



University  
of Antwerp

# **D2.1. NATIONAL REPORT ON POLICIES THAT PROMOTE GENDER EMPOWERMENT**

**RETHINKING INCLUSION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT: A  
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**



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## The ReIncluGen Project

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|-------------|---|
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| Coordinator | UANTWERPEN  |
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| Consortium  | <p>UNIVERSITEIT ANTWERPEN (UANTWERPEN), Belgium</p> <p>UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA DE BARCELONA (UAB), Spain</p> <p>UNIVERSITA DEGLI STUDI DI TRENTO (UNITN), Italy</p> <p>FMV (FMV), Belgium</p> <p>KUNLABORA (Kunlabora), Belgium</p> <p>SYNYO GmbH (SYNYO), Austria</p> <p>UNIWERSYTET WARSZAWSKI (UNIWARSAW), Poland</p> <p>FUNDACJA FEMINOTEKA (Feminoteka), Poland</p> <p>FUNDACION INTERED (INTERED), Spain</p> <p>LA STRADA – DER WEG, Italy</p> <p>ORIENT EXPRESS, Austria</p> <p>ERASMUS UNIVERSITEIT ROTTERDAM (EUR), The Netherlands</p> |

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# Deliverable

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## 1. GENERAL CONTEXT

### Definition of gender empowerment and inclusion (in policy documents)

In the following document, we will focus on different policy levels, starting from international, national and regional policies. To concentrate and contextualise the research conducted in the ReIncluGen project, we aim to focus on all policy levels that are relevant for the research that will be conducted in WP2 and WP3 for this project. This means that we will focus on policies in Belgium (national level) and Flanders (regional level). Given the developments and changes in governmental structure of Belgium over the past decades, relevant changes in the governmental structures will be discussed (only when relevant to frame the latest developments on gender policies).

In Belgium, the biggest national document is the constitution. Gender empowerment is not explicitly mentioned, however Art. 10 states that “*equality between men and women is guaranteed*” and Art. 11 says that “*Enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognised for Belgians must be provided without discrimination*” with Art. 11bis stating that “*The law, federate law or rule referred to in Article 134 guarantees that women and men may equally exercise their rights and freedoms, and in particular promotes their equal access to elective and public mandate*”. International law, however, overrules the constitution.

### Main stakeholders of gender empowerment and inclusion policy (EU, social movements, collective action, CSOs, parties, trade union, Plenipotentiary for gender equality, Commissioner for Human Rights, etc.)

In Belgium, since the 1970s, several constitutional reforms have transformed Belgium into a complex federal state, comprising three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), three linguistic communities (Dutch, French, and German) and a federal government. On a federal level, Belgium decided in 2015 to enforce the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constructed by the United Nations<sup>1</sup>. SDG5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all woman and girls<sup>2</sup>. The Federal Institute for Sustainable Development (FIDO) compiled five ways to implement the SDGs, this includes strategic documents for Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital Region and the German-speaking community<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sdgs.be/en/policy-making-belgium>

<sup>2</sup> <https://sdgs.be/en/sdgs/5-gender-equality>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sdgs.be/en/national-policy>

- 1) Communicating the SDGs to civil society
- 2) Updating and incorporating the SDGs into existing instruments of federal strategy on sustainable development
- 3) The concretization of the SDGs through the operations and policies of federal government departments
- 4) Promoting a coherent approach to the SDGs between the federal and regional governments
- 5) Creating partnerships between the government and civil society actors on the SDGs.<sup>4</sup>

CSOs are in summary prominent actors regarding the implementation of SDGs.

### **Embeddedness of gender empowerment in local and national context**

While FIDO strives to focus on the embeddedness of the SDGs and thus gender empowerment on a federal level, this differs on the Flemish regional government has additionally developed a more applied policy for Flanders to implement these goals. This seems relevant as many of the policy domains in which these SDGs need to be implemented are organised at the regional level. Consequently, the Flemish government translated the SDGs in a policy, 'Vizier 2030' [Visor 2030], which in its turn is part of a larger (long-term) vision called 'Vizier 2050' (situated at the national level). SDG5 regarding gender equality and empowerment remains the same. The goal is to 'strive for proportional participation of disadvantaged groups (target groups in the equal opportunity and integration policy) in all aspects of social life in Flanders'. This goal is reviewed yearly based on the following indicators:

- Employment rate
- Participation of disadvantaged groups on multiple societal territories:
  - o Cultural participation
  - o Sport participation
  - o Active membership to associations
  - o Internet use according to frequency of use
  - o Political participation<sup>5</sup>

The 'Vizier 30' measures, starting from 2018 and set to be achieved by 2030, are implemented by the following agenda:

1. develop clear long-term vision aligned with the SDGs
2. translate into a Flemish SDG framework and define Flemish 2030 goals
3. implementing the 2030 goals

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sdgs.be/en/policy-making-belgium>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vlaanderen.be/uw-overheid/beleid/het-vlaamse-beleid-voor-duurzame-ontwikkeling/sdgs-in-vlaanderen/sdg-5-bereik-gendergelijkheid-en-empowerment-voor-alle-vrouwen-en-meisjes>

- a. analyse target distances
  - b. defining and implementing remedial actions
  - c. supporting good practices
4. develop a custom monitoring and reporting system
  5. integrate the SDGs into the internal functioning, management and tools of the public institutions
  6. collaborate with cities, municipalities and provinces
  7. conduct appropriate stakeholder management and establish new partnerships

### **Trends in civil society**

In Flanders, a third-party government regime is active, meaning non-profit is given a significant amount of agency by the government while maintaining a synergetic and multidimensional relationship (Verschuere & De Corte, 2012). This means that through the funding of civil society organisations and subsidies, the Flemish government aims to implement guidelines and policies that foster gender empowerment and reduce gender inequalities. Numerous examples can be found where civil society steps in to accommodate gender empowerment. JES vzw for example is a youth work organisation that has, on top of mixed groups, a service specifically for girls. This takes form in specific projects as well as permanent group meetings<sup>6</sup> (JES vzw, n.d.). The organisation aims to respond to the needs of girls that feel like they don't belong in the public space<sup>7</sup>. Another example is the Young Women's Christian Association, active worldwide including Belgium. Their Antwerp branch has been empowering women since 1919<sup>8</sup>, and they also have a youth work organisation focused on girls called: Girls in the City Antwerp<sup>9</sup>.

Given the third-party government regime, the government has considerable power in deciding the agenda of CSOs. With doctrines like New Public Management being present CSOs can be pressured by the government to 'improve' their work by implementing principles of the 'business' or private sector (De Rynck et al., 2017). Starting from 01/04/2024 a new decree about subsidising the social-cultural adult work will be active. In this decree it is stated that 'the organisation assumes a bridging role in society. Organisations that segregate by merely folding back on ethnic-cultural origin are not eligible for funding'<sup>10</sup>. This means organisations that focus on specific ethno-cultural or religious target groups cannot receive subsidies for their specific activities focused on these target groups.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://jes.be/who-are-we/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://jes.be/gender-en-de-publieke-ruimte/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ywcaantwerpen.wixsite.com/website>

<sup>9</sup> <https://11.be/organisaties/girls-city>

<sup>10</sup> <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1038228&param=inhoud>

## 2. LABOUR MARKET POLICY

Important topics: equal pay and equal rights, professional activity, unemployment, retirement age, reconciliation of work and care

### 2.1. Legal context

See 1.2. practices and implementation for relevant legal contexts.

