



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SPORTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA



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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
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SPORTS IN NORTH
MACEDONIA

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Executive Summary

The aim of this analysis was to explore the experiences and recognise different forms of gender-based violence against women in sport, the level of awareness among female athletes and the existence, visibility and use of safeguard mechanisms. The research was carried out between August and December 2025 by conducting an online survey of 115 female athletes, a survey of 25 sports federations, interviews with 22 stakeholders, as well as an analysis of publicly available federations' documents, relevant national and international legislation and policies, researches and reports.

Available analyses and research indicate that gender-based violence in sport is a poorly researched and insufficiently visible phenomenon. Data is fragmented and often limited to individual cases or sports, highlighting the normalisation of certain forms of violence, low rate of reporting and the dominant role of coaches as risk factors. Reviewing the available national reports further indicates that cases are rarely publicly recognised and that there is no system for registering and monitoring violence in sport, which creates a significant gap in understanding and addressing the problem.

Although North Macedonia is committed to ensure advanced standards for the prevention and protection from gender-based violence based on the Istanbul Convention, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and other relevant legislation, these obligations have not been transposed into sports related legislation. The Law on Sports does not have any provisions related to gender equality, nor mechanisms for reporting and protection.

The majority of female athletes who responded to the online survey are minors, i.e. under 18 (48.7%), followed by female athletes between the ages of 18 and 24 (28.7%), and a significant proportion of them are involved in sports at the club/regional level (66.1%) and at the national/international level (32.2%). The survey responses indicate that harassment and violence are widespread in organised sports, with only a small share of respondents (10.4%) believing that these phenomena do not exist in sports, while for the majority they are rare or frequent. More than half of female athletes (61.9%) have experienced offensive or humiliating comments, a significant proportion have experienced aggressive or intimidating shouting (35.4%), and a smaller number have experienced threats and blackmail, physical abuse and online harassment, indicating a widespread normalisation of psychological and verbal violence. Although sexual harassment is reported (7.1%) rarely, its presence is significant given the age of some female athletes, as well as the hierarchical dependence in the sports context. Violence most often originates from fans and the public (53.3%), but also from individuals within the sports structure, such as teammates (39.8%) and coaches (36.4%), which indicates the multi-layered risks that female athletes face during matches/competitions (88.2%), training (31.2%) and travel (10.8%), but also on social networks (21.5%).

Only 13.4% of female athletes reported experiencing harassment or violence, and the most common reasons for not reporting are the perception that the case is "not a serious one" (61.4%), disbelief that anything would change (51.8%), distrust in institutions (20.5%), and lack of information about existing mechanisms (15.7%), reflecting low visibility and limited availability and trust in support systems. However, it is encouraging that most of the female athletes reported that the experience had no significant impact on their continued involvement in sports, but a significant number suffered direct consequences, such as changing clubs or coaches (14.5%), taking a break from training (11.5%), or quitting from competitions (4.2%), indicating that the effects of violence are not negligible. Additionally, the high prevalence of testimonies of violence against other female athletes (38.3%) and the fact that almost two-thirds of respondents (67.8%) do not know whether their clubs or federations have a designated person or safeguard mechanism, indicate that information, transparency and trust in the system are significantly low.

The survey of sports federations shows that many of them have not established basic policies and safeguard mechanisms against harassment and abuse. More than half of the federations (56%) have not adopted an official policy, protocol or code of conduct for "safe sport" that include prevention and action

in the event of harassment or violence against athletes, and only 28% have established a safeguard and reporting mechanism, and in another 28% the mechanism is in the process of being developed. Even among the federations that have declared that they have a mechanism, it is usually reduced to a general code of conduct (6 federations), while only 3 have a designated person to handle reports. In the last five years, 80% of the federations have not received or been informed about reports of harassment or violence against female athletes, which may indicate a low reporting rate, lack of recognition or absence of functional safeguard mechanisms. Almost half of the federations (48%) have organised or participated in training on gender equality or “safe sport”, and these activities are significantly more often carried out by federations that already have or are establishing a protection mechanism, indicating a link between education and institutional preparedness. The review of publicly available documents showed that out of 11 federations that declared having adopted documents, in the case of 5 of them we did not find any publicly available documents, while in the others the documents were mostly limited to disciplinary rules, without clear reporting and protection procedures.

According to the interviews, psychological violence is the one that is most commonly recognised, but interviewees also point to cases of sexual harassment and violence. These phenomena are embedded in pronounced hierarchical relationships and an organisational culture that normalises insults, pressure and inappropriate behaviour, and the lack of female leadership further reinforces the feeling of vulnerability among female athletes. Training, sports facilities, public space and online communication stand out as contexts where abuse most often remains invisible and unrecognised. Most interviewees indicate that there are significant gaps in policies and safeguard mechanisms and reporting, that they are rarely visible or functional and that distrust, fear of consequences and a culture of silence are the main reasons why female athletes do not report such behaviour. Safe sport initiatives are in their initial phase and in only a small number of federations.

Based on the findings, the analysis proposes a set of recommendations aimed at sports organisations and policymakers, with the aim of establishing a systemic and sustainable approach to preventing and addressing gender-based violence in sport. The recommendations focus on strengthening capacity and awareness, establishing clear and reliable protection and reporting mechanisms, aligning sports regulations with national and international standards, as well as ensuring institutional accountability, monitoring and systematic data collection. Their implementation is key to creating a safer, more inclusive and gender-responsive sports environment.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence in sport is a phenomenon that, although globally present, is very poorly documented, primarily due to the specific context of sport, i.e. hierarchical structures, normalisation of male dominance and a culture of silence, and therefore often remains invisible, unsanctioned and deeply traumatising for victims. Despite the increased global awareness about violence against women, sports institutions are seemingly an exception to this trend, with limited transparency, poor accountability and the absence of effective mechanisms for prevention and protection.


According to data from the European Institute for Gender Equality,¹ gender and sexual harassment are present in all sports, with their prevalence varying between 14% and 73% in the European countries that conducted surveys, and verbal sexual harassment is the most common form, with a higher prevalence among women active in elite sport.

The first Report on Violence against Women and Girls in Sports by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls² confirmed the systemic nature of the problem. According to the report, women in sport are exposed to various forms of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and abuse, verbal and psychological violence, intimidation, exclusion and repression when reporting. The report warns that existing sports structures, including international federations and national committees, often fail to establish independent, effective and gender-sensitive safeguard mechanisms. Unequal representation, the absence of gender protocols and the absence of transparent investigations lead to systemic impunity and repeated victimisation of women in sport.³

In North Macedonia, the position of women in sport is under significant challenge due to the lack of official data, the absence of specific protocols for dealing with violence in sport and the under-representation of women in the managerial structures of sports organisations.⁴ Gender-based violence against women in sports has not been the subject of systematic research to date. In addition, gender-based violence against women in sport remains under-recognised and under-researched, although international and European reports indicate that female athletes are exposed to various forms of violence. The lack of systematic data, low reporting rates and the normalisation of certain harmful practices contribute to the problem being marginalised and often invisible in the sports system. Although the national legal framework for protection against violence and discrimination provides formal intervention mechanisms, they are rarely linked to the sports context, and many female athletes are not informed that they can use them.

The need for this analysis is a result of the serious lack of systematised data, the limited institutional readiness to address gender-based violence, both in sport and in general, as well as the lack of effective, gender-sensitive safeguard mechanisms. This analysis has been prepared in order to fill the existing knowledge gap, to provide a structured picture of the different forms of gender-based violence in sports, their recognition, the conditions that enable their occurrence and the degree of institutional readiness for prevention and protection. The analysis is based on a combined methodological approach and included an online survey with 115 female athletes, a survey with 25 sports federations, 22 semi-structured interviews with athletes, coaches, sports workers, media and civil society organisations, institutions, an analysis of publicly available documents of the federations, research, reports and a review of the relevant national, European and international legislation and policy framework.

- 1 European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). (2017). Gender in Sport. Available on: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-sport>
- 2 United Nations. (2024). Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences. Violence against women and girls in sports. Available on: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a79325-report-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-and-girls-its>
- 3 United Nations, 2024.
- 4 Јовановска, Б., Кочоска, Е. и Митевска, С. (2025). Родова еднаквост и инклузивност во спортот во Северна Македонија. Македонски центар за меѓународна соработка. Available on: <https://mcms.mk/mk/za-nasata-rabota/istrazuвана-i-publikacii/2642-rodova-ednakvost-i-inkluzivnost-vo-sportot-vo-severna-makedonija.html>



The analysis is structured in several interconnected sections. The first section describes the methodology, the choice of instruments and the combined approach that enabled the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. This is followed by an overview of the international and national context, including the relevant institutional framework for protection against gender-based violence in sports. The results of the survey with female athletes, the survey with the federations and the analysis of their documents, as well as the content analysis of the interviews, are presented in the “Findings” section, while the final section integrates the key findings based on which recommendations are given to all individual stakeholders in sports.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this analysis contributes to a more profound understanding of the situation with gender-based violence in sport in North Macedonia. The findings provide a basis for the development of recommendations aimed at improving national policies, institutional mechanisms and sports practices in order to create a more inclusive, safe and gender-responsive sports environment.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose and approach

This analysis aims to explore the different forms of gender-based violence against women in sports in North Macedonia, the way in which female athletes recognise and experience these phenomena, as well as the existence and visibility of mechanisms for their protection. The focus of the analysis is placed on the individual experiences of female athletes, institutional practices in the sports sector and shortcomings in the system, in order to obtain a clearer picture of how the sports environment responds or fails to respond to these challenges.

For the purposes of conducting this research, a combined approach of quantitative and qualitative methods was used, based on the analysis of secondary sources and data and the collection of primary data, in order to better understand the phenomena related to gender-based violence against women in sport in North Macedonia. This approach allowed for the quantification of the basic trends in the recognition of violence, exposure, reporting, etc., qualitative deepening of power dynamics, perceptions, barriers and institutional reactions, as well as checking and comparing institutional statements with publicly available documents.

Combining methods allowed for an analysis of the systemic factors that enable violence, as well as an understanding of personal experiences that cannot be captured by a quantitative approach alone.

The research was conducted between August and December 2025.

2.2. Research methods

2.2.1. Collection and analysis of secondary data

The secondary data analysis included a review of national legal and strategic documents, policies in the field of sports, as well as relevant international standards and recommendations for protection and “safe sports”.⁵ The analysis also included available reports, research and media content related to gender-based violence and discrimination in sport.

This review enabled contextualisation of the problem, i.e. clarification of institutional competencies, existing mechanisms and key gaps in the protection system. The analysis of secondary data also served as a basis for the development of instruments for collecting primary data and for interpreting the findings.

2.2.2. Collection and analysis of primary data

The primary data collection process is based on a combined approach using quantitative and qualitative methods, in order to provide different insights and perspectives regarding gender-based violence against women in sport.

As part of the research, a completely anonymous online survey was conducted with 115 female athletes⁶ who are members of sports clubs, i.e. who are part of organised sport. The research included professional, semi-professional and amateur female athletes, but not women who engage in sports only for recreation. This target group was selected because organised sport, clubs and federations have an institutional re-

5 “Safe Sport” is a sports environment in which athletes can train and compete in healthy and supportive conditions, based on respect, equality and fairness, and which is free from any kind of harassment and abuse. For more see: <https://www.olympics.com/athlete365/topics/safesport>

6 The questionnaire is available on [Annex 1. Questionnaire for female athletes](#)

sponsibility to introduce safeguard policies, and at the same time there are hierarchical relationships (e.g. coach-athlete) that create a risk of violence. In addition, the number of professional female athletes in North Macedonia is small, while the majority are semi-professionals or amateurs, but are still members of clubs and participate in competitions representing the club.

For the purposes of the research, federations of 6 individual (kickboxing, tennis, triathlon, table tennis, swimming, judo) and 4 team (basketball, volleyball, handball, football) sports were monitored, selected according to the popularity of the sport, the number of women and girls who train and compete, as well as the developed club network with active channels for internal communication. The federations forwarded the link to the survey to all their clubs, and the clubs further shared it with their members through internal communication channels. In this way, the goal was to ensure a wider coverage of female athletes, with a clearly defined and controlled distribution.

Considering that there is no official record on the number of female athletes in North Macedonia, information was requested for the purposes of the research from the Ministry of Sports, however they informed us that they did not collect that type of data. Hence, the number of active female athletes was requested from the parent federation for each of the sports included in the survey. According to the information provided, the total number is around 7,030 women and girls, athletes, with some federations providing approximate estimates or data that were not fully updated. 115 female athletes responded to the online survey, representing a response rate of 1.6%, indicative given the absence of centralised statistics and the limited ability to determine the exact share of the target population, as well as to cover a larger part of the population, as stated in the section "Research's limitations".

The survey consisted of 9 short questions and sub-questions, designed to take not more than 7 minutes, mostly closed-ended ones, but it was also possible to give elaborate answers for those who wished to share their personal experiences.

The main goal of the survey was to get basic insight into the level of recognition and prevalence of gender-based violence, awareness of safeguard mechanisms and experiences with reporting. At the end of the online survey, participants received information on where and how they can report cases of harassment or violence, as well as contacts from relevant institutions and organisations that offer support. In this way the research ensured for the potential victims to get the information about possible safeguard mechanisms.

In order to obtain specific data on organisational policies and mechanisms, an online survey was conducted with the sports federations⁷ that are members of the Olympic Committee of North Macedonia (OCNM), which provided us with information about protocols, designated safeguarding officers, reports received in the last five years and awareness-raising activities. The questionnaire was sent to 35 federations, members of the Committee, and responses were received from a total of 25 federations, which makes a response rate of 71.4%. In addition, a review of the federations' publicly available documents (rulebooks, codes of conduct and other relevant acts) was carried out in order to check the consistency of the information provided and to determine the degree of formality and transparency of the protection policies.

22 individual interviews were also conducted with various relevant stakeholders (by telephone, online, in writing and in person), with 8 athletes (current and former), 8 coaches, representatives of sports federations and sports clubs, 5 representatives of civil society organisations, media, experts on gender equality and sport and 1 institution. Semi-structured questionnaires were developed for the interviews with each separate group of stakeholders.⁸ The interviews provided a deeper insight into existing safeguard mechanisms, reporting procedures and experiences with institutional response, as well as perceptions of risks and obstacles when reporting various forms of violence in sport. The interviews were an opportunity for the interviewees to share their insights, as well as potentially more sensitive experiences that they would not share in another form, in order to ensure confidentiality, a safe environment for the participants and a

7 The questionnaire is available on [Annex 2. Questionnaire for the national sports federations](#)

8 The questionnaires are available on [Annex 3. Questionnaires for interviews with relevant stakeholders](#)

greater willingness to share experiences and opinions. Additionally, special instructions were prepared for conducting interviews with female athletes who have experienced violence⁹ in order to respect the principles of ethics, confidentiality, voluntariness and respect for the dignity of all participants, with particular sensitivity towards those who have personal experience with some form of harassment or violence.

2.3. Ethical principles

The research, in each segment, was voluntary and confidential, based on informed consent and respect for the dignity of all participants. Special attention was paid to protection from secondary victimisation and creating a safe environment for participation, especially for girls and women who have had personal experience with some form of violence. Gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches were applied throughout the research, with support information provided during the research itself. All data were processed anonymously and used solely for the purposes of the research, with the aim of advancing prevention policies and practices without compromising privacy and security.

2.4. Research's limitations

The research faced several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Some sports federations did not respond to the survey, despite it being short and available online or by email. Repeated attempts to contact and the use of personal contacts did not result in a response from all targeted federations. This limits the completeness of the data concerning institutional policies and safeguard mechanisms.

The response rate in some federations was also limited in the distribution of the online survey for female athletes to the clubs, and the clubs further to the female athletes. The research team has no insight into whether, when and to whom the survey was forwarded, so for certain sports there was a very small number of responses. Due to the indirect distribution process (federation → club → female athletes), it was not possible to determine the coverage of the target group, nor the expected response rate, which limits the representativeness and comparability of the data by sport.

The survey was conducted online and relied on self-reported experiences, which may have led to avoidance of sensitive questions and underestimation of the prevalence of violence due to fear, mistrust, or stigma. Furthermore, some of the interviews were short (15–20 minutes), limiting the depth to which some of the respondents could have gone concerning their individual experiences.

9 The instructions are available on [Annex 4. Instructions for conducting interviews with female athletes who have survived violence](#)

3. Context and review of available data on gender-based violence against women in sports

Gender-based violence against women in sports is a complex and systemic problem that is present at all levels, in both professional and amateur sports. Although sport is often seen as a space for equality, solidarity and personal development, research shows that sport can also be a place where gender inequalities, discrimination and violence are reproduced. However, research on gender-based violence against women in sport is still scarce, and those that are available are fragmented and methodologically inconsistent, making it difficult to assess the scale, prevalence and consequences of violence. This review of the context and available data on gender-based violence in sports aims to show how gender power relations, institutional practices and cultural norms shape the occurrence, forms and consequences of gender-based violence against women and girls in sports. Moreover, globally there is a lack of systematic and comprehensive research on this phenomenon, and in North Macedonia there are almost no systematised research or official statistics that would allow for deeper analysis and comparison.

3.1. Definition and conceptual framework

Violence against women and girls is internationally recognised as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination arising from historically unequal power relations between women and men.¹⁰ The Istanbul Convention,¹¹ as one of the most important international documents regulating this area, sets the concept of gender-based violence as a structural and societal problem, not just an individual act, which requires a systemic institutional response and a change in the cultural and gender norms that legitimise inequality. According to the Convention, violence against women includes *“all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”*¹²

In accordance with the Istanbul Convention, Macedonian legislation defines violence against women as *“a violation of human rights, discrimination against women and encompasses all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including direct and indirect threats of such acts, coercion, arbitrary restraint and/or deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”*¹³ Gender-based violence against women is violence directed against women because they are women or violence that disproportionately affects them, reflecting and reinforcing the unequal power relations between women and men as a societal, rather than an individual problem.¹⁴ These

10 Council of Europe. (2011). Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). Available on: <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>; UNESCO and UN Women. (2023). Tackling violence against women and girls in sport: A handbook for policy makers and sports practitioners. Available on: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/07/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-sport-a-handbook-for-policy-makers-and-sports-practitioners>

11 Istanbul Convention, 2011.

12 Istanbul Convention, 2011.

13 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

14 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

definitions position violence against women as the most extreme form of gender inequality and part of a continuum of broader gender-based violence.¹⁵

In the context of sport, gender-based violence refers to a phenomenon that encompasses physical, psychological, sexual and economic harms resulting from systemic gender inequality and discriminatory social norms.¹⁶ It refers to actions directed against individuals because of their gender, gender identity or expression, including various forms such as sexual, physical, psychological and violence aimed at LGBTI persons, which often results from the abuse of power within organisational cultures that ignore or fail to prevent such behaviour.¹⁷ The European Commission's proposal for strategic actions for gender equality in sport similarly defines gender-based violence as violence directed against a person because of their gender, including gender identity or violence that disproportionately affects persons of a particular gender, explicitly recognising sexual violence, harassment and abuse as its forms.¹⁸

These conceptual frameworks share an understanding of gender-based violence, including in sport, as a phenomenon deeply rooted in structural inequalities and harmful cultural norms that normalise male dominance and female subordination and allow perpetrators to act with impunity.¹⁹ Moreover, violence against women and girls is not an isolated incident, but part of a broader social system that gives privileges to male authority and tolerates control and coercion. In sport, this manifests itself through rigid, male-dominated hierarchical structures, where figures in authority have significant influence over the bodies, careers and opportunities of female athletes, thereby creating the conditions for the perpetuation and concealment of violence.

