

Investigation into workplace bullying and transgressive behavior at UCLouvain

'Sexist climate' and 'sense of impunity'

Ten complaints from (former) employees and a well-known whistleblower. The public prosecutor for the labor court in Walloon Brabant is investigating unwanted sexual behavior and workplace bullying at UCLouvain. In the meantime, 7.6 percent of female students in a survey reported being victims of rape on university grounds. What is going on?

Revelations "De Morgen" 3 full pages published this Saturday, March 16, 2024
(See <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-in-louvain-la-neuve-het-is-een-onveilige-plek~b07b9d15/>)

Investigation: Eline Bergmans

In October 2019, Bertanne Visser (39) was appointed professor at the Catholic University of Leuven (UCLouvain). For this Dutch biologist, who studies fruit flies and parasitic wasps, this was the culmination of years of work as a researcher in Belgium and abroad.

In 2016, she received a contract with the FRNS (Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique), the French-speaking counterpart of the Fund for Scientific Research (FWO). Under the wings of that FRNS, she worked for three years as a postdoctoral researcher at UCLouvain until she was allowed to become a professor there at the Earth and Life Institute (ELI). At that prestigious institute, more than 300 scientists study the influence of humans on nature.

Her appointment as a professor at ELI-B, one of the ELI's five departments, did not go according to plan. "Right from the start, I noticed that colleagues didn't appreciate my coming," recounts Bertanne Visser. "As I was employed by the FNRS, I wasn't supposed to teach. This didn't sit well with my male colleagues. They even lodged a complaint with the rectorate against my appointment. When I started my position, I wasn't given a laboratory or even an office. When I was finally given a space, I had to buy the furniture myself.

According to Bertanne Visser, her research was also thwarted. "I had brought in hundreds of thousands of euros in grants for insect research, but the technical staff didn't want to culture the insects, so at one point gross mistakes were deliberately made. My parasitic wasp cultures were lost. More than three years of research work disappeared into the dustbin. That was when I'd had enough. In early 2020, I contacted the vice-rectors Didier Lambert and Michel Devillers".

According to Bertanne Visser, her research was also thwarted. "I had brought in hundreds of thousands of euros in grant money for insect research, but the technical staff didn't want to culture and maintain the insects, so at some point gross mistakes were made deliberately. My parasitic wasp cultures were lost. More than three years of research work disappeared into the trash. That was when I'd had enough. In early 2020, I contacted the vice-rectors Didier Lambert and Michel Devillers".

At UCLouvain, the rectorate sees this as a "hyperconflict" in a competitive research group. According to internationally renowned climatologist Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, who himself worked at the Earth and Life Institute until his retirement last year, there's more to the story. "Bertanne Visser's sad fate is much more than a conflict between competing research groups," he says. "It's a reflection of a system in which the words and ideas of a female researcher are not valued in the same way as those of a male researcher. This sexist culture is validated and even reinforced by the arbitrary decisions of the people - mainly men - who hold power at UCLouvain, in particular the Rectorate."

When the MeToo wave swept through higher education in our country two years ago, Professor van Ypersele was already sounding the alarm. In his own words, he had a ten-centimeter-thick file on transgressive sexual behavior and abuse of power at his university, ranging from inappropriate jokes about outfits or hands on buttocks to senior staff members making sexual advances towards female colleagues, pinching their throats, pushing them down a corridor and forcing them to kiss.

A woman testified at the time in De Morgen that the dean of the medical school in 2018 had sexually harassed her for years. "It started with comments on why I never wore skirts. Later, he gave me unexpected kisses on the neck. When I was alone in the secretariat, I'd turn off the light hoping he wouldn't come in," she told De Morgen two years ago.

"I was really afraid of him. I ended up being so scared that I could only see two options: jump into the Meuse or resign. I chose the latter," she said at the time.

The woman, now a grandmother, filed a complaint in 2018 against this dean with the Walloon Brabant labor court for unwanted sexual behavior and moral harassment at

work. The case was heard by the correctional court this week. The verdict is expected on March 22.

There's also another legal case that has been causing problems at UCLouvain for some time, that of biologist and professor Caroline Nieberding. Like Bertanne Visser, Caroline Nieberding worked in the ELI-B department. In 2021, Caroline Nieberding and Bertanne Visser jointly lodged formal complaints of moral harassment with CESI's prevention department against their colleagues and Vice-Rector Michel Devillers. They also informed the Rectorate about everyday sexism, gender-based violence and structural discrimination against women within the ELI-B research center.

