

Are junior researchers at the Flemish universities willing to report inappropriate behavior in the workplace?

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PREVALENCE OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR AT THE FLEMISH UNIVERSITIES

In 2023, all 17838 junior researchers at the Flemish universities were invited to participate in the five-yearly *Survey of Junior Researchers*, which informs the Flemish government on the performance, well-being, and careers of junior researchers. Junior researchers are all researchers without a PhD, of whom 9 out of 10 are engaged in PhD research. In 2023, the *Survey of Junior Researchers* included, for the first time, several questions regarding inappropriate behavior at work.

In ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54, we found answers to two questions: “How often have junior researchers at the Flemish universities been victimized in the past 12 months when it comes to physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace?” and “Which groups of junior researchers are most at risk of these forms of inappropriate behavior in the workplace?” Our findings in a nutshell: 23.2% of junior researchers—or an estimated 4138 people—were victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, and/or discrimination in the workplace over the course of one year. For more than half of the junior researchers who were victims of inappropriate behavior, it involved a single form, primarily discrimination. For the other victims, it involved a combination of multiple forms, with bullying, intimidation or threats, and discrimination occurring together most frequently. Depending on the type of inappropriate behavior experienced, we observed significant differences by gender, nationality, PhD phase, type of appointment, and between STEM and non-STEM. There were no differences between those involved in educational activities or a PhD track and those who were not, the number of promotors, the science cluster according to the VODS classification, nor were there any differences between universities.

WILLINGNESS TO REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE: A DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

When someone is confronted with inappropriate behavior at work — whether as a victim or a witness—a complex decision-making process follows regarding how to respond. This process can proceed quickly or slowly. It can be linear or characterized by feedback loops between the various stages of the process. This decision-making process encompasses elements from both the surface level and the undercurrent of an organization (see ECOOM-brief 55 for more details). The surface level includes all visible, formal aspects of the organization, which are easy to identify and measure. It includes the mission and vision, goals and plans, the macrostructure in the form of the organizational chart with departments and consultative bodies, as well as the microstructure in the form of employees’ roles and responsibilities. The surface level concerns processes and systems, formal rules and guidelines that steer employee behavior within the organization. The undercurrent of an organization, on the other hand, consists of all the informal, often invisible aspects that—although harder to measure and map—have a massive influence on how the organization actually functions. It primarily concerns culture, values, norms, and beliefs that influence employee behavior, as well as relationships: informal networks, patterns of collaboration, and interpersonal dynamics. It also encompasses employees’ emotions, feelings, attitudes, and motivations. And it also involves unspoken rules and implicit expectations regarding one another and the supervisor.

In Figure 1, we present a highly simplified four-phase model of the complex decision-making process involved in deciding whether or not to officially report inappropriate behavior. Each phase has on one central question. In its simplicity and abstraction, Figure 1 captures both the decision-making process of victims and that of witnesses to inappropriate behavior. The model draws on the many models of willingness to report found in the scientific literature, and which

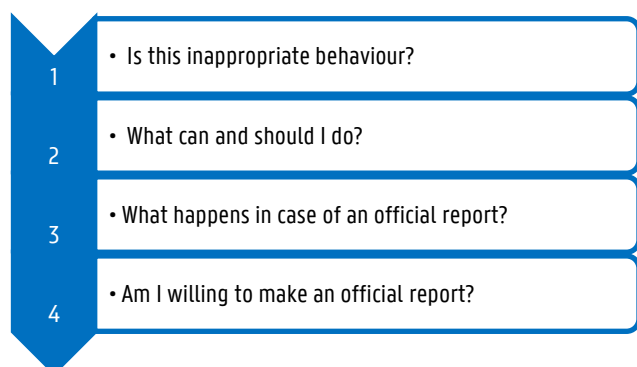
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essentially trace back to the conceptual framework on bystander intervention developed by Latane & Darley (1968) (see ECOOM-brief 58).

Figure 1: Decision-making process following discovery of inappropriate behavior



Is this inappropriate behavior?

Answering this seemingly simple question is often very difficult. We have already discussed this in greater detail in ECOOM-briefs 53 through 55. We reiterate that certain behaviors are punishable by law and are therefore clearly regarded by the legislature as crossing a line. However, this applies only to a limited number of behaviors (such as physical violence, bullying, threats, and a few others). But even within this legal framework, this does not always lead to clarity (e.g., the assessment of what constitutes bullying). Other behaviors are not automatically criminal, which necessitates a personal evaluation of what constitutes “crossing the line”. Personal evaluations, however, are not arbitrary or entirely unique to the individual but are guided by (changing) value frameworks regarding what—given a specific context—constitutes acceptable behavior. To this day, it remains unclear from which diversity of value frameworks employees within the Flemish universities perceive situations and behaviors as inappropriate. It is clear, however, that universities—and sometimes even faculties—use formal regulations, guidelines, and codes of conduct to specify what they consider to be desirable or acceptable behavior in the workplace. But employees’ perceptions of what constitutes desirable or acceptable behavior are not determined solely by what is formally laid out in writing. It is also, and perhaps most significantly, influenced by what goes on beneath the surface of the organization (the undercurrent). It is within this undercurrent that it is determined which behavior is actually desired, common, or accepted in day-to-day practice. This is not the same for everyone or within every group. For example, it may be common practice for one supervisor or in one research group that not all vacation days are taken, that sexually suggestive jokes “are ok” or that everyone remains available in the evenings or on weekends. For other supervisors or in other research groups, such practices are undesirable or unacceptable. The undercurrent not only determines what is desirable, common and acceptable, but also dictates the level of confidence in an appropriate response to inappropriate behavior should it occur.

What can and should I do?

Once behavior is perceived as inappropriate, the question arises: “What can and should I do?” Or, in other words: “Do I need help/something else, is action required?”

