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# **RACISM UNRAVELLED**

**Insights into how people of African descent  
in Belgium experience exclusion.**





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**Responsible publisher:** Sankaa vzw - Griet Bonne, Vooruitgangstraat 323, 1030 Brussels

**Design and layout:** C3Creaties

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**Publication:** September 2022

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All the stories included in this report have been presented exactly as they were written, with the aim of not adding any nuances or interpretations from the researchers to the stories. We hope that as a reader, you will handle these stories with the necessary care and respect, and overlook any language inaccuracies to listen to the essence of the story.

**With the support from;**

**FOD Justitie - Cel Gelijke Kansen, for the research funding**

**Quacker Council for European Affairs (QCEA), for translation from Dutch to English**



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# FOREWORD

Dear reader,

As human beings, we comply to many essential desires to lead a satisfied and fulfilling life. The needs for safety, connection, and authenticity are three basic necessities for survival. However, these needs are constantly violated or remain unfulfilled during racial oppression. The ongoing feeling of insecurity and loss of identity combined with the lack of belonging, results in an accumulation of racial traumas and disconnection (with oneself/with society) as a survival strategy. After all, trauma is more than just what happened to us, but also what did not happen: what was neglected, suppressed, and not nurtured.

As you go through this report, a painful reality will be revealed through the personal stories of more than 400 individuals. Although this listening study has allowed us to establish that discrimination (what HAS happened to us) is deeply rooted in various segments of society and that its impact is felt in numerous domains, I must admit that we still lack adequate instruments to measure the buried racial traumas we experience as a result of what has NOT happened to us (the feelings of self-worth, safety, and connection that were not nurtured). Due to this inability to properly portray these more occult layers of racism, some of you may feel that your experiences and emotions are insufficiently represented. Additionally, I must also acknowledge that not only the discomfort experienced during racial oppression was insufficiently captured, but also all your efforts to bring about positive changes.

Dear reader, my greatest frustration during this process was the fact that words were grossly insufficient to properly depict your emotions. Your pain, tears, fear, insecurities, frustrations, but also the hope, strength, resilience, and

love you have for others. Language fell short in capturing the pain we endure while putting on a smile. It couldn't articulate the anger we feel while bridging the divide, let alone the frustrations we share while radiating optimism. Language has insufficient reach to describe the hope we hold and the love we give despite our heartache. Similarly, we couldn't fully express the strength we radiate while our bodies go haywire, and we could only graze the surface of the resilience we maintain in times when there is no sign of light in our lives. Words only came so far.

I also want to acknowledge that 410 experiences do not reflect the experiences of all people of African descent in Belgium, nor similar experiences of other minorities.

Without minimizing or disregarding these shortcomings, I invite you to read this report and make connections to your own specific experiences. In doing so, form your own impression of the systemic characteristics of oppression outlined in this report, as well as the dynamics that sustain oppression. I am convinced that the fact that this report has reached you means that you are our audience.

At numerous moments during this project, I desired to wake up to a magical app that would permit me to 'un-know' the new insights my mind had already absorbed, and to 'un-see' what my eyes had detected. The knowledge and pain I assembled during this process continued to stockpile on top of the racial oppression of my ancestors, my children, my family, my friends, and now of all those who disseminated their experiences through this survey. 'Un-knowing' refers to the knowledge I would rather lose in exchange for my innocence. However, since this was

an inevitable barrier, I had to accept this knowledge as a vital evil as it compelled me to comprehend the depth of how systemic racial oppression in Belgian institutions contributes to the scarcity of survival opportunities for many black people in this country, and eventually to their wasting of countless talents.

It's the exact knowledge that enabled me to understand why despite my countless contribution to the socioeconomic welfare of this country, I still feel like a transit passenger on a flight without a destination. It encouraged me to connect the missing dots to the riddle of my disconnection with the society I live in and love. Similarly, the new knowledge alleviated the loneliness feelings that wrapped me while paradoxically being surrounded by many people. I eventually could acknowledge why I felt so anxious and unsafe while walking through the crowded or empty streets. I can now comprehend the frustrations and fears I harbour for my children's future and safety while residing in one of the countries regarded as the most developed and safest in the world. So, I learned, and I grew.

Lastly, I realized that although individuals are crucial in addressing racial discrimination, the discourse on systemic issues goes far beyond the realm of individual responsibilities. I must admit that this was a huge relief for me, as it helped me shed the immense weight I felt responsible to bear. Additionally, I learned how brave, strong, kind, and above all, humble, people are who suffer from racial oppression. These attitudes are crucial in coping with discrimination. I learned how they manage to separate their suffering from that of others in order to

still be of importance to other people. I learned how they manage to dissociate people from their mistakes in order to still learn from them. Thanks to you, who have shared your experiences, I have learned to separate my own racial oppression from that of others, which allowed me to find peace and healing. Thanks to you, I have learned to put my story into perspective in light of the stories of many wise individuals who suffer the worst but still build bridges without erecting barriers. Thanks to you, I am also working on my healing journey by leaving behind the heavy bitterness, frustrations, and many disappointments, while still carrying with me the belief in humanity.

I do acknowledge that I am far from finished... because, as Ruth King would say, "I would like to focus on something other than race now, but how do I do that when people who look like me are constantly being hurt? How do I comfort my own angry heart in a sea of racial ignorance and violence? How do my actions reflect the world I want to live in and leave for future generations? How do I advocate for racial justice without causing harm and hatred, both within myself and externally?" Thank you, Ruth King, for these words that I am now experiencing and have made my own.

I would like to express my gratitude for the tremendous help we received from so many people. I sincerely thank all those who shared their painful experiences. Thank you for opening your hearts to us so that we could understand what is at stake. Without you, there would have been no stories to derive conclusions, insights, and a way forward from. A big thank you to the 35 volunteers who helped us collect the stories. I know it was not easy for you to listen

to people who are suffering and do this all in your free time. I understand the challenges you have faced, and from the bottom of my heart, I cannot thank you enough for this.

Many thanks to Cel Gelijke Kansen for awarding the grant, to Nele Claeys and Saskia De Jonghe from Voices that Count for the excellent facilitation, and to Jeroen De Wilde for the data analysis. My special thanks go to Griet Bonne, the coordinator of Sankaa vzw for the inspiring and coaching input, for the support, and for the encouraging feedback. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to everyone who supported this project in any form, UNIA, Hand in Hand tegen Racism, ORBIT, Kifkif, and AfroMedica for their expert input, Bart Haegeman for the cover, Etienne Beel for the photos, and many others. This project owes its success to all of you. Farewell and good luck!

Evodia Uggi





# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

People of African descent have been an integral component of the social fabric of the European Union (EU) for generations. However, multiple studies<sup>1</sup> indicate that they encounter pervasive prejudices and exclusion on various fronts throughout the EU.

International organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), have also expressed growing concerns over this issue. The recent UN report<sup>2</sup> from the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent concluded that racial discrimination is an endemic problem in Belgian institutions. The taskforce was particularly concerned about the lack of recognition of the magnitude of the problem. That results in the usually unintended but nonetheless implicit - systematic exclusion of education, employment, appropriate housing, access to healthcare etc. Credible efforts to combat racism require that these barriers be overcome first.

Reports<sup>3</sup> published by UNIA on discrimination against people of Sub-Saharan African origin (2011, 2019) revealed that Belgium's colonial past still has a strong influence on perceptions of people of Sub-Saharan African origin today. The recent UNIA report<sup>4</sup> recommends giving sufficient attention to this group, expanding knowledge and spreading awareness, taking targeted policy measures, and listening to their voices in public debates.

- 1 Being black in the EU - FRA, EU-MIDS II (2019): <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/being-black-eu>
- 2 Statement to the media by the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, on the conclusion of its official visit to Belgium - OHCHR (2019): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2019/02/statement-media-United-nations-working-group-experts-people-african-descent>
- 3 Discriminatie van personen van Sub-Saharaanse afkomst: een overzicht van stereotypen, 21 maart 2011: [http://unia.be/files/Z\\_ARCHIEF/Persdossier\\_2011%2003%2021\\_NL.pdf](http://unia.be/files/Z_ARCHIEF/Persdossier_2011%2003%2021_NL.pdf)  
Discriminatie van personen van Sub-Saharaanse afkomst: sterk verbonden met het koloniale verleden - UNIA (2017): [https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties\\_docs/Dossier\\_negrofobie.pdf](https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/Dossier_negrofobie.pdf)
- 4 Discriminatie van personen van Afrikaanse origine - UNIA (2022): <https://www.unia.be/nl/publicaties-statistieken/publicaties/discriminatie-van-personen-van-afrikaanse-origine-2022>

## OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

As an umbrella organization of African Associations, Sankaa vzw aims not only to be a partner but above all an actor in the fight against discrimination and racism in all its forms. In this way, we seek to promote the active participation and inclusion of people of African descent in society.

To date, relatively little research has been done on discrimination against people of African descent in Belgium, and what we most lack is the voice of the people themselves: how do they experience discrimination in their daily lives?

With the narrative survey 'Racism Unravelling', we want first and foremost to give people a voice, to let them speak and make their experiences visible. By collecting stories from people of African descent, we want to not only map out the forms of discrimination they experience but above all gain insights into how they experience and cope with it. How do people of African descent understand racism? What impact does it have on them and their environment? How do they feel in these situations and what do they do, if anything, to deal with them? Have they experienced support from others? What are their expectations and what do they most need?

In addition, we want to inform and sensitize people who experience racism, so they know where to turn to when they encounter it.

But we want to go beyond the individual level. Based on the stories that people share within this research, we want to formulate recommendations, build bridges with other organizations, and take action to address the needs of people who experience racism.

## WHY THIS TARGET GROUP?

Although it would be interesting to conduct such research among various communities in order to arrive at targeted policy recommendations for specific target groups, we chose to limit 'Racism Unravelling' to people of African descent in Belgium for the following reasons:

- The limited budget coupled with the complexity of research in different communities. However, the survey tool developed for this research can also be applied to other minority groups with a few minor adjustments.
- This research fits into the policy choices of Sankaa for the coming years: namely strengthening key persons within the community, giving people a voice, working with signals from our community, building bridges with others, etc.
- There is little (scientific) research on how our specific target group, people of African descent, experience racism and discrimination. Even though our member organizations report that their members are often confronted with it.
- The experienced exclusion and discrimination of people of African descent in Belgium differs from those of other minority groups and are strongly linked to the colonial past.
- The step towards reporting is not straightforward for a number of reasons: people do not know where to turn, they do not trust existing authorities, the burden of proof lies with the victims, etc. UNIA also confirms that official figures only reflect the tip of the iceberg and therefore do not reflect the actual situation.
- The under-representation of researchers of African descent in academic research and studies on socially relevant issues such as discrimination.
- As an African umbrella organization, we know this target group inside out. We know their sensitivities, know what works and what doesn't, and have built a relationship of trust with them, enabling us to reach people who are often not reached in mainstream research.

Especially for research into traumatic experiences such as discrimination and racism, creating a safe space where victims of racism are allowed to be themselves, feel understood and seen, and can and may connect with others, is crucial.



# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

## METHODOLOGY

Discrimination is not merely an individual issue, but rather a systemic and structural problem. Various forms of exclusion; such as race, gender, class, religion, and sexuality, are intrinsically interwoven and reinforce one another. This intersectional discrimination results in individuals of African descent often finding themselves at the very bottom layer of the social ladder.

To comprehend the complexity of discrimination and racism, we deliberately chose to utilize the Large-Scale Listening Methodology based on SenseMaker<sup>5</sup> for the 'Racism Unravelling' study. It is a method aimed at collecting a large number of stories from people to better understand their reality and what is important to them. Diversity of perspectives is thus central. At the heart of the process is the concept 'Sensemaking'; creating and providing meaning. This methodology is often utilized to map out difficult-to-measure constructs: things that are difficult to grasp through numbers or a standard survey. Take for example trying to understand conflicts between communities, gaining insight into concepts such as 'resilience', 'inclusion', 'empowerment', and thus also 'racism'.



## HOW DOES SENSEMAKER WORK?

We started by asking people to share a personal story. These are descriptions of experiences, moments, situations, etc. about a certain theme - in this case, how people experience racism. The experiences are triggered by a central question that is the same for everyone. These mini-stories are short anecdotes like you would tell to friends, family or neighbors on the street, in the elevator, on the bus, etc. People are also asked to give their story a title. Immediately after sharing the story, we present the storytellers with a series of additional questions about the personal story they have shared.

SenseMaker differs significantly from other narrative research methods such as field observations or in-depth interviews. It is a form of distributed ethnography because it initially shifts responsibility for interpreting the stories from the researcher to the participants themselves<sup>5</sup>. Through this self-interpretation, SenseMaker largely eliminates the researcher's interpretation, as participants assign meaning to their own micro-stories. This enables large-scale explorations, reduces researcher bias, and allows for a more objective analysis.

All stories and answers to the additional questions are captured digitally. Specific software allows for patterns (graphs) to be visualized based on the answers and to return to the original stories.

It is the multitude (in number) and versatility (diversity in experiences and perspectives) that enables us to recognize patterns in the experiences of the (sub)target groups we are studying. Like how the modern 4k monitors generate finer patterns and more detail by utilizing more pixels, reality will be better delineated in SenseMaker as we collect more and more stories (fragments of experiences).

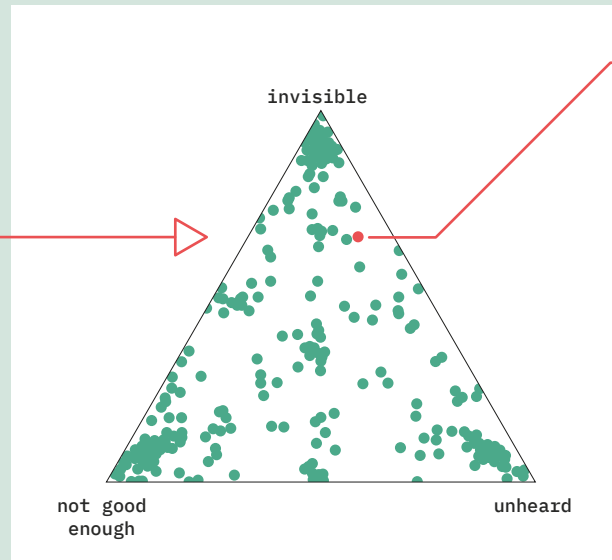
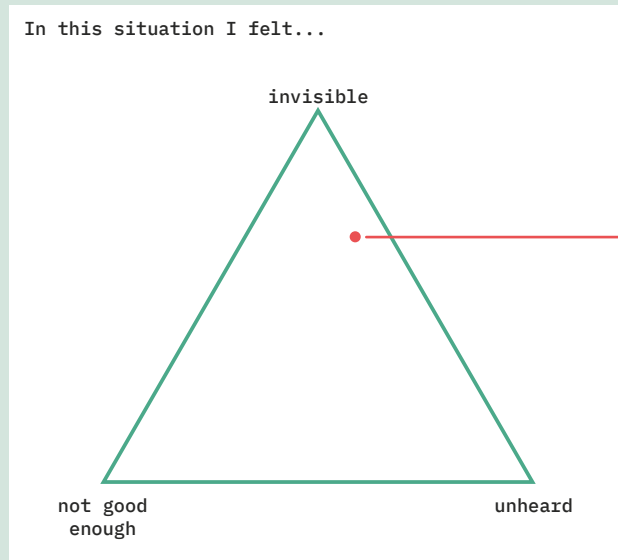
SenseMaker is one of the few methods that combines qualitative and quantitative data within one methodology. On the one hand, you have the graphs and patterns that provide insights, but on the other hand, the text of the mini-stories provides additional narrative and qualitative information for the patterns that emerge. SenseMaker provides a unique insight into the context behind the figures (graphs) and also maps this context.