Research on gender-based violence in sport emerged in the 1990s as part of feminist critiques of patriarchy and male violence, initially focusing on sexual harassment and abuse of women and children in the UK and North America, and over time expanding globally, encompassing different forms of violence and a broader understanding of its structural and institutional dimensions.²⁰ However, despite this, European sport policies remain focused predominantly on child protection, which neglects the vulnerability of adult female athletes to abuse by those in positions of power, leaving these victims marginalised and often without protection and access to justice.²¹

Overall, public and institutional awareness of gender-based violence is still significantly limited. Thus, many in the sports sector, but even beyond, do not know which behaviours are covered by this term, while sports institutions and organisations often refer to gender-based violence through broader terms such as “ethics”, “fair play” or “safe sport”, thereby reducing its visibility and awareness of the gender dimension of the problem.²² This approach, seemingly positive, can dilute the essential connection between violence and the unequal power relations that encourage it, as it presents gender-based violence as an individual incident, rather than as a systemic and structural problem. When violence is framed in terms such as “unethical behaviour” or “unsportsmanlike behaviour”, the focus on gender inequality and the institutional practices that enable it is lost. Such neutralisation of the concept depoliticises gender-based violence, turning it into a technical or disciplinary issue, rather than a human rights and equality issue.

15 More on the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in Chapter [Национална правна и стратешка рамка](#)

16 United Nations, 2024.

17 Council of Europe. (2019). Toolkit “how to make an impact on gender equality in sport All you need to know”. Available on: <https://rm.coe.int/all-in-toolkit-how-to-make-an-impact-on-gender-equality-in-sport-all-y/1680989ab2>

18 European Commission. (2014). Gender equality in sport: Proposal for strategic actions 2014–2020. Available on: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7e7a7ff2-5bff-42b4-90f9-8266b3ddc01c>

19 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

20 Lang, M., Mergaert, L., Arnaut, C. & Vertommen, T. (2018). Gender-based violence in EU sport policy: Overview and recommendations. *Journal of Gender-based Violence*. 2 (1), pp. 109-118. <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/jgbv/2018/00000002/00000001/art00008>

21 Mergaert, L., Arnaut, C., Vertommen, T. & Lang, M. (2016). Study on gender-based violence in sport: Final Report. European Commission. Available on: https://sport.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/gender-based-violence-sport-study-2016_en.pdf

22 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

According to one survey, only 39% of sports organisations at European level have action plans for the prevention of gender-based violence, while less than half have procedures or mechanisms for supporting victims.²³ These limitations point to the need for greater accountability, policies based on the victim-perspective approach and systematic data collection.

3.2. Forms and prevalence

Gender-based violence in sport is a widespread and multilayered phenomenon, manifesting itself in a variety of forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, economic and online violence, reflecting broader societal patterns of gender inequality and discrimination. Researches suggest that between 26% and 74% of women in sport have experienced some form of violence, whether psychological, physical or sexual,²⁴ although the true extent of the problem remains unknown due to under-reporting, a lack of standardised definitions and inconsistent data collection across countries.²⁵ Prevalence estimates concerning sexual abuse range from 2% to 22%,²⁶ while rates of gender-based or sexual harassment in nine European countries range from 14% to 73%.²⁷ Whether in local sports activities or professional competition, women and girls experience various forms of violence, as athletes, coaches, journalists, therapists, referees and spectators, which shows how deep these practices are embedded at all levels of the sports system.²⁸ However, the lack of reliable and comparable international data makes it impossible to determine the exact prevalence of gender-based violence in sport.²⁹ In North Macedonia, despite the lack of data on this issue, an indicative survey shows that 38% of female athletes have faced discrimination in sport, of which only 21% reported the incident, most often without a satisfactory outcome, which indicates insufficient reporting and ineffective institutional protection.³⁰ Despite growing recognition of the problem, the absence of coordinated reporting and monitoring mechanisms obscures the true picture of violence and limits the creation of effective preventive policies.³¹

According to national legislation, physical violence is any act involving the use of physical force or an act that harms the health and physical and psychological integrity of the victim.³² In sport, this definition is extended to harmful training practices, excessive physical exertion and deliberate violations of sports rules that consciously increase the risk of injury. When such risks are tolerated or encouraged, the resulting physical consequences can be understood as an institutionalised form of violence.³³ Although the term “violence” in sport may traditionally be associated with competitive aggression or performance-related injuries, when these acts are based on gender inequality or disregard for the safety of female athletes, they constitute gender-based violence. Moreover, physical violence often coexists with psychological violence or sexual abuse, increasing both the immediate and long-term consequences for victims.³⁴

23 Council of Europe. (2025). ALL IN PLUS: Promoting Greater Gender Equality in Sport. Analytical Report of the Data Collected: Insights into Trends and Progress. Available on: <https://rm.coe.int/prems-007125-gbr-2586-all-in-plus-web-11022025/1680b42ef3>

24 Forsdike, K. & Giles, F. (2024). Women’s Experiences of Gender-Based Interpersonal Violence in Sport: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis. *TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE* 2024, Vol. 25(4) 3254 –3268.

25 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

26 European Commission, 2014.

27 EIGE, 2017.

28 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

29 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

30 Јовановска, Б. (2022). Заговорот на тишината. Available on: <https://meduza.mk/fem-101/trchash-kako-devo%dl%98che-zagovorot-na-tishinata/>

31 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

32 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

33 United Nations, 2024.

34 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

Data show that sexual violence and harassment are the most widespread forms of gender-based violence in sport. Sexual violence is any act of a sexual nature committed without consent, including forcing another person to participate in sexual acts with a third party, while sexual harassment involves verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that violates the dignity of a person or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, offensive or humiliating environment.³⁵ Consent must be voluntary and free, and assessed in the context of the circumstances.³⁶

Comparative research on gender-based violence in sport in Europe distinguishes five interrelated forms of sexual violence: sexual harassment, sexual abuse, rape, attempted rape and sexual exploitation.³⁷ These forms often occur in combination with physical or psychological violence, reflecting the complex power dynamics in sport. Sexual harassment can include unsolicited sexual propositions, invitations, intimidation, forcing one to undress or showing sexual material, including online. Sexual abuse includes non-penetrative physical contact under coercive or unequal conditions, such as forcible touching, kissing or fondling. Rape and attempted rape involve vaginal, anal or oral penetration without consent, often by means of threats, manipulation or abuse of authority. Sexual exploitation occurs when people in positions of power, such as coaches, managers or doctors, abuse their authority for sexual purposes, including forced prostitution, sexual intercourse in exchange for some benefit or producing sexual material without consent.³⁸

In sports, sexual violence most often occurs in the coach-athlete relationship, most often in sports locker rooms or during travel, where coaches abuse their trust and authority to manipulate and abuse athletes.³⁹ Estimates show that 21% of girls worldwide have experienced some form of sexual abuse as children in sports, and the report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children has documented numerous cases of child sexual exploitation within sports institutions.⁴⁰ For example, the scandal that erupted in 2016 about the decades-long sexual abuse of more than 150 American gymnasts by a sports doctor is one of the most evident examples of how perpetrators can abuse their position of power while sports organisations protect their own reputations.⁴¹

Research shows that verbal sexual harassment is the most common form of sexual violence in sports, and the risk increases from recreational to elite levels.⁴² A large number of victims have reported long-term abuse that began in adolescence and continued into adulthood, often involving various forms of sexual, physical, emotional and financial violence.⁴³

Sexual violence in sport sometimes takes more subtle forms that reflect structural and cultural inequalities in society. The control of female athletes' bodies, through strict dress codes, a focus on appearance, and sexualised media portrayals, perpetuates a culture of objectification and control.⁴⁴ For example, female gymnasts are often subjected to body shaming or restricted diet as a form of "discipline."⁴⁵

35 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

36 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

37 Frans & Keygnaert, in Mergaert et al. 2016.

38 Frans & Keygnaert, in Mergaert et al. 2016.

39 United Nations, 2024; European Commission, 2014.

40 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023; United Nations. (2019). Report of the Special Rapporteur. Sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material. Available on: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1473378?v=pdf>

41 Read more on: [Larry Nassar case: The 156 women who confronted a predator](#)

42 EIGE, 2017.

43 Fordsike & Giles, 2024.

44 United Nations, 2024; UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

45 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

Psychological violence is “any conduct that uses coercion, intimidation, or threat, that causes a victim to feel afraid, threatened, distressed, or violates their dignity and psychological integrity.”⁴⁶ In the context of sports, this may include verbal abuse, humiliation, isolation, threats of expulsion from the team, mockery of appearance, or excessive control over training, nutrition, and communication. Such behaviours are often normalised by being presented as “motivation” or “strict discipline,” blurring the line between legitimate training and abuse.⁴⁷

Psychological violence is the second most common form of abuse after sexual violence in all its forms, with higher exposure among adult elite female athletes, while children, especially girls in recreational sports, often face psychological abuse.⁴⁸ The consequences of psychological violence can include fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts, which seriously affect health and sports performance.⁴⁹

Economic violence is any act of restricting or preventing the use of personal income or financial resources, thereby creating economic dependence on the part of the victim.⁵⁰ In sport, this can manifest itself through unequal access to wages, control over the earnings of female athletes, manipulation of sponsorship contracts or deprivation from financial opportunities that enable independence.⁵¹ In addition, existing gender pay gaps and the lack of transparency in compensation contribute to the perpetuation of economic inequality and dependence.

This is complemented by coercive control, which refers to the abuse of power, the use of threats, force or other forms of coercion, deception or misrepresentation in order to control the behaviour and lives of women.⁵² Understood as a pattern of behaviour aimed at dominating, punishing, or intimidating the victim, by controlling their daily life, isolating them, and limiting their independence,⁵³ in sports coercive control can include isolation from family, excessive training, or dietary control under the pretext of optimising performance, which can have the effect of undermining autonomy and self-esteem, especially among young or financially dependent athletes.

Gender-based violence is increasingly present in the digital sphere. Sexual harassment by using electronic means is legally recognised as any verbal, non-verbal or visual act of a sexual nature that creates a threatening, humiliating or harassing environment through electronic communication.⁵⁴ Online abuse, including hate speech, insults on one’s appearance, unauthorised sharing of personal information (doxing) and unauthorised sharing of intimate photos, poses a serious threat to the safety and mental health of female athletes. For example, during the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo in 2021, 87% of identified insults on the social network Twitter were directed at female athletes, with the majority targeting women with darker skin tones.⁵⁵ Certain groups of women and girls, such as LGBTQ+ people, women with disabilities or members of racial, ethnic or migrant communities, are exposed to multiple and intersectional forms of violence and discrimination, both offline and online.⁵⁶

46 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

47 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

48 United Nations, 2024.

49 United Nations, 2024.

50 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

51 United Nations, 2024.

52 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

53 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

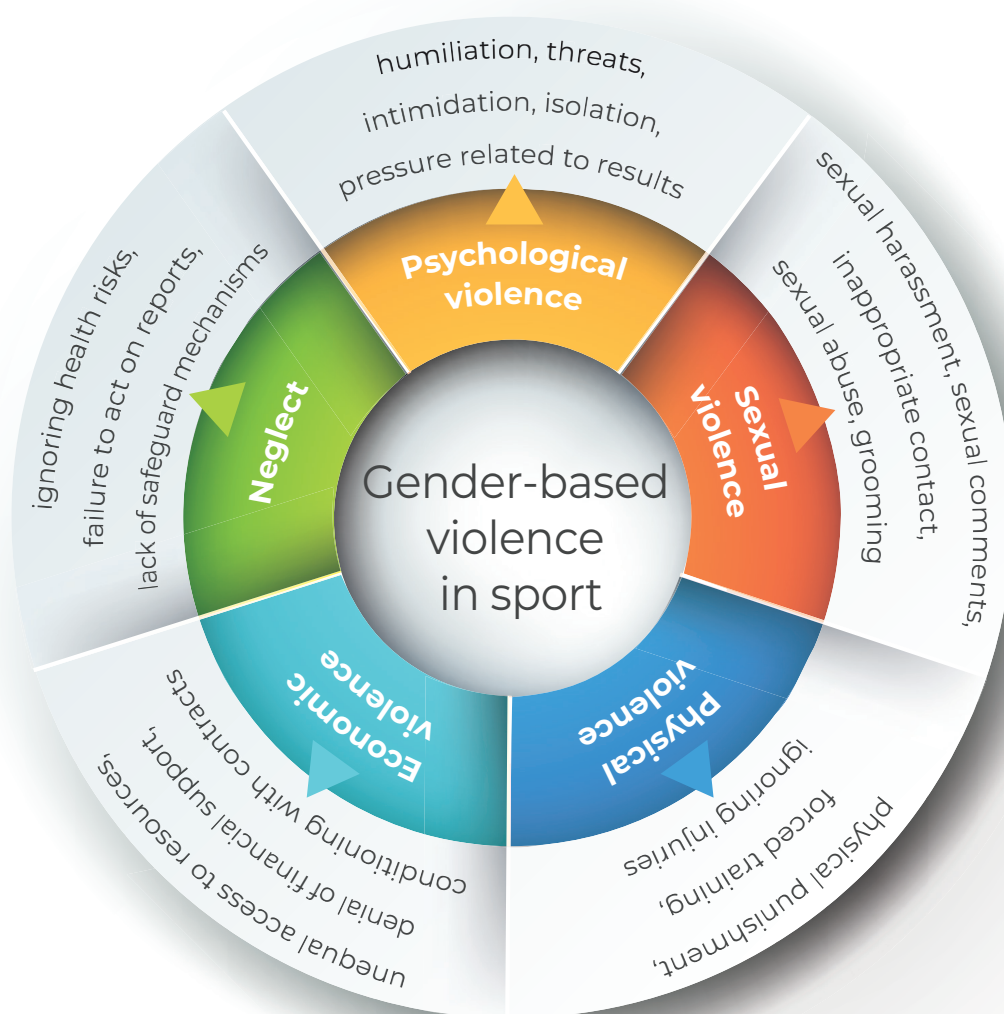
54 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

55 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

56 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023; EIGE, 2017.

All forms of violence against women in sport exist on a continuum, with multiple forms occurring simultaneously or sequentially throughout a woman's life.⁵⁷ Coercion, intimidation and psychological manipulation often overlap with physical or sexual violence, making the boundaries between them difficult to distinguish. Despite growing awareness of the problem, data on gender-based violence in sports remain fragmented, with only a few European Union member states having systematically collected data on the extent or nature of the problem.⁵⁸

Overview of the forms and most common manifestations of gender-based violence in sport.⁵⁹



57 EIGE. What is gender-based violence? Available on: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/what-is-gender-based-violence>

58 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

59 The overview is an author's synthesis based on available reports.

3.3. Power relations and dynamics

Sport, especially at the elite level, has long been shaped by ideals of masculinity, power and victory, with performance and discipline taking precedence over well-being.⁶⁰ In such an environment, success is often equated with endurance and control, creating hierarchies that normalise harmful training methods and violent behaviour as a sign of commitment and strength, contributing to blurring the line between discipline and violence and building tolerance for harm as part of the everyday sporting routine.⁶¹ This also reinforces a gender hierarchy within which male dominance is seen as natural. Such norms create conditions for the continued subordination of women and obscuring of violence, reflecting broader patriarchal values present in the sports sector.⁶²

These power relations are embedded in the very structure of sport. Top management positions are predominantly held by men, while women are under-represented as coaches, professionals and decision-makers, particularly at elite levels.⁶³ The concentration of power in closed male circles maintains a culture that is resistant to change and where traditional attitudes undermine the institutional response to gender-based violence.⁶⁴ The lack of comprehensive legal and policy frameworks for sexual harassment and other forms of exploitation and discrimination further reinforces misogyny and exposes female athletes to abuse.⁶⁵

Sports management systems often favour officials and administrators over female athletes, thus reinforcing existing hierarchical structures⁶⁶ that can be particularly harmful to young people, who depend on adults for advancement and protection. In rural areas, for example, the lack of qualified coaches creates tolerance for abusive practices, while rigid gender norms discourage intervention and reinforce silence.⁶⁷ In environments where top performance is expected, female athletes' dependence on coaches and managers for opportunities and advancement makes them particularly vulnerable to coercion and abuse of authority, with fear of reprisals or career termination often preventing them from speaking out.⁶⁸

The relationship between female athletes and coaches often extends beyond professional boundaries. The concept of "domestic violence in sports" suggests that close-knit teams replicate family structures, in which the coach assumes a "fatherly" role that combines authority, trust, and control. In addition, female athletes, especially young women, often spend more time with their coaches than with their families, developing a deep emotional dependency that perpetrators exploit through isolation and coercive control.⁶⁹ A culture that idolises coaches called "star makers" further fosters secrecy, allowing abuse to persist for generations without accountability.⁷⁰ In such an environment, pain, deprivation, and submission are presented as necessary for success, while those who challenge authority risk exclusion or damaged reputations.⁷¹

Perpetrators of violence in sports are most often male and include coaches, managers, colleagues, teachers, spectators and fellow athletes, while indirect enablers of violence include various administrators, policymakers, journalists and fans, who contribute by reinforcing gender stereotypes or by remaining silent

60 United Nations, 2024.

61 United Nations, 2024.

62 United Nations, 2024.

63 United Nations, 2024; UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

64 United Nations, 2024.

65 United Nations, 2024.

66 United Nations, 2024.

67 United Nations, 2024.

68 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023; European Commission, 2014.

69 European Commission, 2014.

70 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

71 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

in the face of harassment.⁷² Technical and medical staff, who have direct control over athletes' bodies, can also be direct perpetrators, while sports lawyers, referees and arbitrator contribute to the harm by failing to act.⁷³ The lack of intervention by various actors perpetuates the silence and further contributes to their continued passivity. When violations are reported, institutional inaction normalises violence and undermines trust in reporting mechanisms, while the continuing accountability gap allows perpetrators to remain in their positions or quietly depart, despite the existence of credible evidence.⁷⁴

Some researches identify several risk factors that enable violence, such as weak organisational protection, absence of investigations and ethics procedures, and unsupervised contacts during training or travel, which create opportunities for abuse of trust.⁷⁵ In addition, weak parental involvement and limited awareness of female athletes about their rights deepen dependence on coaches, while autocratic, homophobic, or hypermasculine environments legitimise control and emotional manipulation.⁷⁶ The risk of violence and harassment also stems from the still-present resistance of some men to women's participation in traditionally "male" sports, as well as from attempts to reactivate gender boundaries when women demonstrate independence or success.⁷⁷

In addition to gender power relations, the risks of violence in sport are further amplified by intersectional inequalities arising from belonging to different social, ethnic and other marginalised groups. Gender-based violence in sport primarily affects women, while boys and men are also affected, but to a lesser extent.⁷⁸ However, inequalities related to identity categories such as race, disability, age, class, religion or sexuality contribute to a greater risk of violence, creating multiple and compounded forms of discrimination.⁷⁹ LGBTI women therefore face increased exposure to violence due to persistent sexism and misogyny, which are deeply rooted in the history and structures of women's participation in sport.⁸⁰ Traditionally "male" environments are often characterised by misogyny and homophobia, and women with disabilities experience disproportionately higher levels of violence than other women.⁸¹

In North Macedonia, according to a survey, half of female athletes do not know where to seek help, and 58% consider safeguard mechanisms ineffective.⁸² In addition, distrust in institutions and fear of consequences for personal reputation or career were cited as the main reasons for not reporting cases of discrimination or violence.⁸³ These findings reflect a wider-ranging situation in the sports sector in which the initiatives by national sports federations to systematically address gender-based violence are rare and underdeveloped.⁸⁴

72 United Nations, 2024.

73 United Nations, 2024.

74 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

75 European Commission, 2014.

76 European Commission, 2014.

77 Shima, E. & Malo, G. (2024). Gender Equality and Women's Participation in Sports in Albania - A gender-responsive assessment and guidance. UN Women.

78 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, M., 2016.

79 EIGE, 2017.

80 ILGA Europe y ILGA-Europe, EL*C, TGEU, OII Europe & EGLSF. (2021). LGBTI women in sport: violence, discrimination, and lived experiences. Available on: <https://tgeu.org/files/uploads/2023/11/2021-violence-and-discrimination-against-LGBTI-women-in-sport.pdf>

81 EIGE, 2017.

82 Јовановска, 2022.

83 Јовановска, 2022.

