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The fight for a level playing field – ending discrimination against women in the world of sport

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

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Summary

The world of sport has gradually opened up to women and girls and considerable progress has been made in terms of participation. However, it is not yet free from violence, sexism and gender-based discrimination. It remains an environment which is more favourable for men. Inequalities in pay and status can make it difficult for women to pursue a career in sport, as can the lack of arrangements to reconcile private and professional life.

The fight against violence against women and girls in sport must become a priority. Perpetrators of violence must be prosecuted, survivors supported and the prevention of violence given a high priority in the training of sports personnel. Sports federations should commit to actively promote gender equality and invest in the development of women's sport, both at professional and non-professional levels.

Sport has a universal dimension and can contribute to social cohesion and integration. Efforts should be intensified to achieve gender equality in sport, a genuine valorisation of women's sport and an end to the invisibilisation of women in this field.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 14987](#), Reference 4482 of 27 January 2020.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. Substantial progress has been made in the field of sport in recent years as regards gender equality and combating discrimination. Female athletes are beginning to gain greater prominence in the media, some women's sports competitions have sparked worldwide interest and equality in sport is becoming a major topic. The Parliamentary Assembly welcomes these developments and encourages further efforts in this direction.

2. The world of sport, however, is not yet free from violence, sexism and gender discrimination. It continues to be dominated by men. The #metoo movement, which has sent ripples through the sports world, has helped to bring human rights abuses of this kind to light. Sports federations have been called upon to act and implement measures to prevent and detect violence and support survivors. The Assembly reiterates its firm commitment to preventing and combating all forms of gender-based violence and to promoting the ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"). It supports "Start to talk", the Council of Europe's call for action to public authorities, the sports movement and other actors to take appropriate preventive and protective measures to put a stop to the abuse of and violence against children. It also reiterates the support given by its [Resolution 2420 \(2022\)](#) to FIFA's (International Federation of Association Football) plans to create an independent multi-sport centre or agency to promote safe sport, protect and support survivors, and tackle impunity.

3. Inequalities in pay, treatment, access and status between women and men are still common in both professional and non-professional sport. Women, in all their diversity, are poorly represented in decision-making bodies. Women have less access to sport because of gender inequalities in relation to resources, time and lack of infrastructure. Sexist comments and stereotyped images of female athletes, questioning their "femininity", regularly appear in the media and on social networks. The Assembly condemns the hate speech and sexism directed at female athletes, including LGBTI athletes.

4. Female athletes must be recognised in all their diversity so that appropriate measures to prevent and combat discrimination can be implemented. Taking into account the intersectional dimension paves the way for a targeted response and proper policies. The Assembly calls for efforts to promote access to sport for all women and notes that discrimination against LGBTI women has a negative impact on women in general. The Assembly condemns the use of sport as a means of controlling women's bodies.

5. Sport can be an important vehicle for changing attitudes and for fostering respect and diversity. It can contribute to social cohesion through its universality and raise collective awareness of continuing gender inequalities in our societies. It can also have benefits in terms of health and empowerment.

6. There is therefore a pressing need in the field of sport to prevent violence and discrimination, promote gender equality, invest in sport for all, encourage participation and put an end to the invisibility of women. Men have an important role to play in preventing and combating discrimination against women, in all their diversity, in sport.

7. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member and observer States, as well as on all States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status to the Assembly, to:

7.1. As regards combating violence against women and girls, in all their diversity, including in the field of sport,

7.1.1. take measures to prevent violence against women and girls, including LGBTI women, in sport at all levels including in schools and sport organisations;

7.1.2. provide support to survivors of violence, with an independent and specialised structure;

7.1.3. train sports personnel at all levels to prevent all forms of gender-based violence;

7.1.4. ensure that perpetrators of violence are prosecuted and put an end to impunity in this area;

7.1.5. launch awareness-raising campaigns on preventing and combating gender-based violence, including at major sporting events;

7.1.6. collect, analyse and publish data on violence against women and girls in sport;

7.1.7. ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention, if they have not yet done so;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 16 September 2022.