<sup>5</sup> Irene Guijt, Maria Veronica Gottret, Anna Hanchar, Steff Deprez, Rita Muckenhirn, 2022, The Learning Power of Listening: Practical guidance for using SenseMaker, p 17-19



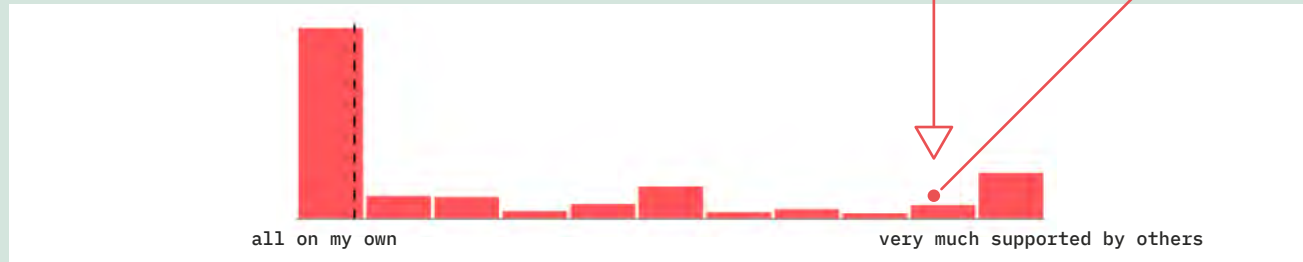
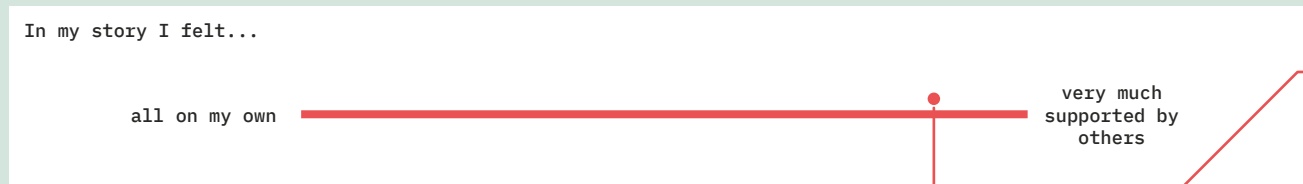
# THE SENSEMAKER METHODOLOGY IN A NUTSHELL


We invited individuals to share their stories. Following their storytelling, the narrators are requested to position themselves along a triangle of response options or between two polarities on a continuum. Upon compiling the answers of all the narrators, patterns emerge, from which the corresponding stories can be interpreted.



 **Chocolate because of my skincolor**

*When I commenced dance lessons, I was so ashamed that I ceased attending them. The other children persisted in calling me “chocolate.” They even approached me, asking if they could call me that. I asked them why and whether I didn’t have a name. They replied that it was because I was entirely brown, like chocolate, and that was a more fitting name for me. They proceeded to laugh in a derisive and ridiculing manner. I felt so enraged, humiliated, and powerless that I quit dance lessons altogether.*



 **No place on the bus**

*This concerns a trip to Walibi with classmates during our fifth year of high school. We still need to take a bus to get there. The bus is quite full. All of my white friends are able to board, but as the last person, I am told that there is no more space. My friends decide to get off the bus in solidarity with me.*

## STAGES IN THE LARGE-SCALE NARRATIVE SURVEY ‘RACISM UNRAVELLED’



### Design of the narrative survey

A team (comprising members from Sankaa vzw, UNIA, Kif Kif, Orbit, Hand in Hand tegen racisme, and the youth group AfroMedica) collaborated on determining the focus of the research and designing the survey instrument, which includes a thoughtfully crafted **trigger question** that generates the story and a set of **supplementary questions** (i.e., probing questions). The questions<sup>6</sup> were available in Dutch, French, and English and underwent testing and modification before being deployed by the volunteers.



### Gathering stories

Volunteers, referred to as ‘Ears’, were recruited from Sankaa vzw’s network, and calls for participation were distributed to universities and colleges to collect stories. A diverse group of ‘Ears’ received training in conversational techniques to effectively discuss sensitive topics like racism.

We set targets for collecting stories from various subgroups (mainly age, generation, and gender) in order to make informed statements about each subgroup and observe differences in trends between subgroups.



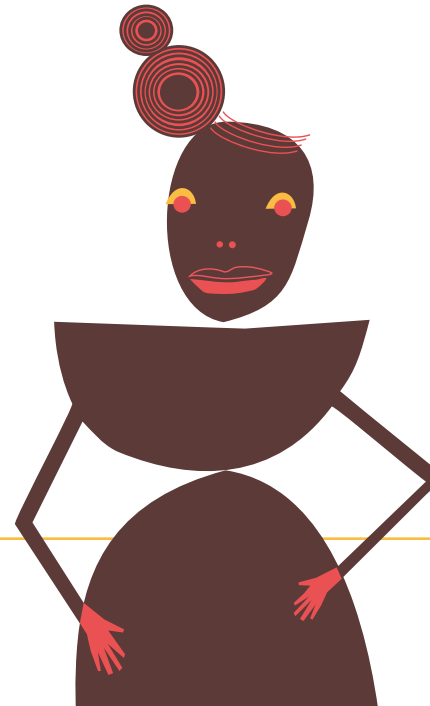
### Discovering and determining patterns and trends

A total of a little over 400 stories were collected. All charts based on the answers to the questions regarding the meaning, were visualized in a dashboard. An initial data-analysis was conducted, comparing groups based on gender, age, generation, one-time experiences versus situations that people reported as frequent occurrences.



### Providing meanings collectively, generating insights, learning and reflecting on actions

Two participatory sensemaking workshops were conducted, where together with various stakeholders we analyzed specific sets of stories. Through this collective sensemaking process, the context behind the charts was mapped out, and meaning was attributed to the stories. The insights gained from these workshops were also incorporated into this report.



<sup>6</sup> Survey available at Sankaa vzw..

## CHALLENGES DURING THE LARGE-SCALE LISTENING SURVEY

Prior to the commencement of the research, potential challenges were identified and a risk analysis was conducted. During the execution of the study, it became apparent that the impact of certain factors was bigger than had been anticipated beforehand.

### Collecting stories in times of corona

The collection of the stories took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a large-scale listening study conducted via SenseMaker, there is a preference for maximum direct and personal contact, especially when dealing with sensitive subjects such as racism. Volunteers are trained extensively to conduct conversations in the right manner and to ask the right questions. Due to the pandemic and the ban on gatherings of larger groups, the training sessions could only take place later than initially planned. From the beginning, preference was given to collecting stories through personal contact. However, the pandemic caused many people to be hesitant to meet in person, and appointments were often postponed or conversations were held online (via Zoom or Skype). The COVID-19 measures required a highly flexible and pragmatic attitude throughout the entire process in order to continually adapt the planning.

### Missed snowball effect

The intention was for each conversation to lead to a new contact via the respondent (snowball effect), but this did not live up to the anticipated expectations. Personal contacts were quickly exhausted, respondents sometimes did not show up for appointments, and Sankaa vzw did not have the time or manpower to continually seek new contacts. Furthermore, the period of collecting stories, due to the delay in training volunteers as a result of the pandemic, fell during the summer months of 2021, a time when people are generally more difficult to reach.



### Scepticism on the potential impact of the research

Doubts and critical reactions were also expressed about the research. Although various studies have been conducted in recent years on racism and discrimination, in practice, little to nothing has changed for people of African descent. This has given birth to the conviction that research tries to demonstrate that people have the opportunity to share their stories and is used as an excuse to maintain the status quo.

### Difficult conversations

The conversations themselves often proved challenging due to the deep-seated traumas embedded in the victims. Not every environment was perceived as safe, and some respondents stopped during the conversation and were unable to continue their story because it became too emotional. The conversations were also emotionally taxing for the black volunteers. The white volunteers, on the other hand, encountered distrust. Attention was paid to this issue during the training, but we underestimated the intensity of the reactions.

Many people also chose not to share their experiences. Over the years, they have developed a thick skin as a protective mechanism and do not want to talk about their painful experiences.

### Demotivation of volunteers and deploying new strategies

Despite organizing moments of peer coaching, many volunteers lost their courage and enthusiasm to continue. As a result, few people remained to collect 400 stories.

Consequently, various novel strategies were developed to gather sufficient experiences. African volunteers hosted 'in-home sessions,' a strategy that bore fruit but was extremely time-consuming. In addition, efforts were made to reach out to people via churches hosting African services and via associations to encourage them to share their stories. An online campaign was established, allowing individuals to submit their own stories digitally without the assistance of a volunteer.

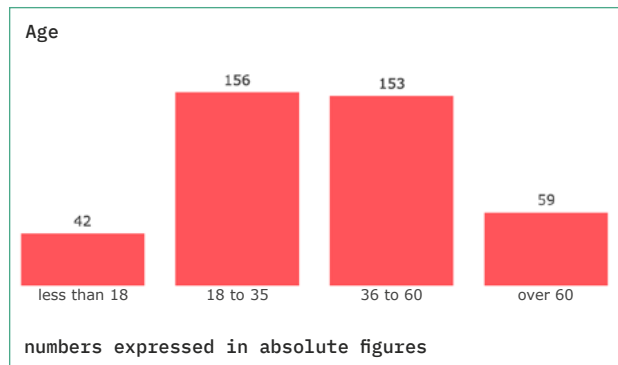
### Backlash from organisations we saw as partners, and online hate

Several organizations that were initially regarded as partners turned out to be unsupportive in our fight against discrimination. We encountered resistance in both schools and churches, where individuals were unwilling to actively address this issue. In one instance, the collected stories were ultimately not released and even destroyed.

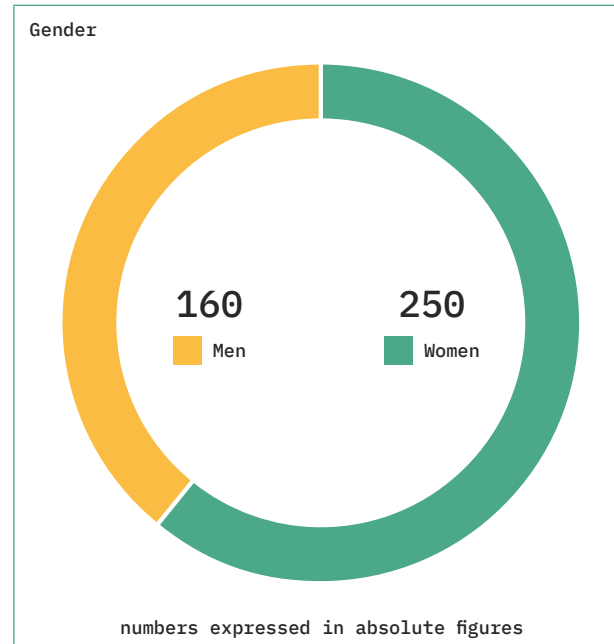
Moreover, the online campaign that was established to inform and encourage people of African descent to share their stories online was met with hatred and slander.

# WHO SHARED A STORY?

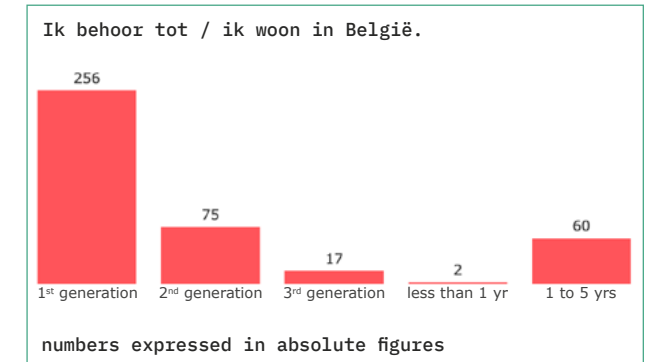
In total, 410 people of African descent shared their stories. The majority of the experiences were provided by individuals between the ages of 18 and 60. Minors and those over 60 years of age were less represented in the listening survey, although the results contain important signals for their respective age groups. Comparisons between different age groups must however be interpreted with the necessary nuance due to this lower representation.



Overall, we collected more stories from women than men, 61% and 39% respectively.



About 62% of the storytellers (256 individuals) identify themselves as first-generation, 29% (75 individuals) as second-generation, and only 4% as third-generation. Additionally, 15% of the storytellers indicated that they have been living in Belgium for one to five years<sup>7</sup>.

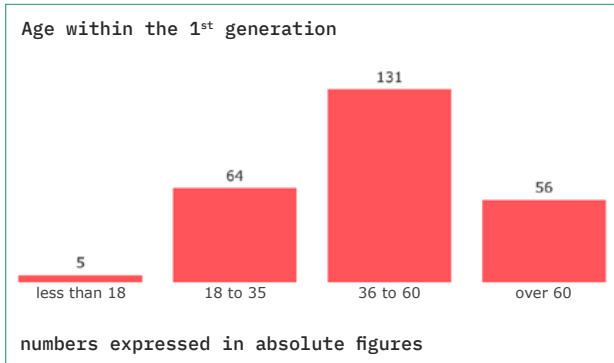


The differences in generation were defined as follows:

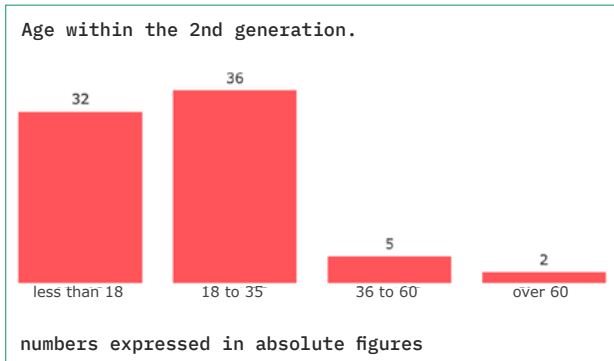
- First generation = You were not born in Belgium, and your parents were also not born in Belgium.
- Second generation = You were born or raised in Belgium, but your parents were not born in Belgium.
- Third generation = You were born in Belgium, and your parents were also born in Belgium.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that several people who indicated this category also fall within the definition of 'first generation' used, but only one answer option could be selected.

When we examine the age distribution within the first generation, we see a significant diversity and observe that almost all storytellers aged 36 and above identify as first generation.