Employees who feel that their boundaries have been crossed—whether once or repeatedly—could overcome possible barriers and address the person(s) involved directly. Alternatively, they can informally bring this to the attention of a supervisor, such as a promotor, department chair, or dean. Recent research by the Netherlands Labor Authority (2024) at the 14 Dutch universities shows that supervisors play a key role and are seen as the cause of many problems, but at the same time also as the solution to problems and the creators of an open and safe work environment. Employees at the Dutch universities indicated that within their institutions, there is a strong emphasis on “a good talk” and informal resolution of incidents of inappropriate behavior. Essential conditions for resolving issues informally are that both the supervisor and the HR department are safe and trustworthy discussion partners for employees. When employees are dealing with a supervisor who is the source of the inappropriate behavior or who refuses to cooperate in finding a solution, such an informal resolution is out of reach. Employees then see few options for addressing the issue (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024). At the same time, it appears that those who do involve their supervisor may end up empty-handed: they feel they are not being taken seriously, no action is taken on the report, or the outcome does not lead to the restoration of a safe and ethical work environment (see also Schraudner et al., 2019). Sometimes victims indicate that “the problem is known”, but that the perpetrator is not punished “from above”, rather supported (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024). In some cases, reporting the inappropriate behavior can cause the unsafe work situation to escalate even further (see also Schraudner et al., 2019).

Those who are confronted with inappropriate behavior may be more likely or find it easier to turn to someone in their personal circle, or to a colleague (whether or not in a supervisory role) who is perceived as approachable and trustworthy (see also Keashly, 2021; Keashly & Neuman, 2008; Schraudner et al., 2019). Informally sharing experiences of inappropriate behavior with people inside and outside the organization can help to better understand and process the behavior (Lewis, 2003) or lead to potential interventions (Keashly & Neuman, 2018). The informal sharing of experiences with inappropriate behavior shapes perceptions of what happens in the university workplace. It shapes not only the perceptions of the organization’s own employees in the undercurrent but also those of the public.

When the question “What can and should I do?” leads not only to informal discussions about experiences of inappropriate behavior, but also to an official report to an internal or external reporting center, legal issues may play a more significant role. What are my rights and obligations? What is punishable by law? Am I obligated to report inappropriate behavior if someone is in danger? Can this be done anonymously? What about the burden of proof? The recipient of the report should guide the reporter by explaining the legal and regulatory framework in understandable terms.

Accurate information on the legislation regarding inappropriate behavior in the workplace can be found, among other places, on the website of the Federal Public Service Employment, Labor, and Social Dialogue (FPS WASO, 2023). This website provides information not only on the protection of victims of inappropriate behavior, but also on the protection of employees who have defended the victim or testified on his or her behalf. From a labor law perspective, victims or witnesses of inappropriate behavior are not obligated to report such behavior. However, there is a civic duty to assist a person in distress. This usually involves an acute emergency in cases of physical abuse or assault, such as in cases of physical violence or rape. This duty to assist in an emergency has implications for the extent to which a report of inappropriate behavior can remain anonymous (see *infra*).

In theory, universities could include in their employment regulations or codes of conduct an obligation to take action or report instances of inappropriate behavior. However, this obligation is difficult to enforce, precisely because inappropriate behavior is defined by what the individual personally perceives as inappropriate, unless it involves conduct that is legally punishable. Universities are therefore limited in this regard and can only use regulations, guidelines, and codes of conduct to indicate what behavior they expect from employees, what they consider acceptable or even desirable. These guidelines and codes of conduct are often vague and general, and open to interpretation. This is inherent to the personal experience of behavior as either inappropriate or not. The question arises as to whether employees at the Flemish universities, and junior researchers in particular, actually have accurate knowledge of the existence and content of these regulations, guidelines, and codes of conduct. Research in other organizations has already shown that employees are not always equally familiar with them (Kröger et al., 2022; Government Commission on Sexually Inappropriate Behavior and Sexual Violence, 2024).

What happens in case of an official report?

Anyone who becomes a victim or witness of inappropriate behavior and is considering filing an official report may wonder what then actually happens. This question explores exactly what a report entails, where a report can be filed, what rules apply, and what the reporting center does with the report.

All Flemish universities provide information on their websites about where to file a report, and the VLIR Ad Hoc Working Group on Inappropriate Behavior highlights the use of decision trees that help clarify the steps involved in filing a report and its follow-up (VLIR, 2022-a; 2023). Is the available information sufficiently reaching employees? And more specifically, is it reaching more vulnerable groups such as junior researchers? Do they know where to report inappropriate behavior? Based on the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, in ECOOM-brief 55 we were able to determine that 2 in 5 junior researchers do not know where to report inappropriate behavior. Among certain groups, this figure rises to 3 in 5. Junior researchers of foreign origin and/or with a foreign scholarship, and junior researchers in more precarious positions, were found to be less knowledgeable of where to report

inappropriate behavior. Are the universities' websites insufficiently visible or unclear? In a status report, the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) points to several opportunities for improvement (VLIR, 2023).

For an employee, making an official report is often a major step. It requires both the ability and the willingness to do so. The visibility of a reporting center, clarity regarding the roles it can and cannot fulfil, and clarity regarding admissibility, procedures, and timelines for following up on a report, play a major role (see also VLIR, 2022-b). This applies equally to the accessibility and independence of a reporting center, the confidentiality, and the option to file a report anonymously (Government Commission on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence, 2024; VLIR, 2022-b). The law obligates employers to allow employees to report inappropriate behavior anonymously. In practice, however, this anonymity is not always 100% guaranteed. After all, confidential advisors at reporting centers, including staff at the Flemish Reporting Center for Transgressive Behavior, are required to take action if there is a threat to third parties (VMGOG, n.d.). Furthermore, universities may decide to launch an investigation in the event of multiple anonymous reports concerning the same individual, even if none of the anonymous reporters themselves have called for action. It is not unthinkable that such investigations may, at some stage, compromise the anonymity of the reporters. It also sometimes happens that a reporter is (cautiously) approached to waive the anonymity requirement because this opens up many more possibilities for following up on the report (VLIR, 2023). In the case of an official complaint, anonymity is not an option anyway. The Flemish universities state on their websites that different procedures are initiated for reports and complaints. In both cases, the burden of proof remains with the person making the report or filing the complaint.