- 7.1.8. ensure the safety of all at sporting events;
- 7.2. implement the revised European Sports Charter of the Council of Europe, if they have not yet done so;
- 7.3. accede to the Council of Europe's Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport, if they have not yet done so;
- 7.4. As regards combating gender-based discrimination and gender stereotypes:
 - 7.4.1. implement Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism;
 - 7.4.2. implement Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 on combating hate speech;
 - 7.4.3. invest in education on gender equality, train teachers in these issues, including in the field of sport, and incorporate a gender perspective in sports education from an early age;
 - 7.4.4. prevent and combat sexism and gender stereotypes and all forms of gender-based discrimination, in particular by adopting legislation, codes of conducts and by organising awareness-raising campaigns, including at major sporting events;
 - 7.4.5. ensure the collection, analysis and publication of data on discrimination in sport at all levels, and contribute to international initiatives to collect and share data for the purposes of research, awareness raising and the development of public policies and sports practices;
 - 7.4.6. recognise the fact that women from diverse backgrounds, LGBTI women, women with disabilities, from a migration background or diverse religious affiliations are subjected to multiple discrimination;
 - 7.4.7. abolish discriminatory policies against LGBTI athletes and respect the human rights of female athletes in all their diversity;
 - 7.4.8. ensure full and equal access to the practice of sport to all women, and to this end, allow transgender and intersex athletes to train and compete in sports competitions consistent with their gender identity;
 - 7.4.9. prevent and combat harassment of LGBTI athletes and prevent and combat lesbophobia, biphobia, transphobia and interphobia in sport;
 - 7.4.10. combat the hypersexualisation of female athletes, including in the media;
 - 7.4.11. promote inclusive and non-discriminatory media coverage of sporting events;
- 7.5. As regards the development of sport for all women and girls:
 - 7.5.1. implement Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)2 on gender mainstreaming in sport;
 - 7.5.2. invest in the development of sport for all, at local and national level, and consider it as a means of integration and emancipation, work to ensure equal opportunities for women and girls in all their diversity to participate in sports activities;
 - 7.5.3. appoint ambassadors for gender equality in sport to carry out awareness-raising activities in the media and with young athletes;
 - 7.5.4. ensure that sports facilities incorporate a gender dimension in their design;
 - 7.5.5. support and encourage the broadcasting of women's sports competitions;
- 7.6. make the adoption and implementation of gender equality strategies, including a commitment to eliminating gender-based discrimination, violence and sexism and to ensuring equal pay, a condition for obtaining funding for federations and clubs;
- 7.7. call on federations and clubs to prohibit gender-discriminatory practices, in particular as regards dress codes, where they are not justified by the sport itself;
- 7.8. promote women's participation in programmes designed to train sports coaches and referees and support women's access to these positions;
- 7.9. adopt a gender-sensitive approach in the preparation of budgets to be allocated to sports federations and structures.

8. The Assembly calls on sports federations to:
 - 8.1. engage in the fight against gender-based violence and discrimination and take appropriate action against perpetrators;
 - 8.2. support the practice of sport by women and girls in all their diversity and promote athletes' work-life balance;
 - 8.3. ensure full and equal access to the practice of sport to all women, and to this end, allow transgender and intersex athletes to train and compete in sports competitions consistent with their gender identity;
 - 8.4. promote the participation of women, in all their diversity, in the governing bodies of sports federations, notably through the adoption of quotas aimed at achieving 40% representation.
9. The Assembly supports the continuation of the joint Council of Europe and European Union "All in: Towards gender balance in sport" project. It calls for its funding to be reinforced and its tools and recommendations implemented.
10. The Assembly expresses its backing for civil society organisations combating gender-based discrimination and violence against women in sport and calls for these organisations to be given support.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Edite Estrela, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. The world of sport can be a place of empowerment and achievement for all, in addition to its benefits for health. It can be a way to promote diversity and equality. By allowing broad participation, regardless of gender, social and economic status, sport, both professional and non-professional, can contribute to shifting gender norms, social cohesion and integration in society and therefore have a universal dimension which goes beyond the quest for performance.
2. Sport can be a source of inspiration for change, at a personal or societal level. In recent decades, the world of sport has gradually opened up to women and girls, including in sports previously supposed to be the preserve of men. Tremendous progress has been made. Yet female athletes are still not considered equal to male athletes. Inequalities in pay, access and status can make it difficult for women to pursue a career in sport. Women are still not recognised in all their diversity in sport.
3. Sports careers are time-limited for all athletes because of physical performance. The issue of work-life balance is an additional barrier to longer careers for sportswomen. Serena Williams, writing about her decision, after a brilliant career in tennis, to leave the sport to devote herself to her family, observed: “Believe me, I never wanted to have to choose between tennis and a family. I don’t think it’s fair. If I were a guy, I wouldn’t be writing this because I’d be out there playing and winning while my wife was doing the physical labor of expanding our family”.³
4. Female clubs are seen as being less important and offering less potential in terms of advertising and generating revenue, and so have more limited financial resources. As a result of this vicious circle, there are fewer opportunities for female athletes to progress and demonstrate their talent. Throughout Europe, women are under-represented in decision-making bodies, including in the world of sport. Measures have been taken to increase their participation and representation but gender balance is not yet a reality at this level.
5. The Council of Europe has been working for many years to combat discrimination in the field of sport. In 2015, the Committee of Ministers adopted its Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)2 on gender mainstreaming in sport.⁴ The European Sports Charter⁵ was revised at the end of 2021 and clearly affirms the principles of non-discrimination and gender equality. Equality in sport will be one of the topics discussed at the Ministerial Conference on Sport to be held in October 2022 in Antalya. A high level of political commitment is needed, in particular on occasions like this, in order to make change happen.
6. Gender-based stereotypes and discrimination are still common in the world of sport and have an impact on how athletes are perceived in the eyes of the public. Characteristics recognised as masculine, such as physical strength, are valued. Strong women athletes are seen as possessing “masculine” characteristics, because strength and masculinity are still closely connected in our societies. The media tend to reinforce these stereotypes and to categorise athletes. Gender inequality and gender-based stereotyping in sport are in fact merely a mirror of the gender inequalities and discrimination present in society as a whole. Discourse aimed at diminishing women is particularly common in the field of sport. Hate speech targeting female athletes is very prevalent, including online.
7. The world of sport is not immune to violence against women and girls. Here too, a “Me Too” movement has emerged, with survivors coming forward from a worryingly large number of sports associations and federations. The authority that trainers wield over young female athletes and their specific role in relation to the youngsters can create a conspiracy of silence around abuse.⁶ It is of crucial importance that sports federations respond to claims of abuse and provide support to victims, and that perpetrators of violence be prosecuted.