### 2.2. Practices and implementation (local, regional, national)

Looking at the latest available data (the third quartile of 2022) 63.7% of the female population, between the ages of 15-64, is employed in comparison to 70.1% of the males. This is higher for Flanders (68.5% vs. 75.1%) and lower for Wallonia (57.7% vs. 62.9%) as well as Brussels (56.1% vs. 65%)<sup>11</sup>. According to the Gender Equality Index Belgium scores 74.9% on the category of 'work'. Looking at the categories in this domain they score best on 'participation' (80.2%), this category included the employment rate and the duration of working life. However, in the category 'segregation and quality of work' the score (69.9%) is considerably lower. This lower score is mainly due to a significant difference between women and men regarding working in education, human health and social work activities (39% vs. 11%). Looking at the career prospect index, women and men score equally (66%)<sup>12</sup>.

Regarding equal pay the Gender pay gap (measuring the difference between average gross hourly earnings of male paid employees and of female paid employees as a percentage of average gross hourly earnings of male paid employees) is at 5% for Belgium<sup>13</sup>. Since the law of the 22th of April 2012 the pay gap is legally being disputed on the following levels:

- 1) **Interprofessional level:** by law social partners (unions and employer organisations) are required to put pay equity on the agenda of the national negotiations that happen every two years. However, this subject has not been systematically handled.
- 2) **At the sector level:** gender neutral job classifications will be implemented
- 3) **At the level of the businessowners:** companies are required to give analysis reports based on sex which should include the ratio fulltime and part time employers, the personal costs and the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/werk-opleiding/arbeidsmarkt/werkgelegenheid-en-werkloosheid#panel-12>

<sup>12</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/work/BE>

<sup>13</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg\\_05\\_20/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en)

fringe benefits. Besides that, companies should organise a mandatory consultation and adoption of equal opportunity plans and disaggregate the data in the social balance by employee gender<sup>14</sup>.

According to the institute for the equality of women and men, 42,7% of the women work part time compared to 12.6% of men. This leads to lower income, lower pension and less chance for promotions and trainings<sup>15</sup>.

### 2.3. Political discourse

It is in principle permissible for employers to prohibit their employees from wearing religious symbols, such as a cross or headscarf, in the workplace, provided there is a good reason for doing so, such as maintaining a certain image or ensuring safety in the workplace<sup>16</sup>. Not being able to wear a headscarf not only can lead to painful internal struggles regarding religion versus working, but wearing a headscarf also minimises application chances because of discrimination by employers (Weichselbaumer, 2020).

## 3. EDUCATION

### 3.1. Legal context

Following the constitutional reforms of 1989, the Department of Education is organised and managed by the (cultural) linguistic communities (see Van Praag et al., 2019). Because of this regional organisation of education over the past decades, for this report, we will focus on the Flemish educational system and its relevant policies related to the ReIncluGen project. In Belgium, education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 18. Before the age of six, children have the possibility to go to nursery school. Both primary and secondary school take six years. While primary school is similar for everyone, students are grouped together in different tracks in secondary education, divided into three cycles of two years each. In the Flemish secondary school system, students choose between four tracks: general or academic, art, technical, and vocational secondary education. Within these tracks, a variety of specific fixed programs of subjects are offered (see Van Praag et al., 2019).

Since the second World War, schools in Belgium have been gradually more mixed in terms of gender. Since 1969, the minister of National Education, Piet Vermeulen, provided coeducation and coinstruction in all state schools. Subsequently in 1970, a new type of secondary education was promoted, namely 'Renewed Secondary Education', aimed to create a better balance between girls and boys in general

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<sup>14</sup> <https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/arbeid/loonkloof/wetgeving>

<sup>15</sup> [https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/arbeid/combinatie\\_werk\\_privelieven/stand\\_van\\_zaken\\_in\\_belgie](https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/arbeid/combinatie_werk_privelieven/stand_van_zaken_in_belgie)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.unia.be/nl/discriminatiegronden/geloof-of-levensbeschouwing/symbolen/werkvloer/private-sector/wat-mag-een-private-werkgever>.



secondary schools. Gradually, starting from these overall implementations, the largest school network, namely the private Catholic schools, followed. The 'Renewed Primary Education' in 1973 led to coeducation in all primary schools. It was however only in 1983, following guidelines from the European Commission, that changes to foster coeducation were implemented in all schools (Van Heule, 2000). Although most schools now are mixed schools, based on gender, some subjects are still frequently taught in single-sex groups, such as physical education. Furthermore, gender compositions vary significantly across schools, tracks and fields of study (Van Houtte & Vantieghem, 2020).

While in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, in Flanders, educational policy makers were focused on the underachievement of women in education, this changed gradually, and since the nineties, policy makers and scholars have turned their attention to the underachievement of men in education. Nowadays, women outperform men in education (Derks & Vermeersch, 2001; Van Houtte 2004; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Voyer & Voyer 2014). In Flanders, gender differences can be found in achievement outcomes, including repeating a year (Derks & Vermeersch, 2001; Van Houtte, 2004) and the making of educational choices and track enrolment (Van Houtte, Vanderwegen & Vermeersch, 2014). Nonetheless, after graduating, men continue to occupy social positions that are better paid and valued by society.

### 3.2. Practices and implementation (local, regional, national)

When it comes to the design and attention of policymakers concerning gender in education, recently, a lot of attention has been paid to a specific group of students: early school leavers or young people that are not in education or training (NEET). Within this group, men disproportionately leave school without an educational qualification, which makes significant groups of men very vulnerable on the labour market (Eurostat, 2023; see also Van Praag et al., 2018). In line with European guidelines to 2020, also in Flanders, an action plan to reduce early school leaving was set up, in which gender was seen as a risk factor to reduce early school leaving.

Another point of attention has been to include more women in STEM (or STEAM) (Van Houtte, Vanderwegen & Vermeersch, 2014; Van Praag et al., 2021). This is visible in the Action plan STEM or the so-called STEM agenda 2030 Flanders, that in general aims to stimulate the number of graduates in careers in technology, exact sciences, and mathematics. Starting in 2012, the Flemish Ministry of Education set up an action plan to stimulate more girls to enrol and graduate in STEM in secondary education (Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths) and MST (Maths, Science & Technology) in higher education. By doing so, this action plan aims to consider including 'more girls' and consider ethnicity. Over the last years, the percentages of women in respectively STEM and MST are in 2000-2009 between 41-43,4% and 25,4%-27,3%. These percentages remain relatively stable over time. Again

here, within these tracks and careers, there are considerable differences in terms of gender composition of each track. For instance, in higher education, 81% of students enrolled in the Master Pharmaceuticals are female, while this is only 11% in the Master Industrial sciences and technology (Ministry of Education Flanders, 2009).

A third point of attention is that migrant newcomers who do not speak Dutch are promoted to enroll in a Dutch language course, as part of their integration into society. For non-EU members, this is often accompanied with an obliged citizenship course. In some cases, these language courses are seen as a requirement before getting welfare support.

### 3.3. Political discourses

Ethnic inequalities intersect with gender inequalities, which is often not grasped within these broad statistics that cover gender inequalities (Van Praag et al., 2021). Apart from crucial intersections between gender and ethnicity, in terms of educational choices, support and early school leaving, some additional gendered stereotyping and discrimination may occur. In addition, there are some specific gender-related symbolic topics that have been dividing school and educational policy makers as well as public debates (and media discourses). This was especially the case when it concerns the wearing of headscarves in schools. In 2009, state schools officially banned the wearing of headscarves in schools in Flanders, which caused a lot of debates, and related to debates on inclusion and diversity (Merry, Agirdag & Van Houtte, 2016). The focus on gender empowerment and inclusion in this discourse at the same time is also used in an exclusionary way.

In public and scholarly debates, some attention has been paid to the trend in which the profession of teachers has been feminised over the years, how to attract more men and how this feminisation of teacher bodies contributes to gender differences and inequalities in education. Nevertheless, no significant negative effect has been found and concerns on the feminisation of the teacher profession should be studied under scrutiny (e.g., Siongers, 2004; Consuegra, Halimi & Engels, 2018).