Within each reporting center, the role of confidential advisors is of crucial importance. Confidential advisors assist employees and provide information about available procedures in cases of social insecurity or inappropriate behavior (Government Commission on Sexual Inappropriate Behavior and Sexual Violence, 2024; VLIR, 2022-a; 2022-b). As a result, confidential advisors play a crucial role in maintaining and building trust in the university's approach to inappropriate behavior. Some organizations, including the Flemish universities, choose to work with external confidential advisors in addition to an internal one, such as a prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects from an external occupational health and safety service. The referral to external confidential advisors may be based on the idea that this might be more accessible for employees (see, e.g., Gao et al., 2015), but the question arises as to whether this is also perceived as such. That same idea of accessibility was also one of the reasons for the establishment of the Flemish Reporting Center for Transgressive Behavior, which was launched in September 2023 and enables reporting of inappropriate behavior in all organizations falling under the jurisdiction of the Flemish government, including the Flemish universities (Flemish Parliament, 2024; see also ECOOM-brief 55). For those seeking further clarification on the role and status of confidential advisors and, by extension, all actors involved in an organization's well-being policy, we

refer you to the website of the Federal Public Service Employment, Labor, and Social Dialogue (FPS WASO, n.d.-a).

Am I willing to make an official report?

The willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior requires more than just theoretical knowledge of the what, where, when, and how of an official report. Reporting centers that are visible and accessible but are not perceived as clear and reliable by employees in terms of their role, mandate, and effectiveness will negatively impact the willingness to report. The same applies when employees find it difficult to assess how their report will be handled in practice, whether their anonymity will be preserved at all times, and what the expected consequences might be and at what point in time. Other factors that may play a role include the nature of the inappropriate behavior, whether the behavior is legally punishable, who is engaging in the inappropriate behavior, and how much objective evidence can be provided. If reporters expect that the follow-up will be inadequate—for example, because rumors are circulating that previous reporters were not adequately protected or were even disadvantaged—this will reduce their willingness to report (Kröger et al., 2022). Many victims do not report because they believe it will not yield any results anyway (Hoebel et al., 2022; Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024; Schraudner et al., 2019). For junior researchers in particular, being able to assess the potential consequences and timelines of a report is of crucial importance: after all, their position at the university is vulnerable. As a result, considering—or actually proceeding with—an official report is often accompanied by fear (e.g., Schraudner et al., 2019; Van Den Bossche et al., 2025). Reporters, whether as victims or witnesses, are often afraid for their own position within the organization and for possible retaliation (Gewin, 2025; Horbach et al., 2020). There can be various reasons for this, and these may depend on who engaged in the inappropriate behavior. A primary reason concerns their dependency related to the renewal of an employment, the approval to defend their PhD dissertation, or the need for positive letters of recommendation in the future (Gewin, 2025). For international junior researchers, there is sometimes additional dependency regarding a residence permit and housing as well. This dependency is particularly large for junior researchers working in a field or on a topic for which there are only a handful of specialists worldwide available (Klingberg, 2025). Second, the willingness to report may be hindered by the potential blame from colleagues or supervisors that reporting would disrupt dynamics within the team or in the workplace, or that a report would be detrimental to the team's *branding* or reputation (see also Schraudner et al., 2019). A third important reason linked to the position of the potential reporter could be the hierarchy within the organization: the supervisor is often directly or indirectly involved in the perceived socially unsafe situation and holds a position of power. Fear for abuse of power can inhibit the willingness to report (Kröger et al., 2022). Fear of being blamed for making a report, of being accused of lacking social or communication skills, of being unable to handle conflict, of being too sensitive or easily upset, or other forms of *victim blaming* can equally inhibit the willingness to report.

Fear of negative reactions and retaliation is also a crucial barrier when inappropriate behavior not only harms the individual or the organization but also harms the public interest (e.g., Cassematis & Wortley, 2013; Kaptein, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Then, the stakes are particularly high. Employees are often the first to become aware of such misconduct. This puts them in the best position to inform those who can take action against it. Whistleblowers report work-related misconduct within their own organization or to an external body, or bring the misconduct to public attention, with the aim of preventing harm or imminent harm to the public interest. In 2019, it was decided that legislation was needed in the member states of the European Union to better protect whistleblowers (European Commission, n.d.). Since 2022, Belgium has had a clear and accessible whistleblower regulation that offers strong protection to whistleblowers. This system applies to both the private and public sectors (FPS WASO, n.d.-b). Also relevant to the Flemish universities is the Decree on the Protection of Whistleblowers in Education in the Flemish Community (Flanders - Education and Training, 2023). This decree was approved in June 2023. The question arises, however, whether this protection against retaliation is effective enough to actually encourage whistleblowers to come forward.

ASSESSING WILLINGNESS TO REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE THROUGH THE SURVEY OF JUNIOR RESEARCHERS 2023

In the following, we examine the extent to which junior researchers at the five Flemish universities are willing to report inappropriate behavior. To this end, we use the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, collected by ECOOM HR in R&D commissioned by the Flemish government. This five-yearly survey is consistently targeting all junior researchers at the Flemish universities. In 2023, there were 17838 such researchers. For more details on the data collection, respondents, and topics, we refer to ECOOM-briefs 51 and 53.