3. Serena Williams and Rob Haskell, “Serena Williams Says Farewell to Tennis On Her Own Terms – And In Her Own Words”, *Vogue*, 9 August 2022.

4. Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on gender mainstreaming in sport.

5. Recommendation CM/Rec(2021)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the Revised European Sports Charter.

6. Adrien Pécout, “Violences sexuelles: le ministère des sports mesure l’ampleur du séisme”, *Le Monde*, 1 July 2020.

8. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the progress achieved by women in the world of sport.⁷ It has served to weaken certain sports federations. The public health emergency has effectively pushed women's participation in sport down the list of priorities and some resources set aside for this have been reallocated to other activities.⁸ The pandemic has also revived gender stereotypes about the traditional roles of women and men in society.

2. Scope of the report and working methods

9. The motion for a resolution from which this report stems refers to Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on gender mainstreaming in sport, Assembly Recommendation 1701 (2005) "Discrimination against women and girls in sport"⁹ and Resolution 2131 (2016) "Sport for all: a bridge to equality, integration and social inclusion".

10. I have analysed the work carried out by the Council of Europe in its project "All in: Towards gender balance in sport",¹⁰ which involved a major data collection campaign focusing on the place of women in sport.

11. I looked for information on the composition of decision-making bodies in sport, the remuneration of women athletes, status, existing measures to help athletes achieve work-life balance, and action taken to prevent and combat gender-based stereotypes and discrimination in sport. I also studied gender mainstreaming strategies. These issues need to be seen through an intersectional lens and examined as to whether specific measures have been taken to address the difficulties women with a minority background, or women with disabilities, might encounter in the world of sport. I have attached particular importance to the issue of discrimination against LGBTI athletes, who are still too often stigmatised, criticised and sidelined.

12. There can be no gender equality if no action is taken to tackle gender-based violence. I therefore also looked at the "Me Too" movement as it has developed in the world of sport. Violence against women in sport has made news headlines and investigations have been launched in several sports federations. On 10 November 2020 the Parliamentary Network Women Free from Violence held a webinar on preventing and combating violence against women in the world of sport¹¹ which provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the matter with Sarah Abitbol, figure skater, Dagmar Schumacher, Director, Brussels Office, UN Women, Pierre-Emmanuel Luneau-Daurignac who made the ARTE documentary "Violences sexuelles dans le sport, l'enquête", Nadezda Knorre, Vice-President, WomenSport International, Béatrice Barbusse, lecturer, Université Paris-Est Créteil, Secretary General of the French Handball Federation, and Joyce Cook, former Chief Social Responsibility and Education Officer at FIFA (International Federation of Association Football). The world of sport is not immune to violence or discrimination and is known to be a male-dominated environment, as evidenced by the multiple levels of discrimination faced by female athletes.

13. I conducted virtual bilateral consultations as part of my preparatory work. In particular, I held an online meeting with Cianán Russell, ILGA-Europe; Francesca Sanders, TGEU (Transgender Europe); Ilaria Todde, EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community (EL*C); Hugh Torrence, European Gay & Lesbian Sport Federation (EGLSF); and Sarah Townsend, European Gay & Lesbian Sport Federation (EGLSF) on 7 June 2022. I also held an online meeting with FIFA representatives including Joyce Cook, now Senior Advisor to the President's Office (Safe Sport Entity); Annaliza Tsakona, Senior Public Affairs Manager; Hala Ousta, Senior Diversity and Accessibility Manager; and Gerd Dembowski, Diversity and Anti-Discrimination Officer on 7 June 2022. Lastly, I was also able to speak with Sophie Kwasny, Executive Secretary of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport, and Francine Hetherington Raveney, Deputy Executive Secretary, on 1 June 2022.

14. The committee held a hearing on 21 June 2022 with the participation of Nagin Ravand, who spoke about her experiences as a young woman of Afghan origin now working as a coach in Denmark, Sarah Townsend, co-president of the European Gay and Lesbian Sport Federation and member of the European Union's High Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport (2022), and Irena Guidikova, Head of the Children's Rights and Sport Values Department, Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe. I also had the opportunity to talk to Ms Ravand at a bilateral meeting.

7. Madeleine Pape, "Rapid rise of women's sport at risk of being halted by Covid-19 outbreak", *The Guardian*, 19 March 2020.

8. Adrien Pécout, "La crise va ajouter de la vulnérabilité là où il y en avait déjà dans le sport féminin", *Le Monde*, 12 May 2020; and Anthony Hernandez, "La crise du coronavirus met en lumière la fragilité du football féminin", *Le Monde*, 12 May 2020.

9. Doc. 10483, "Discrimination against women and girls in sport".

10. Council of Europe and European Union (2019), "Stepping up the pace towards gender equality in sport!", accessed 9 September 2022.

11. Video recording of the webinar: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJlj6DqXS-k, accessed 9 September 2022.

