

STATEMENT

UPR Pre-session on Belgium

Geneva, 25-26 March 2021

Delivered by: the French-speaking Youth Forum and the Flemish Youth Council (Belgium)

1. Presentation of the Organisations

This statement is delivered on behalf of the French-speaking Youth Forum, the Flemish Youth Council and the European Youth Forum. The Belgian French-speaking Youth Forum is the official advisory body representing Belgian youth in the French-speaking Community. The Flemish Youth Council (Vlaamse Jeugdraad) is the official advisory body of the Flemish government on all matters concerning children and young people. The European Youth Forum is the platform of youth organisations in Europe. It is the first time this coalition participates in UPR processes at the national level.

2. National consultations for the drafting of the national report

Both the French-speaking Youth Forum and the Flemish Youth Council have been invited to attend a coordination meeting organized by the Belgian Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs in January 2021, where we were able to comment on the National Report of Belgium.

3. Structure of the statement

This statement will focus on youth-focused inequalities, and more specifically on the following three key areas: access to education (1), youth employment (2) and gender equality, with regard to gender-based violence and gendered division of domestic work (3).

4. Statement

Since its last Universal Periodic Review in 2016, Belgium has made genuine efforts to fully implement the recommendations it accepted. However, there are still some important youth-focused inequalities that need to be addressed. It goes without saying that the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated and exacerbated some already existing inequalities and more specifically the children's and young people's rights.

We also want to mention the efforts of our partners for children's rights in Belgium. We can refer, inter alia, to LaCode and Kinderrechtcoalitie who worked very hard on the situation of homelessness of children and the situation of children in detention centres. We focused on inequalities in education, on the labour market and gender inequalities from a youth perspective.

4.1 Access to education

Better access of vulnerable groups in education was a recommendation made by Angola in 2016.

Despite the commitment of Belgium to achieve this objective, there are still glaring educational inequalities. Students from disadvantaged groups have to redo their year more often, leave school

without a diploma and are less likely to start higher studies after high school. In higher education, only 25% of students whose mother has a lower level of education start their higher studies.

Therefore, we recommend Belgium to examine the root causes of the disproportionate representation of children belonging to minorities and children from disadvantaged backgrounds in education. We also recommend investing sufficient resources, especially taking into account the costs created by the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure the educational system is fully inclusive.

4.2 Youth employment

In 2016, Belgium accepted to tackle youth unemployment and to adopt concrete measures to better integrate the young population into the labour market.

Young people's vulnerability has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Young people who leave school earlier and do not have a high school diploma are very vulnerable. Only people between 21-25 years old can receive an integration allowance which is limited in time. Discriminatory challenges, such as unpaid internships, and discrimination based on origin, socio-economic background or educational level are still too common in Belgium.

Therefore, we recommend improving support measures for young people transitioning from education to employment, and we recommend Belgium to ban unpaid internships and increase the access to integration allowances.

4.3 Gender equality: gender-based violence and gendered division of domestic work

In 2016, Belgium accepted to adopt a specific legislation on domestic violence and to enforce legislation that prohibits discrimination based on gender.

The intersection of gender and young age results in women being structurally disadvantaged. There is a worrying lack of disaggregated data, but evidence shows that young women face gender-based violence and gendered division of domestic work on a daily basis. In 2020, the lockdown has only exacerbated already existing inequalities between men and women.

So, there is an urgent need for a more youth-focused legal framework. We recommend Belgium to address the current lack of disaggregated data to promote a better understanding of the impact of gender-based violence by age group. Also, we recommend updating National Action Plans to better tackle the specific situation of young women.

Finally, thank you for this opportunity to highlight these important challenges. We are open to collaborate and discuss further steps in the advocacy and achievement of these important objectives regarding youth rights in Belgium.