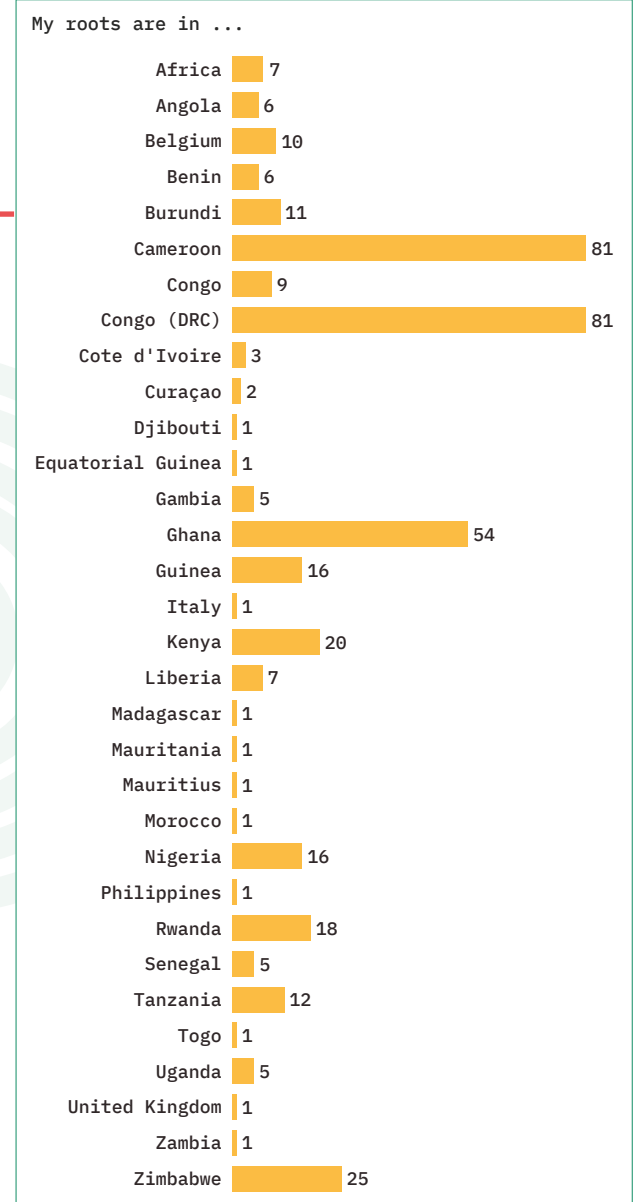


Within the second generation, we mostly see people under 36 years old and the age distribution is less spread out.



The storytellers' roots are mainly in Cameroon, Congo DRC and Ghana. About 70% of the storytellers have the Belgian nationality.

The answer 'Africa' includes responses from storytellers who did not fill in a specific country or who wrote 'Africa' as their answer.



# WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF THE EXPERIENCES?

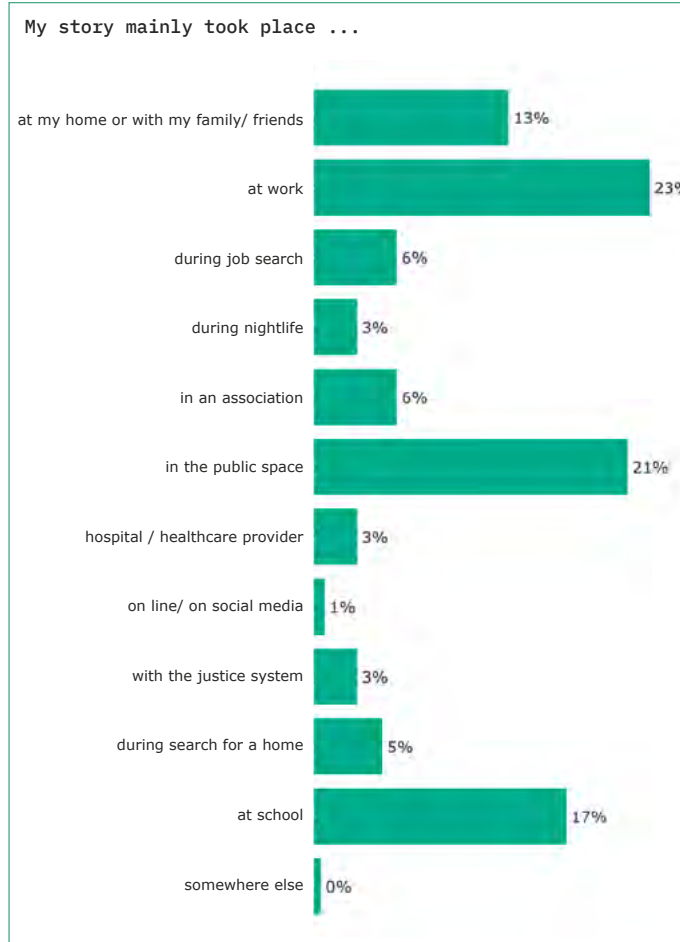
The majority of the experiences take place in the workplace (23%), followed by public spaces (21%) at school/university (17%), and home or with family/friends (13%). It is noteworthy that there are few stories about experiences that occur online or on social media.

Only 3% of storytellers indicate that their experience materialised with the police or justice system, despite 36 stories containing the word 'police' in total. Many stories involving the police took place in public spaces (on the street, in a store, on public transport, etc.).

For 41% of the second generation, their story takes place in school/university, which can be explained by the younger age groups that belong to this generation. The first generation primarily shares experiences that take place in the workplace.

The age group over 60 describes situations that occur 'at home or with family/friends' (see page 17).

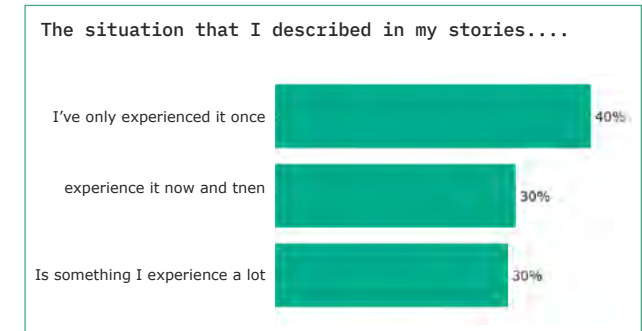
Work situations are most common for women, while events that take place in public places (on the street, on public transport, etc.) are most common for men. Women also shared significantly more stories that transpired at home or with friends compared to men.



Men tend to share slightly more stories that take place within an organization (3% for women and 9% for men, respectively). Many of these stories are related to soccer.

Most people have experienced the situation described in their story more than once (60%).

Experiences that people frequently harbour are typically those that occur in the workplace. Those who describe a singular experience in their story tend to focus on incidents that occur in public spaces.









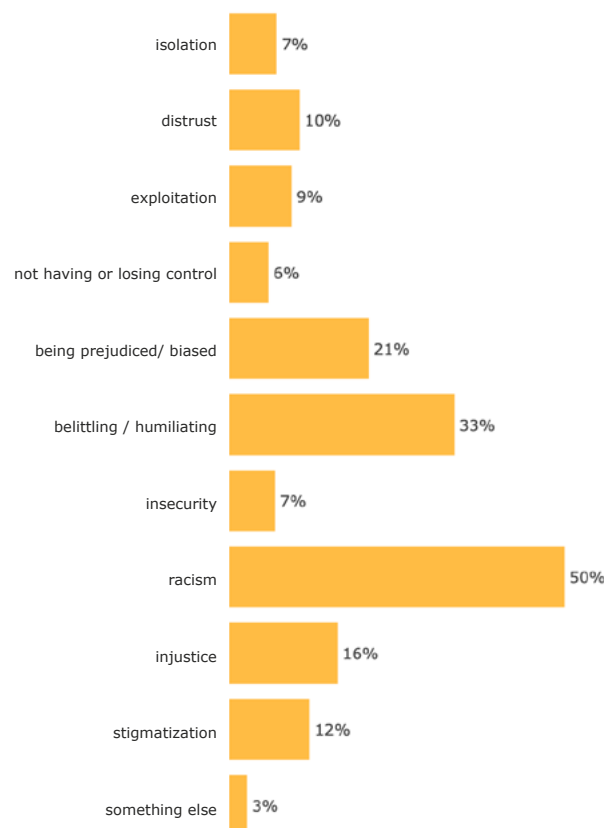
# HOW DO PEOPLE PERCEIVE THE EXPERIENCE THEY DESCRIBED IN THEIR STORY?

The starting point of any Large-Scale Listening Study is always a personal story (see page 8 'About this research'). These personal experiences were triggered by a central question that was the same for everyone, namely:

Could you describe a recent situation from your life in which you felt that you were treated differently or excluded? What exactly happened? But above all: Why did this experience stick with you and what impact did it have on you?



My story is mainly about...



total percentages are more than 100% because people could indicate 2 answer options

The trigger question deliberately did not include the word 'racism'. In a follow-up question, storytellers were asked to what extent they considered their story to be about racism.

Half of all storytellers indicate that their story is mainly about racism, followed by 'belittlement/humiliation', 'prejudice/stereotyping', 'injustice', and 'stigmatization'. Racism is the most commonly mentioned theme, but not by everyone.

Women more often than men indicate that their story is about the theme of insecurity (9% vs 3% for men) or stigmatization (14% vs 9% for men). For men, the theme of exploitation (12% vs 8% for women) is more prevalent.

The younger the storyteller, the more the theme of racism is linked to their story. This is also prominent when looking at the generations. The second generation mentions 'racism' remarkably more frequently (60%) than the first generation (45%). The first generation mentions 'belittlement/humiliation' and 'exploitation' more than the second generation.

A participant in a sensemaking workshop added the following: "Through social media, young people see unfiltered what others post from all over the world, they see much more of what is not OK and how others label things, which may make young people more likely to use the word racism."

*The second generation mentions 'racism' noticeably more than the first generation. The first generation mentions 'belittling/humiliation' and 'exploitation' more than the second generation.*

When looking at the stories of the first generation that take place at home or with family/friends, we notice that they are predominantly associated with humiliation/belittling, or exploitation (and much less with racism). This pattern becomes even stronger when looking only at the oldest age group (60+). We read these 19 stories.

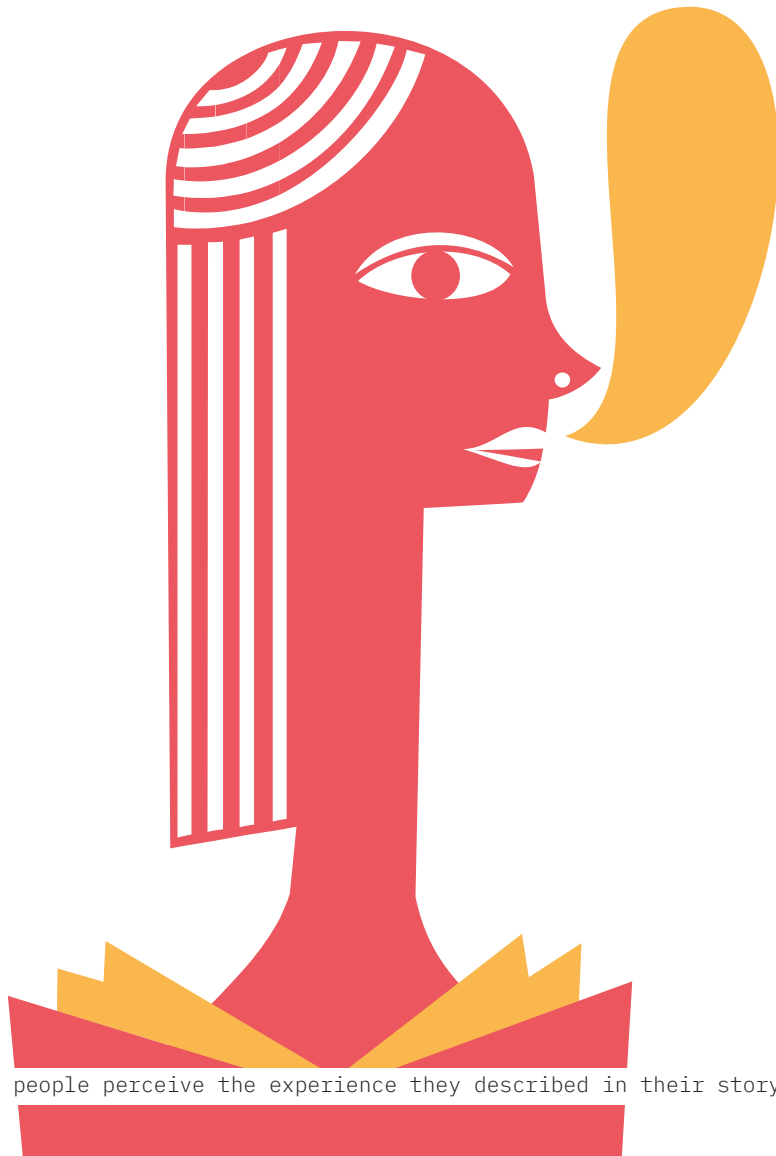
- In many cases, the in-laws are mentioned: people of African descent never feel fully accepted or taken seriously.
- Distrust dominates: (“She’s here for the money”, “she’s here for the papers”, “What he says probably isn’t true”). Sometimes this goes even further and there is an abuse of power by the (ex-)husband or in-laws (“I can’t see my children anymore”, “my white ex-husband and his family have covered this up”)
- In four cases, it is about remarks or pure bullying by neighbours.
- Furthermore, there are conversations with family or friends in which assumptions or stereotypes about Africans are discussed that are very hurtful (“You surely know how to clean a burnt pan?”, “You eat chicken like a little dog.”).



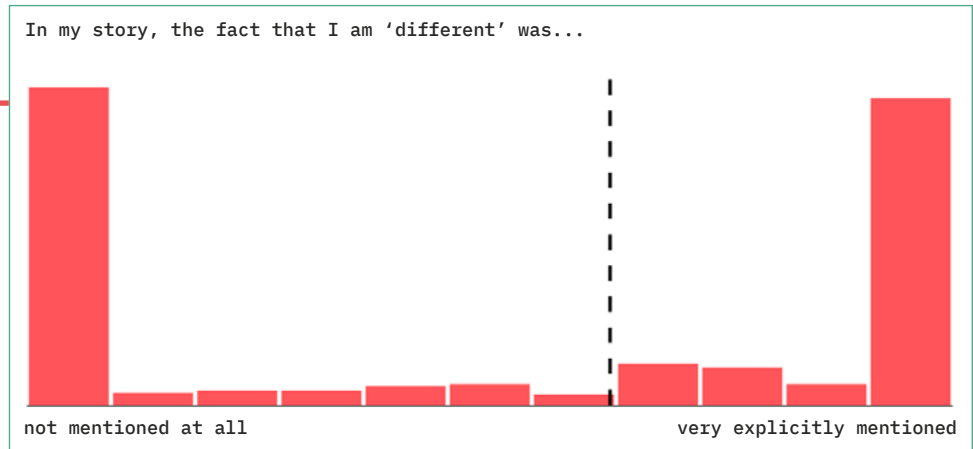
## Family-in-law

*Family and in-laws are amongst the most racist people to exist. I have been married and subsequently divorced twice. In the course of the relationship, one tends to give 200% of oneself without reserving any space for personal growth. Consequently, one becomes a mere non-entity in the union. Nevertheless, they tolerated me until I initiated the divorce proceedings. It was at that moment my former spouse and his family accused me of absconding with the children and the house (if it could move). It is evident that I am deemed to be here solely for their money (no matter how much or little it may be). I have been in touch with them for a decade, and at times, things went well. However, when it came to the point of separation, I suddenly became the “Negroes,” despite all the years of being one of the better ones amongst the “apes” in this “ape land.” This label is inescapable. Even if I chose to relinquish all the wealth to my partner and children during the divorce, they would still bestow upon me that reprehensible title. Thus, it is impossible to be oneself as one strives to avoid disappointing anyone in the marriage. However, if you succeed in pleasing everyone, you are merely superior to those “apes” in your family, but you must not surpass them.*

Each bar represents the number of people/stories that 'rated' themselves at a certain point on the line between two extremes. The dashed line represents the median. There are an equal number of stories to the left and right of the dashed line.

