

Empowering Young Voices: Youth Participation in Tackling GBV

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In the world of sport, where strength, unity, and resilience are celebrated, there remains a troubling issue that often goes unnoticed or unspoken—Gender-Based Violence (GBV). While sport has the potential to be a powerful force for inclusion and equality, it can also mirror the harmful power dynamics and inequalities that exist in broader society. Tackling GBV in sport requires not only systemic change and accountability but also the active engagement of young people—as advocates, leaders, and changemakers. (UNESCO, 2021)

GBV in sport can take many forms: sexual harassment, abuse of power by coaches or officials, discrimination against LGBTQI+ athletes, and psychological intimidation. Too often, victims remain silent due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in institutions, or simply because they do not feel their voices will be heard. Youth—especially girls, non-binary individuals, and marginalised groups are particularly vulnerable. (European Commission, 2017)

Empowering youth is not just about giving them a platform, it is about giving them power and responsibility in shaping safe and inclusive sporting environments. When young people are involved in identifying the problems, co-creating the solutions, and speaking out against violence, real change becomes possible. (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2019)

Youth participation is key because young athletes can reach and influence their peers in ways adults often cannot. Youth bring creativity and energy to addressing complex issues, often finding innovative ways to raise awareness. Survivors and allies within the youth community can share real-life experiences that bring human aspects to the statistics and inspire action. By participating in advocacy efforts, young people build confidence, communication skills, and a sense of agency.

Across the globe, youth-led initiatives are breaking the silence on GBV in sport. From grassroots campaigns to international forums, young people are demanding safer spaces. In Europe, youth advocates are using theatre and sport for development methods to open up conversations around consent and respect. Digital platforms are being used by young athletes to launch hashtag movements, share resources, and report abuse anonymously. These initiatives show that when young voices are given space and support, they can catalyse powerful movements. (UN Women, 2021)

For youth to truly play a meaningful role in tackling GBV in sport, several essential conditions must be in place. First and foremost, young people need to feel safe. This means creating environments where they are not only protected from harm but also where their voices are genuinely welcomed and respected. When young athletes know they are being heard without fear of judgment or retaliation, they are more likely to speak up and engage actively.

However, safety alone is not enough. To empower youth as advocates against GBV, they must be equipped with the right knowledge and tools. This requires investment in training and mentorship programmes that help them understand the complexities of GBV, recognise the signs, and develop the confidence to take action. With proper guidance, young people can transform their passion for sport into powerful advocacy for justice and equality.

Equally important is the role of adults in this process. Coaches, educators, and sport leaders must become allies—people who not only listen to young voices but actively share power with them. Inclusive leadership means creating space at the table for youth perspectives and treating those perspectives as valuable contributions to decision-making processes.

Youth participation must move beyond symbolic gestures. It should be embedded into the very structures of sport through policies, platforms, and mechanisms that institutionalise their involvement. When young people see that their input leads to real, tangible change, their belief in the process and in themselves grows stronger.

Ending GBV in sport is not a task for institutions alone—it is a collective responsibility. Young people are not just the future of sport; they are its present. Their voices, when amplified and respected, can challenge harmful norms, hold power to account, and reimagine sport as a space of safety, joy, and equality for all.

References

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