In the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, we included, for the first time, several questions about inappropriate behavior (see ECOOM-briefs 53 through 58). In the current ECOOM-brief, we zoom in on the answers junior researchers gave us to two hypothetical questions: "If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?" and "If you were to witness inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?". The response options were "yes, but only in case I can report it anonymously", "yes, even in case I cannot report it anonymously", "I don't know if I would report it. It depends", "no", and "I prefer not to answer this question". We did not provide definitions or descriptions of inappropriate behavior in the question, nor did we clarify the difference between a report and a complaint. Regarding this latter distinction, readers can find more information in ECOOM-brief 55. When asked about willingness to report in case of being a victim, 76 respondents indicated they preferred not to answer the question, and 11 respondents left the question unanswered. When asked about their willingness to report in case of witnessing inappropriate behavior in the

workplace, 73 respondents indicated they preferred not to answer the question, and 8 people left the question unanswered.

In what follows, we focus specifically on four research questions:

1. *To what extent are junior researchers willing to officially report in case they were to be a victim or witness of inappropriate behavior in the workplace?*
2. *Does willingness to officially report differ depending on whether the inappropriate behavior is experienced as victim or as witness?*
3. *Does willingness to officially report differ depending on whether a junior researcher was a victim of inappropriate behavior in the workplace in the past year?*
4. *Does the willingness to officially report differ depending on whether junior researchers know where to report inappropriate behavior?*

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE JUNIOR RESEARCHERS WILLING TO OFFICIALLY REPORT IN CASE THEY WERE TO BE A VICTIM OR WITNESS OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE?

Figure 2 shows that approximately half of the junior researchers at the Flemish universities would officially report if they were to be victims of inappropriate behavior at work: for 22.8% of junior researchers, this is on the condition that they can report anonymously, while 28.4% indicate that they would also report even if it cannot be done anonymously. Furthermore, 44.0% of junior researchers appear to be unsure whether they would officially report as a victim: it depends. For 2.8% of junior researchers, we note that they are not willing to officially report, and 2.0% indicate that they prefer not to answer the question.

Figure 2. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior among junior researchers at the Flemish universities in case they were to be victims or witnessed such behavior, 2023 (N=3877)

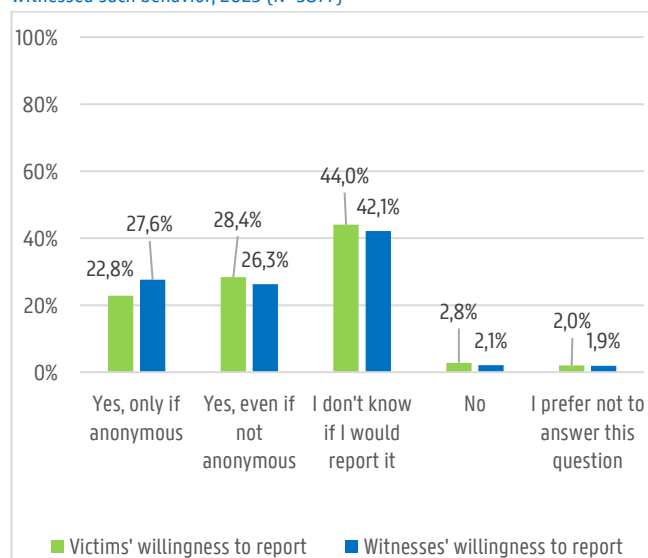


Figure 2 further shows that the willingness to report inappropriate behavior is slightly higher among witnesses than among victims: we note a somewhat higher proportion of “yes” (53.9% versus 51.2%), slightly less doubt (42.1% versus 44.0%), and slightly fewer “no” (2.1% versus 2.8%). There is no noteworthy difference in reluctance to reply between victims and witnesses.

DOES WILLINGNESS TO OFFICIALLY REPORT DIFFER DEPENDING ON WHETHER THE INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IS EXPERIENCED AS VICTIM OR AS WITNESS?

In Table 1, we cross the responses of junior researchers to the hypothetical questions regarding their willingness to report as victims and as witnesses. A Chi²-test indicates a statistically significant association ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Relationship between willingness to file an official report as a victim of inappropriate behavior and willingness to file an official report as a witness to inappropriate behavior; junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877)

	Willingness to report as witness				
	Yes, only if anonymous %	Yes, even if not anonymous %	I don't know if I would report it %	No %	I prefer not to answer this question %
Willingness to report as victim					
Yes, only if anonymous	60.0	16.5	22.2	0.6	0.7
Yes, even if not anonymous	22.6	56.0	20.7	0.3	0.4
I don't know if I would report it	15.9	14.1	67.5	1.9	0.6
No	10.3	7.5	42.1	36.4	3.7
I prefer not to answer this question	7.9	9.2	15.8	2.6	64.5

Note. Significant based on Chi²-test ($p < 0.001$)

First, we see that three-quarters of junior researchers who are willing to report anonymously as victims, are also willing to report as witness: 60.0% would do so anonymously again, but 16.5% say they are also willing to report as witnesses if anonymity is not possible. In addition, we note that 22.2% of junior researchers who are willing to report anonymously as victim are unsure whether they would also report as witness, and only 0.6% say they would not officially report as a witness. Some junior researchers indicated that, as victims, they would officially report even if they could not do so anonymously. In this group, we note that 56.0% would do the same if they witnessed inappropriate behavior, while 22.6% would report as witness, but only in case it can be done anonymously. For 20.7%, we note hesitation about reporting as witness. Rarely do respondents indicate that they are unwilling to report. Among the group of junior researchers who are unsure whether they would officially report being a victim of inappropriate behavior, 67.5% are also unsure about reporting as a witness. We find 30% as willing to

report, either on the condition of anonymity or not. 1.9% are unwilling to report as a witness.