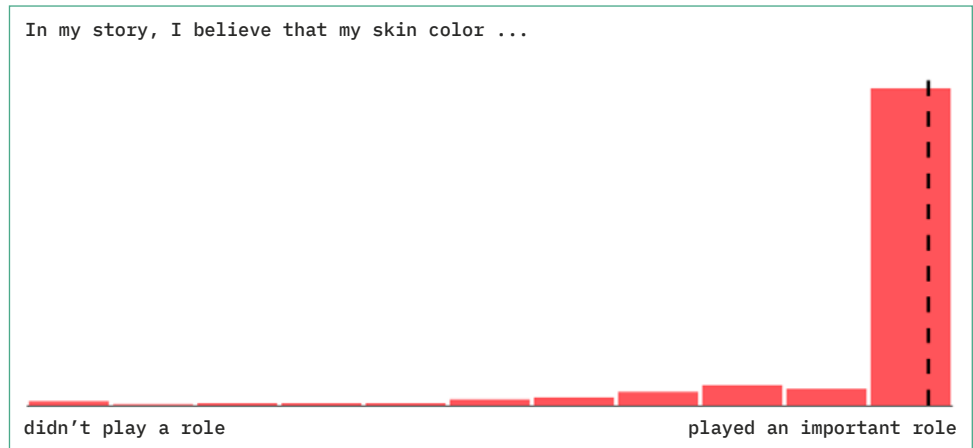


Nearly as many storytellers indicate that **being 'different'** in their story was explicitly mentioned as those who said it was not mentioned at all.



For the older age groups (36 years and older), as well as those who consider themselves part of the first generation, we see the median shifting to the left, indicating that 'being different' was more likely to be 'totally not' mentioned in their stories.

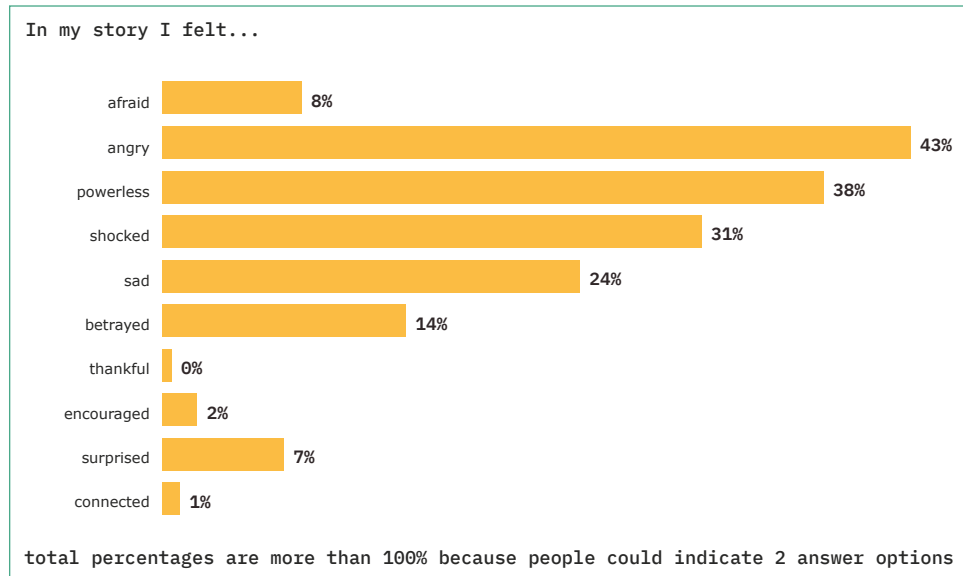
However, most storytellers indicate that **skin color** plays the most important role in their story.



The emotions most associated with the described stories are ‘**anger**’, ‘powerlessness’, and ‘shock’, while ‘gratitude’, ‘connection’, and ‘strengthened’ were mentioned the least.

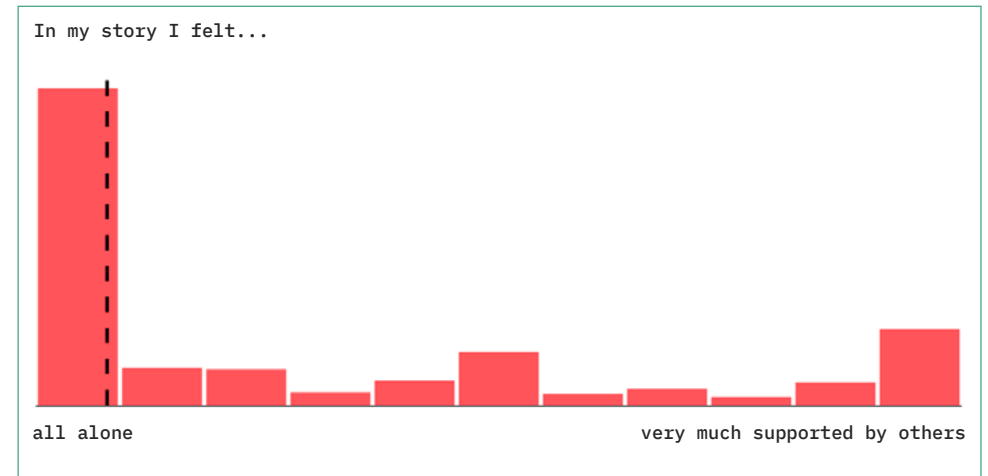
Regardless of whether someone experiences the situation in their story once or many times, anger remains the dominant emotion. People who have experienced the situation multiple times notably indicate feeling more sad and powerless in their story compared to those who experienced the situation only once. It is also noteworthy that they feel much less shocked than those who experienced the situation in their story only once.

People who usually do not feel at home in Belgium more often indicate feeling scared in their story (12% vs 5% for people who usually do feel at home in Belgium).



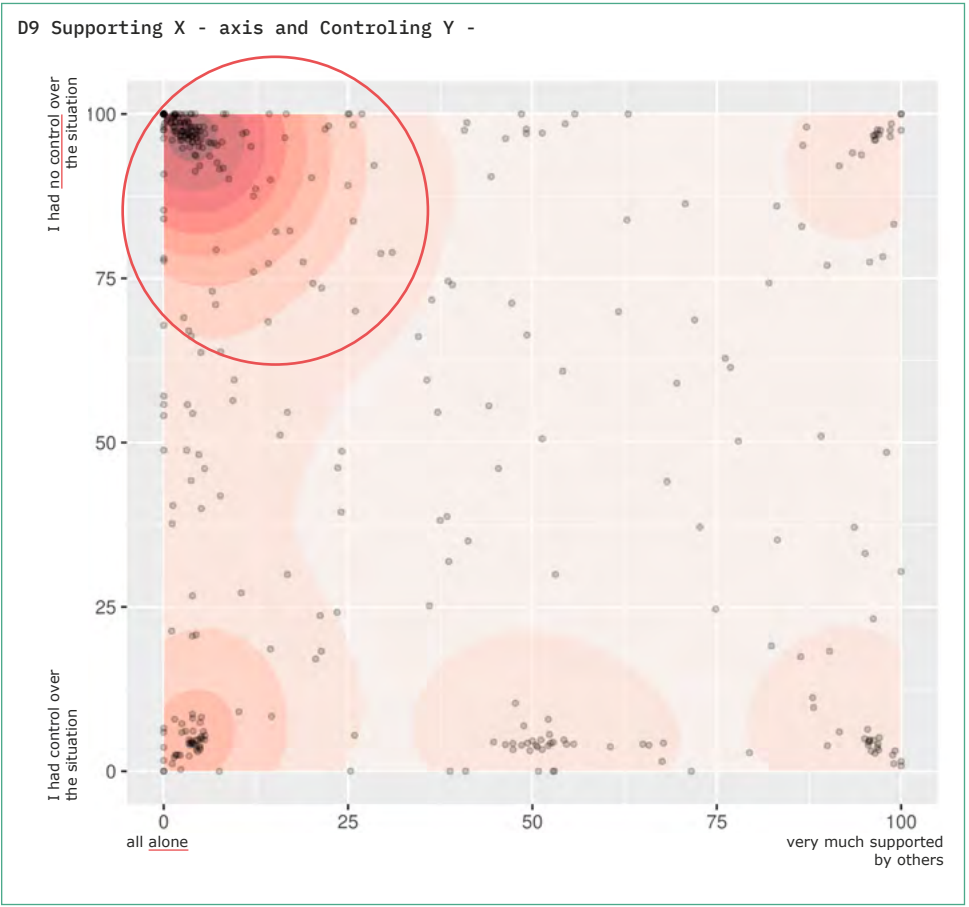
We asked storytellers whether or not they experienced **support** in their story and from whom (see further).

The vast majority of storytellers indicate that they felt completely alone in the situation described in their story when we asked if they experienced any support in their story and from whom (see further).



When comparing the first and second generations, it is evident that the second generation feels more supported in their stories than the first. This trend is also observed when considering age: the younger the storytellers, the more they felt supported by others in their story.

It is noteworthy that the majority of storytellers who report having had no control over the situation in their story were also primarily those who felt alone in their story.



## Discrimination in the selection of players for football matches

I am a secondary school student and a football player. I have been playing football since I was 10 and have progressed from youth clubs to a third division team. It is not easy for a black person to establish themselves in football, especially without a Belgian connection or someone (such as a coach, club member, or an honest and open-minded member of society) who recognizes and values their talents. I never miss a training session, except when I am truly ill. However, during selection matches, I always end up on the bench or not playing at all. It took a club member to speak up and say, "Hey, this boy is really good, why do you always leave him on the bench? Is it because he is black? We see your discrimination all the time. You did this to the previous player and he left. Do you want us to lose him too?" When this man is around, I get the chance to play. My coach is a good trainer but he always favors the Belgians in the team. We, especially the black players, always come last.





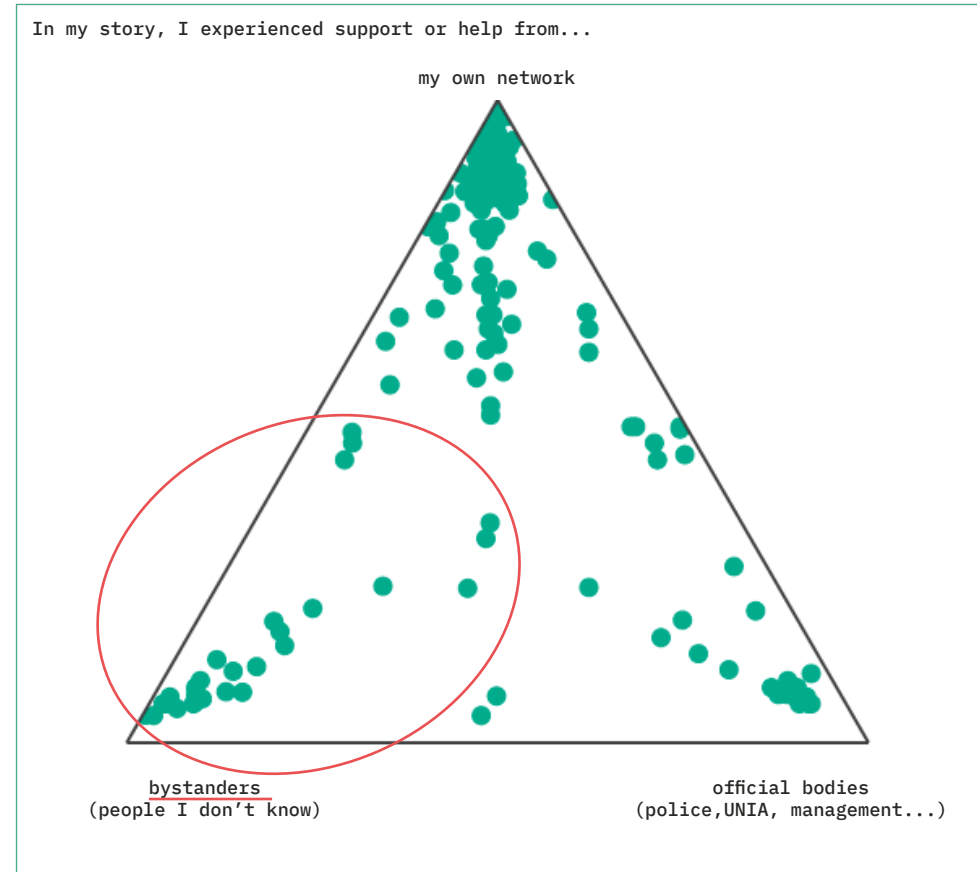
When asked about the **sources of support** in their stories, the majority of people answered that it is mainly their own network. However, it is striking that a large number of storytellers (42%) indicated that this question did not apply to them. This may mean that they did not experience support, or that the three options provided were not applicable to them. As people get older, they are more likely to indicate 'not applicable'.

The first generation more frequently than the second generation, reported experiencing support in their story from official institutions (police, UNIA, management, etc.).

Storytellers who experienced the situation in their story only once (these stories take place more often in public space - see above) indicate more often that they received support from bystanders compared to those who experience the situation in their story more often.

When reading the stories of people who experienced support from **bystanders**, several things stand out:

- The stories mostly take place on public transport, in a football context, at work, or in another context where language is the main theme (being judged on knowledge of Dutch).
- Individuals play a role and can make a difference: several stories tell of individuals who show trust or believe in people's abilities and give them opportunities.
- In several stories, bystanders were present, but the story did not describe how that support (or lack of support) was experienced.
- Several stories highlight the ignorance of individuals in a society where racism is institutionally present. Individuals who discriminate are not so much pointed out, but rather 'the system' which is considered sick.



We requested from storytellers to locate their narratives within various triangular inquiries. Each corner of the triangle represents a possible response to the query. One may situate oneself anywhere in the triangle using a small sphere. Each sphere represents a single narrative. Regarding each triangular inquiry, we may explore whether the patterns differ depending on factors such as gender or age.



## Is the government really working on inclusion or only writing about inclusion!

Two years ago, I was doing an internship for highly educated non-native speakers at the Flemish government, at an agency where I was the only person with a migration background. On my first day, I was warmly welcomed by the supervisor who was going to guide me for the next six months. She suggested we go around the desks of other colleagues to introduce myself. After the tour, we returned to our open-space office where three other colleagues were sitting. One of the colleagues had already seen and spoken to me before. He came to me and started telling me about his trip to my country and so on. The conversation continued for a few minutes, and he was definitely impressed that I spoke Dutch so well. He went back to his desk and came back a few minutes later with something in his hands. He called my name and said, "This is called a stapler!" I was surprised and looked at my supervisor, who looked at the other colleagues, who were even more shocked than I was. I was speechless and replied to him with a long... ooooookkeee...! and nothing else. He left, and I had to go to the toilet urgently because I wasn't sure what this meant. He had talked to me for almost half an hour. He knew that my Dutch was sufficient to understand what a stapler is and what it does, so what did he want to do? The supervisor suggested talking to him and possibly raising it with the management, but I didn't want to. I was afraid that my six months there would just become a nightmare if my first day started with a confrontation with a racist colleague. I left it at that and continued with my internship, which only lasted three months because I found work elsewhere. I didn't feel it was my place to report it, but I did tell the supervisor to raise it without me. This happened at the Flemish government, where they claim to do so much to promote diversity and inclusion...! Is what they claim to do really true, or is it just on paper?

45% of the storytellers indicate that they will ponder greatly about their experiences encountered in their stories in the future. During the inaugural sensemaking workshop, we read this package of stories. What types of situations are depicted? Can we infer from these stories the reasons why people will reminisce about them in the future? And is there a discrepancy in the experience when comparing one-time events with recurring situations? What stands out?

In the stories concerning a **one-time occurrence**, but which will **regularly persist** in people's thoughts, the following is apparent:

- The apathy of bystanders and their failure to act.
- Various accounts revolve around mixed marriages, where one does not want to jeopardize the family's position and hence no action is taken.
- In several stories, people feel unapproached or unrecognized as human beings ("COVID-19 only affects human beings, not apes! Referring to Africans as monkeys in this situation. It was said as a joke. But it hurt me deeply.").
- There are mentions of anxiety and trauma, both due to the incidents and the possible consequences ("Perhaps I will lose my job? Who will believe me? Maybe it is my fault?").
- Feelings of depression, powerlessness, doubt, and self-blame are conveyed in these stories.