## 4. HEALTH POLICY

Important topics: reproductive health access and quality, abortion rights, in vitro, contraception

### 4.1. Legal context

Until 1990 abortion was illegal in Belgium, since then it has been partially depanelized. According to the constitution abortion for psychosocial (not medical) reasons can take place until 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Only women can make this decision and girls have full say in this matter as soon as they are twelve<sup>17</sup>. However, until 2018 abortion was still registered in the criminal justice book as ‘malpractice against the order of the family and against public morality’<sup>18</sup>. Since the 2018 act abortion is taken out of the criminal justice book and put into a new law. The sanctions remain the same, but the notion of ‘state of emergency’ of women disappears. On top of that the new law explicitly mentions that a doctor that refuses to execute an abortion is required to refer to another doctor<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4.2. Practices and implementation (local, regional, national)

Because of the maximum 12 week term, it occurs that people have an abortion in neighbouring countries like the Netherlands where the maximum term is 22 weeks. This so-called ‘abortion tourism’ can be troublesome since the Dutch procedure is not covered by the Belgian social security system on top of being more expensive. Besides that it often happens without psychosocial counselling (De Meyer, 2020). Another problem with the procedure is that women are forced to wait 6 days after their first consultation to make sure their decision is well considered. This can not only be stressful, but also result in missing the maximum term of 12 weeks<sup>20</sup>.

By federal law women under the age of 25 get a 3 euro discount on contraception per month, a total of 36 euros a year. Often this will mean that the contraception is free. For women who don’t fall under these categories it’s up to the health insurance fund if they reimburse contraception. In Belgium there was a long period of pillarization that segregated society according to religious and political beliefs. Even though there has been a process of depillarization, a number of aspects remain in these pillars such as health insurance. It is however free to people of different political and religious beliefs to choose health insurance that doesn’t align with their beliefs. Choosing a health insurance fund thus requires comparing different ones each with their own benefits, something which can be confusing for e.g. newcomers. If someone happens to be a member of a fond that does not reimburse contraception, the price for a safe option of contraception, like a IUD, can be up to 150 euro<sup>21</sup>. For reproductive health, such as gynaecology, the system is similar in the sense that this will also partly be covered by health insurance. However, a report of Médecins du monde (2021) showed that 86.1% of the people they saw (mostly non-EU/EEA migrants) did not have healthcare coverage, making Belgium score the highest proportionally compared to the other countries they are active in. In vitro is partly reimbursed by healthcare, the total cost for Belgian citizens

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<sup>17</sup> [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi\\_loi/change\\_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=2018101503&table\\_name=wet](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=2018101503&table_name=wet)

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi\\_loi/change\\_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=1867060801&table\\_name=wet](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=1867060801&table_name=wet)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/mopdf/2018/10/29\\_1.pdf#Page38](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/mopdf/2018/10/29_1.pdf#Page38)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/03/24/is-verplichte-wachtperiode-voor-abortus-nog-van-deze-tijd/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.sensoa.be/anticonceptiegebruik-bij-belgische-jongeren-en-volwassenen-feiten-en-cijfers>

with healthcare will be around 500 euro. However, for people without the Belgian nationality the costs will add up to 3.200 euro <sup>22</sup>.

#### 4.3. Political discourse

The 'Roe versus Wade' ruling has put abortion back on the political agenda in Belgium. There are multiple political parties in Belgium, with 'CD&V' (christian political party) being more conservative and 'Vlaams Belang' (Flemish nationalist political party) being more right-wing nationalist. By percentage of votes in the last election (2019-2024) 'CD&V' is the 5<sup>th</sup> biggest political party in Belgium with 8.90%, while 'Vlaams Belang' is the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest with 11.68%<sup>23</sup>. It is these two parties that are the most reluctant regarding altering the adoption law. 'CD&V' is being fairly neutral but stresses the importance of an expert committee, while the chairman of 'Vlaams Belang' states abortion should only be allowed when a woman's life is in danger, when the unborn child is not viable or in case of rape<sup>24</sup>.

## 5. FAMILY POLICY

Important topics: gender violence, domestic violence, paternity/maternity leaves, access to childcare, senior care, people with disabilities, single parenthood

#### 5.1. Legal context

Belgium has a legal framework that addresses issues related to gender violence and domestic violence. The Belgian Penal Code criminalizes physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, and economic violence. Since 2001, Belgium has a policy to fight gender-based violence through national action plans (NAP). Currently, NAP 2021-2025 is active, containing 201 measurements (federal, on a community level and regional) to fight gender based violence<sup>25</sup>.

Maternity leave lasts for 15 weeks and includes two periods: prenatal leave, which is a maximum period of 6 weeks before the expected date of delivery, and postnatal leave, a period of 9 weeks which starts on the day of the birth. For employees, maternity benefit is calculated as a percentage of salary with a maximum cap. Unemployed individuals receive a basic benefit plus an additional allowance, while self-employed individuals receive a flat-rate weekly amount. Fathers or co-parents are entitled to 10 days of

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.parentia.be/fr-BXL/administration-familiale/quel-est-le-prix-dune-fiv-et-quel-montant-devez-vous-sortir-de-votre-poche?set\\_language\\_cookie=fr-BXL](https://www.parentia.be/fr-BXL/administration-familiale/quel-est-le-prix-dune-fiv-et-quel-montant-devez-vous-sortir-de-votre-poche?set_language_cookie=fr-BXL)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/belgium/2019-2024/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnews/nl/2022/06/26/sammy-mahdi-abortion/>

<sup>25</sup> [https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal\\_actieplan\\_in\\_de\\_strijd\\_tegen\\_gendergerelateerd\\_geweld\\_2021\\_2025](https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal_actieplan_in_de_strijd_tegen_gendergerelateerd_geweld_2021_2025)

paternity leave (15 days for births after 1st January 2021) which must be taken within 4 months following the birth. The employer pays the full salary for the first 3 days, and for the next 7 days the mutual insurance fund is responsible for payment. Self-employed individuals can receive a paternity and birth allowance for a maximum of 15 days or 30 half-days or for a maximum of 8 days (or 16 half-days) plus a birth support. Benefits in kind such as injections, pre and post-natal care, monitoring and assistance during labour and delivery in a hospital can also be covered<sup>26</sup>.

A report by UNICEF-IRC (2021) analyses policies related to early childhood education and care (ECEC) across 41 high- and middle-income countries. In Belgium, it finds that the availability and affordability of childcare services vary across regions and socio-economic groups. While there are universal subsidies for childcare in place, families still face high out-of-pocket costs, especially for children under the age of three. In addition, the supply of childcare places is insufficient in some areas, particularly for infants. It also notes that the quality of ECEC in Belgium could be improved. There are no mandatory qualifications for ECEC staff, and staff-child ratios are higher than recommended. Moreover, there is limited support for children with disabilities and for children from migrant or disadvantaged backgrounds. Overall, Belgium has made progress in expanding access to ECEC, but there is room for improvement in terms of affordability, quality, and inclusiveness

## 5.2. Practices and implementation (local, regional, national)

Belgium has a decentralised system of government, with responsibilities for social policies divided between the federal government, regional governments, and municipalities. Regarding access to childcare, each region of Belgium is responsible for providing its own childcare services. In Flanders, for example, the government provides financial support to families for day-care and after-school care<sup>27</sup>.