A year later, UCLouvain initiated disciplinary proceedings against Caroline Nieberding, prompting her to file for an urgent legal action against her employer UCLouvain with the Labor Court of Walloon Brabant. After the initial hearing, Nieberding won the case in its entirety, but the judgment was overturned in appeal in April 2023. "The analysis of the file does not lead to the conclusion or presumption that Professor Nieberding was the victim of unwanted sexual behavior or harassment at work as a result of UCLouvain," the appeal judgment states.

But Caroline Nieberding is not giving up: she has appealed to the Supreme Court with the support of the Institute for Equality between Women and Men. The highest court will rule in a few months' time. In the meantime, Caroline Nieberding has also lodged a complaint with the Walloon Brabant public prosecutor's office for labor. The case has been added to a wider investigation into transgressive behavior at UCLouvain. "Criminal law takes precedence over civil law, which means that the procedures can be conducted concurrently," explained her lawyer Violaine Alonso. "What's more, the civil proceedings only concerned part of the case. We had asked the judge to rule urgently on the disciplinary proceedings. The criminal judge will rule on the whole case".

According to Renaud Dethy, public prosecutor for the labor court in Walloon Brabant, there are now more than 10 complaints against UCLouvain for unwanted sexual behavior and harassment at work. "As the criminal investigation is still ongoing, I can't give the exact number, but for the period from April 2022 to December 2023, there are more than ten," the public prosecutor for the labor court confirmed to De Morgen.

UCLouvain has not been sitting still since then, either. In March 2022, after the MeToo wave erupted in universities, Rector Vincent Blondel appointed an independent panel of experts chaired by Françoise Tulkens, ordinary professor emeritus at UCLouvain and former vice president of the European Court of Human Rights.

After more than a year, she submitted a voluminous report in June 2023 - just after UCLouvain had won its appeal in the Nieberding case. The Tulkens report does not focus on individual cases but analyzes the structural dynamics of the university. The

verdict is not mild: the report speaks of a "sexist climate and patriarchal domination" and a "widespread feeling of impunity".

The Tulkens Commission report concludes with no fewer than 140 recommendations. "We have drawn up an action plan based on these," explains Marthe Nyssens, who coordinates the Respect program at UCLouvain to initiate structural reforms. "We've started a mandatory training course for 1,200 managers: in addition to an online module with basic concepts and legal rules, there are workshops where we role-play in small groups to put theory into practice."

There is also training for students around consent. In addition, according to Marthe Nyssens, much work has been done to simplify the existing procedures around transgressive behavior. "We have installed one central hotline where students, doctoral students and staff members alike can report transgressive behavior, either as a witness or as a victim. There they can be referred to assistance, but legal advice is given to take further steps if necessary."

The final pillar of the action plan is greater transparency. Through the central hotline, all reports are anonymously compiled. On this basis, an annual report will be made with the number of files. "In 2022, we had 49 dossiers," said Marthe Nyssens. "That means there is still some way to go, but the fight against gender-based violence is definitely a priority for UCLouvain."

Yet, according to several people concerned, the Tulkens Commission's recommendations have not been sufficiently acted upon. "Training is certainly useful," says Jean-Pascal van Ypersele. "However, I note that no effort has been made to ensure that victims of moral or sexual harassment can turn to an organization outside UCLouvain that could advise them independently. To my knowledge, nothing has been done to implement the recommendations of the Tulkens Commission concerning support for the many victims of moral or sexual harassment. Nor has anything been done to protect witnesses and whistleblowers. I can speak for myself: my presence at UCLouvain and that of my research team has been hampered. The authorities withdrew the two courses I wanted to continue giving, even though these were free of charge, on the pretext that "it would cost too much". Finally, UCLouvain didn't do anything to support my candidacy for the IPCC presidency at the international level, whereas any other university would have gone out of its way to do so. And this despite the fact that the Tulkens report explicitly called for the protection of whistle-blowers".

Françoise Tulkens has also already voiced criticism. According to the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir*, Ms. Tulkens concluded her speech at a study day on gender violence in academia in October 2023 by highlighting the "institutional resistance" to her report. She no longer wishes to repeat this criticism. "My mandate is over," she

says. "Our recommendations were clear and it's now up to the university to do what it has to do."