15. I wish to thank Konul Nurullayeva (Azerbaijan, EC/DA), committee member, for her written contribution on the situation in Azerbaijan and on the importance of combating discrimination and ensuring equal pay for female and male coaches. I also received written contributions from ILGA Europe, containing information prepared by ILGA, TGEU, EL*C, OII and EGLSF, and from FIFA and I would like to thank them for their hard work in this area and the information provided.

3. Preventing and combating violence against women in sport

16. Preventing and combating violence against women in sport is vital in the push for gender equality. A growing number of survivors are speaking out and sharing their experiences, thus helping to lift the taboo around violence. Some countries have also had “Me Too” movements in various sectors, including sport.

17. During our webinar, Sarah Abitbol, a French figure skater, explained how she felt for years after being sexually abused by her trainer when she was a teenager. She explained the power he had over her and why for a long time she had been unable to talk about it. She believed that publishing the testimonies of survivors of abuse could help girls at risk of, or experiencing, violence. She also stressed the feelings of shame and guilt she had endured, and the need to warn young women and girls about the risks.

18. Violence against women and girls in the world of sport can take many forms: instances of psychological, physical and sexual violence have been widely reported. During the webinar, Ms Béatrice Barbusse, Secretary General of the French Handball Federation, made the point that domination and sexism were institutionalised in sport. In her view, there was a triple domination in sport: male over female, adults over young people, and persons with authority over persons under authority. She explained that the climate of trust that developed with trainers provided fertile ground for abuse.

19. For this reason, it is crucial to provide training on preventing and combating violence against women to all actors in the field of sport. Prevention plans should be prepared by every sports federation. In addition, there should be more women in sports leadership and coaching. Efforts should be made to ensure the safety of all, women and men, at sporting events.

20. Joyce Cook, CBE, OBE, former Chief Social Responsibility and Education Officer at FIFA, outlined the organisation’s activities to prevent violence against women and said it intended to do more on this important topic. FIFA has created the Guardian’s Programme, a violence prevention training scheme in which almost 5000 people have enrolled. In order to provide a response at international level, FIFA has called for the creation of a new multi-sport international agency, working on preventing and combating violence against women in sport. Cases of abuse would be reported to this independent entity, which would offer victim/survivor centred support and provide protection for whistle-blowers. The new body is initially expected to focus on combating violence against children in sport. It will mobilise expertise and support to ensure safe reporting, trauma informed investigations, access to care support services, and effective remedy. It is still at the development stage and is anticipated to take the form of a foundation.

4. Discrimination against LGBTI women

21. LGBTI women suffer from invisible and multiple discrimination in the world of sport. Their families may not support them or may actively oppose them participating in sport. They may be rejected upon arrival in a team. Their performance is constantly questioned. The media peddle negative stereotypes about LGBTI athletes, who are apt to be the target of hate speech, harassment and violence. Successful female athletes also have to contend with media reports and speculation about their sexual orientation. All this implies negative stereotypes against LGBTI people.

22. In general, all women are subject to standards in the field of sport, whether as regards their body, behaviour or performance. There is what may be termed a hyper-sexualisation of female athletes. In the opinion of Ilaria Todde, when non-heterosexual women excel in sport, their success is considered unfeminine. According to her, “some sports are perceived as not being feminine, or for lesbians, and are criticised or denigrated.” It is not uncommon to hear politicians complaining about funds being allocated to “lesbian” clubs. Women’s sports, in all their diversity, are considered to be of less interest and value than others. Discrimination against women in all their diversity is deeply entrenched in the field of sport and more efforts must be made to remedy it.

23. Team membership can also be difficult for LGBTI athletes, who may be rejected or asked to deny their own identity. LGBTI athletes are considered by some to be a danger to their teammates. They are discriminated against because of their gender identity and sexual orientation, in an environment that is less friendly to

female athletes than to male ones. Speaking to ILGA Europe, an Icelandic female athlete said: “Being a woman meant being less than the men, which on the whole meant getting less experienced coaches, less money, less respect and interest from the community/club. Being a queer woman was at times shrouded in silence.”

24. I should emphasise that discrimination against LGBTI women has a negative impact on all women, and that combating discrimination against LGBTI people in general is the business of everyone.

25. According to the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, people perceived as outside the dominant gender framework, namely transgender or intersex people, continue to encounter deeply discriminatory treatment and restrictions in sport, in addition to harassment, physical and verbal violence, marginalisation and a lack of welcoming and safe spaces for participation.

26. The situation of transgender athletes also deserves attention. During our meeting, Francesca Sanders from the organisation Transgender Europe pointed out that 75% of transgender people had experienced discrimination in sport. A quarter had been physically abused. According to the Outsport survey report, presented by Sarah Townsend, 45% of trans people had stopped sports because they felt uncomfortable, and 53% of trans women felt excluded from particular sports as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There are many barriers to transgender women's participation in sports competitions. The Olympic Games have been open to transgender people since 2004 under strict conditions, including a requirement to have undergone surgery. Athletes were obliged to have reassignment surgery and at least two years of hormone therapy in order to be eligible to compete. In practice, however, no country had previously sent transgender athletes to participate in the Olympics. Since January 2016, there has been no need to undergo surgery or two years of hormone therapy. Male-to-female transgender athletes, however, must demonstrate that their testosterone levels have been below 10 nanomoles per litre for at least one year before the competition. If male-to-female transgender athletes do not meet these requirements, they can compete in a male category.