## 5.3. Political discourse

In recent years, Belgium has seen an increase in public awareness of and political attention to issues related to gender violence and domestic violence. This year there will be an additional five Family Justice Centers (FMC) making a total of 9, with at least one in every Flemish province. In 2020, 1845 families requested help, by 2022 this increased with 40% to 2588<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1102&langId=en&intPagelD=4415>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaamse-bevoegdheden>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.demorgen.be/snelnieuws/dit-jaar-nog-hulpcentra-voor-familiegeweld-in-heel-vlaanderen-slachtoffers-kunnen-dan-dichtbij-hulp-krijgen~b9144d87/>

Regarding senior care, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to the need for better care for the elderly in nursing homes <sup>29</sup>. However, elderly care can be expensive, being on average 2096.74 euro a month in Flanders. Since the average pension is significantly less, it is often up to children to take care of these costs<sup>30</sup>.

## 6. GENDER REPRESENTATION IN POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ELITES

Important topics: women in power positions in parliament and government, women in political parties, women in science, women in top positions in business

### 6.1. Legal context

Belgium has been working to promote gender equality and equal opportunities since the 1980s, by adopting legal measures at the federal and regional levels. These measures include a Gender Mainstreaming Law, a Gender Act, and the inclusion of a specific provision on gender equality in the Belgian Constitution. The Gender Mainstreaming Law aims to integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas, while the Gender Act prohibits discrimination based on gender, change of gender, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. Although Belgium does not have a federal strategy or action plan for gender equality, it has adopted a Federal Plan on Gender Mainstreaming in 2012, which has been renewed twice and is currently in its third edition (2020-2024). The plan is developed by the Interdepartmental Coordination Group (ICG) and sets out specific objectives and actions to be taken in various areas to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination. These areas include employment, education, health, violence against women, and the media, among others. The plan also ensures that gender mainstreaming is integrated into all stages of policy-making and evaluation<sup>31</sup>.

### 6.2. Practices and implementation (local, regional, national)

Find below a chart regarding women in Belgian legislative and executive institutions, based on numbers by the institute for the equality of women and men <sup>32</sup>.

| Federal level                          | 2019  |
|--|-------|
| Women in parliament                    | 42.8% |
| Women in government                    | 50%   |
| Region, communities and European level | 2019  |

<sup>29</sup> <https://sociaal.net/achtergrond/woonzorgcentra-mogen-geen-mini-ziekenhuizen-worden/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://sociaal.net/opinie/woonzorgcentrum-is-te-duur-vlaamse-ouderenraad/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/belgium>

<sup>32</sup> <https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/politiek/cijfers>

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <b>Women in the Flemish parliament</b>                          | 45.2%       |
| <b>Women in the Walloons parliament</b>                         | 37.3%       |
| <b>Women in the Brussels parliament</b>                         | 48.3%       |
| <b>Women in the parliament of the French speaking community</b> | 37.2%       |
| <b>Women in the parliament of the German speaking community</b> | 40%         |
| <b>Women in the European parliament</b>                         | 38.1%       |
| <b>Women in the Flemish government</b>                          | 33.3%       |
| <b>Women in the Walloons government</b>                         | 37.5%       |
| <b>Women in the Brussels regional government</b>                | 37.5%       |
| <b>Women in government of the French community</b>              | 60%         |
| <b>Women in government of the German community</b>              | 25%         |
| <b>Municipal and provincial level</b>                           | <b>2018</b> |
| <b>Female city council members in Flanders</b>                  | 38,4%       |
| <b>Female city council members in Walloons</b>                  | 38.4%       |
| <b>Female city council members in Brussels</b>                  | 47.34%      |
| <b>Female aldermen (<i>schepenen</i>) in Flanders</b>           | 38.1%       |
| <b>Female aldermen in Walloons</b>                              | 38.6%       |
| <b>Female aldermen in Brussels</b>                              | 41.14%      |
| <b>Female mayors in Flanders</b>                                | 14.3%       |
| <b>Female mayors in Walloons</b>                                | 18.3%       |
| <b>Female mayors in Brussels</b>                                | 5.3%        |
| <b>Female provincial councillors in Flanders</b>                | 42.3%       |
| <b>Female provincial councillors in Walloons</b>                | 43%         |
| <b>Female provincial deputies in Flanders</b>                   | 40%         |
| <b>Female provincial deputies in Walloons</b>                   | 36.4%       |

As the numbers show, Belgium has a fairly high representation of women in political power positions, especially at a federal level and in parliament. However, worldwide violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is a significant worldwide problem, including Belgium despite its high presence of women in politics. This outs itself in hostile work environments (such as denigrating comments and sexual

harassment), silencing women as political actors and excluding them from political decision making, online hate comments which are often gendered and being hindered to work because of these aspects resulting in a clear mental impact (Van Bavel, 2022).

Looking at the Gender Equality Index of the EIGE Belgium scores 67 on the domain of 'power'. It scores highest on political power with 80.9%. On an economic level, however, the score is lower with 63.6. Looking at the share of members of boards in largest quoted companies, supervisory board or board of directors 37.1% are women and women active as the share of board members of a central bank is 35%. The lowest score is for the social level, 38.5% of the board members of research funding organisations are women, women that are board members of publicly owned broadcasting organisations count up to 30.3% and regarding members of highest decision making body of the national Olympic sport organisations 21.2% are women<sup>33</sup>.

### 6.3. Political discourse

The political discourse has been addressed in sections 6.1. and 6.2.

## 7. MIGRATION AND MINORITY POLICY

Important topics: refugees support, access to welfare benefits, special needs and public services

Over the last decades nationalism and multiculturalism have been central concepts in the debates on immigration and integration in Belgium (Loobuyck & Jacobs, 2010). One of the assumptions is that nationalism often results in a more defensive and restrictive reaction against migration. Another assumption suggests that nationalists are not in favour of multicultural policies and will insist on (cultural) assimilation of immigrants (Loobuyck & Jacobs, 2010). These assumptions are salient, especially in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking Northern region of Belgium, because of its right-wing political landscape. Current opinion polls for the European, national, and regional elections to be held in Belgium on 25 May 2023 suggest that right-wing parties will take the lead in Flanders. The political party, Vlaams Belang (before November 2004—Vlaams Blok, Flemish nationalist political party), is the most extreme-right, ethnocentric and anti-immigration party which is recently gaining more and more terrain on the political spectrum. This party promotes the Flemish identity and can be seen as a separatist party (from the Belgian nation-state). Like most other extreme-right parties in Europe, the ideological core of Vlaams

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<sup>33</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2022/domain/power/BE>



Belang is formed by nationalism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism and 'law and order' (Mudde in Loobuyck & Jacobs, 2010).

### 7.1. Legal context

Belgium is often overlooked as a country of immigration due to its size and its less known history of immigration. Yet over the last four decades Belgium has become a permanent country of settlement for many different types of migrants: labour migrants, family migrants, refugees, etc. The most influential migration type in Belgium has been the labour migration. After the Second World War, Belgian industry had to be restarted and there was a strong need for new miners. In 1946, Belgium and Italy therefore concluded an agreement whereby Italy sent guest workers to the Belgian mines in exchange for coal. After the disaster in the Marcinelle coal mine (1956), where many Italian miners lost their lives, the Italian government demanded better working conditions. Belgium was unable to provide this, so the recruitment area was shifted to other southern countries: Spain in 1956, Greece in 1957 and Morocco and Turkey in 1964. Algeria followed in 1969 and Yugoslavia in 1970. Besides labour migration which started before and after the second World War, the system of 'family reunification' also enabled immigration (Castles, 1986). In 1965 a regulation actively mobilised immigrant families to reunite, and even provided reimbursement of half of the travel expenses for the spouse and children who were to accompany a guestworker, on the condition that the family had at least three children under the legal majority age (Martiniello & Rea, 2003). In this sense, migrant workers were thus not only viewed as the answer to labour shortages in certain sectors, family reunification also demonstrated another objective: that of demographic recovery (Martiniello & Rea, 2003). Family reunification was also encouraged since migrant women were considered to be vehicles for integration, enabling men's acculturation in the new society (Martens, 1973). However, as a result of the 1973 oil crisis and its subsequent global recession, almost every Western European country abandoned labour migration and introduced a 'migration stop'. As a result, Belgium intensified its interference with migrants' comings and goings (Schrover, 2008; Martens, 1976). Yet family migration was not so easily stopped, and permanent settlement became increasingly likely.

