September 2026

STOP violence .brussels

Gender-based and sexual harassment

Sheet for professionals



IMPORTANT

The vast majority of gender-based and sexual harassment is committed by men, most of it against women*. People whose gender identity, expression and/or sexual orientation do not correspond to patriarchal society's dominant gender norms are also more likely to be victims of gender-based and sexual harassment. However, gender-based and sexual harassment affects all gender identities: trans- and cis-men and women, as well as non-binary people.

This sheet uses inclusive writing to refer to both perpetrators and victims. When we use the asterisk with the word "women*", we mean anyone who identifies or is identified as such.

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A. Recognising gender-based and sexual harassment

1. Definitions

The term harassment refers to unwanted conduct or a pattern of conduct with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment (source: European Union Directive 2002/73/EC).

Sexual harassment can be defined as *"any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct **of a sexual nature** with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment"* (source: The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention).

While sexual harassment is based on behaviour with a sexual connotation, **gender-based harassment** is specifically based on contempt, belittling, or repeated gender stereotypes. Often regarded as hostile sexism, gender-based harassment is rooted in patriarchal representations of men, women and people from gender minorities or whose sexual orientation is different from the heterosexual norm.

Harassment in all its forms violates a person's dignity and creates a hostile environment. Directive 2002/73/EC of the European Parliament stipulates that it is a form of discrimination and is illegal.

In Belgium, the Law on Sexism states that any person who displays a behaviour or gesture aimed at considering a person as inferior or despising them because of their sex, or reducing them to a sexual dimension, may be punished.

Harassment or discrimination?

Discrimination is unequal treatment based on a protected criterion (age, sex/gender, origin, disability, religion, etc.) with negative consequences.

- E.g., refusal to hire

Harassment is unwanted behaviour that violates a person's dignity or physical and/or mental health.

- E.g., gender-based or sexist insults

2. Types of gender-based and sexual harassment

Harassment can take many forms, which include, but are not limited to, those listed below.

Please note that some of the behaviours listed below may seem harmless or benevolent in the context of an egalitarian and trusting relationship between the parties, but inappropriate in other situations. In all cases, the absence of consent is a key element in establishing whether the behaviour can be considered harassment.

2.1. Non-verbal harassment

- Mentally undressing someone
- Whistling
- Following or stalking
- Making sexual references or gestures with hands or body movements
- Using facial expressions such as winking, blowing kisses or licking lips
- Displaying pornographic posters at work

2.2. Verbal harassment

- Making sexist jokes
- Giving sexist nicknames (e.g., “My darling”)
- Making sexual comments about a person’s body
- Making remarks or insinuations of a sexual nature
- Asking questions about sexual fantasies, preferences or history
- Asking personal questions about a person’s social or sex life
- Doubting a person’s skills based on their gender
- Making sexual comments about a person’s clothing, anatomy or appearance
- Pressuring someone by repeatedly asking them on a date when the person has refused
- Repeatedly asking for a “romantic” date with someone who is not interested
- Using any form of pressure with the actual or apparent aim of obtaining an act of a sexual nature
- Spreading lies or rumours about a person’s sex life or sexual preferences
- Using the wrong gender to address or mention a person, even if the person has already communicated their gender identity

