

Safe sport contexts at a glance: A comparative analysis in seven European countries

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Introduction

All athletes have a right to engage in safe sport, defined by Mountjoy et al. (2016) as an athletic environment that is respectful, equitable, and free from all forms of nonaccidental violence to athletes. However, these issues represent a blind spot for many (local) sport organizations because of a fear of reputational damage, ignorance, silence, or collusion.

In recent years, international and national federations, governments, and Olympic committees have made considerable effort to make sport organizations aware of the issue of harassment and abuse in sport, and the field of athlete safeguarding in sport is now slowly expanding (e.g., Dutch Parliament [Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal], 2018; International Olympic Committee, 2021).

We note an increase in awareness of the systemic nature of harassment and abuse in society and sport. Additionally, the responsibility of sports organizations to safeguard participants from harassment and abuse is more regularly encompassed explicitly in regulatory frameworks.

This factsheet offers an overview of what the situation of safeguarding policies and safe sport environments is in seven different European countries.

Specifically, we highlight the situation in the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, and Spain in respect to securing safe sport environments. The factsheet is a part of the Erasmus+ Safe Sport Allies project, in which we aim to develop, implement, and test an effective bystander intervention to reduce the amount of abuse and harassment in sport.

Methodology

To obtain a sense of the societal and policy situation related to safe sports in these seven different European countries, a country template was developed covering five different topics: (a) recent prominent disclosed cases; (b) prevalence studies; (c) policy frameworks and instruments; (d) governance and capacity-building challenges; and (e) educational, safeguarding, or bystander programs.

The structured country template, with specific questions, ensured consistency among the country reports and allowed for comparability between the European member states. The involved organizations representing the different countries in the [Safe Sport Allies consortium](#) performed desk research and completed the country templates. The researchers conducted a quality check to make sure that the information provided characterized the state-of-the-art information in each of the countries. When necessary, consortium members were asked to gather more information on specific topics of the country template. What follows are the general findings of a comparative analysis of the country templates.

Recent prominent cases

The topic of violence and abuse of athletes is high on the political agendas of different

European countries, mainly due to some very recent public disclosures. Many of these testimonies followed after the Netflix series *Athlete A* (2020). *Athlete A* was a disturbing and illuminating account of the Olympic women's gymnastics sexual abuse [scandal](#) in the United States. It showed how the culture of winning at all costs encouraged a cover-up of crime and personal tragedy. The documentary encouraged gymnasts all around the world to also speak up about their experiences of physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Many survivors used the #gymnastalliance.

In [Belgium](#) and [the Netherlands](#), testimonies of their national elite gymnasts resulted in disciplinary law investigations and parliamentary research investigations.

Besides the testimonies of the female gymnasts, we see other prominent cases that have shaken the field of sports in various European countries.

In Finland, two cases, one in [figure skating](#) and another in gymnastics, has fostered debate within sport federations and sport clubs about female coaches' abusive language and angry behavior toward female athletes.

In Cyprus, a public disclosure of an athlete in shooting about sexual violence initially did not get much traction until the beginning of 2021, when [Sofia Bekatorou](#), a golden Olympic medalist in sailing, spoke up about her experience during a campaign in Greece. Her public disclosure sparked the #MeToo societal movement in Greece and Cyprus.

Furthermore, in the Netherlands, former football player [Renald Majoor](#) shocked the Dutch sport world with his public statement about the abuse he suffered by one of his coaches. Renald's case eventually initiated a parliamentary research committee to gain a better understanding of the magnitude of the problem in the Dutch sport world.

National prevalence studies

Brackenridge et al. (2008) wrote, "Although the exact prevalence of abuse is difficult to determine, it is clear that it occurs across all classes of society and in any context where there is an opportunity of exploitation and an individual with the will to exploit" (p. 387). More than 10 years later, we observe that documentation of abuse and violence against athletes has improved in a number of European countries, but systematic longitudinal monitoring and evaluation of trends are still lacking.

In the Netherlands, for example, two prevalence studies were conducted on the magnitude of different forms of violence and abuse against sport participants. [The \(retrospective\) prevalence study](#) of 2016 estimated that 37% of athletes experience psychological/emotional violence, 12% experience sexual violence, and 10% experience physical violence in sport before the age of 18.