27. On 16 November 2021, the IOC published its Framework on fairness, inclusion and non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations, in order to “promote a safe and welcoming environment for everyone involved in elite-level competition, consistent with the principles enshrined in the Olympic Charter”.¹² This framework should be transformed into a regulation by the national committees. The Framework affirms that human rights must be respected and recognises “the interest of everyone (...) to participate in fair competitions where no participant has an unfair and disproportionate advantage over the rest.”

28. In the name of fairness, a woman with so-called “masculine” characteristics could be “too strong” to compete with female athletes, whereas a man with so-called “feminine” characteristics, if less successful than other male athletes, will not pose a problem or raise any issues relating to fairness because male athletes will be sure to win against that person. Male-to-female transgender athletes have been widely attacked in the media and their place in sport called into question.

29. Femininity tests are conducted regularly to prevent the risk of gender cheating. Such tests violate many internationally protected human rights, such as the right to privacy, dignity, health, non-discrimination and freedom from abuse, as well as labour rights. They should no longer be permitted.¹³

30. The intersectional dimension should not be overlooked. According to Ilaria Todde (EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community), LGBTI athletes of colour, of African descent for example, are particularly stigmatised. The captain of the Italian national volleyball team is a black, immigrant, lesbian woman. Her coming out has attracted spiteful comments, especially in the media.

31. The situation of intersex people is also a source of concern. According to Cianán Russell, there is a structural interphobia at play. Intersex people avoid doing sport for fear of inviting embarrassing questions about their bodies. They do not feel safe in the world of sport.

32. The road to ending discrimination against LGBTI athletes and ensuring equal access and participation for LGBTI people will be a long one. At our hearing Sarah Townsend condemned discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sex characteristics, origin and skin colour, as well as sexism in sport.

12. International Olympic Committee (2021), “[IOC releases Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations](#)”, 16 November 2021, accessed 9 September 2022.

13. Human Rights Watch (2020), “[End Abusive Sex Testing for Women Athletes](#)”, 4 December 2020, accessed 9 September 2022.

33. We have also seen anti-gender movements in Europe and the United States seizing on the subject of sport and calling for LGBTI athletes to be excluded and denied recognition. Their influence is growing and it is important that we respond to this. Sports associations should also support and include LGBTI athletes. Discrimination against transgender athletes should be addressed in a dedicated Assembly report.

5. Gender pay gap

34. There is a significant gender pay gap in most, if not all, sports. Professional athletes earn their income from a combination of salary, bonuses for participation in competitions, prize money and commercial sponsorship. There are differences in pay for each of these categories in almost every sport. In 2017, Sporting Intelligence compared the 12 best paid women's sports leagues with the 12 best paid men's sports leagues.¹⁴ The study found that, on average, men in elite team sports earned 101 times the amount that women in elite sports made.¹⁵

35. Female athletes are believed to attract less media attention and smaller audiences, so women's sports tournaments are seen as being less lucrative than male competitions. Male athletes also feature more in advertising campaigns and therefore earn more from these sources. Media attention and a wide fan base can lead to commercial sponsorship contracts.¹⁶

36. The Gender Equality Review Project of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recommended that National Olympic Committees and International Sports Federations "establish mechanisms to address inequalities between genders in prize money or other athlete payments."¹⁷ The 2015 final report of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on sport and human rights recommended that States ensure "fair and equal distribution of sport sponsorships by gender".¹⁸ Research from 2019 shows that a staggering 93% of the total market volume of direct corporate financial sports sponsoring was directed at the male sport industry, leaving only a 7% share for women's sports.¹⁹

5.1. Tennis: a gender equal sport?

37. I read with interest the Forbes annual ranking of the highest-paid athletes in the world. It featured no women in 2018, one woman in 2019 (Serena Williams) and two women in 2020 (Serena Williams and fellow tennis player Naomi Osaka).²⁰ Tennis would therefore seem to be one of the most gender equal sports, as men and women players in the four Grand Slam tournaments earn the same prize money, play in the same competition formats and on the same tennis courts.²¹ Women's tennis tournaments are broadcast on television and female tennis players are regularly invited to take part in advertising campaigns.

5.2. Major discrepancies in income in football

38. In recent years, several football teams have campaigned for equal pay.²² In 2017, Norway was the first country to grant equal pay to its men's and women's national football teams.²³ 14 other FIFA member national associations have followed suit: Iceland (2018), New Zealand (2018), Finland (2019), Australia (2019), Brazil (2020), Nepal (2020), Sierra Leone (2020), England (2020), Sweden (2020), Republic of Ireland (2021),

14. For the women's leagues, the surveyed sports and countries are Aussie rules (Australia), basketball (USA), cricket (Australia), football (Australia, England, France, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, USA), handball (Denmark) and netball (Australia). For the men's leagues, the surveyed sports and countries are American football (USA), baseball (Japan, USA), basketball (USA), cricket (India), football (China, England, France, Italy, Germany and Spain) and ice hockey (China, USA).

15. Ivana Katsarova, "Gender equality in sport: Getting closer every day", European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2019, p. 8.