2.3. Physical harassment

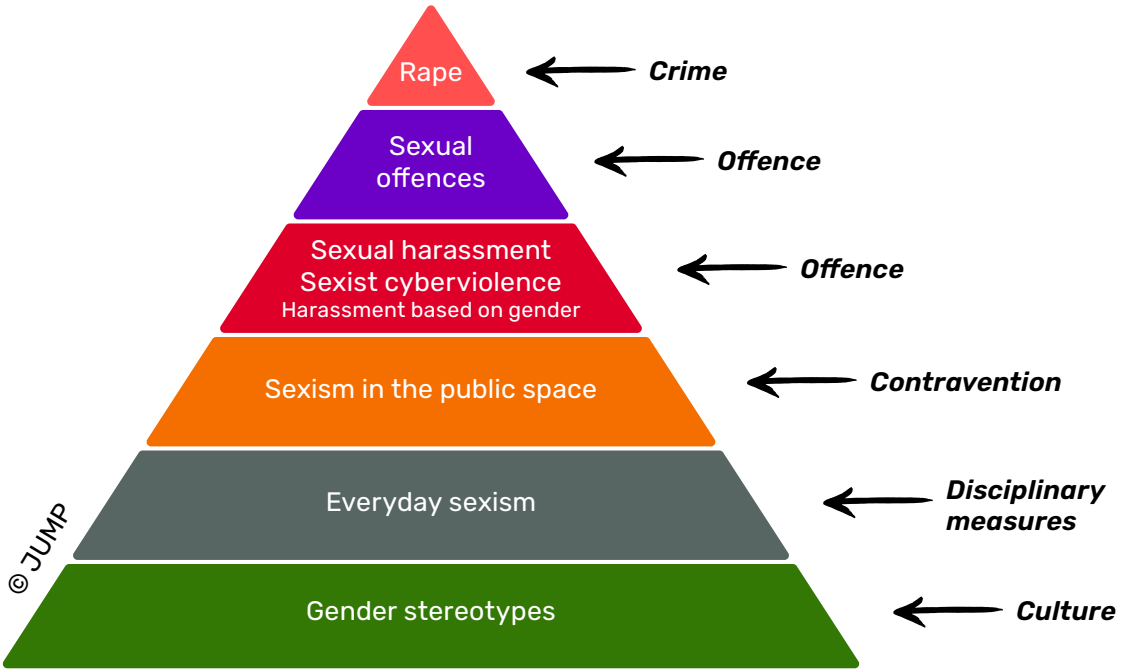
- Neck or shoulder massage
- Touching someone's clothes, hair or body
- Hugging, kissing, caressing, rubbing, touching or sexually rubbing against another person
  N.B.: These are similar to sexual violence. See the stop-violence.brussels sheet on this subject.

3. The pyramid of gender-based and sexual violence

Gender-based and sexual harassment, like other forms of gender-based violence, is rooted in sexism.

Sexism is a discriminatory attitude based on a person's sex or, by extension, gender. Sexism is linked to prejudice and the concept of stereotypes and gender roles, which can include the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically inferior to another.

It can manifest itself in ways that are "common" (e.g., ordinary sexism and gender stereotypes), or more "dangerous" (e.g., rape, attacks on sexual integrity, harassment in its various forms).



4. Harassment locations

In Belgium, gender-based discrimination is prohibited (cf. the 2007 Gender Law). This includes harassment in the private sphere as well as street harassment and harassment in the workplace.

N.B.: Harassment can take place online, in which case it becomes "cyberbullying". It can also take place in settings where there are incestuous acts or an incestuous environment. Both these issues affect many women* and constitute a form of violence on their own and will be covered by separate stop-violence.brussels sheets.

4.1. At work

According to the Belgian Criminal Code, sexual harassment in the workplace is defined as *"any unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour with a sexual connotation, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, or of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment"*.

Gender-based and sexual harassment in the workplace includes many different types of behaviour by one or more people, which are the result of a sexist corporate culture, ranging from gender stereotypes (e.g., Marc asking Brigitte to make coffee because she's a woman), to violations of sexual integrity, and "jokes" referring to the sex or gender of the person being harassed.

In addition, it includes power relationships that put the victim of harassment in a difficult position (*"I really need this job, I have to learn to put up with my boss's inappropriate comments"*); or make them feel powerless (*"My colleague has already touched my behind; I've spoken to human resources about it but nothing is happening and I don't know what to do to make it stop"*).

In the event of a report, the employer is legally bound to take action (see: Role and status of the prevention stakeholders) but, if nothing is done, employees can contact their trade union, the psychosocial risk management department, a specialised association (see the stop-violence.brussels mapping of services), the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, or Unia.

4.2. In the (semi-)public space

Gender-based and sexual harassment in the public space is characterised by unwanted, invasive comments or behaviours that take place in the public space (in this case also known as street harassment) or semi-public space (transport, shops, bars, festivals, student environment, etc.).

This type of harassment takes place in a context of gender inequality and power relations. It can create a feeling of insecurity and have an impact on people's desire to go out and about, dress as they please or enjoy public and semi-public spaces.

Indeed, while cisgender men (whose gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned at birth) generally feel comfortable in the street, women and people from gender minorities tend to develop strategies to counter their feelings of insecurity. For more information, see the brochure *Espace public, genre et sentiment d'insécurité* by the non-profit organisation Garance.

Street harassment or flirting?