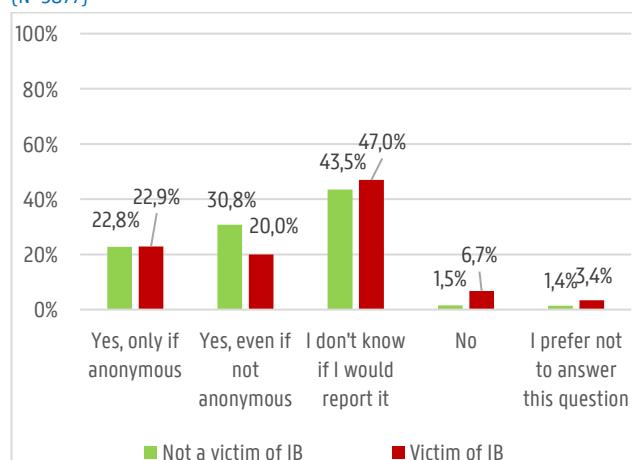
Among the group of junior researchers who, as victims, would not report inappropriate behavior, 10.3% would report it anonymously if they were witnesses, and 7.5% are okay with reporting even when not anonymously. Among the 42.1% of junior researchers who, as victims, would not report it, we see hesitation, and 36.4% give a firm “no” as answer.

And what about those who preferred not to answer the question regarding their willingness to report as a victim? In this (small) group, 64.5% showed the same reluctance when asked about their willingness to report as a witness. Among 7.9% of junior researchers, we note a willingness to report anonymously as a witness, and among 9.2%, we note a willingness to report even if it cannot be done anonymously. Among 15.8%, there is doubt: the willingness to report as a witness depends on a number of conditions. We note that 2.6% of junior researchers would not officially report as a witness of inappropriate behavior.

DOES WILLINGNESS TO OFFICIALLY REPORT DIFFER DEPENDING ON WHETHER A JUNIOR RESEARCHER WAS A VICTIM OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE IN THE PAST YEAR?

In the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023*, we asked about being victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination at work in the year preceding the survey (see also ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54). In what follows, we distinguish between junior researchers who have been victims and those who have been spared from inappropriate behavior.

Figure 3. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior (IB) if they were to be a victim: break down by actually being victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past 12 months – junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877)



Note: Significant based on Chi²-test (p<0.001)

Table 2. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior if they were to be a victim: break down by actually being victim of sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past 12 months—junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877) (§)

	Yes, only if anonymous %	Yes, even if not anonymous %	I don't know if I would report it %	No %	I prefer not to answer this question %
Sexual harassment *					
No	22.7	28.6	44.1	2.7	1.8
Yes	25.2	19.6	44.9	5.6	4.7
Bullying ***					
No	22.5	29.4	44.1	2.4	1.7
Yes	25.9	18.2	45.5	6.8	3.7
Intimidation or threats ***					
No	22.8	29.5	44.0	1.9	1.8
Yes	22.7	17.1	46.8	10.2	3.2
Discrimination ***					
No	22.7	29.7	44.0	2.0	1.6
Yes	23.6	19.8	45.8	7.0	3.8

Note: Significance based on Chi²-test * = p < 0.05, *** = p < 0.001

Note §: The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* also asked about being victim of physical violence. Due to the limited number of indicated incidents (N=20), we have excluded this form of inappropriate behavior from this table.

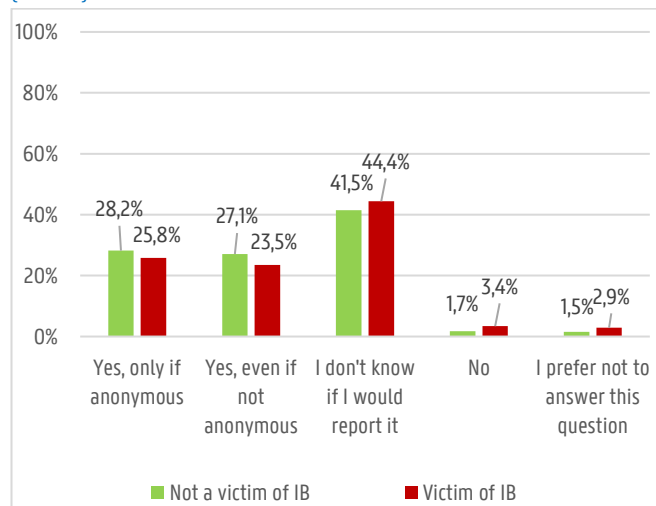
In both groups, we first examine their responses to the hypothetical question: “If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?” We present the responses in Figure 3 and Table 2. Figure 3 shows that victims of one or more forms of inappropriate behavior respond significantly differently to the question about their willingness to report than those who were not victims (Chi² p<0.001). Although victims show virtually identical willingness to report anonymously (22.8% vs. 22.9%), they are less likely to choose the response option “yes, even in case I cannot report it anonymously” (20.0% vs. 30.8%). Victims also more often indicate that they are unwilling to report (6.7% vs. 1.5%) and slightly more often state that they prefer not to answer the question (3.4% vs. 1.4%). This pattern, shown in Figure 3, is also reflected in Table 2, where we zoom in on specific forms of inappropriate behavior. We observe the lowest willingness to report among victims of intimidation or threats.

Let us now examine the response patterns to the hypothetical question: “If you were to witness inappropriate behavior, would you officially report it?” The responses are presented in Figure 4 and Table 3.

Figure 4 shows that junior researchers who themselves were victim of one or more forms of inappropriate behavior at work in the past year are significantly less willing to officially report as a witness (Chi² p<0.001). We observe a lower willingness to report for both anonymously (25.8% vs. 28.2%) and non-anonymously (23.5% vs. 27.1%). Victims also indicate slightly more often that they are unwilling to report (3.4% vs. 1.7%) or show more doubt (44.4% vs. 41.5%). They also

indicate more often that they would prefer not to answer the question (2.9% vs. 1.5%).