In the context of this reality, Belgium however did not imagine a permanent stay of immigrants in the country until the early 1980s (Mandin, 2014). Migration, asylum, and integration policies have for quite a while been largely responsive in nature, reacting to circumstance, rather than pursuing a long-term vision. As a result, there was hardly any coherent migrant integration policy worthy of the name until the end of the 1980s. It is only since the late 1990s that policymakers have started to develop new policies and legislation in a more consistent way. It was in 2004 that the 'citizenisation policy' came into effect.

This period (around 2004-2005) can be seen as a key moment that caused a revival of the entangled debates on integration and immigration. These gendered and culturalised debates are also reflected in media and public opinion: it is shown in the ways the immigrant is addressed in the media, with particular attention being paid to negative aspects, such as marriages of convenience, abuses or fraud with social benefits. As in many other European countries, political debates on marriage migration in Belgium have centred on the issues of forced and sham marriages culminating in a conflation of these terms causing marriage migration to become suspicious. Several political issues and media statements made by Flemish politicians culminated and caused a reform to a stricter family migration policy in 2011 which can be seen as a key point in the legal context of minorities and migration. Remarkable here is the family reunification policy's preoccupation with themes such as gender empowerment, women's rights, Islam and violence which disproportionately aimed at migrant women and their supposed lack of agency (Miri, 2022).

Before the policy change of 2011, which severely restricted family migration, Belgium allowed marriage migrants to reunite when they could meet the minimums required for all families in Belgium: a legal minimum income, standard housing and paying a normal fee (MIPEX, 2015). Since 2011, both non-EU and Belgian citizens face much more restrictive requirements for family reunification. Similar to other EU member states, Belgium in 2011 introduced a minimum income requirement, which meant that those who wish to marry someone from another EU or non-EU country (referred to as a third country) and move the prospective bride or groom to Belgium needs to earn 120% of the minimum social integration income level ('leefloon'). This much debated condition or requirement excludes low-income groups with legal income level (part-time workers, social beneficiaries) (MIPEX, 2015). Other regulations include the extension of the probationary period – a period during which family migrants are subject to controls and can lose their (temporary) residence permit – from three to five years, legitimised by the fight against sham and forced marriages and partnerships. The central line of thinking that informs these restrictive family migration regulations is that of an integration rollback: by choosing a partner from the country of origin, the partner in the receiving country is assumed to not only demonstrate their own lack of integration, but also import a bride or groom that is necessarily of a low economic and educational background. This is especially seen as such if the partners in question are second or third-generation immigrants. These restrictive policies are therefore informed by the rise of a specific gendered and culturalised political discourse: the growing need to protect and save women – especially when they are Muslim or come from a Muslim background (Ghorashi, 2010; Moors & Vroon-Najem, 2020) – and to determine the purposes for marriage migration in order to combat sham and forced marriage practices.

## 7.2. Practices and implementation (local, regional, national)

In Flanders integration and citizenisation policies are decided upon by the Flemish government ([www.agii.be](http://www.agii.be)) while migration is part of Belgian state's policies (Federal Government). Border entry and deportation is thus within the jurisdiction of the Belgian government where Flemish-nationalist and right-wing conservative parties occupy important posts related to asylum and migration 'management', which became even more severe after the 2015 'asylum and refugee crisis'. Newcomers arriving in Belgium must integrate according to the government when it is certain that they will stay in Belgium for several years. This integration or 'citizenisation' can be done in different ways and already has different programs with various forms of work. The logic of 'citizenisation' in Western Europe (Fortier, 2017) and specifically in Flanders or Belgium demands that migrant newcomers acquire information about certain cultural practices, languages, ethnicities and religions, laws, and the citizen's legal rights (Miri, Emmerly & Longman, 2021). Yet, migrants' 'proper' integration and 'good' citizenship become increasingly defined in more ideologically volatile terms. In general, migration policies can be informed by academic research and civil expertise but in turn might have an (ideological) impact on practices, implementation and research (Van De Pol, Vanheule & Clycq, 2018).

Prior to the 'asylum and refugee crisis', Flemish political discourses on the culturalist citizenisation criteria such as linguistic integration or the transmission of cultural practices and beliefs (Mandin in Miri et al., 2021) were already in place. However, as several political analysts have demonstrated such discourses and criteria intensified further in 2015 (Miri et al., 2021). More particularly, these discourses by the Flemish state have emphasised 'our values and norms' conveying both ideas of 'good citizenship' and concerns over 'failed integration' (Arnaut et al. 2009). Hence, according to the Flemish government, successful citizenship entails 'proper' integration.

Certain people are obliged to follow an integration programme. This includes newcomers (e.g. recognized refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, family reunification, people integrating who are ministers of worship, etc.) (Michielsen et al., 2014). A number of these persons will be exempted from the civic integration obligation. This concerns, for example, EU citizens, persons who are permanently unable to follow the integration program due to an illness or disability, persons integrating who are 65 years or older, etc. The civic integration obligation will continue to exist for compulsory citizens as long as they have not complied with it. Citizenisation in Flanders consists of four parts: social orientation, Dutch as a connecting language, registration with VDAB (Actiris in Brussels) this is the Flemish job placing agency

and a participation and networking trajectory. The citizenisation programme is tailored to the person integrating. Via trajectory guidance, the person integrating is offered individual guidance according to their personal situation. The Flemish Agency for Integration and Inburgering and the two city agencies in Antwerp (i.e. Atlas) and Ghent (i.e. Amal) offer these programmes. The content of the citizenisation process is included in an integration contract. Whoever signs an integration contract commits to achieving the objectives of the various parts of the process. Anyone who achieves all the objectives will receive the integration certificate. After obtaining their integration certificate, people integrating can start a follow-up process. For example, they take follow-up Dutch courses in preparation for higher studies, they participate in vocational training or training to become an independent entrepreneur (Jehoul et al., 2021).

### 7.3. Political discourse

'Third-country migrants', as immigrants from outside of the European Union are referred to in migration regulation literature, are and have often been given negative attention in Belgium (Miri & Emmerly, *forthcoming*). This is especially the case for immigrant women with a Muslim background, who are often stigmatised in the current gendered, culturalist and homogenising discourses (De Bock, 2014). In the context of labour migration and integration, policy makers have for quite some time aimed to appeal to immigrant women – yet paradoxically via the men in their communities. Until today, some of these gendered and culturalist discourses have persisted about newer generations of migrant women affecting them in negative ways (Miri, 2022).

The levels of public acceptance and immigrant participation in public life in Belgium reflect the strengths and weaknesses in the approaches to integration at community and federal level. The main areas of weakness are labour market mobility and family reunification, while the main area of strength is anti-discrimination. Other areas—education, health, political participation, permanent residence and nationality—involve several strengths but also a few underlying weaknesses in Belgian approaches. Any differences in approaches in the Flemish and Francophone community were noted in the comments of each indicator and reflected in the final average score for Belgium (MIPEX, 2020).