A follow up research [report](#) of 2020 published by I&O research en centER concluded that 22% of the respondents in the sample experienced or witnessed emotional abuse, almost 13% experienced or witnessed severe physical abuse, and almost 7% experienced or witnessed sexual abuse in their sport career before the age of 18. In terms of risk factors, the two prevalence studies indicated higher prevalence rates for athletes from an ethnic minority or a sexual minority (LGBTQ), with a disability, or competing at the highest competitive level.

In Belgium, there have also been two prevalence studies. The first [one](#) was published in 2016. The study revealed that up to 17% of the 2044 surveyed adults who participated in sport before the age of 18 experienced at least one event of sexual violence, 38% experienced psychological violence, and 11% experienced physical violence.

The most recent [prevalence study](#) was published in 2018. The study showed that 6.8% of the 575 surveyed children and young adults between 10 and 18 years experienced at least one form of sexual harassment and abuse, 46.5% experienced at least one form of psychological violence, and 27.2% experienced one form of physical violence in the context of sports. These numbers are most likely an underestimation because the questionnaire did not measure all types of interpersonal violence in sport.

In Finland, a [prevalence study](#) was conducted in 2020 among grassroots athletes who were 16 years and older. In total, 9,018 respondents were included in the study. The survey focused on sexual and gender-based harassment. Among all respondents, about one in four (26%) had experienced sexual harassment in sport. Almost one in three women (32%) and almost one in five men (19%) had experienced sexual harassment. The research reported similar risk factors as those in the Dutch reports. The report also included a great deal of information about most likely perpetrators (i.e., teammates).

In 2010, scholars inter alia [investigated](#) the experiences of Greek female sport students of sexual harassment. The results indicated that 34% of the women in the sample (n = 616) experienced sexual abuse from men and 14% experienced sexual abuse from women. The form of sexual harassment participants experienced most were repeated unwanted sexual glances. Currently, researchers from inter alia Spain and Romania are conducting a [prevalence study](#) about interpersonal violence in sport. There is no prevalence study available from Cyprus.

Comparison between existing European prevalence studies is difficult because there are differences in samples, in definitions of (sexual) abuse and interpersonal violence, and in the type of prevalence or incidence measures.

Policy frameworks and instruments

Different policy instruments can be used to ensure safe sport environments. Among the seven studied countries, only in the Netherlands has the government developed an [action plan](#) aimed at reducing violence and abuse in sports. In most other countries, there are awareness-raising campaigns funded by the national government.

Except for Spain all countries have clearly outlined disciplinary procedures for cases of violence and abuse in sports, such as reporting mechanisms, investigation procedures, or disciplinary procedures.

The countries also report having training programs for ensuring safe sport environments at the grassroots level, the possibility for criminal background checks for trainers and coaches, a hotline to report cases of abuse, a sport tribunal (except for Spain), and certified safeguarding officers or a safeguarding organization (except for Cyprus, Romania, and Greece).

Not many countries have codes of conduct (both at the national and local levels) about the responsibilities sport officials have in securing a safe sport environment (except the Netherlands and Belgium) or protective measures for [whistleblowers](#).

Currently, officials in Cyprus are working hard on updating their toolbox of policy instruments by working out new instruments related to reporting mechanisms, investigation procedures, disciplinary law, and a hotline for victims of violence or abuse in sports.

Governance and capacity-building challenges

Policy instruments merely represent the administrative reality within a country. In the end, the proposed measures must alter a cultural reality at the level of sport federations and local sport clubs. There are, however, numerous challenges when it comes to ensuring that within all sport federations, local

sport clubs foster and adopt a culture of safe sport (this includes implementing a safeguarding policy, ensuring athlete and entourage education, and appointing a trained safeguarding officer).

Based on the comparative analysis's results, three specific governance- and capacity-building challenges are mentioned. First, the sport sector faces the challenge that mostly volunteers, who often do not have a pedagogic background or experience with cases of abuse or violence at the club level, are responsible for creating and maintaining safe sport environments.

Second, it is still a challenge to convince sport officials of the need to implement safeguarding instruments in their sport organizations. There is no general sense of urgency. Talking about safe sport instruments or abuse is not normalized in the general understanding of what constitutes good sport governance.

Third, sport federations function mainly autonomously; the law does not oblige them to take safeguarding measures. In that respect, it is still up to change agents (i.e., individuals who work against the tide) to promote safe sport policies and safeguarding instruments at the level of sport federations and local sport clubs.