84 Lang, Mergaert, Arnaut & Vertommen, 2018.

Despite significant progress in the participation of girls and women in sports, the sector remains deeply male-dominated, especially in leadership positions.⁸⁵ This continued power imbalance shapes an organisational culture that tolerates or conceals gender-based violence, and where authority, dependency and silence are mutually reinforcing. Limited transparency, weak accountability and a focus on profit or institutional image over the well-being of female athletes create environments in which violence can occur with impunity.

3.4. Effects and consequences

Gender-based violence has a number of negative consequences for the physical and mental health of women and girls, which extend beyond the immediate act of violence. Although this topic has been less researched in the context of sport, especially from the perspective of adult women, available studies show that girls who experience violence in sport have serious health problems.⁸⁶ Moreover, the consequences are long-lasting and multilayered, affecting the psychological well-being of athletes, their sports careers and the wider culture of sport. In this way, violence in sport undermines individual autonomy, but also institutional integrity, destroying trust and perpetuating intergenerational inequality.

Victims of gender-based violence in sport often experience strong emotional reactions, such as shame, helplessness, isolation and self-blame, accompanied by anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and many of them express anger and disgust towards the perpetrators and institutions that did not respond, while others experience delayed emotional reactions or resort to risky coping methods that further deepen the trauma.⁸⁷ Sexual violence and harassment can cause insomnia, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic stress reactions, low self-esteem, broken trust between the coach and the athlete, feelings of guilt and shame, as well as withdrawal from sports or social life.⁸⁸ The consequences of psychological violence in sport, for example, can include eating disorders, headaches, fear, anxiety, loss of concentration, aggression, low self-esteem, substance abuse, self-harm, isolation and decline in academic or sports performance, as well as feelings of guilt, humiliation, depression and suicidal thoughts.⁸⁹ These effects are particularly pronounced among women who are lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, as well as among athletes with disabilities and those in highly competitive environments, where the pressure and intensity increase vulnerability to psychological violence.⁹⁰

Structural inequality in sport further amplifies the personal consequences. Women and women's sports are still treated as "second class" compared to male athletes, with lower salaries, fewer resources and smaller prizes, which devalues their achievements and maintains gender hierarchies.⁹¹ Sport is also still an area in which sexist stereotypes are maintained. Thus, while some sports promote a positive perception of women, others maintain their sexism and subordination through decorative or objectifying roles, such as cheerleading, with female athletes who do not fit these norms being more exposed to various forms of violence.⁹² In sports where the lean figure is emphasised (*lean sports*), female athletes often face ridicule of appearance, emotional manipulation and food restriction in order to maintain an ideal body shape, and

85 See more in: Јовановска, Б., Кочоска, Е. и Митевска, С. (2025). Родова еднаквост и инклузивност во спортот во Северна Македонија. Македонски центар за меѓународна соработка. Available on: <https://mcms.mk/mk/za-nasata-rabota/istrazuvana-i-publikacii/2642-rodova-ednakvost-i-inkluzivnost-vo-sportot-vo-severna-makedonija.html>

86 Forsdike, K. & Giles, F., 2024.

87 European Commission, 2014.

88 European Commission, 2014.

89 UN, 2024.

90 UN, 2024.

91 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

92 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

over 60% of elite female athletes aged 17 to 30 reported pressure from coaches about their appearance and body shape.⁹³ This constitutes institutionalised control over women's bodies.

However, gender-based violence also has institutional and economic consequences. For example, sports organisations can suffer financial losses, loss of reputation, reduced membership, and withdrawal of sponsors after cases of abuse are exposed, effects that most affect women's sports.⁹⁴

Fear of retaliation, public exposure, or career damage often deters women from reporting, and many victims lose their positions on the team as a result, face unfair treatment or humiliation after rejecting unsolicited offers or reporting abuse, and some are forced to change coaches, change sports, or leave the sport altogether.⁹⁵ The absence of effective reporting mechanisms, insufficient protection for victims, and the lack of sanctions for perpetrators leave many female athletes without access to justice, forcing some to abandon their sports careers altogether.⁹⁶

93 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

94 European Commission, 2014.

95 European Commission, 2014.

96 UNESCO and UN Women, 2023.

4. Analysis of the institutional framework concerning gender-based violence in sports

4.1. International and European institutional framework

Gender-based violence, in all its forms, remains underreported and often neglected, both within the European Union and globally.⁹⁷ In the last two decades, this issue has been increasingly addressed through European and international policies covering sport. In addition to documents directly addressing the sport sector, broader legal and policy initiatives on gender-based violence and children's rights are also important and have had a strong impact on national sports policies.⁹⁸ What follows is a detailed and chronological analysis of the most important legal and policy developments at international and European level, in order to show how they collectively form the normative framework for addressing gender-based violence in sport.

4.1.1. International framework

The International Charter of Physical Education, Activity and Sport,⁹⁹ adopted by UNESCO in 1978, recognises sport as a fundamental right for all people. This document established the fundamental framework for recognising sport as a space in which human rights must be protected, respected and promoted, emphasising the obligation to create a safe and inclusive sports environment, in which the prevention of discrimination and violence is an essential part of this vision.

Global efforts for gender equality were further strengthened by the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**,¹⁰⁰ which is a key document that defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that can result in physical, sexual or psychological harm. The Platform calls for a holistic and multidisciplinary approach that integrates prevention, protection, support for victims and sanctioning of perpetrators. These global principles created a foundation that later influenced sport policies, confirming that a safe sports environment is inseparable from efforts for gender equality and human rights.

In 1979, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**¹⁰¹ was adopted, which defines forms of discrimination against women and sets an agenda for national policies. The Convention is the first legally binding instrument in the world to regulate issues related to women's rights. In its original text, CEDAW did not regulate the issue of gender-based violence in an explicit manner, but this changed in 1992 when General Recommendation No. 19 was adopted. In this recommendation, the CEDAW Committee clearly establishes the link between discrimination, gender-based violence and human rights violations.¹⁰² Although not specifically aimed at sport, CEDAW opened the

97 European Union. (2020). Gender equality strategy 2022–2025. Available on: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/682425/en>

98 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

99 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (1978). International charter of physical education, physical activity and sport. Available on: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002354/235409e.pdf>

100 United Nations. (1995). Beijing declaration and platform for action. Available on: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>.

101 United Nations. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Available on: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>

102 Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. (2022). Прирачник за Истанбулската конвенција (Handbook on the Istanbul Convention). Available on: <https://mhc.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/priracnik-za-istanbulska-konvencija-mk.pdf>

framework for the development of more detailed mechanisms to address violence against women and indirectly paved the way for later specialised instruments.

Of particular importance is the **Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence**, known as the **Istanbul Convention** (2011),¹⁰³ which is the most comprehensive international instrument to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. When it entered into force in 2014, its parties committed to putting in place measures for prevention, protection, prosecution and coordination. The Convention is relevant to sport as it provides a legal basis for addressing all forms of gender-based violence in sports settings. The Council of Europe uses it as a basis for developing specialised sports programmes, such as **All in Plus**,¹⁰⁴ aimed at protecting women and girls in sport.

The first World Conference on Women and Sport (1994)¹⁰⁵ established the International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG) and adopted the **Brighton Declaration**, which calls on state and sport institutions to ensure compliance with the principles of equality of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CEDAW.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC)¹⁰⁶ plays an important role in this framework. Over the past few decades, the IOC has developed guidelines, recommendations and mechanisms for safeguarding against violence, which in its terminology is referred to as “safe sport”. The **First Communiqué on Safeguarding in Sport** was published in 2007, followed by the Second Communiqué in 2016, which broadened the scope to include physical and psychological harassment and neglect, setting out a clearer definition of safe sport. On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in 2024, the IOC reaffirmed its commitment by publishing the **Third Joint Communiqué on the Safeguarding and Prevention of Interpersonal Violence in Sport**.¹⁰⁷

It is particularly important to make a clear distinction between the “safeguarding”¹⁰⁸ approach and the concept of gender-based violence. While gender-based violence refers to violence that is directed at a person on the basis of their gender and disproportionately affects women and girls, “safeguarding” is a broader framework that encompasses the prevention and protection from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect in sport, regardless of gender or age. This approach ensures equal protection for girls, boys, women and men, but also allows for more specific measures to protect groups exposed to increased risk, including women and girls. The framework establishes minimum safety standards, clear reporting mechanisms and obligations for sports organisations to provide support for victims. The IOC calls on National Olympic Committees to implement this framework and to commit their members to align internal policies and practices with the principles of safe sport.

103 Council of Europe. (n.d.). Istanbul Convention: Action against violence against women and domestic violence. Available on: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention>

104 Council of Europe. (n.d.). Gender equality in sport. Available on: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/gender-equality-in-sport>

105 International Working Group on Women and Sport. (2008). Windhoek call for action. Available on: http://iwg-gti.org/wpiwg/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Windhoek_call_for_action_e.pdf

106 International Olympic Committee. For more see: <https://www.olympics.com/ioc>

107 International Olympic Committee. (2023). IOC publishes new consensus statement on safeguarding and interpersonal violence in sport. Available on: <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-publishes-new-consensus-statement-on-safeguarding-and-interpersonal-violence-in-sport>

108 The term “safeguarding” is used in its original English form due to the lack of a standardised translation into Macedonian, but also because it is already recognised and used in this form in the sports sector, which is also visible in the statements by various people in the sport. “Safeguarding” in sports refers to all measures for the prevention of violence, harassment or abuse against children or adults in sports, as well as to activities for recognising, reporting, responding and providing appropriate support and protection in the event of actual or potentially harmful behaviour. Safeguarding means providing a sports environment in which respect, fairness and safety prevail for all participants. For more see: <https://www.safesportinternational.com/2025/06/what-is-safeguarding-in-sport/>

4.1.2. European framework

At the European level, prevention and protection from gender-based violence is one of the key priorities of the **Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029**,¹⁰⁹ which aims for a Europe free from violence, discrimination and structural inequalities.

The institutional recognition of sport as a policy area began with the **Lisbon Treaty** (2009),¹¹⁰ which for the first time included sport in the political order of the European Union. Although the Treaty highlights the obligation to protect the physical and moral integrity of athletes, it indicates that there is still no unified legal framework to address gender-based violence in sport. This highlights the need for enhanced inter-institutional cooperation, in particular with sports organisations.¹¹¹

The Council of Europe **European Sports Charter** (1992)¹¹² first highlighted the need to protect athletes – especially children and women – from sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation. Further, following international efforts to prevent gender-based violence in sport, the Council of Europe adopted in 2000 the **Resolution on the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse of women, young people and children in sport (3/2000)**,¹¹³ setting out recommendations for member states to develop policies for a safe sports environment.

The European Commission's **White Paper on Sport** (2007)¹¹⁴ stresses the need for common standards, exchange of good practices and clear safeguard mechanisms against sexual abuse of minors in sport. Although this document does not explicitly address gender-based violence, it provides an important policy context by highlighting violence, discrimination and gender inequality as structural problems in European sport. The focus on equal opportunities, women's participation and the need for inclusive sports systems represents an early recognition of gender inequalities, although gender-based violence itself is not yet conceptualised as a specific policy priority.

It is within this framework that, in 2014, the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted the **Conclusions on Gender Equality in Sport**,¹¹⁵ which explicitly recognised gender-based violence as a risk in the sports environment. Member States were called upon to develop preventive measures, safeguard mechanisms and codes of ethics, and sports organisations were called upon to establish clear procedures and services to support victims. This policy continuity was further deepened by the adoption of the **European Work Plan for Sport (2024-2027)**¹¹⁶ by the Council of Ministers Responsible for Sport, which clearly sets a safe sports environment and gender equality as strategic priorities. Under Priority No. 1 - "Integrity and values", the document highlights the need to prevent harassment, abuse and violence, including sexual violence and all forms of discrimination, as a key basis for ensuring a safe and dignified sports environment.

109 European Union. (2020). Gender equality strategy 2022-2025. Available on: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/682425/en>

110 European Union (2007). Treaty of Lisbon. Available on: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/lis/sign/eng>

111 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

112 Council of Europe. (1992). European Sports Charter. Available on: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016804c9dbb

113 Council of Europe (2000). Resolution on the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse of women, young people and children in sport. Available on: [https://search.coe.int/cm/#{%22CoEIdentifier%22:\[%2209000016804d83da%22\],%22sort%22:\[%22CoEValidationDate%20Descending%22\]}](https://search.coe.int/cm/#{%22CoEIdentifier%22:[%2209000016804d83da%22],%22sort%22:[%22CoEValidationDate%20Descending%22]})

114 European Commission. (2007). White paper on sport. Available on: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0391&from=EN>

115 The Council of the European Union (2014). Conclusions on gender equality in sport. Available on: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52014XG0614\(09\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52014XG0614(09))

116 Council of the European Union. (2024). Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the European Union work plan for sport. Available on: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42024Y03527>

In addition, the **Recommendations of the High-Level Expert Group**¹¹⁷ strengthen this policy framework by further targeting specific measures to prevent violence in sport. These recommendations call for the systematic implementation of education and preventive programmes, an active commitment by sports organisations to the elimination of all forms of violence, and the establishment of clear and secure reporting mechanisms. In particular, it highlights the need for data collection and analysis and the exchange of good practices between countries and sports institutions, in order to create a harmonised, evidence-based and effective European approach to tackling gender-based violence.

This European policy continuum is further complemented by the findings in the **Final Report on Gender-Based Violence in Sport**¹¹⁸ prepared for the European Commission, which indicates a serious lack of reliable and comparable data on the prevalence of this phenomenon. The lack of research, different definitions and the sensitivity of the topic create significant knowledge gaps and make it difficult to develop policies. These findings are further confirmed by the results of the **2022 Eurobarometer**,¹¹⁹ according to which three quarters of European citizens believe that gender-based violence in sport requires much greater institutional attention, and a significant proportion of sports club members do not know who to turn to if they are faced with discrimination or violence.

Although the documents presented above show significant progress in recognising and regulating different forms of violence in sport, their scope, terminology and level of specificity vary significantly. These differences indicate that the topic has developed gradually and that institutions have approached it from the aspect of different policy frameworks, child protection, through sports ethics, to gender equality and human rights. In addition to initiatives that explicitly focus on sexual or gender-based violence, there are also documents where these forms of violence fit into broader concepts, such as sporting integrity or a safe sports environment, which often reduces their visibility.

Explicit recommendations on gender-based violence (most often sexual violence or harassment) are found in the policies of only 13 EU Member States, while others use generalised terms, such as “violence” or “ethical breaches”. In some countries, violence is treated as a breach of ethics or the principles of fair play, while in others it is considered as part of creating a healthy, safe and non-violent sports environment where the human rights of athletes are respected.¹²⁰ Such different policies and frameworks often result in lower levels of awareness, insufficient visibility, and limited mechanisms for recognising, recording, and addressing specific forms of gender-based violence in sport.

4.1.3 National legal and strategic framework

North Macedonia is a party to a number of international declarations and conventions that play a key role in addressing gender-based violence. As a signatory, the country has an obligation to follow established international standards and to ensure conditions for comprehensive strategic planning, harmonisation and improvement of the legal framework, as well as effective implementation of laws, including the provision of adequate financial resources.

North Macedonia is a party to the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** (1995), as well as to the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**. By doing so, the country has undertaken international obligations to advance the status of women and strengthen their role in public and private life. In addition, North Macedonia is one of the first states to ratify the **Istanbul Convention**, and at the same time has accepted the standards and commitments of the Council of Europe to prevent and combat gender-based violence and to promote gender equality. Namely, North Macedonia signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011, and in December 2017 the Parliament adopted the **Law Ratifying**

117 European Commission. (2022). Factsheet: Gender equality in sport. Available on: <https://sport.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-03/Factsheet%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20Sport%202022.pdf>

118 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

119 European Commission. (2022). Special Eurobarometer 525: Gender stereotypes. Available on: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2668>

120 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.¹²¹ The Convention was ratified by depositing the instrument of ratification, which was submitted on 23 March 2018, and entered into force on 1 July 2018. This document recognises the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based and emphasises that violence against women is a result of historically unequal power relations between women and men.¹²²

However, the audit conducted by the State Audit Office regarding the implementation of the Istanbul Convention¹²³ indicated that the measures and activities of the institutions do not provide adequate and effective support, protection and reintegration of women victims of gender-based and domestic violence. As stated in the Report, the protection system is still underdeveloped, and the numbers of victims and perpetrators of criminal offences related to domestic violence show a worrying continuity, without improvement in the situation. In 2023, men were ten times more likely to be perpetrators of crimes than women, while women were four times more likely to be victims than men. This situation indicates that the Convention's requirements remain unfulfilled.

The Law on Sports¹²⁴ in North Macedonia regulates the organisation, functioning and development of sports by defining sports entities, their registration and competencies, the method of financing, licensing of coaches, athletes and sports workers, management of sports facilities, health care and anti-doping policy, as well as national sports programmes, school sports and international sports cooperation. From the aspect of the implementation of the principles of equality and non-discrimination, especially in terms of gender and disability, the Law on Sports is not harmonised with either international or national regulations on the prevention and protection from discrimination.¹²⁵

The **Law on the Prevention of Violence and Improper Behaviour at Sports Competitions**¹²⁶ stipulates measures for the protection of spectators, competitors and participants from violence and improper behaviour and imposes obligations on the organisers and gives power to the competent authorities. This law creates an additional normative layer for safe sports competitions but remains limited in dealing with gender-based violence as a separate category.

The **Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence**¹²⁷ adopted in 2021 aims to prevent gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and the elimination of gender role stereotypes.¹²⁸ According to this law, state authorities are obliged to act with due diligence to prevent violence against women and domestic violence, or they shall be held accountable. As an institutional mechanism, the **National Coordination Body**, established in accordance with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence (Article 15), operates within the framework of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth and coordinates the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

121 Law Ratifying the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 198/2017.

122 Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2022.

123 Државен завод за ревизија (State Audit Office). (2021). Недоволна ефикасност на системот за заштита на жените жртви на насилство. Available on: <https://dzt.mk/mk/250821-nedovolna-efikasnost-na-sistemot-za-zashtita-na-zhenite-zhrtvi-na-nasilstvo>

124 Law on Sports (editorially revised text, it includes the 2019 amendments). Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia.

125 Јовановска, Б., Кочоска, Е. и Митевска, С. (2025). Родова еднаквост и инклузивност во спортот во Северна Македонија. Македонски центар за меѓународна соработка. Available on: <https://mcms.mk/mk/za-nasata-rabota/istrazuvana-i-publikacii/2642-rodova-ednakvost-i-inkluzivnost-vo-sportot-vo-severna-makedonija.html>

126 Law on the Prevention of Violence and Improper Behaviour at Sports Competitions, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 114 of 31.07.2014. Available on: <https://portal.mdt.gov.mk/post-body-files/zakoni-mvr-file-rm0C.pdf>

127 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24 of 29.1.2021.

128 More on defining the forms of violence in the Law in Chapter [Дефинирање и концептуална рамка](#)

The **Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination**¹²⁹ stipulates the prevention and prohibition of discrimination, the forms and types of discrimination, the procedures for protection against discrimination, as well as the composition and work of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. This law covers all social spheres, including sport, in which non-discrimination is a basic prerequisite for creating a safe, fair and inclusive sports environment. Thus, sports organisations, federations and clubs are obliged to apply legal standards, to ensure equal access and equal treatment for all athletes and sports workers and to actively prevent any form of inequality on discriminatory grounds.

In February 2023, amendments were adopted to the **Criminal Code**,¹³⁰ which introduced a clear and legally binding definition of gender-based violence for the first time. Namely, gender-based violence and the concept of a victim of gender-based violence were defined, and a new definition of domestic violence was introduced as well as new criminal offenses. The amendments specify what constitutes gender-based violence, define the term “victim of gender-based violence”, introduce a new and more comprehensive definition of domestic violence, as well as new criminal offenses aimed at more effective protection of women and girls. According to the Code, “gender-based violence against women is violence directed at a woman because of her belonging to the female gender, which leads or is likely to lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm, damage or suffering.”

