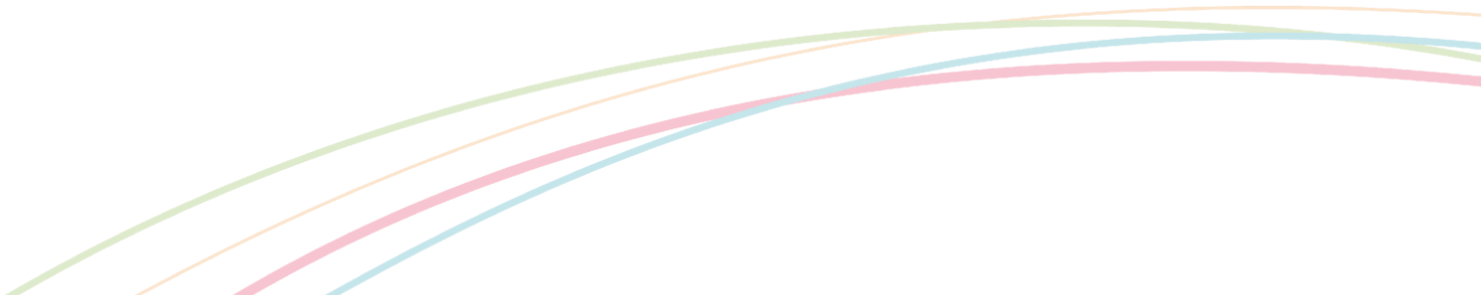


# Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Belgium

Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen (deMens.nu)

# Issue 1: Abortion Access

## Situation in Belgium

- Access to safe and legal abortion is not guaranteed for all.
  - Limitations in law:
    - 1) 12-week gestational limit;
    - 2) Mandatory six-day waiting period.
  - ☒ If these provisions are not respected, criminal sanctions are possible.
  - 42 % of abortions given to people living in Belgium, performed either illegally in Belgium or abroad, or legally abroad (2025)
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## (1) 12-week gestational limit

- Annually: 330 - 800 people travel to Netherlands after 12-week term, at own cost (€1,000 to €2,000).  
→ disproportionately affects people from disadvantaged / marginalized backgrounds.

*"A national legal limit on gestational age does not prevent subsequent abortions, which then take place abroad, but on the contrary, adds additional burdens for women requesting these procedures and thus increases inequalities in access to second-trimester abortion."*

*(Scientific Committee for Evaluation of Abortion Law & Practice in Belgium, 2023)*

### WHO:

- Gestational limits disproportionately impact already disadvantaged people.
- Recommends against laws that prohibit abortion based on gestational age limits.

## (2) Mandatory waiting period

- “perceived as humiliating, suggesting an immaturity in women who should be subjected to a mandatory reflection period, implying that they are incapable of anticipating it themselves.”
- Creates confusion and delays in accessing abortion services.
- Detrimental to women in highly vulnerable situations.

*(Scientific Committee for Evaluation of Abortion Law & Practice in Belgium, 2023)*

### WHO & CEDAW Committee:

- Recognizes that mandatory waiting periods “demean women as competent decision-makers.”
- Recommends states eliminate them.

### Person in an abusive relationship

"My relationship changed drastically when I became pregnant. My partner turned out not to be the man I thought he was. When I said I didn't want the pregnancy, **he threatened me and hit me. He kept me inside for weeks.** I had to flee. I had no stable environment or support system to get my life back on track right away. I was stuck in a kind of limbo, an uncertain situation that completely exhausted me mentally and physically. I decided **I wanted an abortion, but by then I was already past fourteen weeks.**"

### Teenager with no sex education

"We were so young and really didn't know what we were doing. There was no proper sex education. We didn't think about the possible consequences. We **thought that "withdrawal" and washing thoroughly after sex was sufficient** contraception. When I found out I was pregnant, I felt so ashamed. I didn't dare tell my parents. **I'm still a child, and I was terrified. As a result, we waited too long. By the time I finally dared to tell them, I was past the twelve-week mark.** The Belgian legislative framework is not a support, but an obstacle to my future and my self-determination."

### Pregnant from sexual assault

"I became pregnant after sexual assault. I was pregnant by my abuser. The mere thought of it made me sick. I wanted it out of my body as soon as possible. **The mandatory waiting period felt like torture.** It was extremely traumatic. My deeply religious family knew about it and put me under enormous pressure. They said that the pregnancy was a sign from God, a way to lead me away from my "dissolute path" to a life of "purity". I felt trapped. Every day of waiting felt like my abuser's grip on my life was getting tighter. I just wanted to be free, to leave it behind me."