What stands out in the stories that people shared about an experience they **often go through** and will **think about in the future**:

- The presence of micro-aggressions: subtle comments, behaviour, and reactions,... that seem innocent on the surface or are packaged as a joke, but have a significant impact ("I always had to do the cleaning. I wasn't paired in a duo to fill the shelves. If I got a section, it was a heavy one with the drinks.").
- Different reactions of people or institutions to the same incident depending on the color of their skin.
- Basic needs that are threatened: housing, job opportunities, income, food security, safety...
- The feeling of not belonging, not being part of society because of exclusion, ignorance, or targeted ("I got off at my stop with my neighbor who was 50 meters ahead of me, a police car passed my white Flemish neighbor and stopped to check me (...)").
- People articulate in their stories that they are being addressed and treated based on group identity and not as individuals: 'your people', 'people of your category'.
- All stories taking place in a school context have one commonality and that is; a lack of support and assistance.

- Several stories recount violations of personal space, integrity and dignity: In such a way that, people's hair or skin is touched because it is deemed 'different.' When people react, confrontation arises.
- The fact that individuals frequently experience these situations causes replicated or repeated trauma. Despite persistence, flexibility, and countless attempts to adapt, to try to belong, and to meet all requirements and conditions (such as sufficient language proficiency)... no change is noticeable, people see no results, and they are continually confronted with the same situations. *"The rules of the game keep changing."* This leads to demotivation, loss of hope and self-confidence, discouragement, and hopelessness.
- A frequently recurring element is a general sense of insecurity and feeling lost, with nowhere to turn... Not in one's own home, not with the police, not with peers. But also of not feeling at home anywhere. Additionally, 50% of the individuals who described their experiences and will remember them vividly indicate that they usually do not feel at home in Belgium.

A participant in the sensemaking workshop added the following: *"For those who belong to the first generation, this means having one foot in Europe and the other in Africa. For those of the second generation, it is possibly even more impactful, as Belgium is the country where they were born and raised. Confrontations where people shout 'go home' or 'go back to your own country' have an even greater impact, because where should they go? Belgium is their country, home, and homeland."*



## Running away from me

*One day, I boarded a train heading towards Gent Sint Pieters. It was quite full, and as I spotted a free seat, I sat down next to someone. However, this individual immediately stood up with some anger and went to sit in another spot where only one seat was left, next to several white people. There were still three empty seats next to me, and she looked at me in a strange way. I began to wonder if I had a bad odor or something. I didn't understand why she stood up and moved away from me. I felt very embarrassed and treated inhumanely. Throughout the entire journey, I pondered whether I should ask her why she stood up to go and sit somewhere else, but I didn't want to start a conflict on the train. So, I stayed put in my seat. Since then, I always choose an available seat to sit in.*



## Migrant hate

*While riding the tram in Antwerp, I asked a person sitting next to me, "Excuse me, ma'am, do you happen to know if this tram is heading towards Linkeroever?" She opened her eyes wide, looked at me from head to toe, took a pause, and replied very shortly and angrily, "I don't know!" A few minutes later, a white woman boarded the same tram, asked the same woman, and received a brief explanation of how and where to go. I looked at the woman and put my head down. I was not sure if this behavior was racist until the other woman got on the tram with the same question as me. That's when my eyes were opened. She was simply being racist, and she knew exactly where it was. I felt small and sad. I had done nothing wrong. I was very friendly to her and her children. But still!*



## Systemic inequality

*Personally, I do not experience a great deal of racial discrimination. However, subtle racism lingers in my mind, yet I am fortunate enough to hear stories from friends and family. Nonetheless, there is one story that always hits close to home. It would be rather disparaging to label it merely as a 'story' as it is a part of her life. Perhaps, the word 'trauma' would be more fitting. This story pertains to my mother's arrival in Belgium. Despite possessing the same level of education as my father, a white Belgian, she had to commence as a cleaning lady, and to this day, job opportunities at her level are still being denied. This, to me, is the essence of racism; opportunities are deprived based on one's skin color or culture. The strange glances, racist remarks, or other antics, while far from pleasurable, are issues that humanity will undoubtedly graduate from. However, the systematic inequality is what incenses me and also what I fear. For not everyone possesses the same strength as she does to wage a daily battle against the mountain. Therefore, yes, while it may seem like a standard story, it is the story that sometimes keeps me awake and has certainly made me more attuned to issues that I may have previously overlooked.*



## Discrimination from both sides

*I have experienced discrimination from both white people and Africans. When I married a white person, I was no longer seen as a friend, but rather as a traitor who was harassing Africans with the whites. I was viewed as the woman who thinks she's better, whose children are not black, and so on. This is also painful because it gives you the feeling that you don't belong anywhere. In Africa, you are seen as the white woman, but with your in-laws, you are not quite the black woman, and with your friends, you are too white to be black. Therefore, the painting you described from Central Africa, where a man is at the top of a tree with a snake climbing up from below, a lion waiting at the bottom, and a crocodile in the water surrounding the tree, is a perfect metaphor for how you feel. Sometimes, you feel like you're stuck here with nowhere to go and no identity of who you are or where to turn for help. The metaphor of the boy in the tree searching for a safe place is very clear, but if you stay in the tree, a snake will quietly take you, and if you jump, you have the lion waiting for you, and if you jump into the water, there is the crocodile. Where can you turn? Even in my mind, I feel the same way. It's a puzzle of survival that this boy has to solve to be saved.*



The enigma of the boy in the tree: what must he do to survive?



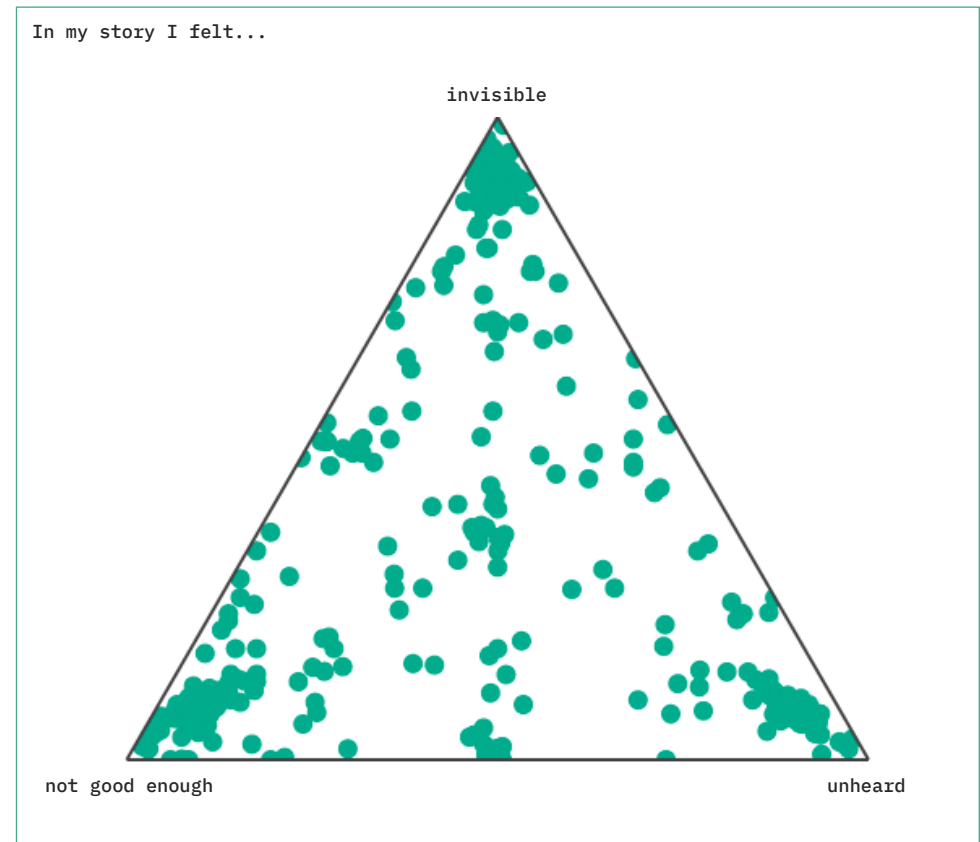
What often recurs in **all stories** that people will **frequently recall in the future** (both one- time situations and situations that occur frequently) is that individuals describe being dumbfounded by shocking incidents, speechless in response to their experiences, and simply unsure of how to proceed (see also chapter ‘How do people deal with their experiences?’).

The way in which official institutions, such as the police or the ‘Center for students support (Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding)’ for example, (do not) respond is distressing. Complaints are not followed up, not answered or there are no visible consequences. The loss of trust in these institutions is described because, even after repeated reporting, nothing changes. Many storytellers do not believe that filing a complaint helps, but on the contrary, makes things worse, as there is a risk of losing one’s job and income and being even more targeted than before...

These experiences have (long-term) effects on many aspects:

- The experiences have an impact on how one views others and society: people begin to despise the system that upholds racial oppression.
- The experiences change the way people view themselves and seriously affect their self-image: lack of self-confidence and self-assurance. Their own behavior is affected (underperformance or overperformance). People begin to hate themselves or feel inadequate. This latter aspect is also reflected in the numbers on the graph. Most storytellers indicate that they felt ‘not good enough’ in the situation described in their story (they position themselves in the left corner), followed by a feeling of ‘invisibility’ and the fact that they felt ‘unheard’.

When we analyse these feelings by generation, it is noticeable that the first generation feels more ‘invisible’ compared to the second generation. The second generation more often feels ‘unheard’ compared to the first generation and also positions itself more frequently in the middle position, indicating that they feel ‘invisible’, ‘not good enough’, and ‘unheard’.



*The first generation shared more stories about feeling ‘invisible’ compared to the second generation. The second generation more often associated the stories with feeling ‘not heard’.*

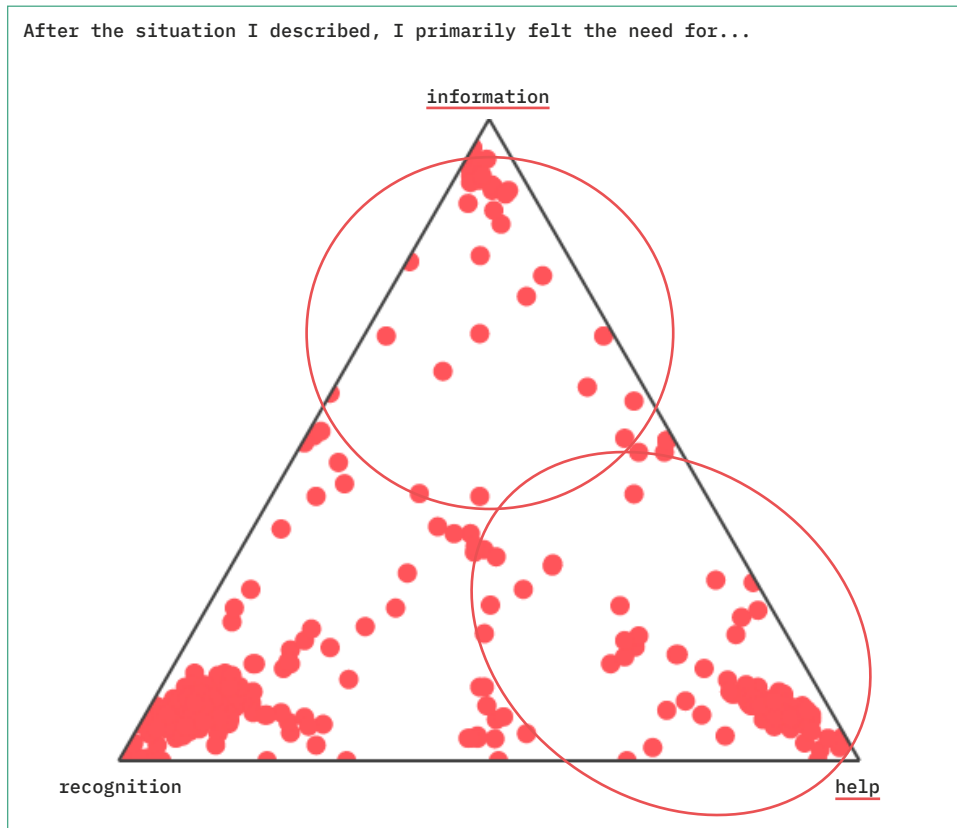






# WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN NEED OF?

We asked the storytellers to indicate whether they felt a need for anything after the experience described in their story. A vast majority positioned themselves in the leftmost corner, indicating a strong need for **'recognition'**, followed by the need for **'help'**. Only a small group of individuals stated that they needed **'information'**.



Based on age differences, with some caution for the age groups of under 18 and over 60 years due to the lower numbers of stories, there is a clear trend that the need for recognition increases with the age of the storyteller. Remarkably, from the age category of 36 years, the need for information almost disappears. The oldest storytellers also position themselves very distinctly in the corners where there is a need for recognition and help.

This is also confirmed when we look at the first and second generations. The first generation more frequently expresses a need for recognition, while the second generation has a greater need for information and positions themselves more in the middle (having had an equal need for information, help, and recognition).

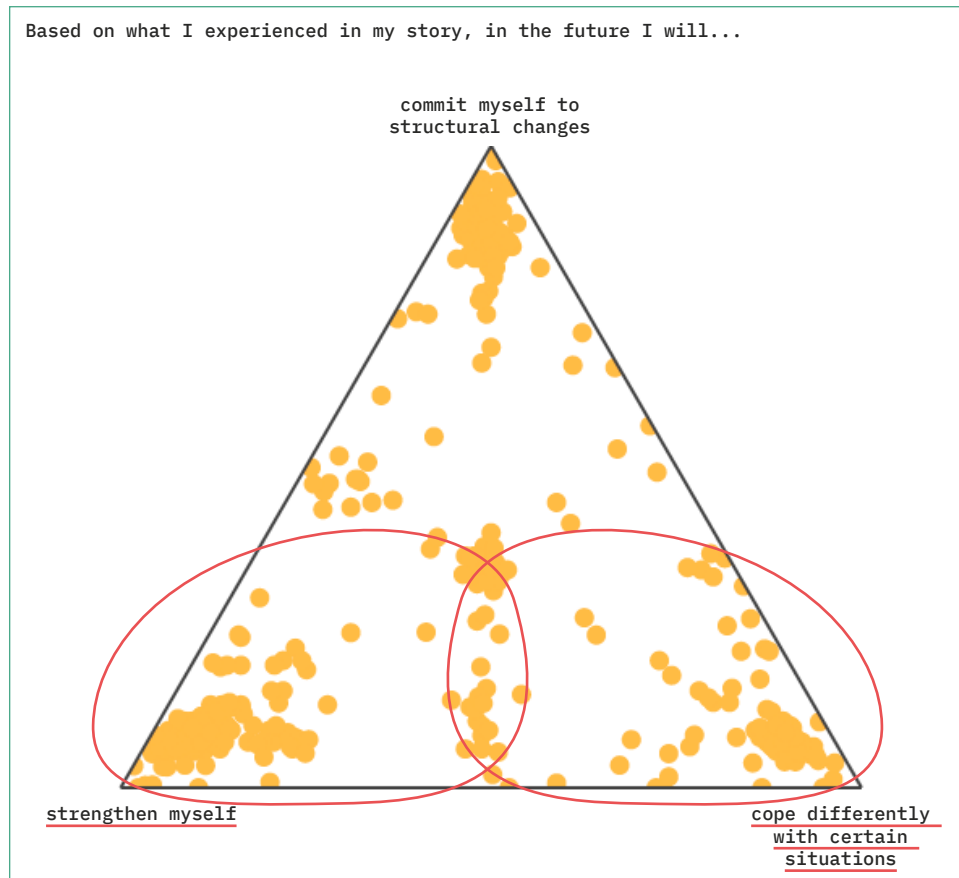
It is also noteworthy that the pattern for storytellers who have experienced the situation only once and those who have experienced it many times differ little. The storytellers who occasionally experience the situation in their story deviate from this pattern, indicating noticeably less need for 'recognition' and more need for 'help' and 'information'.