16. Anya Alvarez, "I thought the main issue in women's sports was equal pay. I was wrong", *The Guardian*, 9 May 2019.

17. International Olympic Committee (2018), "IOC Gender Equality Review Project", Lausanne, recommendation 17.

18. Human Rights Council (2015), "Final report of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the possibilities of using sport and the Olympic ideal to promote human rights for all and to strengthen universal respect for them", A/HRC/30/50, United Nations, Geneva, para 90(d).

19. "Global corporate sports sponsoring market reaches over USD 30 bn with just a share of 7% at female sports", *Statista*, 7 November 2019, accessed 9 September 2022.

20. Brett Knight, "Naomi Osaka And Serena Williams Make A Fortune But Remain Outliers Among The Highest-Paid Athletes", *Forbes*, 18 March 2022.

21. Peter Bodo, "Follow the money: how the pay gap in Grand Slam tennis finally closed", ESPN, September 2018.

22. Ivana Katsarova, "Gender equality in sport: Getting closer every day", European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2019, p. 8.

23. Aimee Lewis, "Norway's footballers sign historic equal pay agreement", *CNN*, 14 December 2017.

Switzerland (2022), Spain (2022), the Netherlands (2022) and the United States (2022) Changes are also expected in Germany, where Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called for “equal bonuses for men and women in German squads competing in football tournaments”.²⁴ In 2019, Dutch football club AFC Ajax signed an agreement which guarantees women players the same minimum wage and benefits as men.

39. A 2020 report by FIFPRO (International Federation of Professional Footballers) showed that while the annual wages paid by women’s clubs are rising, there are still major discrepancies between men’s and women’s pay.²⁵ Female football players’ pay comes from various sources and is irregular. The lack of playing opportunities and the impact that can have on income forces many female professional players to sign for multiple teams.²⁶ They are also often forced to seek part-time work in order to supplement their income from football.

40. A 2019 survey of 3 000 female football players in 33 different countries showed that 89% of the respondents were considering leaving the game early. The reasons given included low pay, the absence of childcare, precarious working conditions and lack of contractual stability. Where players stated that they were paid to play, 42% said they did not get enough to cover their expenses.²⁷ Sports clubs should offer appropriate working conditions and benefits to female athletes, to make sure that they can continue playing and develop their capacities as professional athletes.

41. Both UEFA and FIFA have acknowledged that gender inequality is a major issue in the world of football.²⁸ In July 2019, the President of FIFA announced several initiatives to boost women’s professional football, including the creation of a FIFA Club World Cup for women and a FIFA Women’s World League, the expansion of the FIFA Women’s World Cup from 24 teams to 32 and a doubling of investment in women’s football over the next four-year cycle. The last women’s football world cup was a great success when it was broadcast on TV.²⁹ Football is becoming increasingly popular among girls in Europe, and has been one of the favourite team sports for girls in the United States for some time.

42. In 2016, FIFA’s statutes were amended to include provisions on gender equality and human rights. In its 2017 Human Rights Policy, FIFA reaffirms its commitment to non-discrimination and states that it places particular emphasis on identifying and addressing differential impacts based on gender and on promoting gender equality and preventing all forms of harassment, including sexual harassment.³⁰

43. With the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 was a very difficult year for sports clubs and federations, with fewer opportunities to organise matches and broadcast them. This had a knock-on effect on female players’ pay, with several women’s clubs seeing a drop in the funding they received, as they were considered less important than men’s clubs, or were not yet classified as “professional”. FIFA has taken specific measures to support women’s clubs in the wake of the pandemic.

44. At its first part-session in 2022, the Assembly adopted [Resolution 2420 \(2022\)](#) “Football governance: business and values”. It considered that “protecting underage players and promoting gender equality, as well as fighting discrimination on any grounds, should be priorities for all levels of the wider sports movement and of football organisations in particular. A greater proportion of available resources should be allocated to measures to achieve these goals”. It clearly states that “sport plays a pivotal role in promoting gender equality since its symbolic value and the messages it conveys are so powerful”.

6. Media reporting and participation of women in sports leadership

45. As regards journalism and media reporting, a 2011 study of 22 countries around the world showed that 90% of sport-related articles were written by men; that men traditionally covered the most popular sports; and that 85% of the sport-related print media coverage was dedicated to male athletes.³¹

24. “Foot: le chancelier allemand Olaf Scholz plaide pour l’égalité des primes entre hommes et femmes”, *Le Figaro*, 9 August 2022.

25. FIFPRO (2020) “Raising our game. Women’s football report”, pp. 55 and 63-64.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

27. Aristeia Koukiadaki and Geoff Pearson, “Women’s football may be growing in popularity but the game is still fighting for survival”, *The Conversation*, 5 July 2019.

28. UEFA (2019), “Time for Action: UEFA Women’s Football Strategy 2019–24”, Nyon; FIFA (2018), “Women’s Football Strategy”, Zurich.