Figure 4. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior (IB) in case of being witness: break down by actually being victim of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past 12 months – junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877)



Note: Significant based on the Chi²-test (p<0.001)

Table 3. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior in case of witnessing it: break down by actually being a victim of sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, or discrimination in the workplace in the past 12 months—junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877) (§)

	Yes, only if anonymous %	Yes, even if not anonymous %	I don't know if I would report it %	No %	I prefer not to answer this question %
Sexual harassment					
n.s.					
No	27.6	26.5	41.9	2.1	1.9
Yes	27.1	18.7	50.5	2.8	0.9
Bullying **					
No	27.7	26.7	42.1	2.0	1.6
Yes	27.6	21.6	43.5	3.1	4.3
Intimidation or threats ***					
No	27.8	26.9	41.7	1.8	1.8
Yes	25.1	20.6	47.1	4.5	2.7
Discrimination ***					
No	27.6	26.5	42.6	1.8	1.5
Yes	27.6	25.4	39.3	3.8	4.0

Note: Significance based on the Chi²-test

n.s.=not significant, **=p<0.01 *** =p<0.001

Note §: The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* also asked about being victim of physical violence. Due to the limited number of indicated incidents (N=20), we have excluded this form of inappropriate behavior from this table.

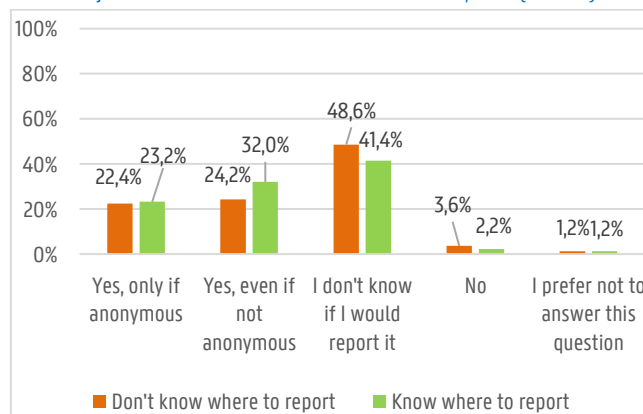
Do we also see this response pattern, as shown in Figure 4, when we zoom in on specific forms of inappropriate behavior? Table 3 shows that

this response pattern is fully reflected among victims of bullying, and intimidation or threats. For victims of sexual harassment, we observe a response pattern quite similar to that in Figure 4 (except for the last response category), but the differences between victims and those who were spared of sexual harassment are not statistically significant. With regard to discrimination, we do observe a significant difference based on being victim, but this is much less pronounced than in the case of being victim of bullying and of intimidation or threats.

DOES THE WILLINGNESS TO OFFICIALLY REPORT DIFFER DEPENDING ON WHETHER JUNIOR RESEARCHERS KNOW WHERE TO REPORT INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR?

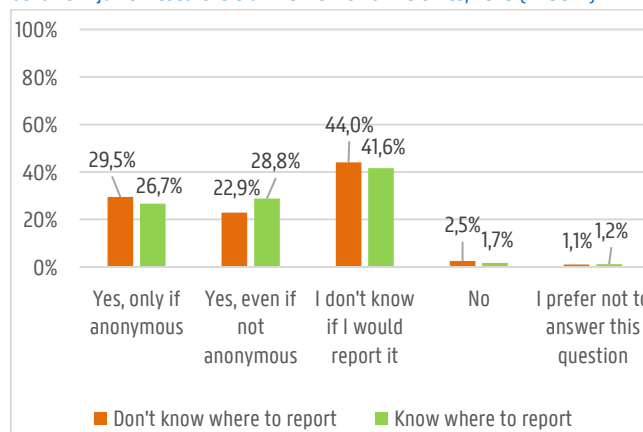
In ECOOM-brief 55, we examined the extent to which junior researchers know where to report inappropriate behavior in the workplace. Does knowing where to report increase their willingness to do so?

Figure 5. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior in the workplace in case one is victim of it: break down based on knowing where to report such behavior– junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877)



Note: Significant based on the Chi²-test (p<0.001)

Figure 6. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior in the workplace in case of witnessing it: break down based on knowing where to report such behavior– junior researchers at the Flemish universities, 2023 (N=3877)



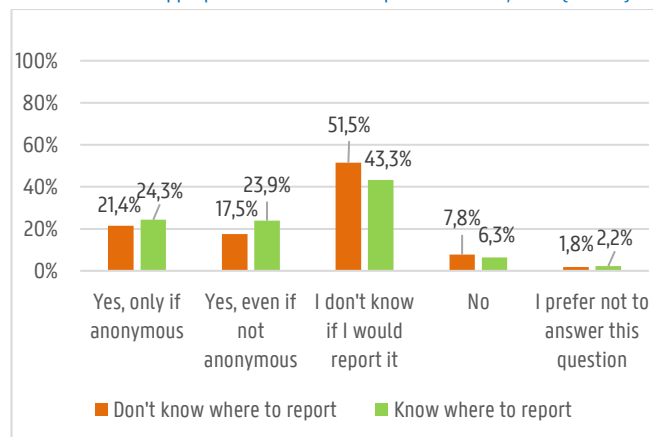
Note: Significant based on the Chi²-test (p<0.001)

Figure 5 examines the willingness to report in the hypothetical scenario of being a victim of inappropriate behavior at work. The pattern is clear: junior researchers who know where to report inappropriate behavior show a significantly higher willingness to report (Chi² p<0.001). This

higher willingness to report is not so much reflected in the willingness to report anonymously (23.2% vs. 22.4%), but rather in a greater willingness to report non-anonymously (32.0% vs. 24.2%), less doubt about whether or not to report (41.4% vs. 48.6%), and less “no” (2.2% vs. 3.6%).