We further investigated the need for **help** and **information** during the second sensemaking workshop. What is described in the stories where people indicate that they needed help or information at work, school, home, and in public spaces?

- In the context of the **home**, we mainly observe a need for psycho-social help or support, for oneself or for children. In stories that take place at work, people mainly describe the need for safety.
- In many stories, the narrator is the only black person at **work**, and it concerns distrust or conflict with a supervisor. The need for information or help is sometimes explicitly described (complaint procedures), but very often implicitly (*"I don't know who to tell or what to do"*, *"Where am I safe?"*, *"I don't understand why they treat me like this"*).
- In **school**, young people interpret the need for help mainly as the need for 'fair play'. They simply want to be treated equally to their white peers (*"If I raise my hand, I also want to be heard"*). The storytellers indicate that it is mainly professionals and fellow students who need help to recognize discrimination.
- In stories that take place in **public spaces** where people indicated that they needed information, they describe:
  - Trying to understand why people of African descent are treated this way.
  - The need to inform the person who makes racist statements about where stereotypes and prejudices come from.

# HOW DO PEOPLE COPE WITH THEIR EXPERIENCES?

Through various approaches, we have investigated how storytellers coped with the incidents. How did they react immediately after the incident? What kind of thoughts were going through their minds? Did they share their experience with others? How do they plan to deal with similar situations in the future? In this chapter, we delve further into the so called **coping mechanisms**.



When examining the general trend, it is evident that storytellers primarily seek to strengthen themselves. They do so by predominantly positioning themselves in the 'empowering' corner of the chart below. This tendency is even more pronounced among women than among men. Comparing the first and second generations, we observe that the former asserts itself more explicitly in terms of self-strengthening and advocating for structural changes than the latter. The second generation positions itself more towards the center of the triangle.

Upon reading the stories associated with **self-strengthening and responding differently to situations**, we noted that many stories did not describe any reaction. The individuals from the African community who participated in the sensemaking workshops were able to discern the reactions and pain that were implicitly conveyed, but they noted that they were difficult to articulate. The 'Ears' referred to the nonverbal communication that was strongly present during the conversations, but that they were unable to capture on paper.

Where a response is described, the overwhelming majority of stories exhibit silence. People remain mute and inactive for various reasons: they are paralyzed and frozen due to being too shocked to react, they accept the situation as it is, they surrender to the situation, they remain silent because they cannot find the words in the language in which the conversation is taking place ("I simply left the café", "I looked at the doctor and left the office", "we left it as is, I looked and listened without reacting", "I could not say anything, I left the table", "I did not engage"). Feelings of anger, helplessness, sadness, etc., are also suppressed or not explicitly mentioned in the majority of cases.

**In the group that does not openly react after the event**, we observe various ways to mentally process the situation. They will engage in self-interrogation, and this internal dialogue leads to internal or external actions.

- A common pattern, especially in the stories of women from the first generation, is the fact that it only dawns on them after the event that racism exists, and as a result, the storytellers build a wall around themselves to protect themselves from feeling worthless, unwanted, and not allowed to exist.
- In addition, we observe a common pattern where people simply continue and encourage themselves to 'just' deal with the situation.
- In some stories, it is also mentioned that the situations evoke a kind of determination and resilience that is necessary to become stronger and move forward (*"I think I have just as much right to be here, so we'll just stay here"*, *"They will never break me, I will always find new ways to stay positive"*). This is the main response in the group that indicates they will handle the situation differently in the future (see graph).
- Some individuals also question their own actions, seek explanations, blame themselves for what happened, and vow to work harder or change their behavior in a different way (*"Is it because of my skin color?"*, *"Are they afraid of a societal reaction if they associate with me?"*, *"Maybe there's something wrong with me?"*, *"Are they doing this so I won't get a job?"*). We also frequently read that people will *"react better/differently"* next time.
- To a lesser extent, we see victims trying to rationalize the situation or the behaviour of the oppressor (person who excludes/discriminates/makes a racist remark), and they form a sort of pity towards the oppressor (*"He will make a decision he will later regret; so I won't say anything"*).
- Closely related to this are people who cite the system as the root cause (*"the person doesn't know any better"*, *"the child still has to learn"*), not the individual themselves. In a few cases, follows the analysis and discussions of the contemporary racial exclusion as a result of colonization. People begin to provide their recommendations for changes in the education system and in this way their minds draw hope from that. We mainly see this mechanism in the second generation.
- In some cases, it also emerges how the general trust in others decreases (*"Since then, I view my 'friends' in a different way, and find it difficult to trust the intentions of men"*).



### **Black power**

*One day, while I was working in my office, someone started shouting at me, calling me names like "nigger", "slave", "blackface", and so on. This was not the first time they had acted this way towards me. At certain times, I was even excluded from their games or conversations simply because of my skin color. They asked me if my color could be washed off, so that I could belong with them. They said, "Why don't you take a shower to get rid of your color, nigger?" This caused me so much pain. I lost my sense of self-worth and began to hate the fact that I had a dark skin color. However, I did not lose my courage.*



### **Are you stealing?**

*Once, while I was opening my mailbox, a couple happened to pass by and they immediately assumed that I was stealing. I was shocked and felt extremely ashamed. The feeling of humiliation was overwhelming and has stayed with me till this day.*



### **Others are treated differently than me**

*I had a meeting at an office where I was treated disparately and with great disdain, but I don't want to explain it here. I perceived that other individuals were given preferential treatment. Thankfully, the appointment only lasted a couple of minutes. But I still felt so bad. Subsequently, I began to regard white people through a different lens. Even prior to this occurrence, I was aware of such realities, yet I chose to delude myself into believing that they would not affect me or my life. Hence, I played along and held them dear. While my perspective of them has altered, I still cherish them.*

In the few stories where **people do respond immediately** to the situation, we read in their stories that they do so in different ways:

- Walking away from the situation or the place.
- Expressing their feelings and explicitly confronting the oppressor with their statement, informing the police, management, leadership, etc.
- Responding with a smiling and smart twist, so that the aggressor is confronted with their own statements. This was seen in the stories of the second generation (“*I thanked him for the conversation in perfect Dutch, waved goodbye, and got off the train - it was the best day of my life.*”).
- Openly asking for an explanation. In one story, we also read how a woman continued to inquire with her colleagues about the reason for a particular decision, ultimately discovering that it was related to her skin color.

When comparing the stories of women to those of men, we notice that women make more internal considerations about whether it is safe to respond or not. This consideration is also more prevalent in the stories of those older than 60. Sometimes, this leads to the decision that it is not safe to respond at that moment, but there is still the intention to respond later.

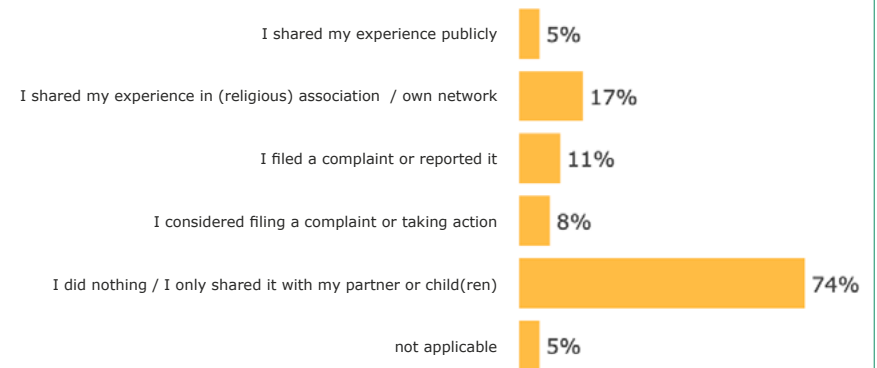
In the group of stories that explicitly tell us the long-term impact of the situation - in addition to the inner process that people go through - we observe that this often involves avoiding certain places or situations. In a few stories, we read that people make a certain decision to preserve their physical and moral integrity: starting to learn boxing, and resigning from work to maintain their dignity. The next chapter delves deeper into the long-term impact.

Throughout the stories, we also observe that people resist in different ways:

- By simply letting the situation slide and pretending it doesn't exist.
- By making internal recommendations to themselves, such as “*I'll show that I can do it*” or “*I'll react next time.*”
- Or to a lesser extent, by openly resisting during the incident and confronting the aggressor.

It is noteworthy that only in a minority of situations, people reacted openly, which is consistent with the conclusions about how people have shared their experiences with others (see chart below). 74% of the storytellers indicate that they did nothing after what they experienced in their story or shared it only with their partner and children. The second generation more often shares the experience in a (religious) association or own network and more often shares the experience publicly than the first generation. Only 11% of people have filed a complaint or report, and 8% have considered filing a complaint or taking action. People who indicate that they experience the situation a lot and will think about it often in the future, share their experience more publicly and have indicated more often that they have filed a complaint or report, or considered doing so.

After what I experienced in my story I ...



the total percentages are more than 100% because people could indicate 2 answer options



## Bullying and racism

*When I was studying dentistry, there was a professor who made racist comments about black foreign students. During one of his lectures, he stated to the entire audience: "Africans should not study medicine, dentistry, or any other university courses. They should follow courses in social promotion or manual labor. They will never pass my course as long as I am the teacher." On another occasion, he directed his attention to one of the black students and asked her to stand up and explain why she was pursuing an education. He said that she would never be able to succeed. During the evaluation, he gave all black students, including myself, a 2/20. Despite our complaints, the faculty never responded. We were not even allowed to see the exam papers.*

In order to gain a better understanding of the situations in which people do **file a complaint**, we read a collection of stories from individuals who have filed a complaint or report and expressed a **need for help** following the experience. What stood out and what can we learn from these stories?

- Several stories explicitly state that a complaint or report was filed due to individuals fearing for their lives, experiencing physical or mental harm, or feeling very unsafe.
- It was notable that there was a lack of information or the existence of misleading information regarding where complaints can be filed or what individuals' rights are.
- None of the stories mentioned any follow-up or consequences that were given to the complaints or reports that the storytellers filed.
- Several stories describe being bounced around from one institution to another, with the responsibility of handling the complaint being passed from one entity to the next.
- Many stories took place in an official setting such as work, public administration, school, or a situation involving some kind of power dynamic (teacher vs. student, employee vs. colleagues and superiors, citizen vs. police).



## How do minors cope with these situations?

When examining the stories of minors, it becomes apparent that children and young people are often confronted with situations they do not understand. *“Why couldn’t I choose whether to dress up as Santa Klaas or black Pete at school? I always had to be black Piet. Why wasn’t I acknowledged when I raised my hand to answer a question in class? Why was I blamed when I reacted when someone called me the N-word? But the person who said it got off scot-free?”*

Storytellers report that they did not understand why they were treated in such a way at the time of the events, that they had no idea then that this was racism, but that they did feel targeted, humiliated, and treated differently. Note also that 24% of minors indicate that their story is about isolation.

Several stories describe situations being reported to teachers/principals or describe teachers being present while situations occur, but little to no action is taken. Other stories show that children report the events to their parents, but sometimes not, in order to spare their parents.

Furthermore, we see in various stories that children react at the time of a confrontation, pretending it doesn’t hurt, blaming themselves, overcompensating, or finding solutions themselves (such as putting their hair in a ponytail so that people don’t constantly touch it).

A participant in the sense-making workshop adds: *“Children have little escape options. Adults can change jobs. Children can’t just stay home from school. Moreover, children are punished/hurt more than adults when confronted with racism. The experiences themselves cause a first wound. Often they are not heard, do not receive recognition, the facts are minimized or they themselves are punished if they react, which is a second confrontation/punishment. Children sometimes drop out of school or end up in a bad environment due to those successive experiences and reactions and/or are confronted by the police and are thus punished a third time. Moreover, their parents are often addressed with a message that they have failed in their upbringing, which results in a fourth confrontation. Hence, children are punished multiple times for something they did not do.”*



## School is hard

*At school, we have the opportunity to engage in enjoyable activities every week, taking turns. This can involve cooking something delicious or devising a game. Each person is assigned a designated day. When it was my turn to contribute, I had done so. As I began to distribute the items, I noticed that someone else had also done so. Everyone was in a state of shock because it was not really her turn and she was absolutely sure of it. I chose to ignore this and continued to distribute my pastries, offering her one as well. She proceeded to complete her round, visiting everyone except me. So everyone received something from her except me. I was shocked and did not understand why she would do such a thing. However, as I know her well, I realize that this is simply because I am the only Black person in that class. She has done this before with other things, but not as openly. If I were to do this to her, she would immediately quit school. However, she does it to others. It has hurt me deeply. So much so that my entire day was ruined. I did very poorly on the subsequent exams, which were numerous. I am starting to dislike school and I cannot confide in anyone because I do not believe they will understand. She behaves strangely in class, and when I react, I am the one who is punished. It is so difficult. If this is happening at school, what will happen at work later on? Last year, there was another girl of a different ethnicity in my class who dropped out of school. I know that racism was the reason, but everyone says she was too stupid and couldn’t do math. So many children lose hope and give up on school. Then the school assumes that these children are unintelligent, but so much happens at school and everyone knows something except the school. And when the school finds out, they usually do nothing, just saying that it wasn’t intended that way. These are all reasons why this behavior is being excused. Now I understand why the other child dropped out of school! I really do not like school anymore.*



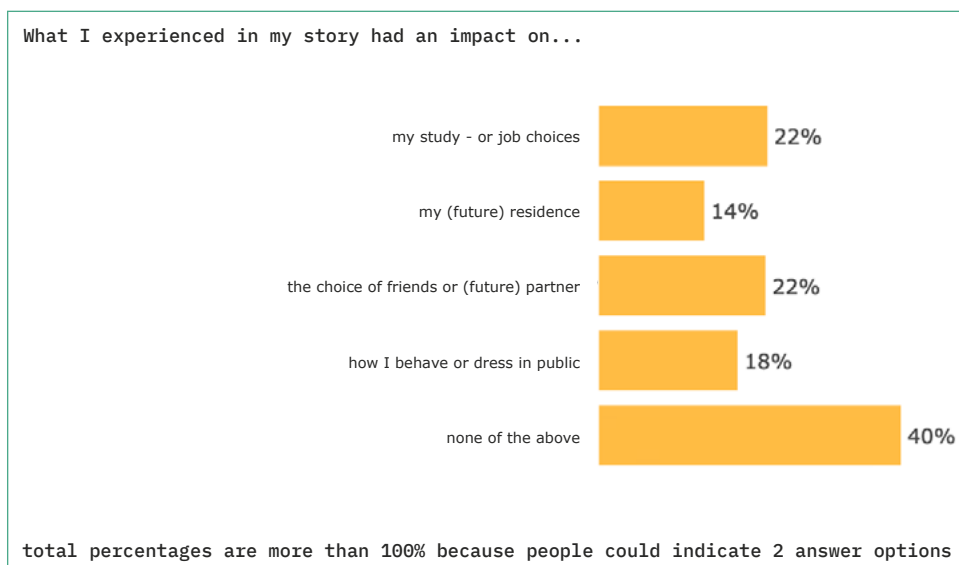




# WHAT'S THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THESE EXPERIENCES?

The previous chapter uncovered several patterns related to the internal processes experienced by people of African descent, and how they cope with the experience of discrimination or exclusion. Additionally, we asked the storytellers to describe the long-term impact of the event in their story on various domains of their lives, and how it changed their perception of themselves, others, and society at large.