29. Up to 1.12 billion viewers, according to data provided by FIFA.

30. FIFA (2017), “FIFA’s Human Rights Policy – May 2017 version”, Zurich, p. 6.

46. Further, the “All in: Towards gender balance in sport” data collection campaign run by the Council of Europe in 2019 on gender balance in sport in 18 European countries found that only 19% of the surveyed sports federations had guidelines for gender balance in communication content.³² An increase in media attention for female athletes might not only boost their income but also lead to an increase in the participation of women and girls in sport. The UN Human Rights Council has referred to the lack of women in decision-making positions as an obstacle to achieving gender equality in the world of sport.³³

47. The “All in: Towards gender balance in sport” data collection campaign produced an impressive amount of data. The accompanying report shows that women are still under-represented in the decision-making bodies of Olympic sports federations and National Olympic Committees.³⁴ Among the countries looked at, France has the highest number of female board members in its sport federations (37%),³⁵ and has achieved gender balance in the composition of boards in gymnastics and skating (52% and 51% respectively).³⁶ Further, the “All in: Towards gender balance in sport” study has shown that only 22% of elite-level coaches employed by federations are women.³⁷ Several sports federations have implemented measures aimed at increasing the number of women in decision-making functions (53%) as well as the number of female coaches (38%).³⁸ They have mostly done so by developing gender-friendly election and appointment procedures.³⁹ With regard to women's participation, the most egalitarian sports are swimming and athletics.

48. The “All in: Towards gender balance in European sport” report⁴⁰ also noted that those sports which are traditionally perceived as “female” and have the most female members, such as gymnastics and skating, also have the highest proportion of female coaches and women in leadership functions. Nevertheless, the position of president is almost always held by a man.⁴¹ According to EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality), 14% of persons in decision-making positions in sports federations in EU member States are women (the figure ranges from 3% in Poland to 43% in Sweden).⁴²

49. One billion US\$ has been invested by FIFA to develop and raise the profile of women's football. FIFA and UEFA run a women leadership programme. The FIFA President actively promotes competitions for women and equality in general. Women have secured seats in the organisation's governing bodies. The current FIFA Secretary General is a woman and a women's staff network has been established since 2014, offering several positive action measures to enhance opportunities for gender equality while considering intersectional equality topics. Three female referees and three women assistant referees have been selected to officiate at the forthcoming Men's World Cup in Qatar. Currently more than 20 FIFA Member Associations (Football Federations) have women in top management.

50. In 2016, the IOC set itself the target of 30% for women's representation in Olympic Movement governing bodies by 2020. The organisation's 2018 Gender Equality Review Project set out a number of recommendations to promote the appointment of women in leadership roles throughout the organisation. These actions included: introducing a “co-mentoring programme for women”,⁴³ transitioning “the composition of the IOC Executive Board and the composition of the Vice-President positions into an equal representation of women and men”; requiring National Olympic Committees and International Federations to “submit one

31. T. Horky and J.-U. Nieland, “International Sports Press Survey 2011, Results and Outlook”, *Play the Game*, Aarhus, 2013, as mentioned in Ivana Katsarova, *Gender equality in sport: getting closer every day*, European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2019, p. 9.

32. European Union and Council of Europe (2019) “All in! Towards gender balance in European sport. Analytical report of the data collection campaign”, figure 5, p. 20.

33. A/HRC/30/50, op. cit., United Nations, Geneva, para. 79.

34. European Union and Council of Europe (2019) “All in! Towards gender balance in European sport. Analytical report of the data collection campaign”, *Council of Europe*, table 2.

35. *Ibid.*, table 9.

36. *Ibid.*, table 15.

37. *Ibid.*, table 3.

38. *Ibid.*, table 5.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

40. The “All In” programme has ended and it is planned to continue it from 2023, subject to obtaining funding from the European Union.

41. European Union and Council of Europe (2019) “All in! Towards gender balance in European sport. Analytical report of the data collection campaign”, *Council of Europe*, p. 33.

42. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission) (2022), “Towards more gender equality in sport, Recommendations and Action Plan from the High Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport (2022)”, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. See also <https://eige.europa.eu/topics/sport>, accessed 9 September 2022.

43. International Olympic Committee (2018), “IOC Gender Equality Review Project”, Lausanne, recommendation 18, p. 22.

female candidate for every male candidate nominated to fill one of the (...) member positions up for election";⁴⁴ and reviewing the electoral processes.⁴⁵ Considerable progress has been made and female representation in the IOC's governing bodies now stands at more than 33%. The Tokyo Olympic Games were the most inclusive so far, and the upcoming Olympic Games are intended to be a global platform for promoting gender equality, diversity and inclusion. Women made up 48% of the athletes who participated in the Tokyo Olympics.⁴⁶

7. Promoting gender equality in sport

51. Preventing and combating violence against women, in all their diversity, in sport needs to become a priority. Support must be provided to survivors and those wishing to share their stories. It is imperative that sports staff be trained in these issues. Numerous acts of violence and abuse have been reported as part of the "Me Too" movement in the field of sport. Perpetrators must be prosecuted, there can be no impunity or silence. Firm decisions must be taken because violence should not be a concern for female athletes or for young women who take up sport, and their families.

52. Investing in gender equality education is a fundamental recommendation for bringing about a change in attitudes. This goes hand in hand with training for teachers in these issues and long-term investment. Training should also be given to sports coaches in order to prevent and combat sexism and gender stereotypes, which can be destructive, and to prevent violence of any kind.

