural funding.

⁸ This is important to ensure appropriateness of words used.

⁹ <http://campagne-excision.gams.be/en/index.htm>

Is a general awareness raising campaign (ARC) a tool for changing attitudes of potential offenders?

Which is better, a general or a targeted awareness raising campaign, and what for? Considering the structural low financing of actions in this field, the question of targets is worth mentioning. The UK and Greek experiences both to target changing the attitudes of men and young boys as potential offenders.

In Belgium, an indication of the results of general campaigns is the rising number of complaints and requests of support. The change in attitude is more on the side of victims and support structures than on that of potential offenders. What is the most useful type of campaign to reach that group? What are the key elements? In that respect, the question of the repetition of actions would also be interesting to discuss. What frequency of ARC?

Evaluation of awareness raising campaigns

As previously mentioned, there is no systematic evaluation of awareness raising actions in Belgium. Information on deliverables: number of leaflets distributed, number and place of broadcast of songs or films, number of pupils or schools participating in a project etc. are gathered but not their result or impact. We deduce from the constant increase in reported cases of violence that awareness and intolerance of violence against women is increasing. However, changes in behaviour, in particular for the youngest age groups, are unknown.

Questions to look at:

- Who was the target group addressed by the campaign?
- How do they react to the campaign (positive regarding the message delivered)?
- Is their understanding of the issue (violence against women and girls) deeper?
- Is the information provided able to change the vision of target groups on the subject of the campaign?
- Is the campaign having an effect on changing the behaviour of people targeted?

3. Transferability

The examples from the United Kingdom and Greece are interesting and raise questions for transferability to Belgium.

First, looking at the UK experience, exchanges on concrete methods and tools used in the campaigns may be interesting as there are similarities in the groups targeted and the medium. Innovative elements in comparison with Belgium are the involvement of employers, community groups, the close link between different forms of violence and the focus on forms of masculinity among young men.

As in the UK, the difficulty in Belgium is to ensure coherence between the different actions of the NAP and to conceive them as a long-term project supported by a consistent framework rather than a series of isolated short-term initiatives.¹⁰ This is reinforced by the federal structure of the country.

In Belgium the main actors involved in policies relating to violence to women are the relevant ministries at federal and regional levels (on federal level: public health, judiciary, police, immigration and gender equality; on regional level: social affairs, education, social housing...) as well as local service providers.

However, it is women's shelters, resource centres and feminist organisations which are playing the major role in implementing the policies: contributing to specific studies on the issue, raising awareness of different groups and providing support to victims.

Another issue that could be of value for Belgium regards the funding of actions. While the Belgian action plans represent important political commitments towards fighting violence against women, there are no formal indications of public funding allocations for the intended actions. The plan is still more a list of activities from the different entities than a real strategic document with clear objectives, results, activities and resources. A number of not-for-profit organisations offering support to women victims of violence are not receiving core financing and have therefore to apply for funding on a project basis. Some have reported the difficulties such framework causes in delivering global support to women or in taking a comprehensive and strategic approach.

Regarding the Greek practices, the approach seems in some ways similar to Belgium's: adoption of a NAP for 3 years, provision of training as well as information and awareness raising campaigns, organising support services. The possibility of having "social messages" broadcast by TV and radio is interesting for Belgium. Having messages broadcast through the appropriate channel and at the right time for the targeted audience is crucial. This is a critical issue for the communities (the competent authorities for media) considering the high costs of advertising time at peak times.

Both practices refer to the difficulty of evaluating awareness raising initiatives. It would be interesting to see what is built into the action plans regarding evaluation. In Belgium, evaluations are generally not planned with actions and they seem totally absent from awareness raising campaigns: evaluation being more on the deliverable side (which is necessary but not sufficient) and not on the effect of the campaign.

Finally, another transferability issue could be the link between strategies to combat violence and gender inequalities. Belgium is working on both sides, but awareness raising campaigns, in particular for the general public and professionals, generally do not make the link between violence and gender inequalities. The focus in Belgium is on informing key actors about signs of violence and explaining the "cycle of violence" between partners rather than on violence as a sign of gender inequalities. Belgium's approach of focusing on family-related violence, and in particular violence between partners, may also be interesting to discuss in that respect.

¹⁰ UK discussion paper, page 15.

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