Street harassment is not flirting. It starts when the victim shows and/or expresses refusal or avoidance (however this is expressed) but the other person insists. The power relationship between the two parties is unequal, creating a climate of fear and/or frustration.

5. Consequences

Gender-based and sexual harassment can lead to:

- **Physical consequences** such as physical trauma (e.g., bruises, redness or injuries following forced contact), fatigue, pain, sleep disturbance, appetite and digestion problems, hormonal dysfunctions, high blood pressure, physical marks on the person's body, etc.
- **Psychological consequences** such as stress, anxiety, withdrawal, isolation, depression, suicidal thoughts, feelings of powerlessness, insecurity, shame, guilt and loss of self-worth.
- **Behavioural consequences:** substance use (tobacco, alcohol, medication, etc.).

5.1. At work

In addition to the consequences listed above, gender-based and sexual harassment in the workplace can have the following specific consequences for the victim:

- **Social and professional consequences:** misunderstandings from personal or professional circles, social isolation, rejection of others, mistrust of others, professional disinvestment, dismissal, long-term sick leave, etc.
- **Economic consequences:** forced unemployment, medical expenses not reimbursed, legal expenses, etc.

Gender-based and sexual harassment in a professional setting also has consequences for the physical and mental health of employees, whether or not they are directly affected.

5.2. In the (semi-)public space

Gender-based and sexual harassment in the public space is a form of violence which has consequences for the victim, including social and psychological consequences.

- **Psychological consequences:** lower self-esteem, loss of self-worth, feelings of insecurity and fear leading to isolation, etc.
- **Social consequences:** development of avoidance strategies in everyday life (adapting their route, dressing in such a way as not to attract attention, etc.), refusal of social activities, victim blaming by family and friends and/or society (*"What were you doing out at that time of night?"*), etc.

6. Identification and specific features

Gender-based and sexual harassment is a form of violence that mainly affects women of all backgrounds, ages and social classes. However, there are specific factors that can influence the experience and care of harassment victims. We will briefly cover these factors, so that you can better understand the reality for victims and provide them with appropriate support.

6.1. LGBTQIA+

People from LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identities) communities are on the margins of social norms relating to sexuality, gender identity and expression and/or sexual characteristics. This is why they are more at risk of harassment related to their gender identity, sexual orientation or biological reality:

- While most victims of homo- and biphobic harassment are men, most perpetrators are also men.
- Transphobic harassment is more often linked to the victim's gender identity (their gender does not correspond to the one assigned to them at birth) or transition (from one gender identity to another). Discrimination is particularly evident in employment, insurance and healthcare (e.g., requiring non-binary, queer and intersex people to indicate their gender identity but only offering a choice of binary options).
- Reports from intersex people remain rare, reflecting above all a general lack of awareness of their realities.

It should be noted that victims of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia or intersexophobia are often reluctant to lodge a complaint, for fear of being stigmatised, exposed or not accepted in their professional and private lives.

6.2. Sex work/prostitution

Sex workers are one of the most stigmatised populations in our society, and their work is often the subject of social and moral judgement. These people can be harassed by frustrated customers, ex-customers, passers-by, etc.

The nature of sex work can create an environment where people are reluctant to report harassment, reducing their access to medical and social services and institutional protection. This can give a degree of impunity to customers who engage in violent or abusive behaviour.

As sex work is now legal in Belgium, sex workers benefit from the same legal protection as other employees against harassment in the workplace. They therefore have the right to refuse customers or certain practices, and to terminate their contract at any time.

When a person is sexually exploited (subjected to forced sex work), they are essentially working under the radar and do not benefit from the same protection as registered sex workers. The violence suffered is manifold, and gender-based and sexual harassment by their pimps or customers often goes unpunished because the victims have no way of reporting it.

6.3. Residence and migration status

Migrants, especially those in illegal situations or facing economic difficulties, are likely to be more vulnerable.

Companies or individuals may exploit the migratory status of illegal residents, also known as “undocumented migrants”, by threatening to report them to the authorities, forcing them to accept an exchange of goods and services, or exploitative living or working conditions, including gender-based and sexual harassment.

In the case of people seeking international protection, reception facilities are not always specifically adapted to the safety of residents, who may be subjected to gender-based and sexual harassment.