#### *Healthcare*

The Belgian health system covers almost the entire population for a large range of services. The main source of financing is social contributions, proportional to income. The provision of care is based on the principles of independent medical practice, free choice of physician and care facility, and predominantly fee-for-service payment. The Belgian population enjoys good health and long life expectancy. This is partly due to the population's good access to many high-quality health services. However, some

challenges remain in terms of appropriateness of pharmaceutical care (overuse of antibiotics and psychotropic drugs), reduced accessibility for mental health and dental care due to higher user charges, socioeconomic inequalities in health status and the need for further strengthening of prevention policies. The system must also continue to evolve to cope with an ageing population, an increase of chronic diseases and the development of new technologies. This Belgian HiT profile (2020) presents the evolution of the health system since 2014, including detailed information on new policies (Gerkens & Merkur, 2020). The most important reforms concerned the transfer of additional health competences from the Federal State to the Federated entities and the plan to redesign the landscape of hospital care. Policy-makers have also pursued the goals of further improving access to high-quality services, while maintaining the financial sustainability and efficiency of the system, resulting in the implementation of several measures promoting multidisciplinary and integrated care, the concentration of medical expertise, patient care trajectories, patient empowerment, evidence-based medicine, outcome-based care and the so-called one health approach. Cooperation with neighbouring countries on pricing and reimbursement policies to improve access to (very high price) innovative medicines are also underway. Looking ahead, because additional challenges will be highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis ([www.covinform.eu](http://www.covinform.eu)), a focus on the resilience of the system is expected. While migrant patients can benefit from regular health and healthcare information and migrant health research, the Flemish and Francophone community lack comprehensive policies that reach all health providers and systematically involve migrants in these services (Winters et al., 2018; cf. COVINFORM project outputs).

### *Refugee support*

Applicants for international protection must go through various steps, from submitting the application to the final decision. This is called the procedure for international protection. The Belgian Government looks at whether the foreigner meets the criteria defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees. By signing this convention, Belgium undertook to protect refugees on its territory. Applicants for international protection recognised as being refugees receive a resident's permit for an unlimited period. The year 2022 was marked by the saturation of Fedasil's reception network. Fedasil is confronted with a recurrent shortage of reception places: since 2021, asylum seekers have ended up on the street due to a lack of places. The priority for reception is given to the most vulnerable (families, minors, women), other asylum seekers, mainly men, have to register on a waiting list. However, the actions taken to increase reception capacity in 2021 and 2022 are not sufficient to accommodate everyone. Fedasil communicates to keep prospecting for new sites. In the longer term, Fedasil wants structural adaptations of the reception centres. In Belgium, applicants for international protection are not entitled to financial assistance but to **reception** during the entire period that their application is being examined. The right to

material assistance applies once the international protection application has been submitted and expires at the end of the procedure. Applicants for international protection are not obliged to stay in the reception structure allocated to them, although the majority of them do so. The reception is organised in an open reception structure, managed by Fedasil or one of its partners.

**Refugee Work Flanders** is an NGO that protects people fleeing war, violence or persecution through policy work, support and campaigns. This organisation helps people to get protection in Belgium when they apply for international protection which was previously known as 'asylum'. The asylum authorities determine whether they need this protection. However many legislative texts show that the Belgian government often assumes that asylum seekers are fraudsters or abuse the system. This assumption translates into numerous measures. For example: if asylum seekers do not carry an identity document, this can be seen as a negative indicator for the credibility of their asylum story. But people on the run usually do not have their identity documents.

In a large number of situations, the court can or must take an accelerated decision (within 15 days) on the application for international protection. In other cases, they will not fully investigate the case, but will be able to declare the asylum application inadmissible on the basis of a brief investigation. In such cases, the time limits for appeal against the decisions of the court are also very short. It is clear that the legislator wants to discourage certain categories of asylum seekers in this way. Refugee Work Flanders is not in favour of procedures that take years, but warns that accelerated procedures could jeopardise the rights of asylum seekers. Caught in the speed and complexity of these procedures, some applicants for international protection will not be able to properly prepare. It is here that Refugee Work Flanders can play a role with their expertise in asylum & migration. In doing so Refugee Work Flanders put pressure on policy, get people moving and campaign. Moreover, this NGO provides asylum seekers an initial welcome, answers legal questions and provides an extensive range of training.

## **8. OTHER IMPORTANT POLICY AREAS – IF RELEVANT TO NATIONAL OR LOCAL CONTEXT**

## 9. ROLE AND POSITION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN GENDER EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION

- 9.1. Role of women CSOs in the political system / addressing the gaps, family, education, equal pay, managerial positions, political positions (local – regional- central level) - CSOs dedicated to women's situation (national, women-immigrants)

In Belgium the 'equality of women and men' has been perceived as an official and separate policy area since 1997. Before this was seen as part of the ministry of employment and labour. On the Flemish level 'equal opportunities' or so-called 'state feminism' is a ministerial authority (Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). Important here is that the institutionalisation of gender empowerment did not occur in explicit response to women's movements but was rather as a result of European policy based on the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). When comparing with other European countries Belgium introduced 'state feminism' quite late. For a long time, the priorities of the cell 'equal opportunities' were centred around three themes: 1) the position of women on the labour market, 2) eliminating violence against women and 3) participation of women in politics (Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). Within the first terrain actions were focusing on education, affirmative actions, work-life balance, equal pay, maternity leave and sexual intimidation at work (Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). Regarding the second theme of violence the priority was on breaking taboo topics and on promoting juridical rights of women (Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). As for the third, the political participation of women was focused on promoting more research and introducing quotas within political parties (Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). Despite all of these actions, research has shown that there is a lack of a vision and theoretical thinking on gender empowerment and inclusion (Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). In contrast with the Netherlands, in Belgium there doesn't seem to be a tradition of defining and theorising political aims around certain societal challenges or problems (Keuzenkamp in Hondegheem & Nelen, 2011). This also reflects in the words 'equal opportunities' and 'equality of women and men': gender is not referred to and is certainly not approached from an intersectional lens.

Women's organisations and feminist associations are subsidised by all levels of government: federal, regional, and local. More broadly, civil society in general is widely consulted by political authorities on many issues relating to gender empowerment and tackling the issue of violence against women ([www.eige.europa.eu](http://www.eige.europa.eu)). Civil society organisations were also consulted as part of the development of the Federal Plan on Gender Mainstreaming and more recently in formal consultations on the development and monitoring of the Action Plan to Combat Gender-based Violence 2020-2025.

Women's organisations and feminist associations also participate in conferences and are one of the main target audiences for the dissemination of information and publications issued by the authorities on gender equality. There are three councils per region (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) that work to promote gender equality:

- the Federal Council for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women (CEC)
- the Walloon Council for Equality between Men and Women (CWEHF)
- Brussels Council of Equality between Women and Men (CEFH)

These Councils include society organisations and have issued numerous analysis documents in recent years on gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Moreover, a Gender and Development Advisory Council was created in April 2014 to provide expertise, debate and advice on gender mainstreaming in development cooperation. Social partners are formally involved via the Council for Equal Opportunities at the federal level, as well as via one-off projects.

## 9.2. Financial situation: change (improving-worsening) over time (2010-2022)

Despite a significant decrease from 49% (2020) to 40% (2022), the share of associations that manage their own financial situation remains high. Almost 1 in 2 (48%) expect that their financial situation will also deteriorate in the next 12 months (IPSOS, 2022). This is more than double compared to the turnaround year 2018 (year with a positive balance). Government grants remain of vital importance to CSOs in Belgium and most often come from local and regional authorities (IPSOS, 2022). 3 associations out of 4 (74%) can rely on government grants either permanently or on demand. In addition, they account for 58% of total income (IPSOS, 2022). Although almost as many associations (73%) can rely on donations (from private individuals, foundations, companies, sponsorship, legacies, etc.), donations make up a smaller share of income (25%) (IPSOS, 2022). In the first place, especially large to very large associations get the most grants (IPSOS, 2022). Associations involved in development cooperation are the least involved in grants/funding (IPSOS, 2022). The latter derive their income most often from donations from private individuals. CSOs that see their permanent funding fall, primarily blame the high inflation. When it comes to funding sources (with the exception of project grants), this seems to be directly linked to the corona crisis and/or high inflation (IPSOS, 2022). The negative impact of inflation is expected to continue for some time to come. In contrast, the impact of the corona crisis seems to have largely worked out in the future (IPSOS, 2022).