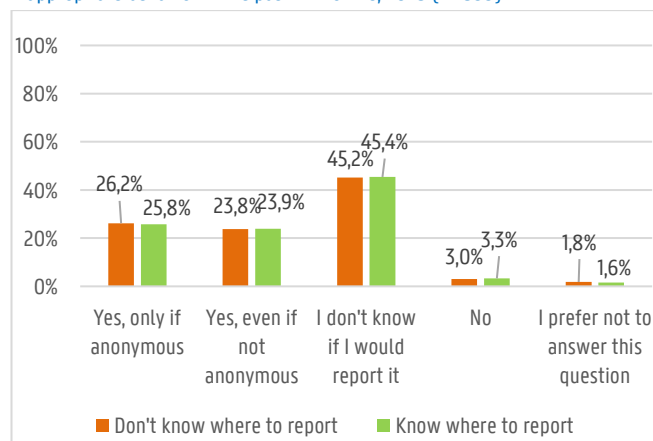
Figure 6 examines the willingness to report in the hypothetical scenario of witnessing inappropriate behavior at work. Here, too, the pattern is clear: junior researchers who know where to report inappropriate behavior show a significantly higher willingness to report ($\chi^2 p < 0.001$). We do not see a higher willingness to report anonymously (26.7% vs. 29.5%), but we do see it for non-anonymously (28.8% vs. 22.9%), less doubt about whether or not to report (41.6% vs. 44.0%), and slightly fewer “no” (1.7% vs. 2.5%).

Figure 7. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior in the workplace if one is a victim of it: break down based on knowing where to report inappropriate behavior— junior researchers at the Flemish universities who were victims of inappropriate behavior in the past 12 months, 2023 (N=899)



Note: Not significant based on the χ^2 -test ($p > 0.05$)

Figure 8. Willingness to officially report inappropriate behavior in the workplace if witnessed: break down based on knowing where to report inappropriate behavior— junior researchers at the Flemish universities who were victims of inappropriate behavior in the past 12 months, 2023 (N=899)



Note: Not significant based on the χ^2 -test ($p > 0.05$)

While Figures 5 and 6 focus on all junior researchers at Flemish universities, Figures 7 and 8 zoom in on those junior researchers who, in the past year, have been victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, and/or discrimination in

the workplace. How did these victims respond to the hypothetical questions “If you were the victim of inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?” and “If you were a witness to inappropriate behaviors, would you officially report it?”. Figures 7 and 8 show that those who were victims in the past year and know where to report inappropriate behavior do not demonstrate a higher willingness to report it. Neither as victims nor as witnesses. The positive correlation between knowing where to report and willingness to report—which we noted in Figures 5 and 6—therefore only applies to those who were not victims of inappropriate behavior at work in the past year.

DISCUSSION

Officially reporting inappropriate behavior in the workplace is far from self-evident for employees. However, for those involved, officially reporting is often a crucial step in the healing process. But also for the organization's effective functioning official reports of inappropriate behavior are extremely important: reports can help adjust and optimize operations, structures, procedures and tasks, as well as values, norms, and attitudes that ultimately lead to a socially safe and ethical work environment. Such a work environment not only has a positive impact on employees' professional performance and productivity but also contributes to their trust in their university. A high level of willingness to report inappropriate behavior in the workplace can be an indication of employees' trust in their employer's policies.

What is the current state of willingness to report inappropriate behavior in the workplace at the Flemish universities? We were unable to find any research on this topic. Do Flemish universities have insight into this willingness to report through their periodic well-being surveys? If so, what patterns emerge? And are these patterns consistent across all universities? What policy recommendations are needed? And what are the *good practices* that can be shared?

In 2023, the new *Survey of Junior Researchers* provided an opportunity to gain initial insights for the five Flemish universities. Through this survey, the Flemish government aims to monitor all junior researchers at the Flemish universities every five years regarding performance, well-being, and career dynamics. In 2023, some questions regarding inappropriate behavior were asked for the first time. The findings have since lifted a corner of the veil on the extent to which junior researchers experience inappropriate behavior in the workplace (ECOOM-brief 53), who is most at risk (ECOOM-brief 54), and the extent to which junior researchers know where to report (ECOOM-brief 55). In the current brief, we focus on the extent to which junior researchers are willing to officially report inappropriate behavior.

Takeaways

First, it appears that only 1 in 2 junior researchers would officially report inappropriate behavior in the workplace if they were to be victim. For 1 in 5, this would have to be done anonymously. Furthermore, it appears that somewhat more than 2 in 5 junior researchers doubt whether they would report inappropriate behavior: it depends. Only 3% of all junior researchers indicate they are unwilling to make an official report, while 2% are reluctant to answer our question. The willingness to report as a

victim is slightly lower than that as a witness. As a witness, the option to report anonymously appears to be of particular importance. Junior researchers may apply different criteria in their decision-making process regarding reporting when acting as a victim versus as a witness: a significant number of junior researchers who would not officially report as a victim, are willing to report as a witness (under certain conditions).

Second, it appears that junior researchers who were victims of physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation or threats, and/or discrimination in the past year are significantly less likely to report than those who were not victims. Compared to junior researchers who did not experience inappropriate behavior at work in the past year, among victims, we observe 10.7% fewer “yes”, 5.2% more “no”, 3.5% more doubt, and 2.0% more reluctance to answer the question. When we take into account the specific type of inappropriate behavior experienced, we see that the proportion of junior researchers who indicate they would not report it rises from just over 1 in 20 in cases of sexual harassment to 1 in 10 in cases of intimidation or threats. Those who were victims of inappropriate behavior in the past year also show less willingness to report if they were to witness inappropriate behavior.