6.4. Language barriers

Migrants or people with a migrant background with little or no knowledge of one of the national languages may find it difficult to communicate with Belgian organisations and institutions. This can create barriers when seeking help, reporting harassment or understanding information about the available resources.

Language barriers can also be encountered in other situations, for example deaf or hard-of-hearing people using sign language, and people with learning disabilities and/or visually impaired people who may find it difficult to fill in and understand administrative documents or use certain media.

Gender-based and sexual harassment should never be minimised because of language differences. Any unwanted behaviour with sexual or sexist connotations is punishable, regardless of the language in which it is expressed.

Gender-based and sexual harassment combined with language barriers makes victims even more vulnerable, and their experience may be minimised, ignored or misunderstood. To avoid punishment, perpetrators may rely on victims' difficulties in understanding or communicating and their lack of access to information about their rights and the available services and resources.

6.5. Mental health problems

People with mental health problems may be more vulnerable and find it harder to report incidents of gender-based or sexual harassment, or have judgement problems, communication difficulties, low self-esteem or tendencies towards isolation.

That's why it's easy for the perpetrators of harassment to minimise the facts (*"She mixes everything up, it's because of her condition") or to discredit the victim's word ("You know she's been through crises before, you can't trust what she says"*).

N.B.: This type of argument is equally used by perpetrators against victims who do not have any mental health problems. This is part of rape culture, and these arguments are a classic "excuse" put forward by perpetrators to counter the victim's comments implicating them.



6.6. Addiction and psychoactive substance abuse

Gender-based harassment and addictions often come together in a vicious circle:

- Sexual harassment and violence, particularly at parties or in the workplace, increase the risk of developing addictions (alcohol, drugs) as a survival mechanism or self-medication against psychological distress.
- People with addictions, i.e. (former) users of drugs or alcohol, may be physically or emotionally vulnerable and may not be taken seriously when reporting incidences of harassment (*"Who's going to believe a drug addict like you?"*).

Non-voluntary consumption: spiking

The practice of "spiking" involves administering drugs, medication or alcohol to a person without their knowledge, either by pouring a substance into a drink or by injection. It is mainly used to make victims more docile to sexually assault, rape, or rob.

Whatever the circumstances, a victim – even one who uses alcohol or psychoactive substances – is never responsible for the violence inflicted on them.



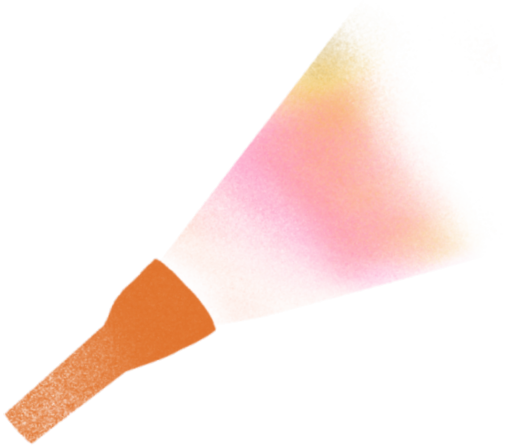
6.7. Homelessness

In November 2024, there were almost 10,000 homeless people in Brussels, including almost 2,000 women, as well as LGBTQIA+ people who have left their families or are seeking asylum.

All homeless people are subject to violence, but homeless women and LGBTQIA+ people are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, including gender-based and sexual harassment in public spaces. Some people will develop invisibility strategies such as not sleeping at night, changing locations every day, camouflaging their femininity or neglecting their hygiene.

The sector's mixed-sex shelters cannot always adequately protect women and LGTBQIA+ people from the risks of sexual assault, as they are potentially exposed to their abusers or dealers and move together on the streets and in shelters.

There are, however, a few mixed-use and non-mixed-use areas, so that these people can be welcomed safely, with services and responses adapted to the serious violence they have experienced. To find these services, see the stop-violence.brussels mapping of services: https://stop-violence.brussels/en/mapping-services



6.8. Disability

Women and LGBTQIA+ people with disabilities face discrimination based on gender and ableism. Their disability can be exploited to minimise the harassment or discredit the victim's statements.

When dealing with the support services or authorities, they may fear being misunderstood, disbelieved or shamed. They may also fear the consequences if they make a report, including isolation, loss of freedom, placement in a care institution, or the loss of personal assistance (for washing or dressing, for example) provided by the perpetrator of the harassment, etc.