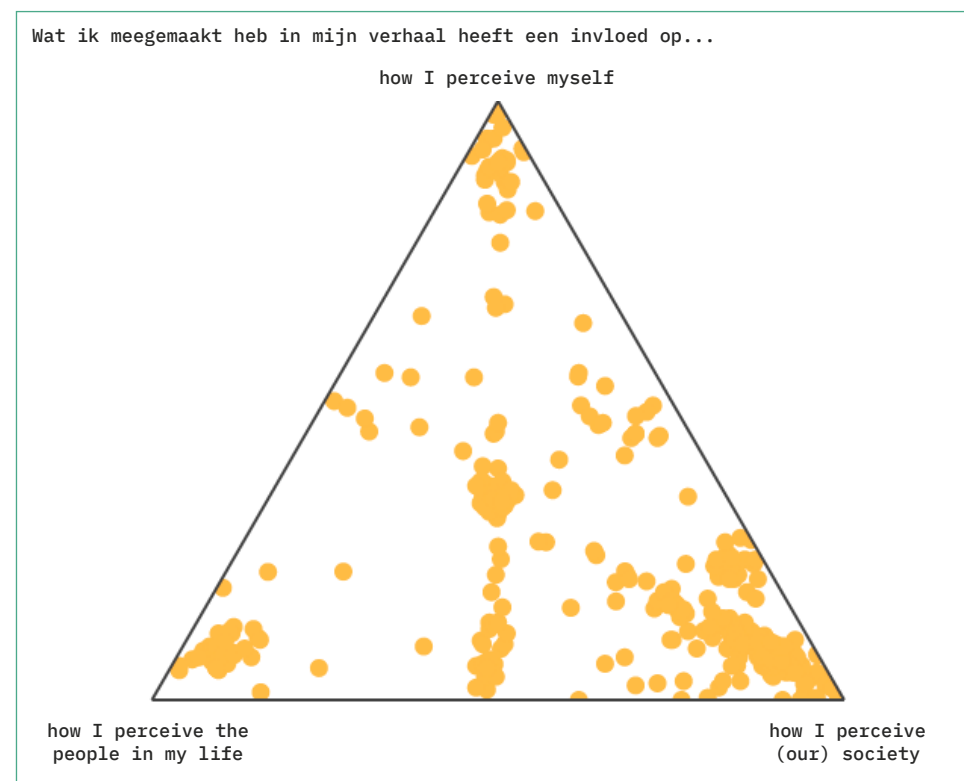
About 40% of the storytellers reported that the situation in their story had no influence on their choice of work or study, the people they associate with, how they behave or dress in public, or where they choose to live.



This pattern is confirmed for the first generation and for storytellers aged 36 and over, but becomes more nuanced when we look at the second generation. For them, this is much less pronounced. We observe that for one third of these storytellers, the event did have an impact on how they behave or dress in public.

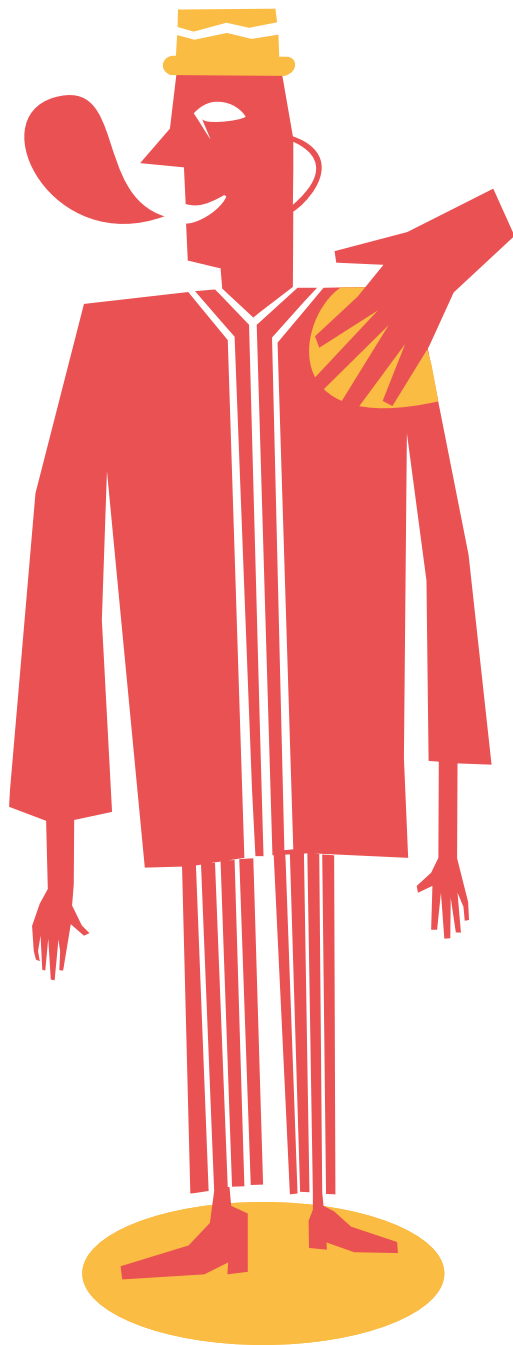
Moreover, for those who indicate that they have been residing in Belgium for 1-5 years, we see a completely different picture. About 38% of them indicate that it has had an impact on their (future) place of residence and 37% on their study or career choice.

Most storytellers have been influenced by their experiences in how they perceive society. This is true for both the first and second generation. However, we observe a greater impact on how the second generation perceives themselves compared to the first generation.



If the storytellers experienced the situation described in their story multiple times, they more frequently indicate that these events have an impact on how they view themselves.

When examining the difference between men and women, we see that women more frequently position themselves in the middle of the triangle, indicating that the experience has had an impact on how they view themselves, the people in their lives, and society as a whole, as compared to men.



## #leftracism

*I had not been living in the city of Ghent for very long when I discovered a group of men who played football together through some acquaintances. They were mostly West- Flemish men who had settled and worked in Ghent, and identified as left-leaning progressives. I was introduced to them through my then-girlfriend, and joined them to play indoor football every Thursday evening. Over time, I assumed that we had developed a friendly bond as a group.*

*However, I was shocked when I received an email communication that excluded the other Sub-Saharan Africans on the team, using language like “always the same with those Africans.” It was clear that these so-called progressives were not actually open-minded. One of them even worked with issues related to international relations, which made the breach of trust all the more hurtful. I had relied on them as people I could count on in a difficult society, and I had believed that I would find that support among progressives. I had hoped that at least one of them would react to the email, but instead, they waffled.*

*I decided to confront them, stating that perhaps they no longer saw me as one of the Sub-Saharan Africans because I spoke their language, but that I found their words to be very hurtful. Firstly, because the other Africans were not included in the conversation and could not give their version of events. Secondly, because of the choice of language*

*and the underlying assumptions being made.*

*They all said so. I received the response that it was not about me and that I was one of the ‘good’ ones. And I was expected to be content with that. However, it is not about me, but about a category of people to which I also belong. I quit playing football for that team. I did not share it with the other Africans. I did not want to spoil something they were really looking forward to. I assumed that the group would be more careful/better behaved towards others afterwards. I got the impression that they felt a twinge of guilt somewhere. Subsequently, I developed a healthy distrust towards left alternative Flanders. This incident changed my view and perception of society. I was very naive back then. When I shared those situations in the beginning, people around me said “they are all uneducated people, don’t worry about it.” Yet I felt it a little differently. Why then, all those political votes for certain parties? This type of incident, such as mine, indicates that it exists at all levels of society, but it is just more subtle to hear and feel it. Racism is not just those who call me a brown monkey on the street, but also those who speak in that way in an alliance. That was shocking and the basis of my awakening. The incident was an eye- opener. Now, when I hear someone say “I don’t see color and I am a global citizen,” I lean back and wait to see what follows.*



## The role of the teacher in maintaining the status-quo

Recently, I began my studies after enduring very difficult high school years where I was constantly the only black girl in class. The most memorable moment that often comes to mind is after the end of my exam period. I did very well in all of my exams, except for French during my high school years. During the evaluation, I was told that it was not possible for me to continue in the direction I was following because of my French. I was then kindly advised to pursue a lower level of education. I asked my classmates about their grades and found that there were others who performed poorly in more than one subject, yet did not receive the message to change their educational path. After crying for a long time, I made the decision to switch schools. I went to another school to continue in the same field of study. Soon I discovered that this school also had the same attitude towards black people. They said that I belonged in 'beroepsonderwijs' (an educational path focused less on academics, and more on occupation skills). This time, I spoke up and said that it was not fair to tell me I belong to 'beroepsonderwijs', even before they saw my grades.

Thus, I began to advocate for my rights. However, I soon became a young lady who opposed the educational system, and as a result, I became an adversary to many of my teachers, which was never my intention. Even in the classroom, when I had to answer a teacher's question, they simply started openly laughing at me. Nevertheless, I persevered in this school until the end of my secondary education. Now, I attend university, and I am performing well academically, but I have lost my self-confidence since then. Specifically, my confidence to speak in public, my trust in myself and my ability to achieve, and my trust in the people around me.

To cope with this, I decided to initiate a talk show to inspire others who are experiencing what I have experienced, to encourage them to stand up for what is right and never lose hope. Gradually, I am regaining my self-assurance.







# EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS POLICY MAKERS

We asked the storytellers about their expectations from policymakers, based on their experiences shared in their stories.

Initially, the plan was to organize dialogue sessions with various stakeholders and governments, based on insights gathered from the Listening Study. However, due to the postponement of the project timeline because of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated measures (I refer to the 'About this Study' section), it became unfeasible to arrange such sessions within the project's timeframe. Therefore the results and conclusions presented here are based only on the outcomes of the narrative survey.



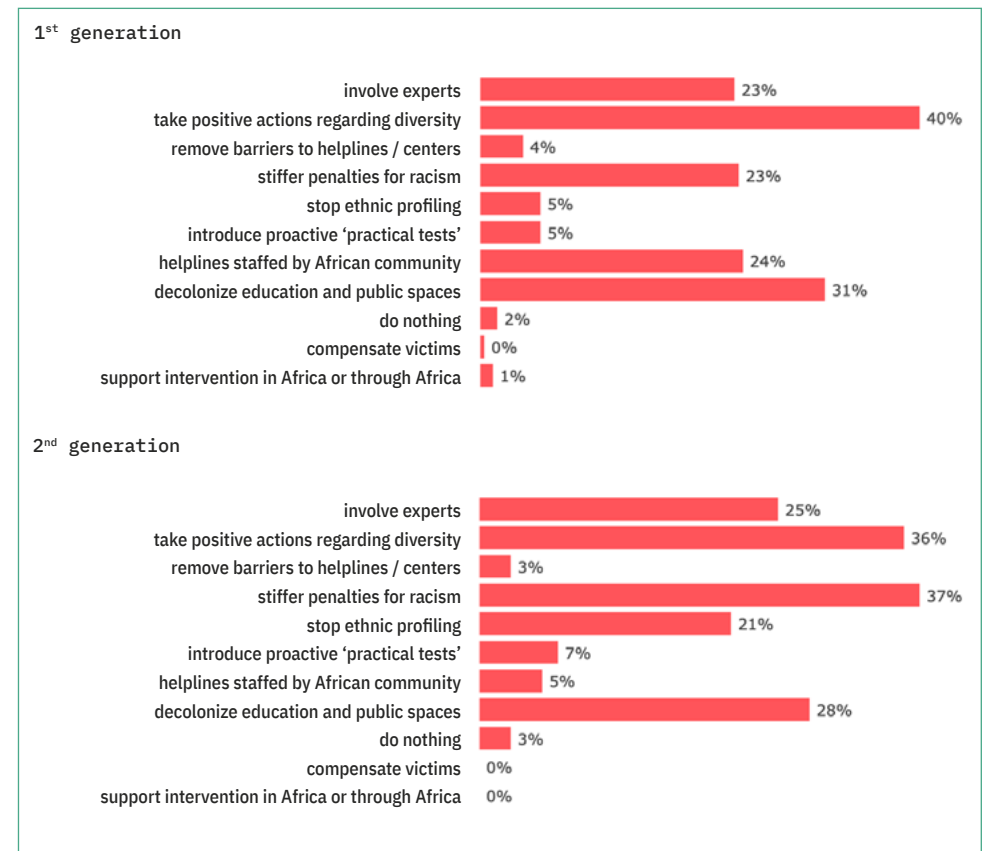
The primary expectation of the storytellers (38%) is for policymakers to take positive action to better reflect diversity in society.

In second place is the decolonization of the education system and public space (31%). For people with roots in DR Congo, this is even the most important expectation (50%).

Stricter punishment of racism ranks third with 25%.

When comparing the first and second generations, we see notable differences in their expectations. In 23% of cases, the first generation expects racism to be punished more severely, whereas, for the second generation, this percentage is 37%.

The second generation also places much greater importance on putting an end to ethnic profiling (21%) compared to the first generation (5%).





The first generation places importance on having a support system run by the African community (24%), while this is not a priority expectation for the second generation (5%).

We see the same pattern when looking at expectations towards policymakers by age group. 26% of storytellers over 36 years old expect policymakers to provide a support system run by the African community, while only 10% of those under 36 years old indicate this.

However, men and women largely emphasize the same points in their expectations towards policymakers.

These results confirm that an approach to tackling racism requires a finely-tailored approach and policies that take into account different needs based on age and generation.



