

AI Index: EUR 14/001/2004

Stop violence against women

Belgium – breaking the cycle of violence

[photo caption]

Cover photo: Men and women in Belgium march for women's rights.

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[end caption]

'I feared being rejected and felt ashamed'

Juliette (not her real name) did not dare tell her friends and family that her partner was hitting her. "You feel dirty...you defend him, you feel sorry for him... I feared being rejected and felt ashamed, so I became isolated from everyone around me. I told my doctor that I'd been attacked in the street.

"We met in October 2000. He was very jealous and hassled me endlessly on the telephone and when we were together to know where I was, who I was with, etc... In March 2001 the physical violence started. At the end of November, it was terrible, he had hit me again, I was very bad... I left my place and drove towards the police station, with him following me."

Juliette was referred to a shelter in Brussels, where she made a formal complaint against her partner. About two months later, he came to her home asking for a reconciliation and she called the police again. Despite the seriousness of her complaints, Juliette is not aware of any action by the authorities, other than one letter of inquiry from the prosecuting authorities. "To begin with, I was reluctant to bring a complaint, because I was frightened of retaliation," Juliette says. "But now I wonder what's going on. I've complained twice; the police have a file, is there going to be a trial or judgment, and when?"

[photo caption]

A rally in Brussels, Belgium, calling for an end to violence against women
© Reuters

[end caption]

Despite a number of legislative initiatives undertaken since 1997 to address violence against women in Belgium, it appears that the majority of women's formal complaints of domestic violence do not result in prosecutions. As yet the police can provide no precise statistics on formal complaints, having only recently begun recording domestic violence separately from other assaults. However, a 1998 study found that more than 50 per cent of women had experienced violence within the family, nearly 30 per cent of them at the hands of their partner.

Juliette eventually found sympathy and support from her doctor and at work. "But in general, when people see a woman with a bruise on her face, straight away they say, 'You've been hit by your bloke', for a laugh. I think that's unacceptable. There should be 'zero tolerance' of such so-called jokes."

The cruelty experienced by Juliette was part of a cycle of violence. "My partner and attacker suffered severe violence when he was small. It makes him very anxious... His mother too was beaten by her father and his sister's husband hits her."

Women's rights organizations in Belgium are pressing for specialist professional support services for all victims of domestic violence; suitable treatment and therapy for abusers to prevent re-offending; and support and monitoring of children in families where violence against women occurs, who are often damaged by their experience and may copy what they have seen in later life.

[box - common text]

Support our campaign: together we can make a difference

- **Take an interest:**
Find out and monitor how your community, government, police, security forces and courts respond to violence against women and girls.
- **Take a stand:**
Speak out about violence against women. Challenge prejudiced or dismissive attitudes.
 - **Take action:**
Join our global campaign for women's right to freedom from violence and discrimination.

[end box]

[box - common text]

In the home and in the community, in times of war and peace, millions of women and girls are beaten, raped, mutilated and killed with impunity. Join Amnesty International's campaign to demand action by governments, communities and individuals to stop violence against women throughout the world.

[end box]

Take action against violence in the home in Belgium

While welcoming the legislative initiatives, information and awareness campaigns on violence against women which have been undertaken by the Belgian authorities in recent years, express concern at continuing reports of a high incidence of violence against women in the family.

Call on the Belgian government to:

- increase efforts to implement legislative measures to combat violence against women, to monitor its incidence and to publicize assistance for victims;
- facilitate communication on such legislative initiatives between the relevant federal ministries and the regional and Community governments;
- ensure gender-sensitive training and procedures aimed at addressing the cycle of domestic violence for all police, judicial and medical services involved in frontline services for women who have experienced domestic violence.

Send your appeals to: Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister, Wetstraat 16 - Rue de la Loi 16, B-1000 Bruxelles/Brussel, Belgium, fax: +32 2/512 69 53 - 511 50 21

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What you can do

I would like to join the Stop Violence against Women campaign.

Please send me more information.

I would like to join Amnesty International. Please send me details.

I would like to make a donation to support Amnesty International's work.

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Please send your form to the Amnesty International address in the box below, if there is one:

or to Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House,
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or visit Amnesty International's website at
www.amnesty.org/actforwomen
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