### 16-year-old refugee, pregnant from sexual violence

"I was only sixteen when I arrived in Belgium with my parents after a long, arduous journey via the Balkan route. We were fleeing. Along the way, **like so many other women, I was the victim of sexual violence.** That violence led to a pregnancy. I didn't dare tell my parents. I was too afraid. **By the time I could no longer hide it, I was already in Belgium.** But even when I realised what was happening, I first tried to solve it myself. I had read online that you had to drink toilet un-blocker. That it would put your body into shock and thus terminate the pregnancy. I brought it to my lips, but the smell, the reaction of my body... I started to retch. The shock was so intense that I gave up. That moment, that act of desperation, ultimately brought me to the counsellors at the institution. It was my last resort, and it almost cost me my life."

## Testimonies


### Immigrant Single Mother

"I am a **single Congolese woman with two children.** When I became pregnant, I thought the father would marry me. He promised he would, but as the pregnancy progressed, he ran away. He left me in a terrible financial mess. Unpaid bills, creditors at the door... It turned out he had a gambling addiction. Because of my background, **I have no support from my community, and I don't have the money for an operation abroad.** I am completely dependent on the help of complete strangers from an NGO to find a solution at all. I don't want this, but I have to protect my family."

### Refugee couple in financial distress

"My partner and I love each other dearly, but we are having such a hard time. **We are refugees, struggling every day to keep our heads above water.** We realise that in Belgium, with all the administrative barriers and lack of support for newcomers, we do not have the means to give a child a good chance in life. We come from a deeply religious community where abortion is considered murder. **We had to do this together, in secret, and we both struggle with immense guilt.** We know it was the only realistic choice, but it still feels like we have killed someone, even though that is not the case at all."

We recommend that the Belgian government:

- 1. Revise gestational limits, in line with WHO recommendations.**
  - 2. Remove any reference to a mandatory waiting period in the law that governs abortion provision, in-line with WHO recommendations.**
  - 3. Revoke any laws, policies, or practices that provide for criminal penalties for the act of seeking, obtaining, providing, or assisting in the procurement or obtaining of an abortion.**
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## Issue 2: Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)

Previous UPR Recommendation: *"Take all appropriate action, including programmes of education and training, in order to eliminate prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity"*

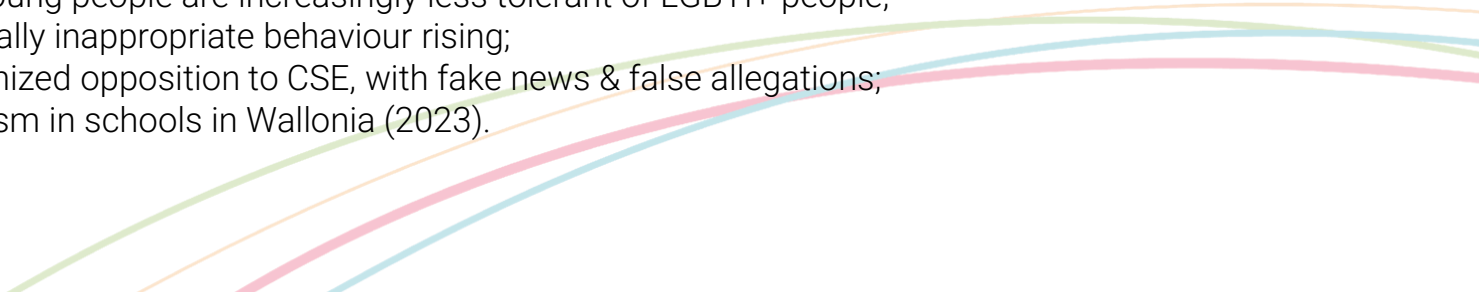
*(Norway, first cycle, supported)*

### **Situation in Belgium**

#### Flanders:

- New CSE goals (2022) barely existent & oversight weakened.
- Targets for secondary CSE do not include SOGI experiences.
- Teachers & schools left vulnerable to anti-CSE groups.

#### Backdrop:

- Evidence that young people are increasingly less tolerant of LGBTI+ people;
  - Reports of sexually inappropriate behaviour rising;
  - Growing & organized opposition to CSE, with fake news & false allegations;
  - Arson & vandalism in schools in Wallonia (2023).
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We recommend that the Belgian government:

- 1. [for Flemish authorities] establish explicit, mandatory, and age-appropriate CSE learning objectives per year, covering topics such as consent, sexual violence, sexual health, diversity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and digital media literacy.**
  - 2. Develop a monitoring system for social movements spreading fake news about CSE.**
  - 3. Launch a central, accessible online platform offering reliable, evidence-based information on CSE goals and benefits.**
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