Although the adoption of a new law on gender equality, which was to establish a secretariat under the authority of the Government was planned, due to strong social polarisation, this law, despite being in an advanced consultative phase, has not reached the parliamentary procedure. Currently, the **Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men**¹³¹ is still in force, the aim of which is to establish and promote equal opportunities for women and men in the political, economic, social, educational, cultural, health, civil and all other spheres of social life. This law also applies to sport, which is recognised as part of the public and social system in which equal access, equal treatment and protection from any form of gender-based discrimination must be ensured.

At the national level, harmonisation with international standards for prevention and protection from gender-based violence is reflected in the strategic documents of the state. Namely, the **Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2027**¹³² is the basic strategic document that establishes a comprehensive framework for gender equality activities and the advancement of the status of women. One of its central goals is the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres—a goal that is directly relevant to the sports sector, where the risks of gender-based violence are particular and often insufficiently recognised. Sport, as a separate social area, is clearly singled out, emphasising that the gender gap in the representation of women in governing bodies and management structures is the most pronounced compared to all other social spheres.

Despite years of institutional announcements, the **National Sport Strategy** has not been drafted or published yet. In 2024, the Agency for Youth and Sports was transformed into the **Ministry of Sports**,¹³³ which, in accordance with its new responsibilities, should draft and adopt the National Sport Strategy. The absence of such a strategic document creates a gap in systemic planning, especially in the area of integrating a gender perspective and creating sustainable mechanisms for dealing with gender-based violence in sports.

129 Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 258 of 30.10.2020. Available on: <https://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/d1cad95799fb48d19825ab843deefe09.pdf>

130 Law amending the Criminal Code, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No.36 of 17.02.2023. Available on: <https://ldbis.pravda.gov.mk/PregledNaZakon.aspx?id=62139>

131 Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 201 of 16.11.2015. Available on: <https://portal.mdt.gov.mk/post-body-files/zakoni-mstp-file-UvOx.pdf>

132 Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2022). Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2027. Available on: https://cms.mtsp.gov.mk/juli-2022-ns_article-mtsp-izglasana-strategijata-za-rodova-ednakvost-2022-2027-godina.nsp

133 Ministry of Sports of the Republic of North Macedonia. For more see: <https://ms.gov.mk/>

Sport as a sector is largely regulated with self-governing systems, which allow for autonomy and independence. Supporters of this model argue that it protects sport from political interference, while critics point out that such autonomy often creates a serious lack of accountability, transparency and effective oversight.¹³⁴ Because of this, states generally avoid direct intervention, and only a few have developed specific national policies to deal with various forms of gender-based violence in sports.¹³⁵ In addition, the complex and heterogeneous governance structure in sport creates uncertainty about the extent to which sports rules are aligned with international human rights standards. As a result, victims of violence often do not have a clear and accessible avenue for reporting, legal support or appropriate care.

Although North Macedonia, as a signatory to key international declarations and conventions, has a clear obligation to apply international standards for the prevention and protection from gender-based violence, including in sport, the practical implementation of these standards in the sports sector remains limited. In our country, sport also operates through self-governing and autonomous structures, which places the main responsibility for developing and implementing safe sport policies with national sports federations, as well as the Olympic and Paralympic Committee. The extent to which they are implemented in practice largely depends on the internal rules, institutional capacities and priorities set by each organisation.

134 Play the Game/Danish Institute for Sports Studies. (2013). Action for Good Governance in International Sports Organisations. Available on: https://www.playthegame.org/media/rc2g510y/aggis_final_report.pdf

135 Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen & Lang, 2016.

5. Positive practices in European and regional context

There are several good practices that focus on preventing gender-based violence through education, awareness-raising and establishing clear policies and protocols, thus improving the culture in sport and strengthening the participants' safety. Other practices relate to the introduction of structural measures, ethical codes and integrity systems, which effectively reduce prejudice and promote positive models of behaviour. They are relevant for analysis and can be applied in different national contexts, including in North Macedonia. Below are some examples of good practices that can serve as a guide and be implemented in the Macedonian context.

5.1. Good practice example 1

Country: Sweden

Organisation: „Locker Room Talk“

Main topic: Prevention of gender-based violence

Target group: Boys at the age of 10 to 14

The “Locker Room Talk” team visits sports teams across Sweden and talks to boys in their locker rooms about gender equality and changing negative attitudes and stereotypes. The aim is to raise awareness of equality, build positive models of masculinity, prevent negative behaviours and forms of gender-based violence, and invest in early education for young people.

First, the team established contact and cooperation with sports clubs, followed by training of coaches and implementation of the programme based on peer education. The programme has included over 15,600 participants, of whom 2,128 are boys aged 10 to 14.

At first, they faced scepticism from the clubs, who feared that the boys would become “too soft” and show a weaker competitive spirit. These prejudices have gradually been overcome with support from sports federations and prominent athletes, such as Zlatan Ibrahimović and Jimi Durmaz. The main challenge remains the fact that adults – coaches and parents – often have difficulty accepting the topics, which suggests that it is equally important to work with them, not just children.

More information on: www.lockerroomtalk.se

5.2. Good practice example 2

Country: Flanders, Belgium

Organisation: „Sport Vlaanderen“ (Flanders Sports Agency) – Centre for Ethics in Sport

Main topic: Prevention of gender-based violence

Target group: Sports federations in Flanders, Belgium

Six integrity measures were included in the cooperation agreements between the subsidised sports federations and the centre for Ethics in Sport, with the obligation for the federations to gradually implement them and transfer them to club level. The framework includes: appointing an integrity person and participating in a network supported by the centre for Ethics in Sport; continuous activities for prevention, education and awareness-raising; establishing an ethics committee with an advisory role; defining target

groups and introducing codes of conduct that guarantee physical, psychological and sexual safety and integrity; developing a response protocol with clear procedures; and, establishing a disciplinary system that protects and sanctions. The implementation of these measures is supported by the centre for Ethics in Sport through legal assistance, documents and mentoring with an initial focus on the federation level and a gradual transition to clubs. From 2021, the adoption and active implementation of the integrity policy is a mandatory condition for receiving subsidies and state recognition of sports federations. The goal is to strengthen federations' policies at three levels: structural, preventive, and reactive – in order to prevent and better respond to gender-based violence.

More information on: <http://www.ethischsporten.be/ondersteuningSGG>

5.3. Good practice example 3

EDEX Coordinator – Educational Excellence Corporation Ltd, Cyprus, supported by the Erasmus Plus Programme.

The “Sport and Gender-Based Violence” training package is a European initiative aimed at improving knowledge, awareness and institutional capacities to address gender-based violence in sport. The aim is to empower all relevant stakeholders in the sports ecosystem, such as sports clubs, coaches, federations, officials and organisational structures, to create a safer, more inclusive and responsible sports environment. Several specialised online resources and practical materials have been developed within the framework of the initiative, including:

- a portfolio on gender equality and gender-based violence in sport, which offers basic concepts, definitions and guidelines for recognising different forms of violence;
- a toolkit for sports professionals and practitioners, with practical steps, exercises and tools for working with athletes and sports communities;
- a policy and prevention practice manual for sports officials and management with recommendations for implementing safeguard mechanisms, protocols for action and institutional obligations.

These resources are free and available on: <https://sportgvp.eu/elearning/training-package/>

6. Findings from the primary data analysis

6.1. Analysis of data from the female athletes' questionnaire

The data from the online survey, which was answered by 115 female athletes from 10 sports, is shown in aggregate form, segregated into individual and team sports, without segregating the results individually by sport. This approach has been applied in order to present the obtained data as indicative trends, without targeting certain sports or creating impressions of higher risk in specific disciplines. Considering that the survey covered different sports with unequal representation of female respondents, the summary form allows for a more accurate and responsible interpretation of the findings, while at the same time preserving the integrity of female athletes and the sports community.

Most of the female athletes who answered the questionnaire are active in team sports, i.e. 74.8% (86 female athletes), while 25.2% (29 female athletes) are active in individual sports (Chart no. 1. Almost half of the female athletes (56 female athletes or 48.7%) are minors, i.e. they are younger than 18 (Chart no. 2), followed by female athletes aged 18 to 24 with a representation of 28.7% (33 female athletes) and 11.3% female athletes from 25 to 34 and over 35, respectively.

Chart No. 1. Type of sport.

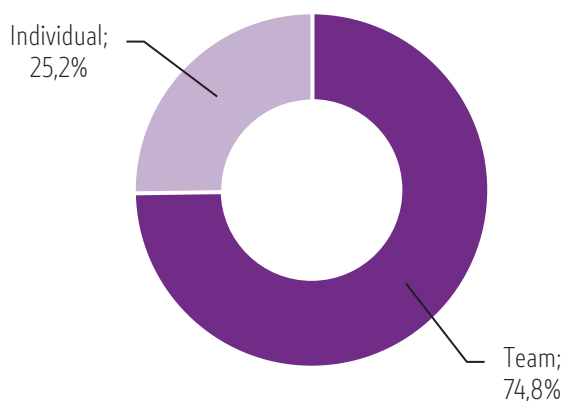
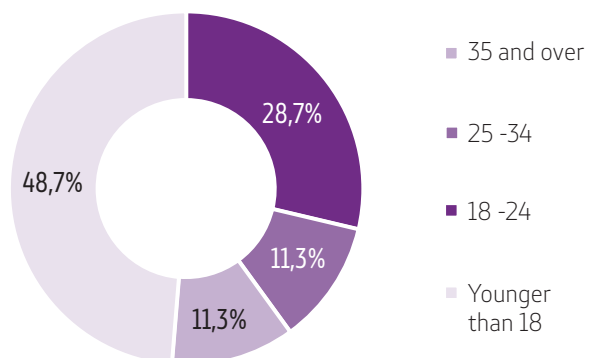
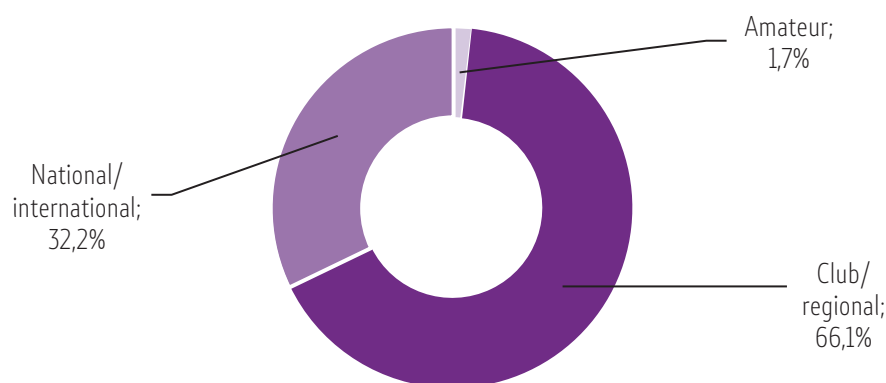


Chart No. 2. Athletes' age



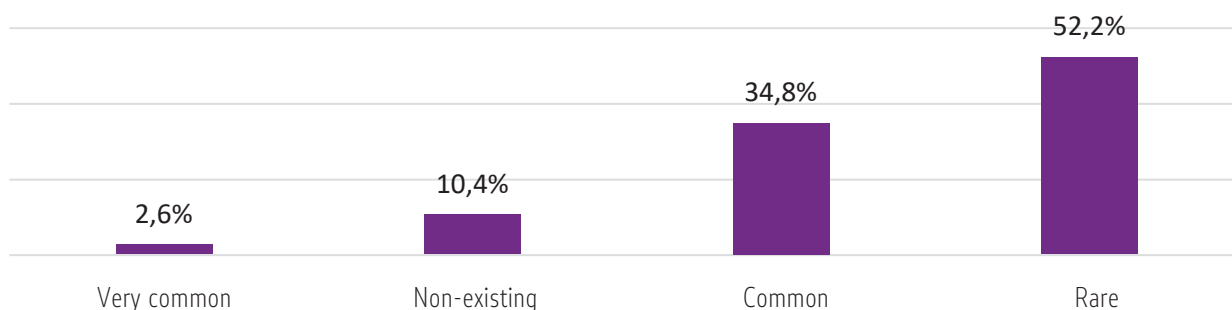
Most of the female athletes, i.e. 66.1% (76 female athletes), compete at club/regional level, 32.2% (37 female athletes) at national/international level and only 1.7% (2 female athletes) at amateur level (Chart no. 3).

Chart No. 3. Level at which they compete



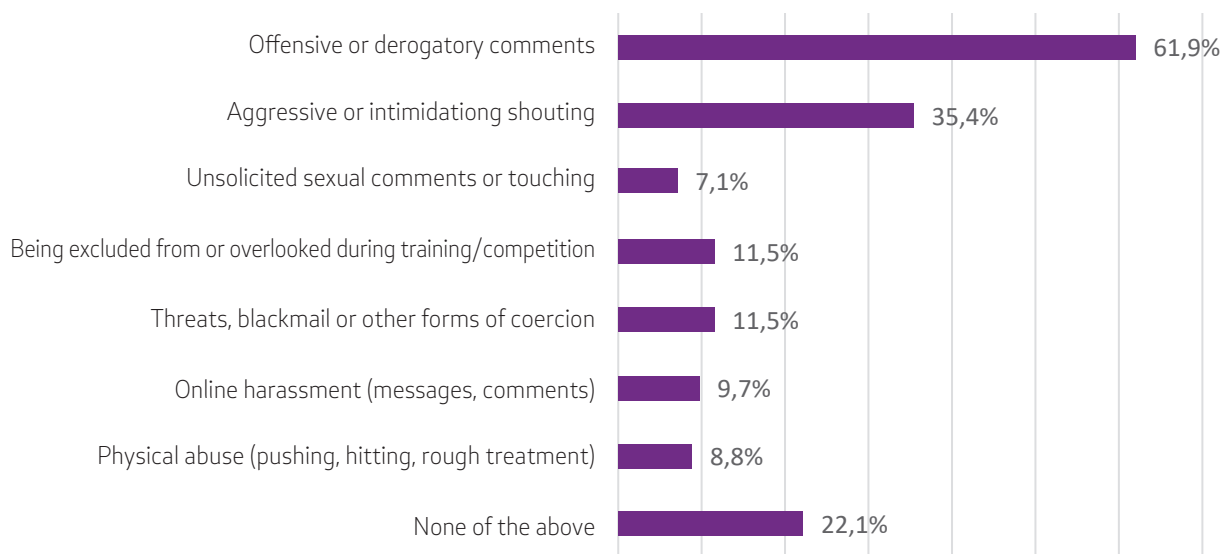
Only 10.4% of female athletes (12 athletes) state that there is no harassment and violence against female athletes in North Macedonia (Chart No. 4). The majority, i.e. 52.2% (60 athletes), consider violence and harassment in sports to be a rare occurrence, while 34.8% (40 athletes) consider it to be a common occurrence. For a few female athletes, i.e. 2.6% (3 athletes), violence is a very common occurrence in sports.

Chart No. 4. How prevalent is harassment and violence against female athletes in North Macedonia?



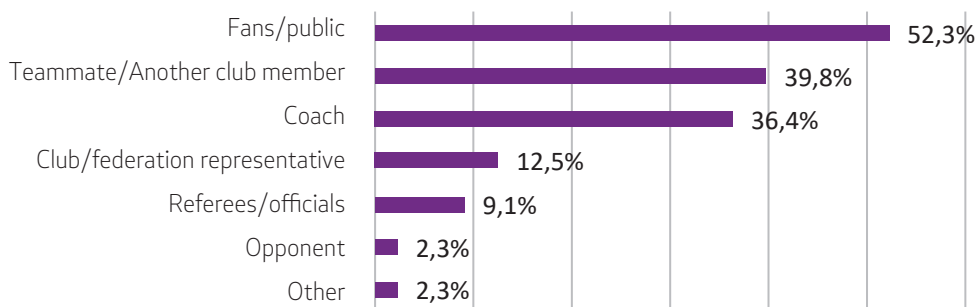
When asked in what kind of situations they found themselves while playing sports, including training, competition, travel, and sporting events, as many as 61.9% of female athletes (70 female athletes) faced insulting or humiliating comments, and 35.4% (40 female athletes) faced aggressive or intimidating shouting (Chart No. 5). 13 female athletes (11.5%) faced being excluded from or overlooked during training or competitions, as well as threats, blackmail, or other forms of coercion. A smaller number of female athletes faced online harassment (11 female athletes or 9.7%), physical abuse (10 female athletes or 8.8%), and unsolicited sexual comments or touching (8 female athletes or 7.1%). Only 22.1% (25 female athletes) stated that they had not faced any of the above.

Chart No. 5. What situations have they experienced while playing sports?



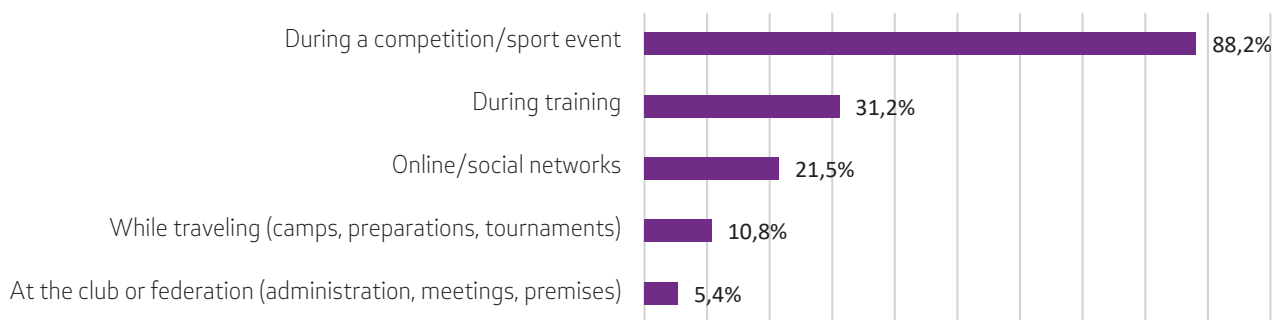
The harassment or violence usually came from fans, i.e. the public (46 athletes or 52.3%) (Chart No. 6). In less situations, it originated from a teammate or other club member (35 athletes or 39.8%) and a coach (32 athletes or 36.4%), while less were caused by a representative of a club or federation (11 athletes or 12.5%) and referees or official representatives (8 athletes or 9.1%).

Chart No. 6. Who was behind the act of harassment or violence?



In 88.2% of cases (82 female athletes), the act of harassment or violence happened during a competition, i.e. a sporting event (Chart No. 7). In 31.2% (29 female athletes) the incident occurred during training, in 21.5% (20 female athletes) online i.e. on social networks, while in 10.8% (10 female athletes) while traveling.

Chart No. 7. In what situations did the unsolicited behaviour occur?



Of the female athletes who experienced some form of harassment or violence, only 13.4% (13 athletes) reported the case (Chart No. 8). Of those who reported it, they usually did so to the coach (8 athletes or 61.5%), while 4 athletes (30.8%) reported the case to another person in the club, such as administration or management, and 2 athletes (15.4%) to another person in the federation (Chart No. 9). Only a few athletes provided information about the procedure, of which in one case it has not been completed yet, in another it ended “well”, in a third it was resolved “in a peaceful manner with a conversation”, while in one case “we started joking about it and there was no closure”.

Chart No. 8. Did you report the incident of harassment or violence?