53. Inspiring sportsmen and sportswomen can serve as role models for the younger generation. I therefore also support the idea of appointing ambassadors for gender equality in sport, who would carry out awareness-raising activities in the media and with young athletes. At our hearing, Irena Guidikova made the point that charismatic athletes can help to change attitudes and perceptions in our societies. Nagin Ravand, through her experience, inspires many young women and encourages them to do sport. She started playing football by chance and never stopped. She believes that everyone should feel comfortable engaging in different sports activities and that having more diversity in sports is extremely beneficial: "no team would win with 11 goalkeepers".

54. The fight against discrimination in sport must be a priority for federations, which should commit themselves to playing an active role in preventing it. Stereotypes, sexist remarks, attacks on sexual orientation, gender identity and physical appearance should no longer be tolerated. Sanctions should be imposed if necessary. Data should be collected on all aspects related to discrimination against women athletes and violence.

55. Large-scale sporting events can be key moments in the fight against discrimination and violence against women, particularly in the field of sport. Organisers of major sports tournaments should be encouraged to use these opportunities to launch awareness-raising campaigns aimed at combating violence, discrimination and stereotypes and send powerful messages about inclusion.

56. Making the adoption and implementation of gender equality strategies, including a commitment to preventing and combating violence against women and to ensuring equal pay, a condition of funding for federations and clubs could also be an effective measure.

57. Sport can be a means of celebrating women in all their diversity. Discriminatory practices, particularly with regard to dress codes, when they are not justified by the sport itself, should no longer be tolerated. The ban on veils in some federations can be a barrier to participation. Nagin Ravand spoke from personal experience; she can play soccer in Denmark wearing the veil and participate in the work of the Danish football association. Wearing the veil has been her choice and has not prevented her from becoming an accomplished athlete.

58. The requirement for female athletes to wear white clothing, which can be embarrassing during menstruation, could be reconsidered. This issue was discussed by some sports federations during the UEFA Women's Euro football tournament and raises the question of how to accommodate women's body characteristics in the choice of clothing.

44. *Ibid.*, recommendation 19, p. 23.

45. *Ibid.*, recommendation 20, p. 23.

46. International Olympic Committee (2021), "[Gender equality and inclusion report, 2021](#)", Lausanne.

59. According to Lydia Nsekera, Chair of the International Olympic Committee's Women in Sport Commission, said: "Women, in all their diversity, have so much to contribute to the world and to the relevance and lasting success of sport. More women and more diverse voices need to be involved in leadership and in the decisions regarding the allocation of resources and other key agenda items in sport. That is the future."⁴⁷ The appointment of women to the governing bodies of the federations is very important, therefore.

60. Work also needs to be done with the media to prevent the kind of gender stereotyping that too often still permeates sports commentaries. Combating discrimination against women in sport also means combating the hypersexualisation of female athletes.

61. There are still too few women coaches, and training and support programmes should be funded and implemented.

62. Achieving work-life balance can be particularly difficult for elite female athletes. Federations should make adjustments to support athletes.

63. Intersectionality should be taken into account in the development of gender equality policies in sport. Athletes from diverse backgrounds, athletes who are LGBTI, have disabilities or diverse religious affiliations often experience multiple discrimination. The Olympic Committee has made promoting inclusion, gender equality and diversity one of its priorities. This should go hand in hand with robust action, such as ensuring accessibility for all and systematising equality, including through gender mainstreaming policies and concrete initiatives to combat all forms of racism.

64. Lastly, I also believe that men have an important role to play in combating discrimination against women, in all their diversity, in sport. They can take action when they see violence, support victims, speak out against discrimination, promote diversity and support their colleagues. They can help make sport a safe haven for everyone. Nagin Ravand underlined the fact that men, too, could call for equality in sport, promote women's participation and lobby for equal pay.

8. Conclusions

65. The summer of 2022 was the summer of the UEFA European Women's Football Championship. Matches were broadcast on prime time television and there was intense media interest in the players. In Germany, the number of TV viewers for the competition doubled to over 17 million for the final when a record-breaking 87 192 fans gathered in Wembley Stadium.⁴⁸ The women's Tour de France was also a great success. These events make us optimistic about the future of women's sport. Greater recognition and investment are called for.

66. The Council of Europe has an important role to play in promoting access to sport for all, but also in combating all forms of discrimination in sport. The European Sports Charter was revised in 2021 and I am confident that its implementation in the member States will lead to greater equality in practice.

67. Sport engages, motivates and drives progress. It can be a factor in emancipation and in changing attitudes. It can also hold up a mirror to our societies. The treatment of female athletes reflects gender stereotypes that are deeply embedded in those societies. Women have to deal with comments about their private lives, what they wear and how they behave whereas media coverage of male athletes is much more focused on their performance. The same is true for women who engage in politics.

68. Co-operation between the sports world and political representatives is essential to ensure that sport acts as a true vehicle for change. In this respect, I would like to commend the role of the Assembly's Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media, which has been working with football's governing bodies for many years, and which has supported progress in this area.

69. The world of sport has gradually opened up to women, and I hope that the efforts undertaken will continue in the years to come and will lead to gender equality in sport, a genuine appreciation of the value of women's sport and an end to the invisibility of women in this area.

47. Ibid.

48. Julie Renson Miguel, "Le sport féminin pleine lucarne, enfin!", *Libération*, 2 August 2022.