

Sport as a Catalyst for Policy Reform on Gender-Based Violence



Sports & Gender-Based Violence. Are there cases of gender-based violence in sports ? To what extent have the EU institutions and Member States taken action to ensure equality and combat gender-based violence (GBV) in sport? And the most important question: Can sport act as a catalyst for policy reform and societal change, as a critical avenue for addressing gender-based violence?

Sport as an agent of change

The first references to sports were found in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) as outlined in the *Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the key features of a European Sport Model* (2021). More specifically:

Article 6 of the TFEU refers to sport as an area where action at EU level should support, coordinate and supplement the actions of Member States.

According to Article 165.1 of the TFEU, "the Union shall contribute to the promotion of European sporting issues, while taking account of the specific nature of sport, its structures based on voluntary activity and its social and educational function".

According to Article 165.2 of the TFEU (2008), Union action shall be aimed at "developing the European dimension in sport, by promoting fairness and openness in sporting competitions and cooperation between bodies responsible for sports, and by protecting the physical and moral integrity of sportsmen and sportswomen, especially the youngest sportsmen and sportswomen".

In the years that followed, each Member State has adopted and implemented respective initiatives and policies to address GBV in sports. For example,

In the **Netherlands**, among other initiatives, in 2011, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport issued the policy "A Safe and Respectful Sport Environment: 2011-2016". The policy adopts a zero-tolerance approach to (sexual) harassment, abuse and other forms of unethical conduct across sport. The policy promotes cooperation between organised sports, local government and the police-, the judicial and welfare system in order to encourage all stakeholders to take responsibility for creating a safe and secure sports environment.

In 2012, in **Belgium**, a commitment statement was signed to protect children's physical and sexual integrity in sport. However, the most important action arising from this statement was

the development of a policy framework on the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse of children in sport, which was implemented by non-governmental organisations.

In **Italy**, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2013, establishing the organisation of a “sport week against gender-based violence in and through sport” on an annual basis. Various events have been held to promote so-called ‘healthy’ sport, including initiatives to raise awareness of GBV in sport. The Italian Association Sport for All (UISP) and the Italian Sports Centre (CSI) joined the Save the Children campaign (‘Adults in Place’) by adopting a policy for the protection of children in sport. This policy provided:

- 1) specific criteria for recruiting appropriate staff,
- 2) the adoption of a Code of Conduct that is recognised and signed by all adults working with children,
- 3) sensitisation campaigns about the rights and protection of children, and
- 4) an assessment of the risk of abuse in sport activities.

In 2014, the **Croatian** Olympic Committee issued the National Sports Programme (2014-2020), with the aim of addressing concerns about protecting women and girls from all forms of violence (including sexual violence in sport).

In **Austria**, a position statement and a joint declaration to fight sexual violence in sport and to implement measures for respect and safety in sport were signed in late 2015. A National Action Plan on Gender Equality in Sport was also developed.

In 2016, **Denmark** endorsed the use of the so-called Children’s Certificate as a way of ensuring paid and voluntary staff recruited in the sector are suitable to work with children. It also set up a disciplinary task force and referral system to deal with ongoing and closed cases of sexual abuse in sport.

According to a European Commission's Final Report of the *Study on GBV in sport* published in 2016, “in EU Member States the concept of ‘GBV e’ is largely unknown or not widely used in the context of sport. In general, people do not know or understand which forms of behaviour the concept refers to (includes or excludes)”. The study also points out that “no uniform legal framework exists to address gender-based violence in sport. There is no sport-specific legal framework to prosecute GBV that occurs within sport in any Member State country. Rather,

sport legislation, where it exists, generally refers to the promotion of ethical values and fair play, condemns (all forms of) violence and harassment, and encourages measures to prevent and combat (all forms of) violence.”.

On the EU side, an important step was taken in 2021. A Council resolution on a European Sport Model is issued, calling on Member States, the Commission and the sports movement to respect and promote fundamental and human rights in and through sport.

At the same time, the Parliament adopted a resolution on 'EU sports policy: assessment and possible ways forward', calling for equal pay and greater visibility for women. The resolution called on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that sports policy and legislation support gender equality, with particular attention to tackling all forms of violence and harassment, gender stereotypes, low visibility and media coverage.

In a 2022 resolution, Parliament also stressed the pivotal role of sports clubs and federations in addressing racism and promoting equality, and noted that sport, and team sport in particular, is a driver of social inclusion, equality and the promotion of EU values.

It is worth noting that, in the context of a 2022 Eurobarometer survey, three-quarters (75 %) of respondents agreed that GBV in sport deserved more attention.

Therefore, with regard to the EU's response to this issue so far:

In 2023, the Council adopted conclusions on “Women and equality in the field of sport”, acknowledging that abuse, sexual harassment and violence against women and girls, including in the digital arena, as well as gender stereotyping and sexism, remain major concerns in the sports sector. They also noted that treatment of women in sport is often based on gender stereotypes or is sexualised and sexist. The Council put forward recommendations to strengthen and mainstream gender equality and to combat gender-based violence, harassment and discrimination in sport.

In 2024, the Council of Sports Ministers approved the new EU work plan for sport (2024-2027), which includes the prevention of harassment, abuse and violence. The goal, according to the plan, was to implement the content of the previous conclusions, action plans, and recommendations. Measures against GBV include: implementing educational and prevention programmes at all levels, getting sports leaders and organisations to commit to ending sexual harassment and violence, collecting data to measure the extent of the problem and the efficacy of prevention initiatives, setting up whistleblowing mechanisms and appointing safeguarding officers to handle complaints, and promoting the exchange of best practice to

prevent violence in sport. In the EU work plan for sport, awareness-raising, exchange of best practices and knowledge-building are mentioned as goals to be achieved by the target date of 2025.

Conclusion

To conclude, until a few years ago, the only reference we found on the issue of GBV in sport was related to the key role that sport plays in the social, cultural and educational life of EU citizens, promoting values such as democracy, respect, solidarity, diversity and equality. Several efforts have been made by the EU member states to develop more efficient and effective approaches to combating GBV in sport, but according to the European Commission's Final Report, entitled *Study On Gender-Based Violence in Sport*, published in 2016 identified a lack of reliable prevalence and incidence data on the subject. This knowledge gap was explained by an underestimation of the problem, a lack of research in the area, the sensitivity of the topic and the use of differing definitions and methodologies. Nevertheless, significant steps have been taken by the EU to place the issue of GBV on the European agenda.

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