B. Taking action in the event of gender-based and sexual harassment

1. Interview methods

1.1. Set the scene

Put the person, their pace and their needs at the heart of the care and respect their agency:

- If the person needs an interpreter (foreign language or sign language), make sure it is a neutral person from outside the situation, not someone close to the victim, as there is a risk of blocking the victim's speech.
- Bear in mind that certain situations of dependence can be an obstacle to free speech. For example, reporting a situation can have real or imagined consequences for the victim, such as the loss of rights, privileges, freedom, essential care, being placed in an institution, and so on. They risk finding themselves in an even more vulnerable situation.
- Do not judge the person, whatever their specificities or situation and show understanding of any difficulties they may have in expressing themselves.
- Take personal and socio-cultural aspects into account during the meeting. The way to deal with intimate issues varies greatly depending on the individual's specific needs.
- Always pay attention to the victim's behaviour, asking if they want to take a break, have a moment alone in a quiet place, and above all, take their time.
- Pay attention to your own positioning too. For some victims, being received by someone who may represent an authority figure, or who is in a position of power, can block the relationship and their speech.



If the victim has disabilities:

- In Belgium, there are no specialist services for disabled victims of gender-based and sexual harassment. They need to be redirected to existing services, despite physical accessibility difficulties (ramps, lift, adapted toilets, circulation, etc.) and communication difficulties (documents in large format, Braille, easy to read, sign language interpreters, etc.).
- Let go of any stereotypes linked to disability (less credible speech, etc.).
- Remain non-judgemental for a neuroatypical or neurodivergent person, as they are often not believed, and their words, story and behaviour are attributed to their "disorder". The expression of emotions by these people does not necessarily correspond to what is typically expected. For example, they may smile during a serious, tragic situation.

1.2. Build trust

As a prelude to any possible discussion:

- Make sure the conversation is confidential and that the person is in a place where they feel safe. For example, some people cannot stand closed doors, while others need to be sure that no one can hear what is being said.
- Make sure you see the victim alone (no children, no spouse, no relatives) and, if necessary, arrange for a neutral interpreter who is sensitive to gender-based violence.

The victim may wish to be accompanied if they are vulnerable or a minor.

1.3. Conduct the interview in a friendly manner

During the interview:

- Respect the person's pace and accept that the resources used are not always sufficient for the story to emerge.
- Let the person give a spontaneous account, then ask increasingly specific questions to avoid influencing them (especially for vulnerable victims or minors).
- If the victim is a minor, avoid asking specific/leading questions about the facts until a TAM (Techniques for interviewing minors) hearing has been carried out. This avoids the risk of collusion.
- Demonstrate that you are open and friendly.
- Bear in mind that this may be the first time the person has spoken out.
- Understand that the person talking has already overcome several obstacles before doing so: fear of being judged, shame, guilt, fear of reprisals, fear of doing the wrong thing, etc.
- Recognise the victim as a victim: it is vital that the person feels heard and believed because a positive social reaction reduces the risk of post-traumatic stress.

DO NOT...

- ✘ Judge
- ✘ Question what is said
- ✘ Trivialise or minimise statements, for example by saying “everything’s going to be fine”
- ✘ Seek to establish the objective truth of the facts
- ✘ Make promises
- ✘ Insist, try to find out (too much)
- ✘ Ask leading questions
- ✘ Touch the person without their prior consent, including for medical procedures
- ✘ Appear distracted (e.g., looking at your screen or watch).

INSTEAD...

- ✔ Make yourself available
- ✔ Reassure, be patient and calm
- ✔ Let the person express their fears, difficulties and emotions.
- ✔ Respect the pace of their speech and accept silences
- ✔ Recognise the person’s experiences and their courage to speak out and believe them, regardless of their specific needs.
- ✔ Bring them back to reality with breathing exercises if necessary
- ✔ Explain what happens next
- ✔ Pay attention to who is accompanying the victim and their relationship (it may be a perpetrator of violence)
- ✔ Provide clear and explicit information

2. Action to be taken after identification

In some cases, it may be appropriate to support the person in front of you, respect their consent and wishes, and give them the information they need to make free and informed decisions.

In other cases, the emphasis may be on listening before acting. The person sometimes needs to talk and may need time before more concrete decisions can be made.

They may also not want to take any action. It's important not to rush them or force your opinion on them. This way, your door will always be open in case they ever change their mind.