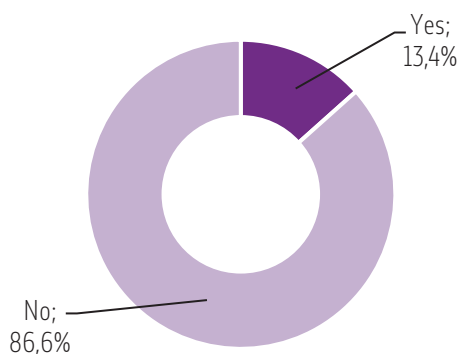
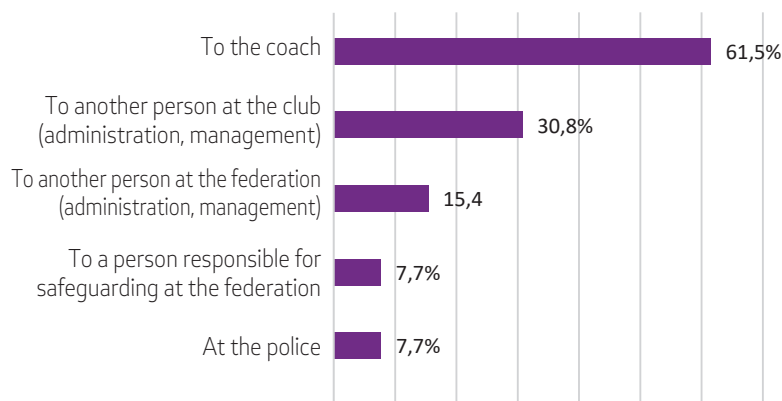
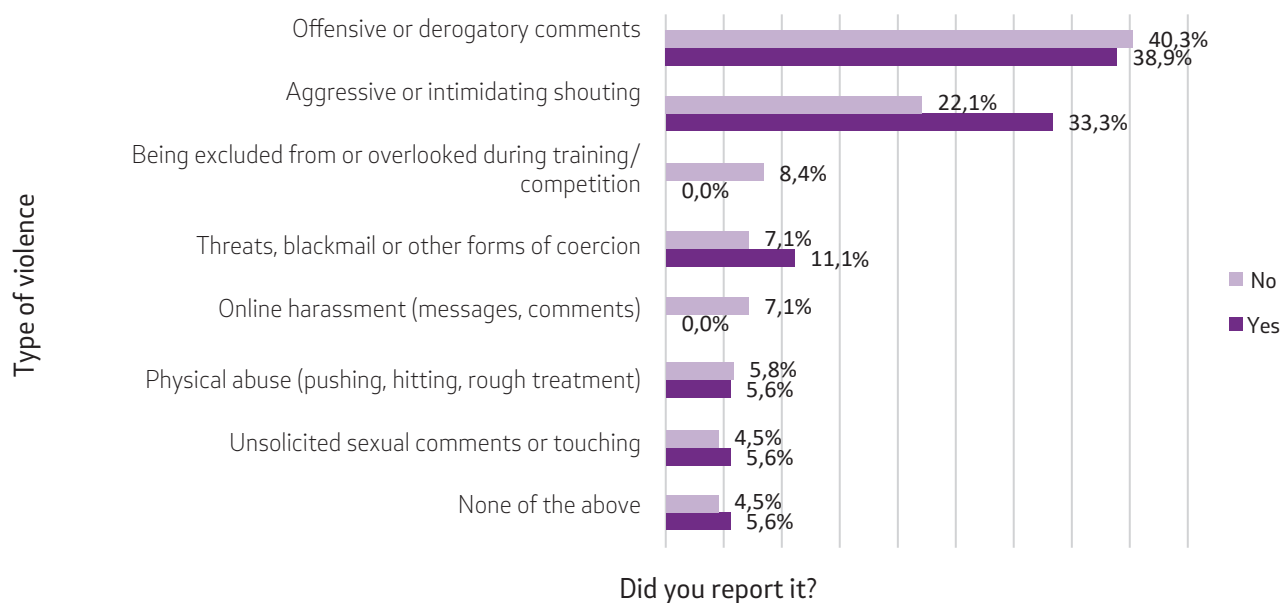


Chart No. 9. Who did you report it to?



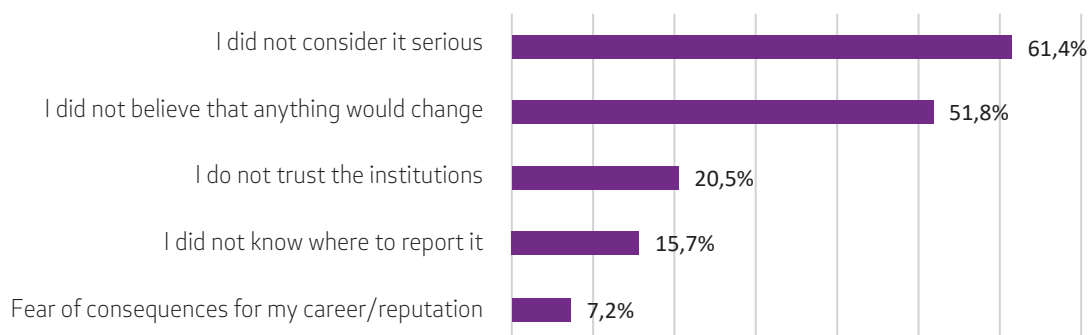
When analysing the link between the type of experienced violence and the reporting of violence, we see an almost equal distribution among the majority of cases (Chart No. 10). However, none of the athletes who reported experiencing online harassment or being excluded from or overlooked during training or competition reported violence.

Chart No. 10. Link between the type of violence and reporting it



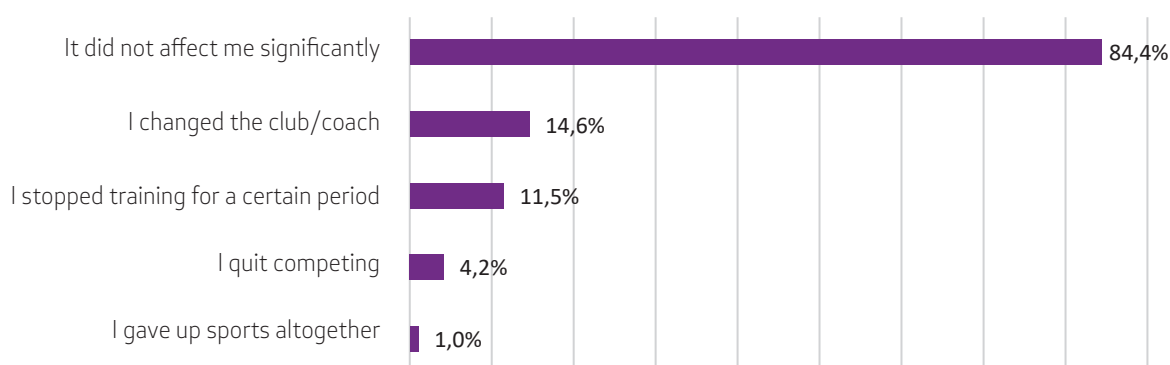
Concerning the athletes who did not report, the most common reasons for not reporting were that they did not consider the case serious (51 athletes or 61.4%), as well as that they did not believe that anything would change (43 athletes or 51.8%) (Chart No. 11). 20.5% (17 athletes) did not report due to distrust in the institutions, and 15.7% (13 athletes) because they did not know where to report. In 7.2% of cases (6 athletes) the reason for not reporting was the fear of consequences to their career/reputation.

Chart No. 11. Reasons for not reporting it



On a positive note, most of the female athletes (81 athletes or 84.4%) stated that the experience of harassment or violence they experienced did not have any significant impact on their further involvement in sports (Chart No. 12). However, 14 female athletes (14.6%) changed clubs or coaches as a result of the experience of violence, 11 female athletes (11.5%) stopped training for a certain period, 4 (4.2%) withdrew from the competitions, and 1 female athlete gave up sports altogether.

Chart No. 12. How did the violence affect you future involvement in sports?



As many as 38.3% of female athletes (44 athletes) reported witnessing harassment or violence against another athlete (Chart No. 13), and in most cases (88.4% or 38 athletes) they stated that it involved insulting or humiliating comments, while in a smaller proportion (25 athletes or 58.1%) it involved aggressive or intimidating shouting (Chart No. 14). In 20.9% of cases (9 female athletes) it involved threats, blackmail or other forms of coercion, in 16.3% (7 athletes) it involved physical abuse, such as pushing, hitting, rough treatment, in 14% (6 athletes) it involved being excluded from or overlooked during training or competition. In several cases there were unsolicited sexual comments or touching (9.3% or 4 athletes) and online harassment (7% or 3 athletes).

Chart No. 13. Have you ever witnessed harassment or violence against another female athlete?

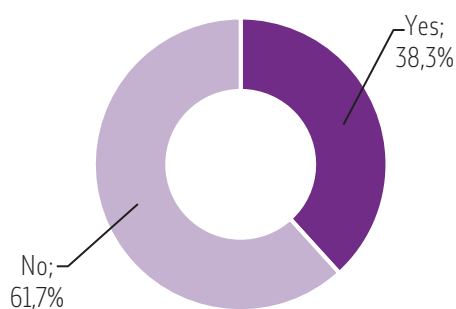
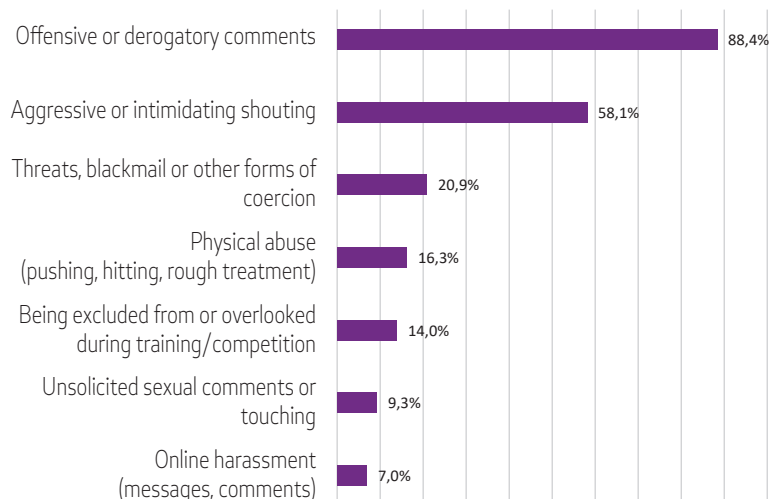
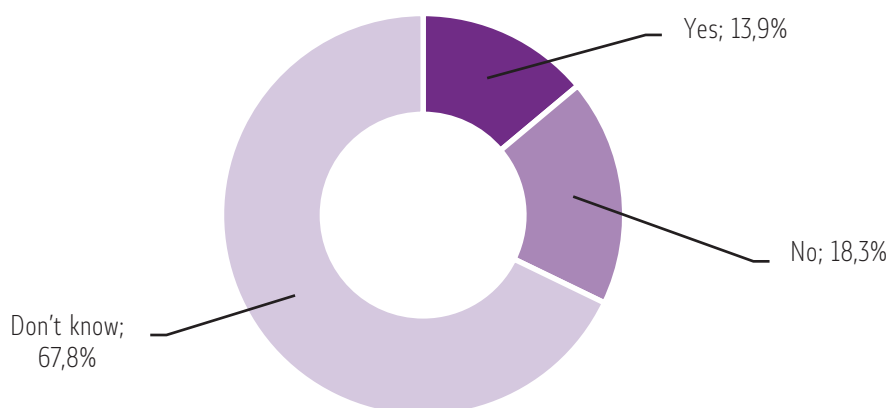


Chart No. 14. The type of violence they witnessed



Almost a third of female athletes (78 athletes or 67.8%) stated that they did not know whether their club or federation had a designated person or safeguard mechanism ("safe sport"), while 18.3% (21 athletes) stated that such a person did not exist (Chart No. 15).

Chart No. 15. Is there a designated person or safeguard mechanism ("safe sport") in the club or federation?



According to the majority of female athletes (64 female athletes or 58.7%), what clubs and federations should, or can, do to better protect female athletes from any harassment and violence is to educate all persons involved in sports (federation/club employees, coaches, referees, sports doctors, etc.) about what harassment and violence represents, how they should behave with female athletes, and how to help female athletes who face harassment and violence (Chart No. 16). 45.9% (50 female athletes) of female athletes believe that a code of conduct for prevention and protection from harassment and violence should be introduced, 41.3% (45 female athletes) that female athletes should be informed where and how they can report violence, and to inform/educate female athletes on how to recognise different types of violence (42 female athletes or 38.5%). An equal share of female athletes, i.e. 35.8% (39 female athletes), believe that it is necessary to establish effective mechanisms for reporting violence in federations/clubs, to appoint a trusted person in each federation/club who will be trained to recognise violence and act upon reports of harassment and violence, and to strengthen trust in institutions (police, prosecutor's office, courts, etc.) by having them do their job more effectively.

Chart No. 16. What should/can clubs and federations do to better protect female athletes from any harassment and violence?



Only a small number of female athletes shared personal experience or a situation they witnessed in which they spoke about cases of verbal violence, as well as abuse of power by coaches, in the form of shouting, belittling, favouritism, blackmail and threats, including preventing a change of club and public insults based on physical appearance.

“Some coaches don’t realise how much they shout and what they do, they only think about success, winning and not making mistakes.”

“Coaches blackmail girls into training at their club so that they can be called up to the national team, when the coach is also the head coach of the national team.”

“I wanted to change the club, the coach didn’t agree with that and threatened that he would make sure I don’t train and that he would badmouth me.”

“It’s all in vain, nothing works in this country.”

“Pushing a certain person and treating them as a favourite, while throwing others out, belittling them... by a coach.”

“A coach of the opposing team publicly and loudly insulted and threatened a female athlete, and he only got a warning.”

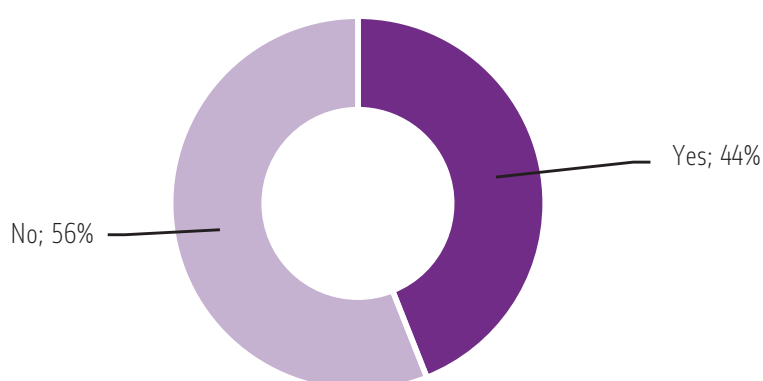
“In the middle of a game, a coach yelled at a teammate and aggressively insulted her based on physical appearance.”

6.2. Analysis of data from the national sports federations

6.2.1. Findings from the questionnaire

More than half (14 federations or 56%) of the sports federations that responded to the questionnaire have not adopted an official policy, protocol or code of conduct for “safe sport” that includes prevention and action in the event of harassment or violence against athletes, in contrast to 44% (11 federations) that have (Chart 17).

Chart No. 17. Has the federation adopted an official policy, protocol or code that includes prevention and proceedings for dealing with harassment or violence against athletes?



Only 7 (28%) of the federations have established a mechanism for the protection of athletes and procedures for dealing with reports of harassment or violence, while the same number of federations stated that such a mechanism is in preparation (Chart No. 18). 8 (32%) federations do not have such a mechanism, and the least number (3 federations or 12%) stated that they have no information about its existence within their federation. Of those federations that responded that they have some kind of mechanism, it most often consists of an adopted protocol or code of conduct (6 federations or 67%), and in less an officially designated contact person for cases of harassment or violence (3 federations or 33%) (Chart No. 19). Two federations stated that they have both a protocol/code of conduct and an officially designated person. In two federations, the designated person bears the title of "Safeguarding" Officer and is female, while in one federation it is a person responsible for reporting conflicts and harassment.

Chart No. 18. Has the federation established a mechanism to protect and act upon reports of harassment or violence?

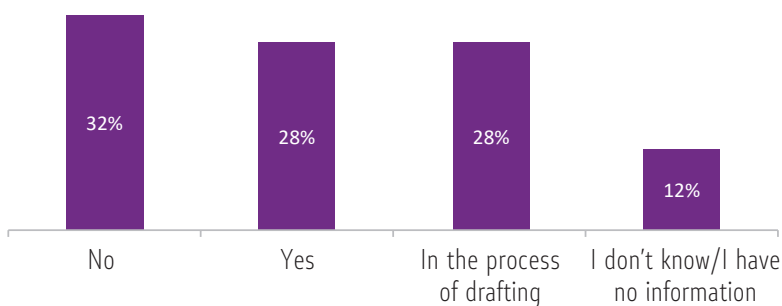
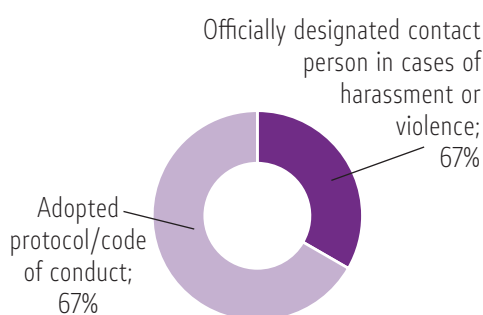
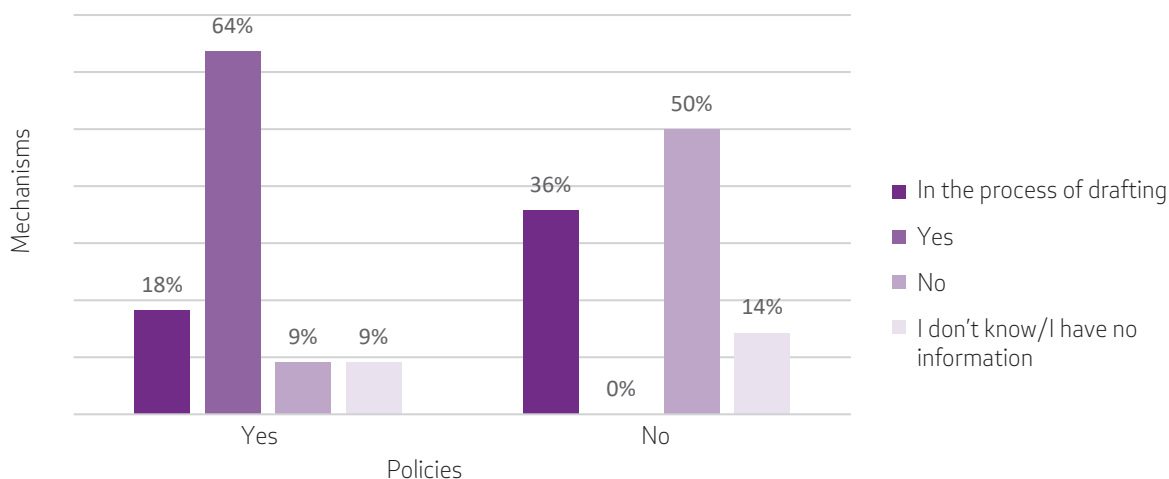


Chart No. 19. What kind of mechanism is it?



Of the federations that stated that they have adopted an official policy, protocol or code of conduct for "safe sport" that includes prevention and action in the event of harassment or violence against athletes, more than half (7 federations or 64%) stated that they also have a protection and reporting mechanism in place, while in 2 of federations (18%) it is in the process of being established (Chart No. 20). It is good that one third of the federations (5 federations or 36%) that do not have policies have a protection mechanism in development. The findings indicate a clear link between the existence of official policies and the establishment of safeguard mechanisms and reporting violence.

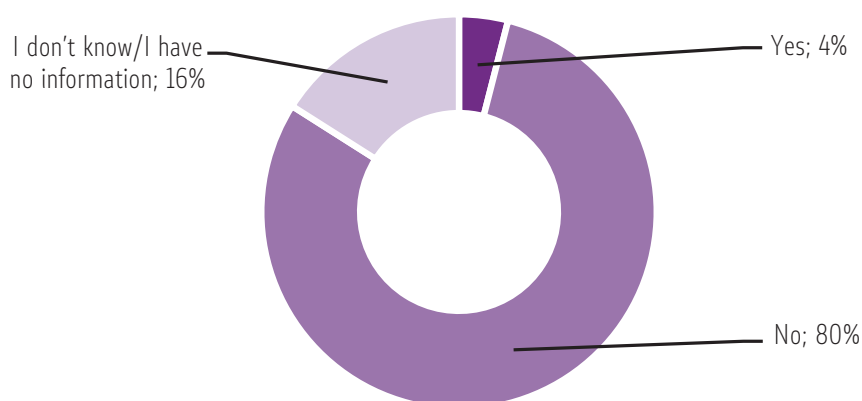
Chart No. 20. Link between having policies and mechanisms



Only 4 federations stated that they plan to appoint and train a person for safe sport within the federation in the course of the next year.