Last month, another survey concerning the University of Louvain-la-Neuve made the headlines. The Faculty of Psychosocial Sciences surveyed 3,072 UCLouvain students in March 2022. Fourteen percent said they had repeatedly been victims of unwanted sexual behavior. This may involve jokes, comments, looks or gestures, but also insistence on a date, questions about sex life or attempted abuse. The survey also asked about rapes committed on university premises. 7.6% of female students answered in the affirmative. In student associations and project kots, the figures were even higher: 11% of project kot students and 20.1% of student association members said they had been victims of rape on university premises. In his talk-show, Pascal Vrebos then titled his TV program: "Louvain-la-Neuve: rape capital".

"That's a terrible figure," replied van Ypersele. But I also found it disturbing to read that a significant number of participants in the survey were accusing "members of the teaching staff". The reaction of Philippe Hiligsmann, vice-rector in charge of student affairs, was also revealing: he asserted that "this is a reflection of what's happening in society in general, and not just at UCLouvain". Such trivialization is appalling. It's easy to see why nothing changes: the next rector will have to put things in order to restore UCLouvain's reputation".

"UCLouvain is a dangerous place," says Bertanne Visser. "The main problem is the lack of help. People are left to their own devices".

Bertanne Visser was dismissed in October 2021 for "serious misconduct". She disputes this error. She has filed a civil complaint against UCLouvain for wrongful dismissal. Her case is also part of the investigation of the Walloon Brabant public prosecutor for the labor auditor.

Following complaints from Bertanne Visser and Caroline Nieberding in 2020, Didier Lambert, Vice-Rector for Human Resources, appointed a commission to investigate the operation of the ELI-B research center. Their opinion was clear: ELI-B should be dissolved.

In fact, almost the entire ELI-B team was able to restart as ELI-X thanks to a decision taken out of nowhere by Vice-Rector Michel DeVillers, with the exception of Caroline Nieberding and Bertanne Visser, who were not part of the team. The two women were placed under the supervision of Claude Bragard, then President of the Earth and Life Institute. "We were gagged," says Bertanne Visser.

On June 24, 2021, a meeting was held in auditorium SC01, during which the creation of ELI-X was voted upon to comply retroactively with UCLouvain regulations. "Caroline and I had requested at the last minute the creation of a separate research center for our teams as well. But after five minutes, I was interrupted because a vote was about to take place. The new research group was accepted, and we were placed under supervision and separated from our teams. It was extremely humiliating," said Bertanne Visser.

"In the months that followed, we found ourselves in a sort of no man's land," recounts Bertanne Visser. "Every time I went to the office, I locked the door. One colleague was behaving very aggressively. I no longer felt safe."

At the time, the Dutch biologist had secured funding of 90,000 euros to purchase a mass spectrometer, a device that allows for the precise identification of molecules in substances. "I got the device, but UCLouvain did not provide me with adequate space and access to use it. In desperation, I contacted other universities," Bertanne Visser explains. "This is not uncommon, but UCLouvain vetoed it. I then chose, in the interest of my team's research, to temporarily place the mass spectrometer at Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech, a research institute at the University of Liège. When Vincent Blondel found out, I was fired immediately."

Bertanne Visser lost her position as a professor immediately but remained employed by the FNRS that continued to pay her salary while she was working at UCLouvain. According to the biologist, the then-rector Vincent Blondel - who is running for the political party Les Engagés in the elections - allegedly pressured the FNRS board during a special meeting to get her fired.

Mr. Blondel did not respond to our request for comment. Fabrice Bureau, a professor at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and former vice-rector of the University of Liège, acknowledges that Vincent Blondel, as the rector, exerted pressure on the FNRS. "It's a very strange story," he says. "Bertanne Visser is a brilliant researcher. It is extremely rare for someone like her to be dismissed. I am not a legal expert, but temporarily placing a device at another university does not seem like a reason at all to dismiss someone."

"Visser operated this device in Gembloux," he continues. "At UCLouvain, she was not allowed to do so. She had no intention of stealing the device. If a researcher wants to work, how can that be considered a serious offense?"

At UCLouvain, they declined to comment on Bertanne Visser's dismissal. "We cannot comment on individual cases," says Benjamin Adnet from the communications department. "But I can tell you that Bertanne Visser was dismissed for proven material facts."

Shortly after her dismissal, Bertanne Visser found refuge as a researcher at the University of Liège, but the mass spectrometer was returned to UCLouvain, even though it was intended for Bertanne Visser's research. "It's tough," she says. "I lost years of research and my title as a professor, but also my trust."