2.1. Initial measures

Gender-based and sexual harassment doesn't leave any visible traces, and it's important to work with the victim to note down in their file all the facts that contributed to the violence experienced.

Ideally, you should note the dates, places, comments, perpetrators and any witnesses.

2.2. If gender-based and sexual harassment takes place in a (semi-)public space

Since 2014, gender-based and sexual harassment in the public space (or street harassment) has been punishable by law and carries a prison sentence of between one month and one year and/or a fine of 50€. However, punishment is only possible if the perpetrator is caught in the act by the police, or if the victim lodges a complaint.

If the harassment takes place at a party, at the time of the incident it is possible to refer to security staff, volunteers or organisers. After the event, it's best to refer to the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men (harassment based on gender or gender identity) or Unia (harassment based on gender identity or sexual orientation), which offer options for reporting, legal advice and support, free of charge.

2.3. If the gender-based and sexual harassment takes place in the workplace

If someone confides in you that they are facing gender-based and sexual harassment at work, it's important that you react quickly to help them get out of the situation and avoid traumatic and far-reaching consequences.

As soon as the employer has been informed of the formal/informal complaint or report, the victim is protected. The employer is explicitly prohibited from dismissing the victim or taking other prejudicial measures in connection with the complaint.

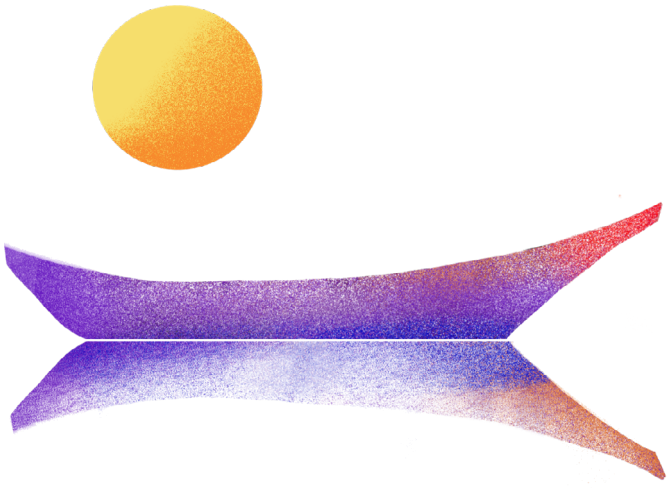
There are several options available, depending on the victim's situation and the identity of the perpetrator:

- Contacting their company's support person: this can be a good first step, but the support person may not be trained to deal with the specific nature of certain situations, for example when various criteria, such as gender, disability, apparent race and sexual orientation, intersect.
- Inform the company's management, provided they are not directly involved in the sexist environment conducive to the harassment the victim is experiencing.
- Contact the internal or external organisation for the prevention of psychosocial risks at work (Mensura, Securex, Liantis, etc.) and/or the trade union of which the victim is a member (FTGB, CSC, CGSLB, etc.).
- Contact the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men to report violence and receive direct protection. If the harassment is based on sexual orientation, contact Unia.
- File a complaint with the police.

Employers can take preventive action or react to such situations:

- Train one or more reference/resource persons on the subject (e.g., support persons).
- Highlight the company's stance against all forms of discrimination, as well as the procedure for dealing with harassment, sexism or discrimination, as soon as a new employee is hired, and ensure the policy (and the sanctions) is widely distributed to staff.
- Display possible resources in various places, physically (notice boards, toilets, etc.) or virtually (intranet).
- Train staff or a team on sexism, prejudice and gender stereotypes.

This list is not exhaustive. To find out more, visit Actiris' website (content available in French and it Dutch): https://www.actiris.brussels/fr/employeurs/realiser-un-plan-de-diversite/



3. Competent services

Here is a list of the main services responsible for dealing with cases of gender-based and sexual harassment.

- **Unia**
  Freephone 0800 12 800 (from Belgium)
  Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 1pm
  Reporting form: https://www.melding.unia.be/en/report-it
- **The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men**
  Freephone 0800 12 800
  Reporting form: https://digital.belgium.be/iaf/hil/igvm/complaint/
- **Police :** Go to one of the police EVA units in the Brussels-Capital Region (contact details on the mapping of services at https://stop-violence.brussels/en)

> Further information: https://stop-violence.brussels/en/mapping-services