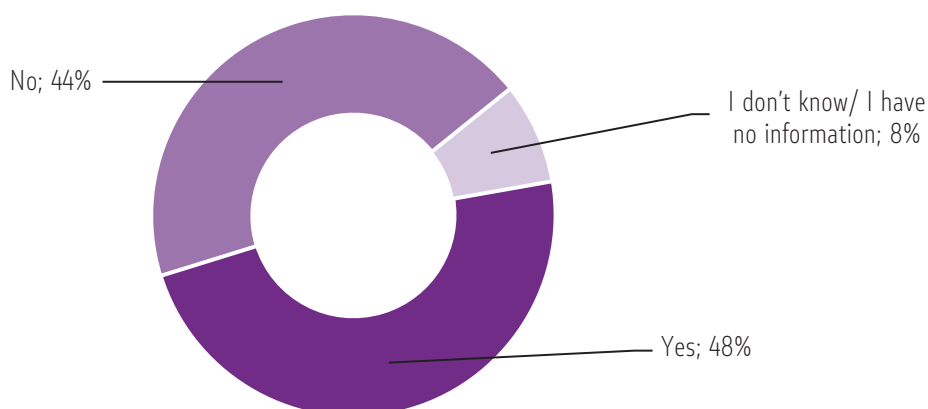
The majority of federations (20 federations or 80%) stated that in the last five years they had not received information or were not informed about reports related to harassment or violence against female athletes, while 16% (4 federations) did not have information whether there had been any reports (Chart No. 21). In only one federation (4%) was there one report or information in the past five years about harassment or violence.

Chart No. 21. Has the federation received any reports or information about harassment or violence against female athletes?



Almost half or 48% (12) of the federations have organised or participated in trainings/activities to raise awareness about the safety of female athletes, gender equality or "safe sport" in the last five years, compared to 44% (11 federations) that did not have such activities (Chart No. 22). 8%, or 2 federations, do not have information about such training or activities.

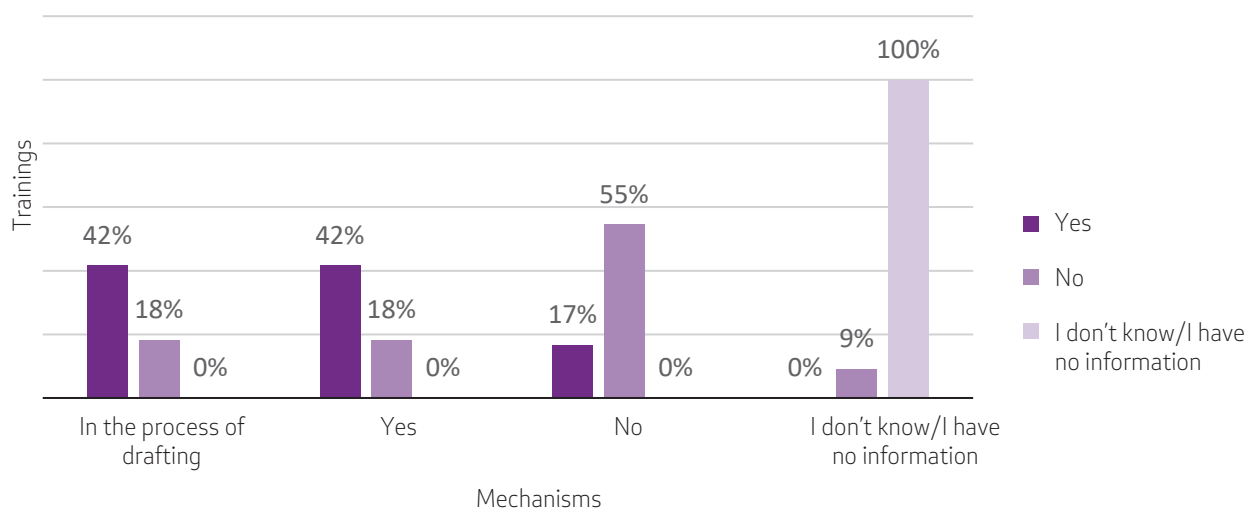
Chart No. 22. Has the federation organised/participated in training/awareness raising activities?



Regarding the link between safeguard mechanisms and participation in training, the majority of federations that have established a safeguard and mechanism for reporting violence or are in the process of establishing one (a total of 10 federations or 84%) reported that they have participated in or organised training or awareness-raising activities on the safety of female athletes, gender equality or "safe sport"

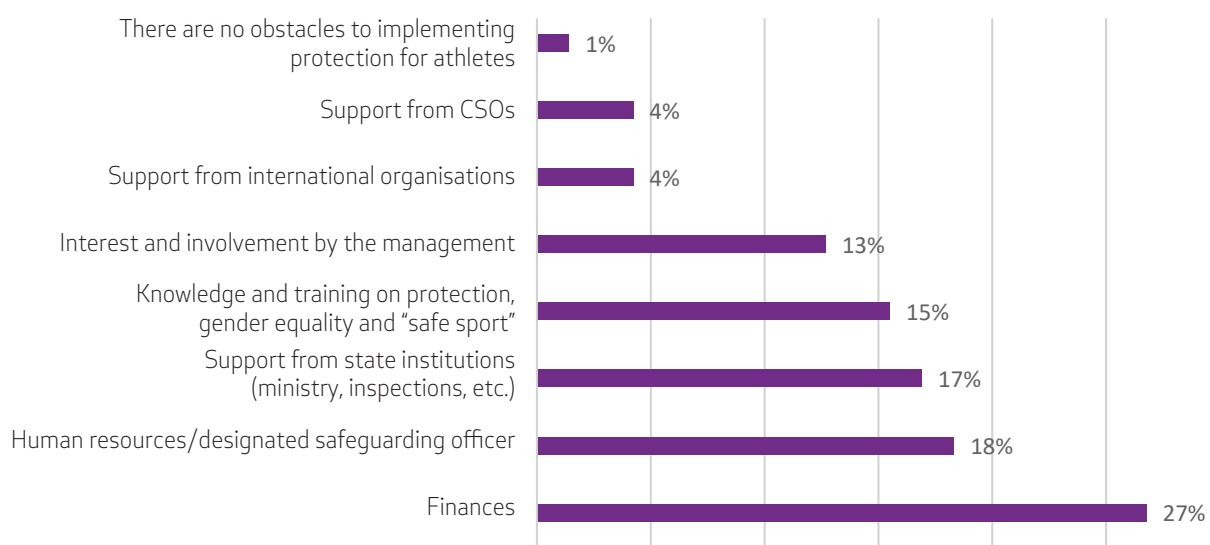
(Chart No. 23). This suggests the possibility that training and awareness-raising activities are associated with greater institutional readiness and a tendency to establish safeguard mechanisms.

Chart No. 23. Link between having safeguard mechanisms and participation in training



According to the majority of responses (19 federations or 27%), what their federations lack to establish and implement effective policies and mechanisms for the protection of female athletes is finances (Chart No. 24). Approximately the same number of federations mention human resources, i.e. a designated person for protection (13 federations or 18%) and support from state institutions (12 federations or 17%), followed by knowledge and training on gender equality and “safe sport” (11 federations or 15%) and interest and involvement of management (9 federations or 13%). Only one federation sees no obstacles to implementing effective policies and safeguard mechanisms.

Chart No. 24. What does the federation lack to establish and implement effective protection policies and mechanisms?



6.2.2. Review of publicly available documents related to athletes' protection

In order to compare the statements from the questionnaire with the real situation, an additional review and analysis was made of all publicly available documents of the federations that stated in the questionnaire that they had adopted an official policy, protocol or code of conduct for safe sport/safeguarding, which includes prevention and procedures in cases of harassment or violence against athletes. This provided insight not only into their formal responses, but also into what actually exists and is publicly available for athletes.

The review of publicly available documents showed that out of 11 federations that responded that they had such policies or documents, in 5 of them the listed documents were not publicly available on their official websites. This means that athletes essentially do not have access to information on the existing rules or do not even know that they exist, which may affect their ability to recognise the reporting mechanism, as well as its use. In 2 of these federations, the only publicly available documents are the disciplinary regulations, which refer almost exclusively to conduct in competitions and most often recognise and sanction physical assault, but without the gender component. This means that the documents deal with offenses that are visible to the public and delegates, and not those that most often affect female athletes, i.e. situations less visible to the public, such as coach-athlete relationships and situations of hierarchical dependence. In addition, the regulations are often dominated by formulations aimed at protecting the reputation of the sport and the organisation.

Of the remaining 4 federations that have publicly available documents, in one case the documents were taken from international and European organisations, in which a high degree of normative elaboration is noted. For example, it is stated that discrimination is recognised on the basis of "race, gender, ethnicity, religion, philosophical or political conviction, marital status or on any other basis" and "all forms of harassment of participants are prohibited, regardless of whether it is physical, professional, religious, political, hierarchical or sexual harassment and any physical or mental harm to participants". The rules also contain guidelines for coaches not to use "physical or verbal violence during a fight and/or training against any judoka or any person in general". However, this federation does not have a nationally elaborated reporting procedure, but the report should be submitted directly to the international federation. In practical terms, this means that although the documents on paper contain formally good elements, these athletes in the country do not have a clear domestic point of contact, nor a mechanism that would be accessible, reliable or functional in a national context.

In another case, a code of conduct is available that prohibits verbal abuse, racism and sexual harassment, and states that "such behaviour will not be tolerated". The code also prohibits "favouring individuals for certain positions in the federation based on economic factors, race, religion, skin colour, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability or national background". However, this document again builds on disciplinary regulations, and the sanctions it provides are limited to formal violations, without any guarantee to provide protection to the victim or confidentiality of the procedure.

In other documents, the wording is very broad, for example, stating that a disciplinary measure is imposed if someone "spreads religious, racial or gender intolerance" or "commits verbal abuse and/or uses physical force", but even here there are no definitions of gender-based violence, nor a mechanism that would deal with the situations that female athletes most often find themselves in.

One of the documents states that the disciplinary commission evaluates the evidence "based on their convictions", while the commission itself is appointed by the federation's board of directors. In practice, this would mean that the proceedings are entirely internal, subjective and dependent on the will of the same structures that have power in the federation, which creates a serious conflict of interest and reduces the likelihood of an independent or fair procedure. Additionally, disciplinary mechanisms act on a

“written report on the spot” or a report submitted by a delegate at a match, which is unenforceable for the absolute majority of cases of harassment and violence that occur off the sport courts, especially in the context of training, locker rooms, travel, selection processes or online communication.

One of the documents contains general principles, such as the expectation that the athlete should be “a good student, employee, must have respect for all athletes, the coach, officials, parents, spectators and in no case should they use physical force, belittling, utter abusive words”, as well as that “all participants in the competition shall be treated in accordance with the rules of fair play and respect, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race and religious affiliation or sexual orientation”. It also states that “the coach must have moral and ethical values; they must never allow themselves to be guided by self-interest in their work (e.g. acts with underage athletes, etc.); they must respect the ethical norms of their profession in the coach-coach, coach-athlete and coach with other sports workers relationships”. These formulations represent one of the rare examples where non-discrimination is partially mentioned and awareness of possible risky situations is hinted at, which can be considered a positive starting point. However, the content remains too general and does not delve into the core issues related to gender, hierarchy and unequal power relations that often underlie harassment, and does not provide clear mechanisms, guidance or safeguards that would be truly relevant to girls and women in sport.

6.3 Analysis of data from the interviews with relevant stakeholders

The analysis of the interviews data is structured into several thematic units that address the forms and contexts of gender-based violence in sport, organisational culture and power relations, existing policies and safeguard mechanisms, as well as barriers to reporting. The interviewees are grouped into three categories: athletes (current and former), coded with the abbreviation SPO, representatives of sports federations, clubs and coaches, coded with ORG, and experts and representatives of institutions, civil society organisations and media, coded with EXP. This division allows for a comparative analysis of the different perspectives, experiences and institutional positions regarding gender-based violence in sport.

6.3.1. Forms and manifestations of gender-based violence in sport

Violence and harassment in sports occur in multiple forms, contexts and power relations, and the visibility, recognition and social reaction vary significantly depending on the position of the athletes, the type of sport, the level of competition and the organisational culture. According to the interviewees, they are not uncommon in sports, but rather “a structural problem that has multiple forms and roots, especially where there is a great imbalance of power”.¹³⁶

In terms of forms of violence, psychological violence appears as the most commonly recognised and most widespread form. It manifests itself through mobbing, insults, belittling, threats of losing a place in the team, blackmail and excessive pressure to achieve results.¹³⁷ Some of the interviewees indicate that a significant part of such violence stems from the lack of education among coaches and sports workers, who are often unaware of the psychological consequences of their behaviour.¹³⁸ In parallel, sexual harassment and sexual violence are also present, although they remain the least visible in the public discourse. Despite the lack of systematic data, experts say that in the past ten years there have been three court rulings for sexual violence by coaches against female athletes,¹³⁹ indicating that these phenomena are not isolated incidents.

136 Interview with SPO-07.

137 Interviews with SPO-06, ORG-04, ORG-05, EXP-05.

138 Interview with EXP-05.

139 Interview with EXP-03.

Training and sports facilities are recognised as a key context for the occurrence of violence. Some federations and experts indicate that the incidents “most often occur covertly, during training”,¹⁴⁰ where informal relationships, closeness and hierarchy create conditions for abuse. Particularly worrying are statements about sexual violence against underage athletes by coaches or fitness trainers, which “remain hidden, unspoken and without an appropriate reaction from institutions”.¹⁴¹ Others further indicate that such situations are often not even recognised as violence: “it happens that a coach pulls the athlete by the hand, takes her to a room, but she does not perceive it as violence”.¹⁴²

One of the most common circumstances in which harassment occurs is the public space associated with training, especially in individual sports. Female athletes testify to repeated situations of harassment during outdoor training: “they whistle at me constantly, they shout words at me, they stop their cars next to me”,¹⁴³ as well as direct consequences on the training process, such as skipping training sessions due to fear, especially at night and in winter conditions.¹⁴⁴ These experiences show that access to sport for women is not only a matter of infrastructure, but also of basic personal safety.

The online space emerges as another important dimension of harassment. Some of the interviewees describe cases where coaches directly write to underage female athletes to convince them to transfer to another club, thus bypassing formal procedures and exerting psychological pressure.¹⁴⁵ Experts further point out that social networks are “fertile ground for sexist comments”, and hate speech is “a constant part of any sporting event”.¹⁴⁶

Violence and harassment most often originate from people with formal or informal power, such as coaches, referees, officials, but also spectators and fans.¹⁴⁷ One athlete stated that it most often comes from the superiors, “those who profit from our success”.¹⁴⁸ The coach-athlete relationship is described as particularly risky due to the high level of dependence, closeness and authority, where “the relationship becomes very close and friendly and can be easily manipulated”,¹⁴⁹ and blackmail emerges as a significant mechanism of control.¹⁵⁰

Some of the interviewees believe that in “calmer”, less commercial sports, violence is less present because “we all know each other”¹⁵¹ and that in more popular sports, where there is more money, power and sponsors, there is more discrimination, pressure and violence.¹⁵² In addition, it has been pointed out that “the further one advances in sports, the more serious the problem becomes and the less people talk about the cases”,¹⁵³ which points to a strong mechanism of closing ranks and self-protection of hierarchical sports structures.

140 Interview with ORG-04.

141 Interviews with SPO-07, EXP-01, EXP-02.

142 Interview with EXP-02.

143 Interview with SPO-01.

144 Interview with SPO-04.

145 Interview with ORG-03.

146 Interview with EXP-05.

147 Interviews with SPO-07, ORG-04, EXP-01, EXP-05.

148 Interview with SPO-06.

149 Interview with EXP-02.

150 Interviews with EXP-02, EXP-05.

151 Interview with ORG-05.

152 Interviews with SPO-05, EXP-02.

153 Interview with EXP-02.

It is also necessary to highlight the strong difference in perceptions among different actors. While some claim that in their sport “there have been no such cases” or that they are “minor” and “resolved quickly”,¹⁵⁴ experts and some female athletes point to a high degree of normalisation of violence and discrimination, as well as very limited familiarity with gender-based violence.¹⁵⁵ This gap in perceptions further deepens the institutional blindness to the seriousness of the problem.

Public discourse on violence in sport is extremely limited. “It is very rarely discussed in public”, “most often people keep quiet and bow their heads”,¹⁵⁶ and even when there are testimonies, they mostly circulate in closed informal circles.¹⁵⁷ The absence of systematic data, databases of reports and official statistics further contribute to the violence remaining socially invisible, although according to the experiences of most of the interviewees it is real and present.

6.3.2. Relationships and organisational culture

The organisational culture in sports is described as a predominantly male, authoritarian and closed environment in which violence is often relativised and normalised. Some sports workers do not differentiate between gender and sex at all and do not recognise gender-based violence as a separate problem.¹⁵⁸ In this environment, female athletes are taught that insults, humiliation and pressure for results are part of the “normal” sports dynamics, so “most of them are not even aware of the violence, they think it is all part of the game and sport”.¹⁵⁹ Even in cases where it is spoken out openly, “there is no reaction and it is most often accepted as a normal occurrence”.¹⁶⁰

Male dominance in management structures further deepens the inequality. One expert points out that “there are only men in high positions” and that women’s teams are “very often managed by men”, which makes female athletes “wonder where their safe space is”.¹⁶¹ In addition, the lack of female leadership and the absence of trusted figures to whom they could turn can contribute to silence and self-censorship. In some of the federations with predominantly female membership, a more open atmosphere is yet noticeable, where one interviewee stated “we often laugh that it is a women’s sport - anyone who wants to can share their troubles, we are all women in the federation.”¹⁶²

Relationships in clubs are experienced by some female athletes as instrumental and exploitative. For example, one female athlete explains that she was in a club for a long time where she was “top ranked” and that suited the coach because she promoted the club and allowed him to “brag” about her successes, but when she and another girl complained to the coach about inappropriate behaviour by some of the men in the club, such as using club contacts for private messages and inappropriate comments, the coach did nothing, “it even seemed that he was embarrassed that we complained to him about it at all.”¹⁶³ This lack of response prompted the athlete to distance herself from the club and stop competing, which shows how impunity and ignoring create a sense of insecurity and lead to giving up on organised sport.

154 Interviews with ORG-06, ORG-08.

155 Interviews with EXP-02, ORG-04.

156 Interview with ORG-01.

157 Interview with EXP-05.

158 Interview with EXP-02.

159 Interview with EXP-01.

160 Interview with ORG-05.

161 Interview with EXP-02.

162 Interview with ORG-08.

163 Interview with SPO-04.

Experts also point to structural obstacles in organisational functioning. Team sports are described as “cumbersome” systems with many employees but “little interest”¹⁶⁴ in the topic, while minor sports often have neither the resources nor the motivation to deal with the issue of safe sport.¹⁶⁵ Many federations, lack even the “most basic” safeguarding mechanism, “even if only on paper”.¹⁶⁶ In addition, financial instability and the absence of strategic planning keep federations in a state of constant amateurism: “they struggle with getting a sports hall, schedules, instead of developing a strategy and vision”.¹⁶⁷ Where some bodies, such as disciplinary committees, exist, they are mostly focused on the regularity of competitions and sports rules, and not on gender-based violence, abuse or discrimination.

In such a culture, dealing with violence is often left to the individual level or transferred to the private sphere. Some female athletes say that they discuss their experiences “only among themselves”¹⁶⁸ or share them with close friends, while in most cases “such situations are kept quiet” and often even parents are not informed.¹⁶⁹ Representatives of sports organisations confirm that “more is kept quiet than spoken about openly”¹⁷⁰ and that it is often decided to “protect the reputation” of the club or federation, rather than to protect the athletes.¹⁷¹

An additional dimension of organisational culture is related to power, finances and visibility. According to one female athlete, “in more popular sports, where there is more money and sponsors, there is also more discrimination and violence”,¹⁷² which indicates that economic interests further reinforce the hierarchy of power and pressures on female athletes. Experts also emphasise that “the further one advances in sports, the more serious the problem becomes and the less people talk about the incidents”,¹⁷³ which creates a strong effect of closed ranks, especially at the highest levels.