### 9.3. Short description of selected organisations (selected because of their activities, successes)

We will give an overview of the most important CSOs that promote gender empowerment and inclusion. When listing them we will pay attention to the differences based on their target group, vision on empowerment, mission statement and historical evolution.

**Femma** (earlier called KAV) is the oldest women's association in Belgium. As part of the pillarization it grew out of the Flemish Catholic Social Women's Network which was the parent organisation for many female educational activities, cooperatives, women's mutual insurance schemes, women's guilds, etc. Today, labour is still central to Femma's vision on gender empowerment. Getting the combination of paid and unpaid work for men and women on the social agenda as always and is still of central importance for the organisation. Moreover as society keeps on changing, Femma now reaches women of all ages, with or without a paid job and with different ethnic-cultural and religious (non-religious) backgrounds. Femma's aim is to create a world where everyone feels free and finds a balance between work, care and time for themselves. In their women's networks they mainly challenge each other to consciously make time for free time drawing strength from connection with themselves and with others.

Whereas Femma does not identify explicitly with politics, **Furia** (earlier called VOK – Vrouwen Overleg Komitee) intervenes in societal debates and formulates policy requirements. Also, unlike Femma, Furia has always been a more pluralistic organisation: it is an independent feminist think-and-do tank that focuses on equality, self-determination and solidarity. Founded in 1972 as VOK, the organisation continues to assume its role as a think tank and action group with outspoken political visions: from the 1974 'emergency program to the government', over the long struggle for abortion out of the criminal law and the protest against the economic crisis throughout the 1980s, to the 'headscarf debate' and daycare crises in recent years. Since the birth of the organisation Furia continues to organise the 'National Women's Day'. Since the immense success of the first 'National Women's Day' (nearly 10,000 visitors in Brussels) the very young organisation got immediately known to the press and the public. Many more editions would follow. Building on intersectionality Furia aims to tackle stereotyped and discriminatory ideas as well as formulate structural solutions to eliminate existing discriminations and inequalities between people: a strong bottom-up operation with inclusive, personal and accessible activities tailored to a wide audience; positionings in the public debate; addressing policy makers; actions in public space; activating volunteers; collaborations with and consultations of all kinds of organisations and individuals.

Local groups, or Mobilization Groups, are the heart of the **Collecti.e.f. 8 Maars**. Based on sectoral or geographical criteria, or on the basis of a common experience or even an already existing association,

Collecti.e.f. 8 Maars mobilises for the feminist strike on their own scale and in their own way. These groups thus appropriate the demands, words and practices of the feminist strike in Belgium and elsewhere in order to keep them alive throughout the year. In 2019 and 2020, the Collecti.e.f 8 maars, independent of parties and trade unions, for the first time brought together (people identifying as) women from all walks of life to organise the first women's\* strikes in Belgium. This yearly feminist strike takes place on March 8<sup>n</sup>, the International Day of Struggle for Women's Rights, and is intended as a first step to make concrete progress in political demands and contribute to building a broad feminist movement in Belgium.

Whereas many organisations do not explicitly focus on the experiences of women and girls with a migration background, **ella** - the Flemish expertise centre on Gender & Ethnicity - has been a pioneer in their approach and work. The former Support Center for immigrant girls and women was founded as a project within the former ICCM (Intercultural Center for Migrants) and became a non-profit association in 2000. An action research in 1999, which mapped out the immigrant women's associations in Flanders and Brussels, showed the urgency for specific support with regard to girls and women from ethnic minorities, given that their participation is often low and they are often not fully represented within the structures of minority policy as well as within the women's movement. Since then, however, the organisation has evolved in its mission and the direct support function towards individuals (girls/women or aid workers) and organisations is no longer their core task. Instead, Ella develops and implements knowledge and toolkits from, with and for the target group, for intermediaries, and works on raising gender awareness in wider society from an intersectional perspective. Ella develops all kinds of printed publications on its themes, such as methodologies, informative booklets and brochures, articles in magazines and books, as well as documentaries on DVD and other educational material.

Whereas other organisations do not explicitly focus on socio-economic background in relation to migration **Alma** is an open house in (the second largest Belgian city) Antwerp for women with a migration background in vulnerable situations. Formerly called IVCA - Intercultural Women's Centre Antwerp - this unique and influential organisation grew out of the global women's organisation Young Women Christian Association (YWCA Antwerp). YWCA is a renowned NGO that has been fighting for women's rights and empowerment since 1855. The Antwerp branch of YWCA (first IVCA and now Alma) is unique because of its pluralistic character: as one of the few global YWCAs, they have split from the Christian identity. When the first waves of immigration to Belgium started in the 1960s, YWCA-Antwerp was also one of the first organisations to focus on migrant newcomers: they organised many activities for Congolese students and so-called North African "guest workers". In 1992, Mwasi was founded, a support organisation for refugee women and their children. In 2012, part of the activities were taken over by the Centre for

Wellbeing (CAW), which is housed in the same building. With empowerment and participation as its central objective, Alma (CAW) continues to build on the legacy of organising training with free daycare and socio-cultural activities for and by women of various migration backgrounds. Central is the very warm and homely atmosphere this organisation offers to the most vulnerable women and their families.

**BOEH!** ('Baas Over Eigen Hoofd' – 'Boss Over Own Head') is listed here because of its small scale yet influential position and origin. BOEH! is a feminist and anti-racist action platform that defends the right of women and girls to decide whether or not to wear a headscarf. BOEH! is a unique organisation that analyses the intersection of sexism, racism and Islamophobia. Originally founded around the ban on headscarves it continued to show and take action against the disastrous consequences of this for today's society. BOEH! has been taking up the fight for over 15 years with all means while sensitising a broad public to this theme. In Belgium (Flanders) the headscarf debate is to be considered a 'symbolic case': it is important to note that the headscarf ban violates fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of religion, the right to freedom of expression, the right to self-determination, the right to education and the right to work. Moreover, the ban on headscarves results in the social exclusion and stigmatisation of a specific group of women. In line with this, prejudice and discrimination against Muslims are normalised and popularised in wider society. BOEH! refuses to accept this harmful discourse and tries to counteract it with all possible means.

**Avansa** is one of the largest and most widespread organisations in Flanders that focuses on empowerment and learning. Avansa creates a wide range of educational activities for adults, without explicitly focussing on gender. Their core mission is to bring people together and support them, as a community, group and as individuals. This organisation is mentioned here because of their networks and collaborations with the state authorities. Central in Avansa's work is to join forces with citizens' initiatives, cities and municipalities, etc. They see their role as complementing the work of the State and as bridge builders towards the people. Avansa develops forms of learning that take place in everyday life in which people can learn informally, while talking or being active in group. Their working method is centred around: the exploration and expansion of own experiences, reflection on those experiences and critical analysis. Both participants and supervisors constantly learn from what they experience, become wiser and take steps forward.

The identity of **FMV** ('Federation Migrant Associations') is linked to the themes on which they have built up expertise and on which they prioritise, namely education and work and the priority target groups of young adults and women with a migration background. Basic rights such as the right to good education, the right to decent work, the right to good health care, the right to equal political rights and the right to experiencing one's own culture and religion are all too often violated. FMV is an umbrella organisation

with 140 smaller organisations spread over the whole of Flanders and Brussels. Unlike the other organisations mentioned here, FMV focuses on socio-cultural life. FMV is convinced and also notices, through years of experience in socio-cultural work, that social change is best achieved in groups. The strength of a group is more than just the sum of its individuals. FMV believes that each individual in the group brings his or her experience and expertise which can be a source of empowerment. FMV aims to inform, sensitise, activate and unite 'citizens from migration' with the aim of improving their social position and increasing their participation in an open, Flemish, pluralistic society.