Third, for the total group of junior researchers, we found that knowing where to report inappropriate behavior is associated with a greater willingness to report: we observed 8.6% more “yes”, 1.4% fewer “no”, and 7.2% fewer doubt to the question about willingness to report as a victim. When we distinguish between junior researchers who were victim of inappropriate behavior in the past year and those who were not, we get a more nuanced picture. Among junior researchers who were spared of inappropriate behavior in the past year, willingness to report appears to be significantly higher among those who know where to report it. However, among junior researchers who were victims of inappropriate behavior in the past year, knowing where to report does not appear to correlate with a higher willingness to report.

Policy reflections

An initial policy reflections concerns the set-up of a sustainable awareness-raising initiative regarding inappropriate behavior, as outlined in the VLIR Charter on Inappropriate Behavior (2018) and further elaborated in the Commitment to a Strengthened Policy on Inappropriate Behavior at Flemish Universities (VLIR, 2022-a; 2022-b). In ECOOM-brief 55, we noted that 2 out of 5 junior researchers at the Flemish universities do not know where to report inappropriate behavior, and in some groups of junior researchers, this figure rises to 3 out of 5. These figures encourage universities to invest in awareness and outreach campaigns, but policy expectations in this regard must be realistic: knowing where to report does not necessarily result in a willingness to report. Our analyses show that knowing where to report inappropriate behavior does not lead to a greater willingness to report among victims of such behavior. Moreover, victims of inappropriate behavior were found to be significantly more hesitant when asked whether or not they know where to report.

A second policy reflection highlights the need for an accurate and comprehensive *evidence base* regarding university staff's perceptions

of inappropriate behavior. What are the prevailing views on inappropriate behavior in the workplace and on how the university addresses it? What actions do employees see themselves take or not take, and under what conditions? What barriers must they overcome, and whom do they confide in? And what is the role of the supervisor(s) in this? Supervisors play a key role in creating and maintaining, but also in undermining, a psychologically safe work environment (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024). When the institution places great emphasis on “a good talk” and an informal resolution for incidents of inappropriate behavior and for social insecurity, then it is an essential prerequisite that both the supervisor and the HR department are perceived as safe and trustworthy conversation partners (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024). In the Flemish universities as well, the principle for internal guidance and support is that issues which can be resolved in the immediate or nearby environment should, as much as possible, be handled locally by colleagues, supervisor, HR, etc., who also receive the necessary support for this purpose (VLIR, 2018). Furthermore, the Flemish universities are also committed to addressing the issue of inappropriate behavior in leadership training and coaching for supervisors (see VLIR, 2018, as well as Van Den Bossche et al., 2025). The question arises as to whether the Flemish universities also have insight into the effects of these commitments in daily practice. To what extent do junior researchers—and other employees—experience psychological safety in daily practice to confide in their supervisor, department chair, dean, or HR staff member regarding inappropriate behavior? Scientific research on trust in supervisors and employer policies regarding inappropriate behavior is limited for universities. Existing research on integrity violations and integrity management typically focuses on corporate settings (Horbach et al., 2020; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Can the insights gained in corporate settings be directly applied to academic settings? The data from the *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* provide initial, limited insights into the willingness of junior researchers at the Flemish universities to report (see also ECOOM-briefs 57 and 58), but there is a need for broader and more in-depth research into what is happening in the undercurrent at universities (see introduction here and ECOOM-briefs 53 and 54). Change processes that take into account both the surface level and undercurrents in organizations—the formal and informal, the visible and invisible—have the best chance of achieving sustained, supported success.

The third policy reflection builds on the previous one and also addresses the *evidence base* upon which policy should be grounded. Accurately designed surveys can yield highly valuable insights that can serve as a compass for policymakers. When dealing with highly sensitive topics such as inappropriate behavior, it is not only important to understand who participates in the survey, but also to understand who does not participate, who does not answer the questions about inappropriate behavior, and who indicates they would rather not answer the questions. What message are (potential) respondents sending with this? What message do victims of inappropriate behavior, for example, send when they prefer not to answer the question of whether they know where to report? And what message do they send when they know

where to report but are unwilling to do so? The *Survey of Junior Researchers 2023* does not allow for empirically grounded answers to these questions, only speculation and reflection. Do victims perhaps indicate through their survey responses that they do know where they could report inappropriate behavior *in theory*, but that this is not an option for them *in practice* (see also Van Den Bossche et al., 2025)? Do victims' responses perhaps indicate that they did feel heard and supported by the reporting centers, but that what they hoped for ultimately did not happen: no "solution", which may imply no sanctions, no restoration of damaged relationships, and no positive cultural or structural changes? Do victims perceive that reporting centers and confidential advisors lack the necessary clout to *effectively* bring about change? Research at Dutch universities has already shown that this is the case (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024). It also showed that reports of inappropriate behavior reaching the reporting center often occur at a late stage (Netherlands Labor Authority, 2024), which implies not only that any attempts at informal problem-solving have failed or been insufficient, but that problems have escalated further in the meantime, making an effective solution less evident. What exactly is the situation at the Flemish universities? Do all universities have a clear understanding of the barriers their employees face in approaching an internal reporting center and how they perceive the follow-up to the report? Is the reporting center perceived as independent or rather as a tool to protect the university's reputation and shield professors from criticism? How many staff members do not turn to an internal reporting channel but instead seek help from an external one? All Flemish universities have their own system and procedures regarding inappropriate behavior that align with their unique characteristics. There are differences among the universities: the extent to which policies have been developed and translated into procedures, and the channels available for reporting (e.g., all universities have different channels through which reports can be made, and most also have a central reporting center (VLIR, 2021; 2022-a)). Which system is the most effective and is perceived as most trustworthy?

In ECOOM-briefs 57 and 58, we take two new steps forward in shedding light on what is happening in the undercurrent at the Flemish universities regarding inappropriate behavior. Specifically, we examine whether junior researchers' willingness to report varies by gender and nationality, by certain job and employment characteristics, and by science cluster and university. Who is most willing to make an official report of inappropriate behavior? To what extent is anonymity important in this context? And who faces the most barriers?

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