Overall, these relationships and practices create an organisational culture in which female athletes are often left “on their own”,¹⁷⁴ and violence, discrimination, and abuse are treated as individual problems, rather than as systemic issues that require an institutional response.

6.3.3. Reporting and safeguard policies and mechanisms

From the perspective of female athletes, the existence of formal reporting policies and mechanisms is almost unknown. Some explicitly say that they have “never encountered”¹⁷⁵ a reporting policy or mechanism, even though they have more than ten years of experience in sports.¹⁷⁶ Others assume that there may be some regulations in some federations, but they do not know how they are applied and whether they even cover gender-based violence.¹⁷⁷ For some of them, the only institution they recognise for reporting is the Ministry of Interior,¹⁷⁸ which shows that sports mechanisms are either poorly developed or poorly communicated with.

164 Interview with EXP-03.

165 Interviews with EXP-03, ORG-01.

166 Interview with EXP-04.

167 Interview with ORG-08.

168 Interview with SPO-04.

169 Interview with SPO-08.

170 Interview with ORG-02.

171 Interview with ORG-04.

172 Interview with SPO-05.

173 Interview with EXP-02.

174 Interview with EXP-02.

175 Interview with SPO-01.

176 Interview with SPO-04.

177 Interview with SPO-03.

178 Interview with SPO-03.

Where disciplinary committees exist, their jurisdiction is limited and focused on violations of sports rules. One female athlete explains that violence can be reported to a disciplinary committee, which can issue a warning or suspension, but that “the problem is that it is difficult to prove – it has to be obvious”, and reporting during a match must be immediate, via a match delegate.¹⁷⁹ This formal but narrow approach is not aligned with the reality of sexist or psychological violence, which rarely occurs in public or in front of witnesses, or exclusively during a match/competition. In addition, one person confirmed that this disciplinary committee “has other powers” that do not cover gender-based violence, especially not beyond matches/competitions.¹⁸⁰

Representatives of sports organisations admit that there are practically no “safe sport” policies or that they themselves are not informed whether some federations have established protection and reporting mechanisms.¹⁸¹ Even when some rules exist, they are most often focused on children and youth, without a specific emphasis on gender-based violence.¹⁸²

Experts go even further, speaking of an “institutional problem”, because federations do not have a structure for reporting, dealing with and providing support, “almost no federation has a rulebook”, and even when there are some documents, there is no “channel for reporting and resolving the case”.¹⁸³ Even when some mechanism exists, it is often “settled within the federation ... because there are no clear rules and procedures in place for reporting and handling cases”.¹⁸⁴ This further discourages female athletes from reporting even within the federation because “there is no resolution”¹⁸⁵ or the report “drags on for years with no outcome”.¹⁸⁶ Some federations have established “safeguarding” officers, but female athletes are not informed of their existence,¹⁸⁷ which makes these mechanisms inoperative.

The lack of clearly defined institutional responsibility is further confirmed by the response received from the line ministry, which places the responsibility for dealing with gender-based violence exclusively with national sports federations because “the various types of acts usually happen there, and athletes initiate certain legal proceedings”.¹⁸⁸ This position means that the action depends on the individual capacities and practices of the federations.

The shortcomings in the regulation and weak implementation are recognised by the majority of interviewees. The athletes point to “insufficiently clearly defined protocols and procedures” and that the rulebooks, even when they exist, are “rarely implemented in practice”, in the absence of oversight, transparency and accountability.¹⁸⁹ Representatives of sports organisations add that “we see the greatest shortcomings in the management structures, which do not undertake measures even when there are written rules and regulations”.¹⁹⁰ Experts also emphasise the lack of information, meaning that neither the federations nor the female athletes clearly know which institutions are responsible, where to turn to, and who should solve the problem.¹⁹¹

179 Interview with SPO-05.

180 Interview with ORG-06.

181 Interview with ORG-01, ORG-02, ORG-05.

182 Interview with ORG-07.

183 Interview with EXP-02.

184 Interview with EXP-04.

185 Interview with EXP-04.

186 Interview with EXP-03.

187 Interview with EXP-03.

188 Interview with EXP-05.

189 Interview with SPO-07.

190 Interview with ORG-05.

191 Interviews with EXP-04, EXP-05.

6.3.4. Reporting barriers

Barriers to reporting violence and harassment in sport are multifaceted, with individual, institutional and cultural factors acting in combination. According to the statements “these factors combined often create a so-called environment of silence that protects the perpetrators, while leaving the victims without appropriate and timely support and protection.”¹⁹²

At the individual level, the most frequently mentioned reasons for reporting violence are fear of consequences, such as retaliation, shame, stigma and distrust in reporting systems. Female athletes state “we have no knowledge of where to turn to...” and “trust in institutions is at a low level.”¹⁹³ According to another female athlete, “there is no information on where to report a case, nor can they identify who is responsible for what, especially the young athletes.”¹⁹⁴ In a small environment, where “everyone knows everybody,” there is a strong fear that “everyone will know and gossip about you” and that the victim will be perceived as “unfit” or as someone who “deserved what they got.”¹⁹⁵ In this way, stigma and victim blaming can act as a silencing mechanism, especially among young female athletes.

The position of power of the perpetrators is a key barrier. Female athletes indicate that the outcome of a report often depends on “against who it is addressed ... if it is a person with power, the case may be swept under the carpet, regardless of what one does.”¹⁹⁶ Others state that the biggest obstacle is that “nobody does their job properly,” there are no “sanctions” or “punishment” for perpetrators, and reporting can result in “removal from competitions or dismissal from the club.”¹⁹⁷ For some, the experience of violence is so disheartening that it directly leads to an athlete quitting the sport.¹⁹⁸

Institutional barriers are related to a lack of mechanisms, a dysfunctional system and a lack of information. A large part of the interviewees agree that “a lack of mechanisms and a dysfunctional system” are some of the main reasons that discourage female athletes from reporting.¹⁹⁹ Experts emphasise that “the reason they do not report is not so much distrust, but institutional – they do not have any support systems”.²⁰⁰ Female athletes often do not know that they can report to the police and are not informed that there are other instances outside of sports organisations.²⁰¹ One female athlete explains that the enforcement authorities are contacted “only in case of sexual harassment and violence, where the victim, out of trauma and helplessness, will decide to turn to the enforcement authorities”.²⁰²

A specific aspect of institutional barriers is the lack of safe and reliable reporting channels in the sports environment. Even the representatives of sports organisations clearly point out the “lack of a clear, anonymous channel and contact point”²⁰³ and the “lack of anonymous and secure reporting mechanisms”.²⁰⁴ Without a clearly designated person, procedure and guaranteed confidentiality, the risk of “leaking” information and consequences is high, which can further discourage reporting.

192 Interview with ORG-02.

193 Interview with SPO-01.

194 Interview with SPO-05.

195 Interview with SPO-02.

196 Interview with SPO-05.

197 Interview with SPO-06.

198 Interview with SPO-04.

199 Interviews with ORG-03, ORG-03, ORG-06, SPO-07.

200 Interview with EXP-02.

201 Interviews with EXP-03, EXP-04.

202 Interview with SPO-03.

203 Interview with ORG-04.

204 Interview with ORG-07.

The cultural dimension further reinforces silence. The sports environment is described as “masculine and authoritarian”, where reporting is not encouraged and where gender-based violence is not recognised as a particular problem.²⁰⁵

6.3.5. Prevention and protection initiatives

Although the system for protection in sports is in its infancy, interviews show that there are several initiatives that open up the topic and create potential for change. The OCNM’s project, funded through the EU Erasmus programme, holds a central place and it aims to establish a “Safeguarding Officer” within the national sports federations. Athletes and representatives of sports organisations indicate that through this project, training phases are organised and introducing designated persons for safe sport, safeguarding officer “has started”.²⁰⁶ These activities are expected to help in recognising the problem and in knowing “how to act adequately in such cases”.²⁰⁷

There are also other, more fragmented initiatives. Some federations are starting to internally prepare rules for “safe sport” and plan to appoint officials to deal with reports in the coming period.²⁰⁸ Others are working on programmes to empower youth, develop self-confidence and create a “safe place” on the playground.²⁰⁹ Experts point out that the materials and procedures are not sufficiently visible, i.e. they are not published on the websites, so female athletes cannot easily access information.²¹⁰

Despite these positive steps, the dominant assessment is that the initiatives are still based on projects in which only some of the federations participate, and it is not a question of systemic change. Some of the interlocutors express disappointment due to the “lack of interest from other federations”, especially from the “major” sports.²¹¹ Others point out that even when a federation has a person hired who partially works on this topic, that person does not have sufficient capacity and knowledge to be able to provide adequate protection.²¹²

6.3.6. Necessary changes and the role of institutions

According to the majority of those interviewed concerning sports in North Macedonia, in order to make it a safer and fairer environment for women and girls, systemic and not declarative changes are needed. The most commonly mentioned is the need for legislative amendments. Many point to “loopholes” in the Law on Sports and the need to be amended and to include “safeguarding” provisions, without which federations “do not have the power” to implement the system.²¹³ Some even propose the adoption of a “special law for the protection of athletes from abuse, harassment and violence”, with clear obligations and mechanisms for implementation.²¹⁴

205 Interview with EXP-01, EXP-02.

206 Interviews with SPO-02, ORG-01, ORG-03, ORG-04.

207 Interview with ORG-04.

208 Interview with ORG-07.

209 Interview with ORG-08.

210 Interview with EXP-03.

211 Interviews with ORG-06, EXP-03.

212 Interview with EXP-04.

213 Interviews with SPO-02, ORG-05.

214 Interview with ORG-02.

Some experts agree that amendments to the Law on Sports must explicitly include “safeguarding” and condition federations and clubs with an obligation to introduce mechanisms and regular training. They suggest for the state to condition federations with a time frame (“you have one year to implement this”) and to link receiving state funds to the existence of functional mechanisms.²¹⁵ Additionally, they point to the need for inspections in federations that will regularly check for cases of discrimination and violence, because “if we see that nothing happens when a case is reported, it is a sign that the mechanism is not functioning.”²¹⁶

In addition to legal changes, the need for clear, mandatory policies and codes for “safe sport” in federations and clubs is emphasised, including reporting procedures, safeguard measures and sanctions, as well as designated persons to support victims.²¹⁷ State institutions, such as the Ministry of Sports, the Ministry of Education and Science, and inspection services, are recognised as key actors that should lead this change in close coordination with OCNM and the federations.²¹⁸ The fact that the Ministry of Sports brings down its role to gender-sensitive budgeting, while transferring responsibility for gender-based violence exclusively to the federations,²¹⁹ indicates the need for a clearly defined, active and coordinated role of state institutions in this area.

A large part of the interviewees see education as the “main tool” for raising awareness about violence in sports.²²⁰ Mandatory training is proposed for coaches and sports workers on the recognition and prevention of violence, on gender equality and on safe coach-athlete relationships, with regular updates.²²¹ The fact that a large part of the coaches have no formal education in methodology and psychology and “no education on working with female athletes”, is particularly problematic.²²²

Some of the statements call for the establishment of protection services where female athletes can report, receive psychological and legal support and where there will be a clear procedure for investigation and having an outcome.²²³ Some, however, warn of the danger of overlapping competencies and believe that instead of creating new bodies, the existing mechanisms should be “operationalised” and the capacities of the people who work on these cases should be developed, at the level of paralegals and specialised contact points in the federations.²²⁴

Many of those interviewed also emphasise the need for greater participation of women in decision-making positions in sports, specifically in clubs, federations and commissions, as gender balance is seen as key to creating a sensitive and safe system.²²⁵ Women’s voices are considered essential in policymaking, not only as a “target group”, but also as active decision-makers and change-makers.

The role of civil society organisations, media and the academic community in raising awareness, imposing public pressure and developing continuous prevention, not just project-based activities, is also recognised.²²⁶ Without such a horizontal network and without a stable institutional framework, there is a risk that all efforts will remain fragmented and dependent on individual enthusiasts.

215 Interviews with EXP-02, EXP-03, EXP-01.

216 Interview with SPO-05.

217 Interviews with ORG-04, ORG-07.

218 Interviews with SPO-06, SPO-07, ORG-02, ORG-04, ORG-07.

219 Interview with EXP-06.

220 Interviews with SPO-03, EXP-02.

221 Interviews with ORG-03, ORG-07, EXP-02.

222 Interview with ORG-03.

223 Interviews with SPO-06, SPO-07.

224 Interview with EXP-04.

225 Interviews with SPO-07, ORG-06, EXP-02.

226 Interviews with EXP-04, EXP-05.

6.3.7. Good Practices

Information on good practices mainly comes from an international context, rather than from domestic examples. Most female athletes and some representatives of sports organisations stated that they were “not familiar” with good practices that they could refer to.²²⁷ This gap in itself is indicative, i.e. it shows that the sports system does not create sufficiently visible positive models of support.

However, several of the interviewees cite specific examples from other countries. Models are mentioned where, for example, in Italy, successful female and male athletes are guaranteed employment (in the police or the military) or in Turkey a residence.²²⁸ These policies are understood as a way for the state to recognise and valorise a sports career, especially for women, who often remain invisible after the end of active competition.

From the perspective of gender equality, examples are cited from Norway and Sweden, where there is “equal valuation of sports results” between men and women,²²⁹ and from the USA, where “safe sport” policies apply to all individuals involved in the Olympic and Paralympic Movement, with the aim of preventing inappropriate behaviour and creating a “safe and respectful athletic environment”.²³⁰

European federations, such as the British and Dutch, where there are mandatory “safeguarding” officers and anonymous reporting lines, are also cited as good practice.²³¹ At the regional level, Croatia was pointed out as a positive example, where “safeguarding” is included in the law and where the relevant ministry and the Croatian Olympic Committee work “hand in hand”, unlike in the Macedonian context, where everything is still done on a personal level and “things have not moved forward for years.”²³²

On a symbolic level, the sexual harassment lawsuit against the head coach of the Spanish women’s national team was pointed out as an encouraging example, seen as a model for female athletes to follow when facing sexual harassment.²³³ This example shows how visible publicly supported processes can have a powerful effect on encouraging other women to speak out.

227 Interviews with SPO-01, SPO-03, ORG-01.

228 Interview with SPO-06.

229 Interview with ORG-05.

230 Interview with ORG-02.

231 Interview with ORG-07.

232 Interview with EXP-03.

233 Interview with EXP-01.

7. Conclusions

The analysis shows that gender-based violence against women in sport is a serious and complex problem that is deeply rooted in organisational culture, hierarchical relations and normative gaps in sectoral policies. Although the forms, intensity and contexts of occurrence vary between different sports and levels of competition, what is common is that violence is not an isolated incident, but a systemic phenomenon that often remains unrecognised, unreported and unsanctioned. In addition, the analysis indicates that access to relevant data on gender-based violence in sport in North Macedonia is limited, and the available data is fragmented and non-unified, which represents a serious structural problem and significantly complicates the establishment of clear, continuous and comparable monitoring of trends over time.

Psychological violence stands out as the most widespread and normalised form. Interviews and survey data clearly indicate that insults, belittling, aggressive tone, blackmail or threats of losing opportunities in sport are accepted as part of the “sports discipline”. Athletes often do not recognise these behaviours as violence, indicating a significantly low level of awareness and internal acceptance of harmful practices that are considered “normal.” This normalisation creates an environment in which serious and repetitive forms of psychological abuse go unchallenged, and the boundaries between permissible and impermissible behaviour remain unclear.


Although less publicly visible, sexual harassment and violence are a real and present phenomenon, especially in hierarchical relationships where the power is with coaches, officials or other persons with formal or informal authority. Hidden and chronically unreported situations are present, including cases that lead to legal proceedings. At the same time, many female athletes, especially minors, do not have sufficient information or capacity to recognise the abuse of power, which further increases vulnerability. Not being familiar with the mechanisms, fear of consequences and distrust in institutional responses significantly reduce the likelihood of reporting.

Reporting violence is extremely rare, and the reasons for this are multidimensional. Female athletes often believe that their experiences are not “serious” enough, have low confidence that institutions will respond, fear consequences for their sports careers and do not know where to turn. There is also a low level of awareness that external mechanisms, such as the police, social welfare centres or anti-discrimination bodies, can also act on cases in sport. This creates a so-called “environment of silence”, in which silence is the dominant strategy, and protecting the reputation of clubs and federations often takes priority over protecting female athletes.

Sports federations have not developed effective systems for protection, prevention and handling of cases of gender-based violence. Most federations do not have policies, protocols or a designated person to handle complaints. Even when some documents exist, they are mostly declarative, formal or focus exclusively on disciplinary offences during competitions. Practical reporting mechanisms, confidential and anonymous channels, procedures for protection and support of victims are largely missing. This creates an institutional vacuum in which neither the sports organisations are informed about the existing obligations, nor female athletes about the possibilities for getting protection.

The organisational culture in sports is predominantly male and hierarchical, creating power structures in which abuses are more likely to occur and more difficult to detect. The absence of women on decision-making positions further contributes to the fact that issues related to violence rarely receive adequate attention. Under such circumstances, violence is treated as an isolated problem, rather than an issue for which institutions have an obligation to respond.

Although national laws on protection from gender-based violence and discrimination are aligned with international standards, they are not integrated into the Law on Sports. The absence of clear legal obligations for sports federations and clubs to establish safeguarding mechanisms contributes to inconsistency, lack of structure and avoidance of responsibility. Federations often rely on voluntary initiatives or projects, rather than a systemic approach.



Initiatives for “safe sport”, although positive, are limited and insufficient for systemic change. The projects initiated by OCNM represent an important starting point, but they cover a small portion of the federations, and the mechanisms established within the projects are not always sufficiently visible, functional or integrated into everyday practice. Continuous education, supervision and support are lacking to ensure effectiveness.

Gender-based violence against women in sport in North Macedonia is the result of structural deficiencies in culture, regulations and institutional mechanisms. The problem results from a combination of insufficient awareness, hierarchical relations, weak or non-existent safeguarding mechanisms, inconsistent institutional practices and a legal vacuum. This context creates an environment in which violence can occur in various forms, but is rarely reported, leading to cases remaining unrecognised, unreported and without institutional action.

8. Recommendations

Addressing gender-based violence against women and girls is a serious societal challenge that requires a sustained, coordinated and multisectoral commitment from governments and all relevant stakeholders. These efforts must be directed at addressing the structural and cultural causes of violence, not just its consequences. The following recommendations are addressed to political and sports leaders who, in addition to their formal responsibility, also have real power and influence. Their active support can substantially strengthen efforts to prevent violence against women and girls in the sports. At the same time, the analysis emphasises that every individual has a moral and social obligation to contribute to creating a safe, inclusive and equitable sports environment.

8.1. Recommendations for sports organisations (national sports federations, sports clubs)

Systematic education and capacity building

Establishing regular and mandatory training for coaches, administrative staff and other employees, with a special focus on prevention, recognition and appropriate action in cases of gender-based violence. Continuous education enables timely response, risk reduction and enhancing culture of accountability in sport.

Raising the knowledge and awareness among female athletes

Providing regular training and information-sharing sessions for female athletes, so that they can recognise the different forms of gender-based violence, understand their rights and be informed about the available reporting mechanisms both within the sports organisation and to the competent institutions. When designing these activities, it is necessary to take into account underage athletes, with information activities and reporting mechanisms being age-appropriate, with a clearly defined role for parents and additional safeguard protocols for working with children and young people in sport.