9.4. Number of members (2010-2022) and their social structure (gender, age, education, race, ethnicity, length of stay in the country)

| Organisation                 | gender | age | education              | race         | migration status         | Activities  |
|------------------------------|--------|-----|------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|---|
| <b>Femma</b>                 | all    | 18+ | Mainly educated        | Mainly white | /                        | Outdoor, workshops, events, counselling                       |
| <b>Furia</b>                 | all    | all | Mainly educated        | divers       | Mainly second generation | Press and opinion, event of 'national women's day', workshops |
| <b>Collecti.e.f. 8 Maars</b> | all    | 18+ | Mainly higher educated | Mainly white | /                        | Strikes & press   |

|               |     |     |                                      |   |  |  |
|---------------|-----|-----|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <b>ella</b>   | all | all | all educational backgrounds          | Mainly migrantized                                  | Mainly second and third generation + newcomers | Workshops, networking events                                   |
| <b>Avansa</b> | all | 18+ | Mainly educated (depends on region)  | Mainly white (depending on region also migrantized) | /  | Workshops, outdoor activities, networking events               |
| <b>Alma</b>   | all | all | Mainly low literate/vulnerable women | Migrantized   | Mainly newcomers                               | Workshops, language learning, integration courses              |
| <b>BOEH!</b>  | all | all | Mainly (higher) educated             | Mainly migrantized                                  | Mainly second and third generation             | Events, blogs, opinion pieces in press, reading groups         |
| <b>FMV</b>    | all | all | All educational backgrounds          | migrantized   | All migrant backgrounds                        | Workshops, outdoor, networking, events, administrative support |

### 9.5. Events offered to members

We added this to the table above.

#### 9.6. CSOs as both positive and negative actors of gender empowerment (e.g., right wing organisations)

Quite some CSOs perceive empowerment as something that can only occur when leaving out religion. This is especially the case for Islam and the Islamic headscarf. A good example of this in Flanders (Antwerp) is the NGO “**Mothers for Mothers**” which had a ban on headscarves. In 2021, Unia, which is the state authority that fights discrimination, went to court against this. It was ruled that ‘Mothers for Mothers’ discriminates on the basis of religion, because it only admits and helps mothers in need with an Islamic headscarf in the entrance hall and thus excludes them from the full range of services provided. If Muslim women wearing a headscarf wanted to use all services, they had to take off their headscarf. The organisation argued that it introduced a headscarf ban to create a sense of home for mothers who do not feel comfortable around women wearing headscarves. According to the judge, the non-profit organisation assumes that some mothers have Islamophobic feelings. However, such discriminatory and Islamophobic motives could never justify discrimination. According to the judge, it is not acceptable for Muslim mothers to give up part of their sense of home in order to guarantee the sense of home for others.

#### 9.7. Examples of CSOs active in gender empowerment and inclusion field

We have taken this up in sub-section 9.3

## 10. SUMMARY

There are several measurements in place, in Belgium, that enhance gender empowerment. Regarding labour market policy, there is a law in place that disputes the gender pay gap<sup>34</sup>. In terms of education measurements are in place to include more women in STEM, implemented by the STEM agenda 2030 Flanders (Van Houtte, Vanderwegen & Vermeersch, 2014; Van Praag et al., 2021). Regarding health policy numerous positive matters are in place: abortion is legal<sup>35</sup> and contraception is often free for women under 25. Family policy wise gender violence and domestic abuse is included in the Belgian Penal Code

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<sup>34</sup> <https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/arbeid/loonkloof/wetgeving>

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi\\_loi/change\\_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=2018101503&table\\_name=wet](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=2018101503&table_name=wet)

and NAP 2021-2025 is active to fight gender based violence<sup>36</sup>. Looking at gender representation in political, economic and social elites Belgium has a Gender mainstreaming law, a Gender Act and a political gender quota in place<sup>37</sup>. Civil society in Belgium, with many good practices available, is seen as a valuable actor in policy and participates in conferences, besides that a Gender and Development Advisory council has been created in 2014.

However, there are many factors where there are still opportunities to improve. Some of these are at an institutional level. For example, the ban of headscarves in schools, sometimes at school and even at the NGO “Mothers for Mothers’. Furthermore, reimbursement of anti conception and other healthcare is determined on the healthcare you are part of, which can be a complex system to figure out. In addition, childcare, regardless of the subsidisation, is still a big cost. Abortion is legal, but the conditions are still strict leading to ‘abortion tourism’ to neighbouring countries. Moreover, CSOs are seeing their funds being decreased and their conditions for these funds being hardened. Besides, one could argue intertwined with these institutional working points there is a certain mindset present. Belgium scores fairly low on the category of women in social power positions and regarding political power, where a big representation is present, VAWIP is still very present. It is noticeable, but not necessarily troublesome, that the amount of women working part-time is considerably lower than the amount of men. On top of that, regardless of performing better in school women often achieve less high functions than men. Similarly, even though almost half of people in STEM are women, the field of studies they graduate in are often fields that are considered ‘more feminine’ like pharmaceuticals.

## Acronyms & Abbreviations

| Acronym     | Explanation  |
|-------------|--|
| <b>BOEH</b> | ‘Baas Over Eigen Hoofd’ – ‘Boss Over Own Head        |
| <b>CAW</b>  | Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk - Centre for Wellbeing |

<sup>36</sup> [https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal\\_actieplan\\_in\\_de\\_strijd\\_tegen\\_gendergerelateerd\\_geweld\\_2021\\_2025](https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal_actieplan_in_de_strijd_tegen_gendergerelateerd_geweld_2021_2025)

<sup>37</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/belgium>

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| <b>CD&amp;V</b> | Christenen, Democraten & Vlaams - Christian, democratic and Flemish                                |
| <b>CEC</b>      | The Federal council for Equal opportunities between Men and Women                                  |
| <b>CEFH</b>     | Brussels council of Equality between Women and Men   |
| <b>CWEHF</b>    | The Walloon Council for Equality between Men and Women   |
| <b>ECEC</b>     | Early childhood education and care   |
| <b>ECHR</b>     | European Convention on Human Rights  |
| <b>EIGE</b>     | European Institute of Gender Equality  |
| <b>FIDO</b>     | Federal Institute for Sustainable Development  |
| <b>FMC</b>      | Family Justice Centers   |
| <b>FMV</b>      | Federation Migrant Associations  |
| <b>ICCM</b>     | Intercultural Center for Migrants  |
| <b>ICG</b>      | Interdepartmental Coordination Group   |
| <b>ICVA</b>     | Intercultural Women's Centre Antwerp   |
| <b>IUD</b>      | Intrauterine device  |
| <b>MST</b>      | Maths, Science & Technology  |
| <b>NAP</b>      | National Action Plan   |
| <b>NEET</b>     | Early school leaver or young people that are not in education or training                          |
| <b>SDGs</b>     | Sustainable Development Goals  |
| <b>STEM</b>     | Science, technology, engineering, mathematics  |
| <b>STEM</b>     | Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths   |
| <b>VAWIP</b>    | Violence against women in politics   |
| <b>VB</b>       | Vlaams Belang  |
| <b>VDAB</b>     | Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (public employment service of Flanders) |



|      |  |
|------|--|
| VOK  | Vrouwen Overleg Komitee - Female Consult Committee |
| YWCA | Young Women Christian Association                  |

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