

# Sexual harassment at work in the Belgian Defense: a prevalence study

Kaatje Buyse<sup>1,3</sup>, [kaatje.buyse@mil.be](mailto:kaatje.buyse@mil.be)

Kaat Goorts<sup>1\*,2</sup>, [kaat.goorts@mil.be](mailto:kaat.goorts@mil.be)

Erwin Dhondt<sup>1</sup>, [erwin.dhondt@mil.be](mailto:erwin.dhondt@mil.be)

Dominique Peeters<sup>1</sup>, [dominique.peeters@mil.be](mailto:dominique.peeters@mil.be)

Gwendolyn Portzky, Prof, [Gwendolyn.Portzky@UGent.be](mailto:Gwendolyn.Portzky@UGent.be)

## Authors Affiliations

<sup>1</sup>Belgian Defense, Department of Health and Well being, Evere, Belgium

<sup>2</sup>University of Leuven, Centre for Environment and Health, Leuven, Belgium

<sup>3</sup>Ghent University, Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine, Ghent, Belgium.

Correspondence to Kaatje Buyse, Department of Health and well being, Evere, Belgium; [kaatje.buyse@mil.be](mailto:kaatje.buyse@mil.be)

## **Background**

Sexual harassment at work can have a large impact on general health and wellbeing and on the productivity of the employee. However, today no accurate numbers on sexual harassment exist. Therefore, this study assessed the prevalence of sexual harassment (both physical and non-physical) within the Belgian Defense.

## **Methods**

A representative sample of 399 female military employees was drawn to investigate the prevalence of sexual harassment and mental wellbeing. The impact on mental well being and professional functioning was measured. Some demographic characteristics and their impact on sexual harassment were captured as well.

In 8 depth interviews the impact of sexual harassment on general wellbeing, professional performance and psychosocial wellbeing was explored. In addition, barriers for non-reporting of sexual harassment were interrogated.

## **Results**

The prevalence of non-physical sexual harassment is 36.1% over the last 12 months and 64.4% over the course of a career. Physical sexual harassment has a prevalence of 16.1% and 43.4% respectively. 9% of the female military personnel has been raped over the course of their career.

1 in 3 females within the Defense suffers from reduced mental wellbeing, which was significantly associated with sexual harassment. Female employees also reported an impact of sexual harassment on professional and personal functioning and on their general wellbeing. The willingness to report is rather minimal, due to misunderstanding, disinformation and psychosocial insecurity.

### **Conclusion**

High prevalence numbers were found within the Belgian Defense suggesting an important impact on professional functioning and mental wellbeing of female military personnel.