There are also country-specific challenges. In Spain, for example, there is a lack of protocols, reporting mechanisms, and disciplinary laws to create a safe sport environment for all athletes. In Belgium, support from the senior management for safeguarding officers is often lacking, which makes it difficult to implement integrity policy in all sport federations.

Four strategies are suggested to foster a safe sport culture at the sport federation and grassroots level in different countries. First, funding mechanisms (i.e., reward bonuses or penalties) can be implemented to motivate sport federations to adopt welfare policies and appoint safeguarding officers.

Second, investments can be made in the monitoring capacity at the grassroots level by, for example, working with club support officers that visit the sport clubs every year to see which measures are really in place or developing a quality mark that is also annually monitored to see whether the sport club still possesses a safe sport climate.

Third, more attention should be dedicated to bystander programs to make people involved in sport (e.g., athletes, board members, volunteers, parents) aware that they can play a vital role in diminishing (the risk to) violence and abuse in sport by being reflective of risks and signs and intervening when they observe unwanted behaviors.

Fourth, safeguarding training should be mandatory for all professionals in sport. For voluntary instructors and coaches, this can be made obligatory before they are allowed to work with minors.

Educational, safeguarding, and bystander programs

Across the European continent, different educational, safeguarding, and bystander programs exist to foster safe sport cultures. In total, data on 20 relevant programs were collected in this research. Most of the programs (10 in total), such as the [Väestöliitto program](#) in Finland, the Athletic Club's [Aterpe program](#) in Spain, or International Centre for Ethics in de Sport's [Flag System](#) in Belgium, target young athletes, parents, and coaches.

Ultimately, these training programs strengthen the self-determination of young athletes; increase the knowledge and awareness of parents and coaches to help them recognize unwanted forms of contact, behaviors, and harassment; and ensure that all people that come into contact with minors comply with a basic set of safety and integrity rules.

Another group of programs have managers of local sport clubs as the target audience. Some

examples include the [High 5 Plan](#) in the Netherlands, ICES's toolkit of [transgressive behaviors](#) in Belgium, and [Zubipe's](#) action protocol (against sexual harassment and abuse) in Spain. These educational programs provide board members with safeguarding policies, action protocols, reporting mechanisms, policy strategies, and templates to draft their own specific safeguarding strategy. In Cyprus, the [CSO program](#) aims at making a similar change with the same strategy but at the sport federation level.

In the Netherlands, there are two survivor-led educational and bystander programs. After Renald Majoor's public disclosure of his abuse case, he started his own foundation, Breaking the Silence (in Dutch, [Stichting de Stilte Verbroken](#)), to help fellow athletes in disclosing their cases and promoting safe sport environments in the Netherlands.

Specifically, the foundation organizes locker room talks for young athletes where survivors in small team settings describe what happened to them and how peer athletes can, as direct bystanders, avoid more cases of abuse or harassment in sports. Additionally, the foundation has developed a platform called [Athletes Help Athletes](#), where victims can reach out to survivors and receive help and support after they have disclosed their case of abuse.

The "branding" role of the Basque Athletic Bilbao football club is relevant to mention. The football club has a strong network of local clubs in the region. In the network, Athletic Club Bilbao uses its professional status as a football club to influence local sport clubs in the Basque area to foster a safe sport environment through training, education, and protocols.

However, none of these programs have been longitudinally tested for effectiveness. The success of the programs is merely determined by how many people have participated in a program or how many sport clubs have

drafted a safeguarding policy. Additionally, no specific bystander intervention programs are known in the field of sport that effectively improve the self-efficacy levels, norms, belief systems or skills of (young) athletes to intervene in unwanted or toxic situations that can evolve into incidents of abuse or harassment.

Conclusions

The results of our inventory show that safe sport practices are being implemented throughout European sport. However, monitoring and evaluation data on the effects of policies, bystander interventions and educational programs in sport barely exist. This hinders the possibility of conducting a good assessment of their effectiveness. Moreover, it remains a challenge to ensure that local sport clubs have designated and trained staff to adequately implement the required procedures and practices.

To minimize abuse and violence in sport, it remains crucial to educate instructors/coaches, managers, parents, athletes, and other people active at local sport clubs on minimizing risks for sexual abuse and violence and on when and how to intervene in the case of a report, disclosure, or concern. The Safe Sport Allies project aims to contribute to this ambition by developing, implementing, and testing a prosocial bystander protocol in the future work packages of the project.

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