## **Working in government is very difficult for people with a migration background**

*I worked as a counsellor for an organization which I prefer not to disclose here. I executed my duties with great proficiency. At one point, I was approached by the HR department with an invitation to participate in an interview regarding diversity matters. I accepted the invitation and expressed my genuine admiration for my employer and colleagues, which was, in fact, accurate. However, upon the publication of the report, I was met with silence from my team, even though many individuals outside of my department expressed praise for my contribution. It appears that they had learned of my two master's degrees from Belgian universities and concluded that I was clearly overqualified for my role as a counsellor. Consequently, they began to treat me with racist animus, shunning me and expressing ill sentiments about my character. Although I tried to shrug off their behavior, I found myself progressively excluded from team spaces, including the dining area. I decided to speak with the manager. However, despite my complaint, no action was taken. So, I sought the advice of a confidential advisor and submitted an informal complaint, which began to stir things up, albeit not in the right direction. The management decided to transfer me to a remote location, far from my residence, where I performed exceptionally well. Upon seeing that the change did not faze me, they assigned me an additional location, requiring me to meet clients at two distant locations. At that time, my colleagues began to confuse the clients. When they came to a location where I was just working at my desk, they were told that I was at a different location. And when they went there, they were then told that I had just left for the other location from where they had come.*

*The clients couldn't keep up with this, so they went to my colleagues for further guidance and I saw fewer and fewer people seeking my assistance. My colleagues went even further than this; they began reporting that they were doing my work and that I was doing nothing. However, I did not give up. I showed up every day and continued to assist new people. When they saw that I would not give up, my supervisor decided to assign me administrative tasks such as photocopying, archiving, and so on. Even then, I carried out my duties with respect and diligence. However, I was eventually sent a dismissal letter stating that I was incompetent and thus fired. I took the letter and went to higher authorities to report what had happened. There, I explained everything that had occurred and they asked me why they had not been informed earlier. I had indeed reported the matter, but I was informed that an informal report could not prevent my dismissal. They said that I should have made a formal report, and then they would not have fired me. Thus, I had been wrongly advised to make an informal report, while they were internally working on finding excuses to dismiss me unfairly. As the only African on the team, I knew nothing about my rights, only my duties. My colleagues joined forces with my supervisor to get rid of me, simply because I was a threat to them with my diplomas and know-how. This happened in a government agency that was supposed to protect us. Where could I possibly be safe? I am now working at a non-profit with people from different nationalities, and I feel very safe here.*

# THE CONFIDENCE TO TACKLE RACISM

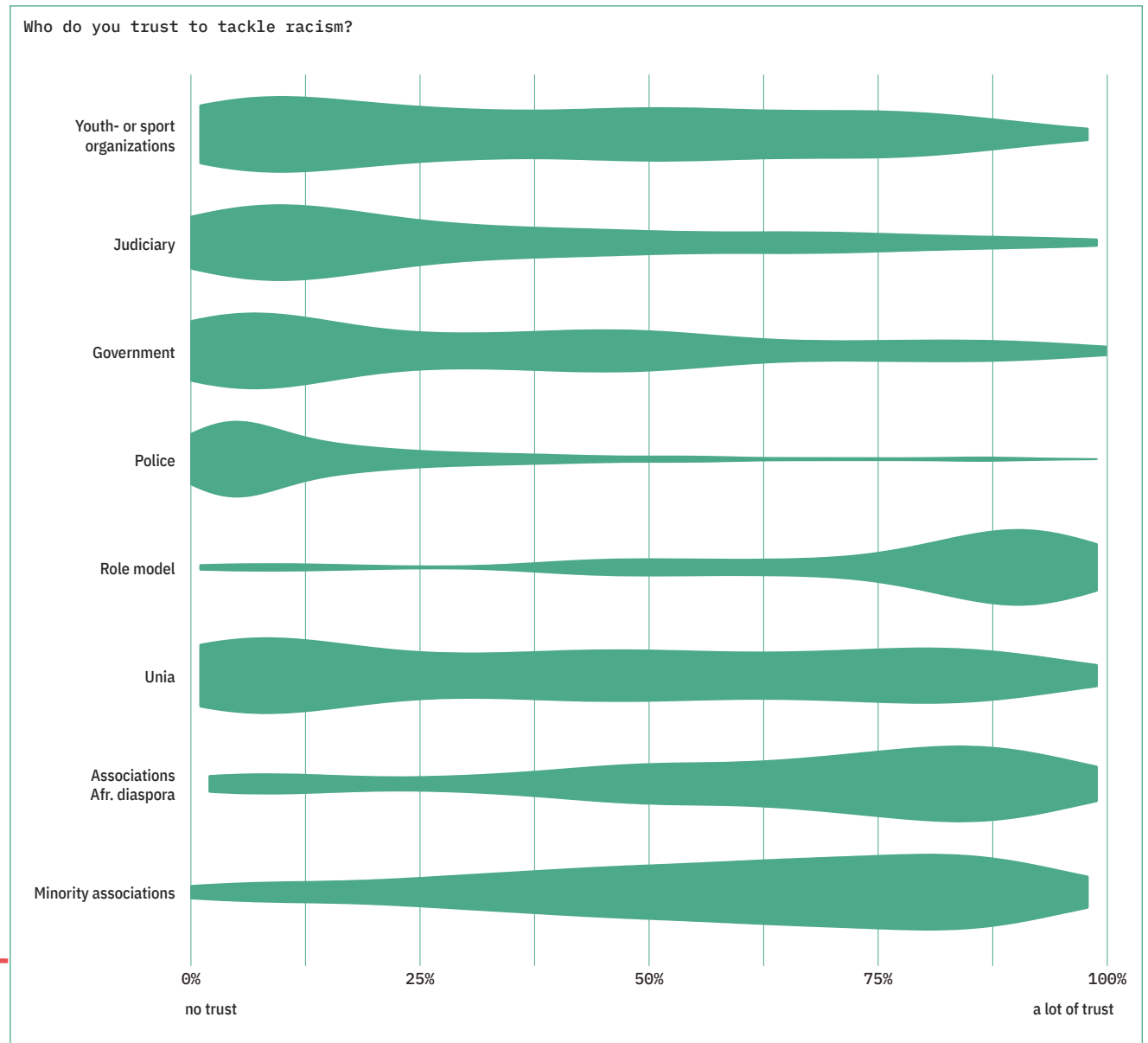
The question at hand is whom do people trust to combat racism, and how do the different actors stand amongst one another? Additionally, is there a consensus among people regarding certain organizations or is there a lot of diversity in their opinions?

The graph to the right shows where people positioned themselves on a scale on a line between 'no trust' and 'a lot of trust'. According to this graph, people have the least trust in the police, and there is also the most unanimity about this distrust. The trust in youth and sports organizations and especially UNIA (Federal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Anti-racism) is the most diverse (with the most dispersed answers along the line > the shape is nearly the same throughout the line).

Digging deeper into the additional analysis of this data, we observe that, compared to the second generation, the first generation has less confidence in UNIA, police, the judiciary, minority associations and youth or sports organizations to address racism.

People place the most trust in role models, especially those from their own circles (family, friends, and personal social networks were mentioned 40 times). Secondly, famous individuals from the cultural or sports world are mentioned (23 people), and 16 people indicate that they trust no one to combat racism, or only trust themselves. Religion and religious networks are also mentioned 11 times.

The thickness of the colored shapes in the graph indicates the primary concentration of dots/ answers.









# DO YOUTH AND ELDERLY PEOPLE ATTACH DIFFERENT MEANING TO THEIR STORIES?

We have compared the patterns (charts) of the four age groups in this study (see page 12) and summarized the main conclusions below. However, due to the small number of stories from minors and those over 60 years of age, caution is required when drawing conclusions about these age groups

The younger the person who shared a story, the stronger the experience is connected to racism. The plus-60 age group mainly sees their experience as belittling/humiliating and to a lesser extent linking it to racism.

Moreover, younger age groups and the second generation more often indicate that their 'otherness' is explicitly mentioned in their story. While older age groups and the first generation more often share experiences of implicit racism (where their 'otherness' is not explicitly mentioned).

The feeling that each age group most strongly associated with his/her story is anger. However, the younger the person, the more strongly they associate their narrative with this feeling. As the storytellers get older, the feeling of invisibility increases, as does the degree to which one was/remained in control of the situation in their story

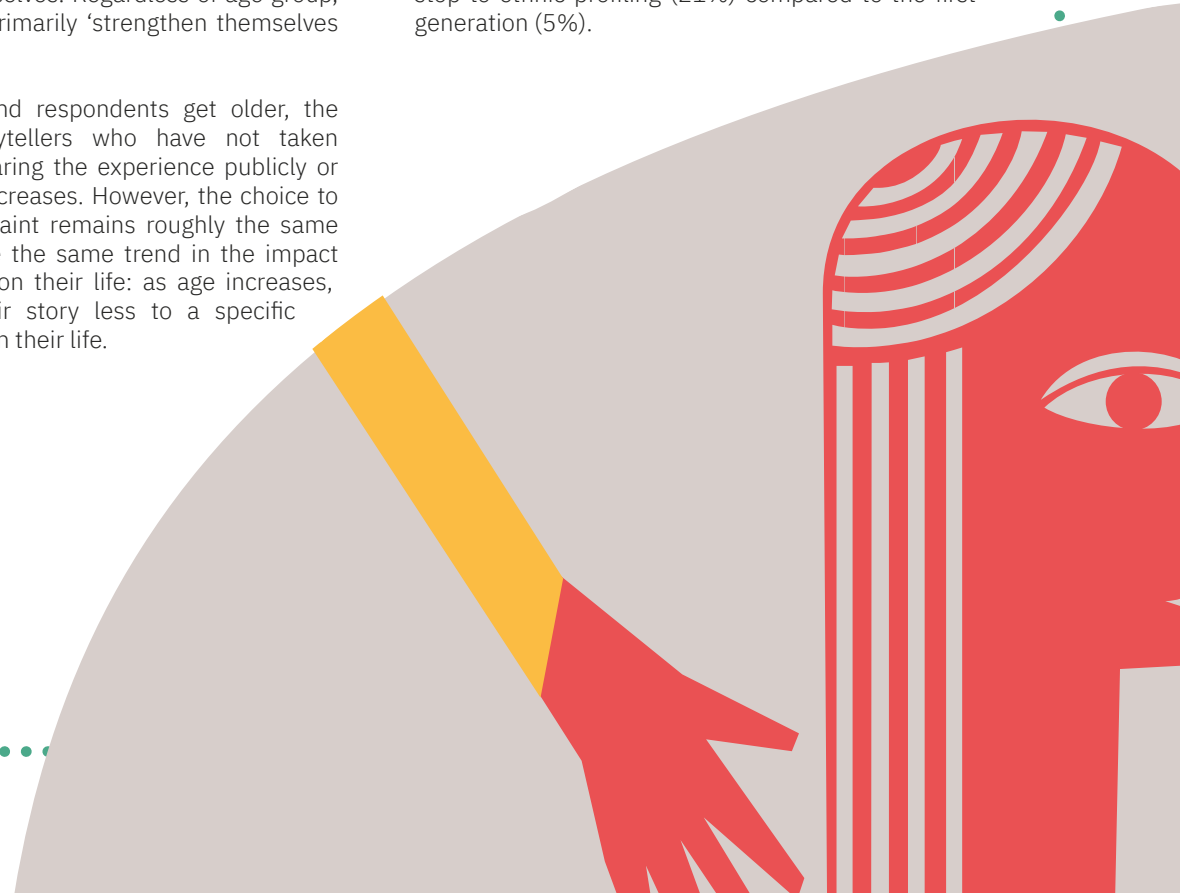
The younger age groups feel more supported than the older ones. Support from their own network is by far the most important support that storytellers experience, regardless of their age.

All storytellers indicated after the situation in their story, they felt most in need of recognition. This need for recognition increases even more with the age of the storyteller. While the need for information is strongest among the younger age groups, this need seems to disappear beyond the age of 35 years of age.

Of all age groups, minors indicate proportionally more that their stories had the strongest influence on how they view themselves. Regardless of age group, everyone wants to primarily 'strengthen themselves in the future'.

As age increases and respondents get older, the percentage of storytellers who have not taken external actions (sharing the experience publicly or filing a complaint) increases. However, the choice to actually file a complaint remains roughly the same across ages. We see the same trend in the impact the experience had on their life: as age increases, storytellers link their story less to a specific impact on a domain in their life.

As individuals age, storytellers more frequently express an expectation to establish a permanent confidant or support system, manned by members of the African community, while having less of an expectation to implement proactive field tests. The first generation expects 'racism to be more stringently punished' in 23% of cases, while for the second generation, it is 37%. The second generation also places much greater importance on putting a stop to ethnic profiling (21%) compared to the first generation (5%).



# HOW DO THE STORIES OF MEN AND WOMEN DIFFER?

In the stories of women, we primarily read about work situations, whereas men mainly recount events in public places such as on the street or public transportation. Women also shared notably more stories that took place at home or with friends compared to men.

Men more often report their 'otherness' being explicitly pointed out compared to women, and they had little or no control over the situations they described.

Men also shared more stories in which they expressed feeling inadequate. They feel slightly less at home in Belgium (40% responded 'usually not') compared to women (30%).

Both women and men indicate that they have the greatest need for recognition, as opposed to help and information. Both groups feel equally unsupported in their stories, but men share their experiences more often in (religious) associations or their own networks (27% vs 10% for women).

Both men and women predominantly indicate that the situation in their story had no influence on a specific area of their life. However, when they do indicate an impact, more men say that they adapted their behavior in public spaces (note that they also shared more experiences that took place in public), compared to women. Women see more influence in their social relationships (friends or (future) partners). The impact on career or education choice is equally significant for both groups.

Furthermore, men also strongly indicate that what they experienced in their stories has changed their perspective on society and that they will handle certain situations differently in the future or work towards structural changes. Women, on the other hand, focus more on empowering themselves.

Regarding expectations towards policymakers, men and women largely follow the same pattern. Men expect a slightly stricter punishment for racism, while women attach slightly more importance to involving experts with experience in the debate on racism.



# HOW WILL THIS LISTENING SURVEY PROCEED



'Racism Unravalled' conducted a large-scale survey of the experiences of discrimination among people of African descent in Belgium. This research aligns impeccably with the policy objectives that Sankaa vzw, as an umbrella organization, strives to achieve in the years to come:

- to reinforce key persons within the community to give a voice to the people
- to promote a sense of community between associations and individuals
- to gather signals from the member organizations of Sankaa vzw and to further promote active participation and inclusion in society.

Sankaa vzw, in fact, aims to play a critical role in the prevention and eradication of discrimination in all its forms.

'Racism unravalled' confirms that discrimination is deeply ingrained in our society and presents itself on sometimes unexpected fronts.

At the same time, the results of this listening study demonstrate the determination, resilience, and tremendous fortitude of individuals with African roots who are confronted with discrimination on a daily basis, starting from a young age.



During this research, we have observed that people are more inclined to share their experiences and participate in a motion for change when they believe that a significant difference can be made. To this end, we have tried to provide immediate assistance in specific cases of discrimination, demonstrated that it is a systemic or structural issue and less an individual issue, fostered connections between people, instilled hope that this type of research is necessary, and allowed these individuals to be involved in further analysis and policy recommendations. The sense-making workshops yielded valuable insights while also promoting a sense of connection and awareness.

This latter aspect is crucial for Sankaa vzw in order to refine our future priorities and actions, empower marginalized groups, and encourage an inclusive society. 'Racism Unravelling' highlighted various aspects and serves as the starting point for a journey to work collaboratively with our members and anyone who wants to take concrete steps towards structural change regarding racism.

This study treasures a wealth of information that we want to continue working on in the coming years, together with our partners. From the basic analysis and insights from the sensemaking workshops, the following important themes emerged:

- How do people deal with discrimination? What coping mechanisms do they use?
- How do we strengthen people with traumatic experiences? What is the power of safe space?
- Where can people go with their experiences? What are the barriers to filing a complaint or taking action?
- What makes someone feel at home in Belgium or not? How is this related to the commitment to bring about change? What can we learn from this?

Currently, our organization wants to prioritize trauma and safe space. We are concerned that people indicate that they do not feel safe in their environment, at work, on the streets, but also often not in their own home situation. The sensemaking workshops in which we delved deeper into coping strategies taught us that constant rejection by the environment, humiliation, and micro-aggressions strengthen the feeling of worthlessness and are a source of psychological and physical suffering.

We also learned that there is a connection between the extent to which racial trauma manifests in the affected individual and the type of coping mechanism that results from it.

**Henceforth, we are embarking on a new journey over the next few months: 'SAFE HARBOUR'. This project places emphasis on connection, healing, and resilience.**

The objective of this project is twofold. On the one hand, we aim to train experience experts to become 'Safe Support Leaders' who facilitate groups and assist in discussing the deeply hidden emotions, frustrations, and traumas experienced by people of African descent.

On the other hand, we seek to facilitate the creation of safe spaces; platforms where individuals can reinforce their self-confidence, find (recognition) for their problems, engage in reflection with others, connect with others, and heal from traumatic wounds caused by racism and discrimination. This will enable them to build a network on which they can rely when confronted with events such as racism, and also to reconnect with the broader society.

The stories from this study reveal a painful reality, told from the personal experiences of more than 400 individuals.

Sankaa vzw will continue to work towards these goals in line with its mission and strategy. At the same time, we call on all parties, including the government, to work together to achieve the change we desire.



Representation of the most common words in the stories.





# RACISM UNRAVELLED

Insights into how people of African descent in Belgium experience exclusion.

SAN  
KAA