Establishing a trust and protection mechanism

Appointing a trusted person (“safeguarding officer”) with appropriate specialised training and a clearly defined mandate to prevent, receive and act upon reports of violence, abuse and harassment in sport. This person should be independent when undertaking actions, easily accessible and clearly recognised by athletes, coaches and other personnel as a safe and confidential point of contact. Within the framework of the established reporting mechanisms, sports organisations should enable anonymous reporting of violence, which is particularly important in small sports environments and smaller sports. In addition, it is necessary to communicate the role, responsibilities and procedures for contacting the officer publicly, in order to ensure trust, timely response and protection of those who report from possible retaliation or stigmatisation. Sports organisations must explicitly guarantee that reporting violence will not result in any negative consequences for the athletes’ status, selection, contracts or future careers in sport. Any form of retaliation, direct or indirect, including marginalisation, loss of position or pressure to leave the sport, should be treated as a serious offense and subject to disciplinary action.

Clear and transparent procedures

Developing clear, accessible and transparent procedures for reporting, investigating and dealing with cases of gender-based violence in sport. The procedures should be formalised through rulebooks, codes or other official policies, with clearly defined steps, roles and responsibilities for all parties involved. They should be easily accessible and publicly available, both on the organisations' websites and through internal channels, and regularly communicated to athletes, coaches, staff and member clubs. The aim is to ensure a confidential and safe reporting process, a timely and effective response, and protection of those who report from possible repercussions or stigmatisation.

Zero tolerance policy

Adopting and consistently implementing a zero-tolerance policy for gender-based violence is key to creating a safe sporting environment. Sports organisations should ensure that these policies are also implemented at club level, where they should be setting a positive example and providing support for its implementation.

Internal acts harmonisation and members accountability

All internal documents, strategies and regulations of sports organisations should be harmonised and contain clear provisions for the prevention, recognition and management of gender-based violence. In addition, federations have an obligation to monitor and evaluate whether their members (clubs) adopt and apply the same standards, thereby ensuring consistent protection of athletes. This process should include regular reports, monitoring and support in the implementation of policies, as well as clear mechanisms for correction or intervention in case of non-compliance or inconsistency.

Multi-sectoral cooperation and external support

Promoting cooperation among sports organisations, federations, clubs, civil society organisations, competent institutions and experts on gender-based violence and safety in sport. This includes the exchange of good practices, development of joint initiatives, coordination in policymaking, as well as connections with existing support services for those who have experienced violence.

8.2. Recommendations for policymakers

Training and awareness raising

Providing regular training and information sharing activities for sports federations in order to raise awareness and improve capacities for preventing and addressing gender-based violence. In this way, the Ministry of Sports strengthens the ability of federations and clubs to provide a safe and inclusive sports environment, as well as trust in institutional safeguard mechanisms.

Linking funding to safeguards

Introducing as a condition for the federations to adopt rulebooks, codes and established functional mechanisms for preventing, reporting and dealing with gender-based violence, which will serve as a prerequisite for receiving state funding. This will ensure that all financial resources are directed to organisations that actively implement the safe sport policy and are committed to the protection of female athletes.

Legislative harmonisation

Harmonising and amending the Law on Sports in accordance with the relevant European recommendations and international standards, in order to clearly, unambiguously and bindingly establish the principle of zero tolerance of gender-based violence, as well as the obligations of sports organisations for its prevention, reporting and sanctioning.

Integrating gender-based violence prevention policies into sports strategies

Integrating gender-based violence prevention policy as a mandatory component in all future strategies, action plans and strategic documents in the field of sports, in order to ensure a systemic and sustainable approach to the gender-based violence prevention and management.

Financial support

Allocating fixed, adequate and sustainable funds from the state budget, for the purpose of developing, implementing and continuous functioning of policies, procedures and mechanisms for preventing and addressing gender-based violence in sport.

Data and records

Imposing an obligation for systematic, standardised and continuous collection of data on reports, actions and outcomes related to gender-based violence in sport. In parallel, it is necessary to regularly collect and update basic, gender-disaggregated data on the number of active female and male athletes within organised sport, by federations and clubs. Federations and clubs should keep unified records, with clearly defined indicators and protection of personal data, and aggregate data should be regularly submitted to the competent institutions. This data should serve as a basis for monitoring the situation, identifying risks and creating evidence-based policies.

Monitoring and accountability

Establishing mechanisms for regular monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of measures to prevent and address gender-based violence in sport. Competent institutions should regularly assess the effectiveness of the undertaken measures, act in cases of non-compliance and ensure appropriate sanctions. This process allows for timely changes, improvement of practices and strengthening of trust in institutional safeguard mechanisms.

Inter-sectoral cooperation to prevent gender-based violence

Establishing and promoting inter-sectoral cooperation with competent institutions outside the sports sector, including institutions responsible for preventing and addressing gender-based violence, in order to ensure a coordinated, efficient and comprehensive institutional response.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Questionnaire for female athletes

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE FEMALE ATHLETES

This questionnaire is part of the research on gender-based violence in sport conducted within the framework of the project “Fair Play: Supporting Gender Equality in Sports Policies”. The aim of the research is to collect information on how female athletes recognise and experience the phenomena of harassment and violence in sport in North Macedonia. The questionnaire is intended for female athletes.

The term gender-based violence in sport refers to various forms of harassment and abuse, including verbal and psychological abuse, insults, sexual harassment or violence, abuse of power and position, gender-based discrimination, as well as online harassment.

The survey is completely anonymous and consists of 9 short questions with several sub-questions and will take you **5 to 7 minutes** to complete. Your answers will help develop recommendations on how clubs and federations can better protect female athletes.

Thank you in advance for your time and sincerity!

For all additional information, please contact bojana_jovanovska@yahoo.com

1. Age
 - Younger than 18
 - 18–24
 - 25–34
 - 35 and over

2. What sport do you play?

3. At what level do you usually compete?
 - National/international
 - Club/regional
 - Amateur

4. In your opinion, how prevalent is harassment and violence against female athletes in Macedonia?
- Non-existent
 - Rare
 - Common
 - Very common
5. Which of the following situations have you experienced while playing sports (training, competition, travel, sporting events)? (you may select more than one answer)
- Offensive or derogatory comments
 - Aggressive or intimidating shouting
 - Threats, blackmail or other forms of coercion
 - Physical abuse (pushing, hitting, rough treatment)
 - Unsolicited sexual comments or touching
 - Online harassment (messages, comments)
 - Being excluded from or overlooked during training/competition
 - None of the above
 - Other (specify)
- 5.1. If you have experienced at least one of the listed situations, who was responsible for it? (you may select more than one answer)
- Coach
 - Teammate/ Another club member
 - Club/federation representative
 - Referees/officials
 - Fans/public
 - Other (specify)
- 5.2. In what situations did the unsolicited behaviour/s occur? (you may select more than one answer)
- During training
 - During a competition/sport event
 - While traveling (camps, preparations, tournaments)
 - At the club or federation (administration, meetings, premises)
 - Online/social networks.
 - Other (specify)

5.3. Did you report the incident?

- Yes
- No

5.3.1. If you did report it, who did you report it to? (you may select more than one answer)

- To the coach
- To another person at the club (administration, management)
- To a person responsible for safeguarding at the federation
- To another person at the federation (administration, management)
- At the police
- At the Social Welfare Centre
- At the Prosecutor's Office
- To the ombudsperson
- At the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination
- At a CSO
- To a lawyer
- Other (specify)

5.3.2. If you did report it, what was the outcome from the procedure?

5.3.3. If you did NOT report it, what was the reason? (you may select more than one answer)

- I did not know where to report it
- Fear of consequences for my career/reputation
- I did not believe that anything would change
- I do not trust the institutions
- I did not consider it serious
- Other (specify)

5.3.4. If you had such an experience, how did it affect your involvement in sports afterwards? (you may select more than one answer)

- It did not affect me significantly
- I stopped training for a certain period
- I changed the club/coach
- I quit competing
- I gave up sports altogether
- Other (specify)

6. Have you ever witnessed harassment or violence against another athlete?
- Yes, I have.
 - No, I haven't
- 6.1. If YES, what was it about? (you may select more than one answer)
- Offensive or derogatory comments
 - Aggressive or intimidating shouting
 - Threats, blackmail or other forms of coercion
 - Physical abuse (pushing, hitting, rough treatment)
 - Unsolicited sexual comments or touching
 - Online harassment (messages, comments)
 - Being excluded from or overlooked during training/competition
 - Other (specify)
7. Is there a designated person or safeguard mechanism ("safe sport") in your club or your federation?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
8. What should/can clubs and federations do to better protect female athletes from any harassment and violence? (you may select more than one answer)
- Inform/train female athletes on how to recognise different types of violence
 - Inform female athletes where and how they can report violence
 - Establish effective mechanisms for reporting violence in federations/clubs
 - Introduce a code of conduct for the prevention and protection against harassment and violence
 - Train all persons involved in sports (federation/club employees, coaches, referees, sports doctors, etc.) on what harassment and violence represent, how they should behave with female athletes and how to help female athletes who face harassment and violence
 - Appoint a trusted person in each federation/club who will be trained to recognise violence and deal with reports of harassment and violence
 - Enhance trust in institutions (police, prosecutors, courts, etc.) by having them perform their job more effectively
 - Other (specify)

9. If you wish, you can anonymously share your personal experience or a situation you witnessed, without providing any personal information.

Thank you for the shared responses!

If you ever feel the need to report harassment or violence, or need advice or support, you may contact:

- The nearest police station or 191
- The nearest social welfare centre
- The public prosecutor's office and court
- Civil society organisations offering support

National SOS lines

- Free mobile SOS line: 141-700
- National SOS line (Crisis Centre "Nadezh" (Hope)): 15 315

Psychosocial support

- National Network against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence: 075 255 154, sovetuvaliste@glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk

Free legal aid

- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights: +389 2 3119 073
- Macedonian Association of Young Lawyers: +389 72 223 963

Annex 2. Questionnaire for the national sports federations

Within the framework of the project "Fair Play: Supporting Gender Equality in Sports Policies", we are conducting a survey that aims to collect information on existing policies, mechanisms and practices for the protection of female athletes from gender-based violence in national sports federations. *The term gender-based violence in sport refers to various forms of harassment and abuse, including verbal and psychological abuse, insults, sexual harassment or violence, abuse of power and position, gender-based discrimination, as well as online harassment.* In this regard, as part of the survey, we are conducting a short questionnaire intended for sports federations.

The questionnaire consists of 6 short questions with the possibility of several sub-questions. It will take you a maximum of **5 minutes to complete it**. The deadline for completing the questionnaire is **10 October 2025**.

You may complete the questionnaire in two ways:

- ONLINE - fill out the questionnaire online via the following link: LINK.
- E-MAIL - answer the questions directly to this email (with the Reply option) - the questions are listed below.

All data collected with this questionnaire will be treated with strictest confidentiality and will be used solely for the purposes of the research. All data from the research will be presented in aggregate form and in no case will the names of the federations be mentioned.

Thank you in advance for your time and contribution. For any additional information or questions, please feel free to contact us at erasmus.mok@gmail.com

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE NATIONAL SPORTS FEDERATIONS

1. Name of the federation (please specify): _____
2. Has your federation adopted an official policy, protocol or code of conduct for “safe sport/safeguarding”, which includes prevention and procedure in case of harassment or violence against athletes?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Does your federation have an established mechanism for the protection of athletes and procedures that are undertaken after reports of harassment or violence?
 - Yes
 - No
 - I don't know/ I have no information
 - In the process of drafting
- 3.1. If the answer is YES, what kind of mechanism is it? (you may select more than one answer):
 - Adopted protocol/code of conduct
 - Commission or working body
 - Internal records keeping or case monitoring system
 - Officially designated contact person in cases of harassment or violence
 - Other (specify): _____
- 3.2. If there is a designated person within the mechanism, please indicate their position in the federation and gender:
- 3.3. If you do not have a designated person, do you plan to appoint and train a person for safe sport within your federation within the next year?
 - Yes
 - No

4. Has your federation received or been informed of reports related to harassment or violence against female athletes in the last five years?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know/ I have no information

4.1. If YES, please indicate how many reports have been registered?

5. Has your federation organised or participated in training/awareness-raising activities on the safety of female athletes, gender equality or "safe sport" in the last five years?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know/ I have no information

6. What, in your opinion, does your federation lack to establish and implement effective policies and mechanisms for the protection of female athletes? (you may select more than one answer)

- Finances
- Human resources/designated safeguarding officer
- Knowledge and training on protection, gender equality and "safe sport"
- Support from state institutions (ministry, inspections, etc.)
- Support from CSOs
- Support from international organisations
- Interest and involvement by the management
- Other (specify): _____

Annex 3. Questionnaires for interviews with relevant stakeholders

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS

Female Athletes

The public rarely discusses harassment and violence in sports. From your experience, do this kind of phenomena exist in sports in our country and how are they usually recognised, i.e. in what form do they appear?

- What forms of harassment or violence are most common (physical, psychological, sexual, online, blackmail...)? Who is usually responsible for them?
- How does the sports community react when such cases emerge? Are they discussed openly or are they kept quiet?

Do you know if your club or federation has a person or mechanism for safeguarding and reporting cases of harassment or violence?

- Do you know who you should turn to if you had such a problem?
- Would you feel safe and supported if you reported it?
- Is there trust between female athletes and the people who are supposed to act on reports?
- Has the club or federation ever, in any way, shared any information with you on this topic?

Have you ever experienced or witnessed any form of harassment or violence in sports? (this could be during training, competition, travel, in online communication or in relationships with coaches, teammates, fans, referees, etc.).

- If this question is sensitive, you do not have to answer it. If you wish, you can briefly share something that you consider important in the context of the situation.

Follow-up questions (posed only if the interlocutor wants to share):

- Without going into details that you do not want to share, could you briefly describe the harassment or violence and who was it coming from?
- How did you react in that situation, did you seek help or support?
- Did that experience have an impact on your participation in sports (did you quit sports, change clubs, etc.)?
- Did you report the incident? If YES, what happened next? If NO, what prevented you?

How do you think such experiences affect female athletes and their careers? (Do girls give up or reduce their activity because of such experiences? How does it affect their self-confidence and motivation?)

What, in your opinion, should change to make sports in Macedonia a safer and fairer environment for women and girls? What specific measures could federations and/or clubs take?

- Do you know of any good practices from other sports or countries that could be applied here?

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS

Representatives of federations and clubs and coaches

The public rarely discusses harassment and violence in sports. From your experience, do this kind of phenomena exist in sports in our country and how are they usually recognised, i.e. in what form do they appear?

- What forms of harassment or violence are most common (physical, psychological, sexual, online, blackmail...)? Who is usually responsible for them?
- How does the sports community react when such cases emerge? Are they discussed openly or are they kept quiet?

Do you have information or knowledge about the extent to which sports federations and clubs in Macedonia have established policies or mechanisms for the protection of athletes (for example, "safe sport" rules) or procedures for reporting harassment and violence? If YES, do you know how these mechanisms are applied in practice? Do these mechanisms also cover gender-based violence or do they only refer to the protection of children? Are there designated persons to handle reports?

- Where do you see the biggest shortcomings (in the legislation, implementation, capacities)?

What, in your opinion, are the most common obstacles that prevent female athletes from reporting cases of harassment or violence (fear, mistrust, lack of mechanisms or something else)?

What, in your opinion, should change to make sports in Macedonia a safer and fairer environment for women and girls?

- In your opinion, which institutions should lead this change?
- Do you know of any good practices from other sports or countries that could be applied here?

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS

Representatives of CSOs, media and experts

The public rarely discusses harassment and violence in sports. From your experience, do these phenomena exist in our country and how are they usually recognised or portrayed?

- What forms of violence do you think most commonly occur in sports (physical, psychological, sexual, online harassment, blackmail, etc.)?
- Do you think that these phenomena are related to positions of power and gender roles in sports?

Do you have information or knowledge about the extent to which sports federations and clubs in Macedonia have established policies or mechanisms for the protection of athletes (for example, “safe sport” rules) or procedures for reporting harassment and violence? If YES, do you know how these mechanisms are applied in practice? Do these mechanisms also cover gender-based violence or do they only refer to the protection of children?

- Are there designated persons to handle reports?
- Where do you see the biggest shortcomings (in the legislation, implementation, capacities)?

What, in your opinion, are the most common obstacles that prevent female athletes from reporting cases of harassment or violence (fear, mistrust, lack of mechanisms or something else)?

- Are there safe and reliable ways and mechanisms for reporting?
- Who should be the first point of contact for female athletes facing such situations?
- What, in your experience, most discourages female athletes from reporting?

How do you see the role of the media and civil society organisations in raising the issue of harassment and violence in sport? Are they contributing to change, or are public pressure and visibility still missing?

What, in your opinion, should change to make sports in Macedonia a safer and fairer environment for women and girls?

- In your opinion, which institutions should lead this change?
- Could you suggest any specific measures or good practices from other sectors or countries?

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS

Institutions’ representatives

1. Are there policies or strategic documents within the institution that relate to the prevention and protection from gender-based violence in sport? If so, can you specify which document and in what year it was adopted? If not, is the drafting of such a document planned in the future?
2. Are there provisions in the existing sports legislation (Law on Sports, by-laws, rulebooks, etc.) that relate to a safe sports environment, protection from gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination? If there are, to what extent are they applicable in practice? If not, is there a need to supplement the existing legislation?
3. Does the institution have data on whether national federations have established a protocol, procedure or mechanism for dealing with reports of cases of gender-based violence or harassment in sport? If not, why has this type of information not been requested?
4. Does the institution have a designated person or body or cooperates with an external institution in terms of monitoring and documenting cases of gender-based violence in sport?
5. How does the institution cooperate with sports federations, clubs and other stakeholders on this topic (e.g. through education, recommendations, joint activities)?

6. Are there any public campaigns or initiatives supported by the institution to raise awareness about preventing and protecting against gender-based violence in sport?
7. What activities or measures does the institution plan in the coming period to improve the protection of male and female athletes from gender-based violence and harassment? Is the institution considering to introduce mandatory safe sport policies within national sports federations?
8. What support (financial, expert, institutional) does the institution plan to provide to national federations in this area?

Annex 4. Instructions for conducting interviews with female athletes who have survived violence

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH FEMALE ATHLETES WHO HAVE SURVIVED VIOLENCE

The interviews with female athletes will be based on the principles of ethics, confidentiality, voluntariness and respect for the dignity of all participants, with particular sensitivity towards those who have personal experience with some form of harassment or violence.

Informed consent and confidentiality

- Introduction to the objectives of the research, the content of the questionnaire and the basics of trauma-informed interviewing.
- Providing an appropriate environment, with no presence of third parties.
- We begin the conversation with a brief explanation of the purpose of the research and the way in which the data will be used.
- We confirm that participation is completely voluntary, that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers and that the interviewee can refuse to answer or stop the interview at any time.
- We explain that all information will be anonymous and used for research purposes only.
- We do not record or take notes without prior informing and consent from the interviewee.

Trauma-informed and gender-sensitive approach and protection from secondary victimisation

- We show empathy, patience and a non-judgmental attitude towards the interviewee.
- Using open and neutral language (e.g. “Do you want to share something about that?” instead of “What exactly happened?”).
- We never express doubt, condemnation or distrust in regard to her story.
- We do not comment with our personal views or opinions.
- We focus on the interviewee’s experience, perceptions and needs, not on the details of the case.
- We need to maintain emotional distance, but also respect the interviewee’s feelings.
- We avoid questions that may sound like accusations or re-examination (e.g. instead of “Why didn’t you report?” ask “Was there anything that prevented you from reporting?”).

- We do not insist on details that may cause discomfort or reliving of the trauma.
- If the interviewee becomes upset, we immediately stop talking on the topic, offer a break and remind her that she does not have to continue.

After the interview is over

- We thank her for her time and participation.
- We reiterate that what is said will remain confidential and anonymous.
- We offer contact information for support and reporting violence, regardless of whether the interviewee has shared a personal experience or not.

Ethical conduct after the completion of the fieldwork

- No information, names or identifiable details are shared outside the research team.
- General descriptions are used in the analysis (e.g. an athlete who is involved in an individual sport).
- If a situation emerges in which there is a real threat to the safety of the respondent, the project team is informed.



