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Levers and Barriers Within Sports Federations: Implementation of Child Safeguarding Programs



PROTECTING CHILDREN IN SPORT: DEVELOPING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SPORT ORGANIZATIONS



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Levers and Barriers Within Sports Federations: Implementation of Child Safeguarding Programs

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Abstract

This study examines the applicability of child protection programs in sports federations, along with the obstacles encountered and facilitating factors, from a multidimensional perspective. Despite the contributions of sports to child development, it is observed that the risks of sexual, physical, emotional abuse, and neglect within sports environments have reached significant levels. In this context, it is emphasized that child protection policies should not only be reactive but also preventive in nature. While guiding frameworks provided by organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the European Union enhance the ethical and institutional responsibilities of federations, notable variations and deficiencies are observed in their implementation. The research reveals that shortcomings in areas such as leadership, financial resources, training opportunities, and staff competence within federations limit the effectiveness of child protection policies. Furthermore, the frequent underreporting of abuse cases is associated with power imbalances and cultural barriers. In contrast, systematic training programs, robust reporting mechanisms, active participation of children in the process, and local-international collaborations are identified as factors that strengthen child protection capacity. In conclusion, the effective implementation of child protection policies in sports federations requires multilevel, participatory, and sustainable strategies. At the core of these strategies, the safety and voice of the child must be prioritized.



1. Introduction

Sport, encompassing physical activity and exercise-based practices, is widely recognized as a critical domain that significantly contributes to the physical, psychological, and social development of children (Mountjoy, Rhind, Tiivas & Leglise, 2015; Carson et al., 2018). Numerous studies have reported that regular participation in sports activities not only enhances children's physical health but also fosters the development of discipline, teamwork, self-confidence, and leadership skills (Mountjoy, Rhind, Tiivas & Leglise, 2015; Logan et al., 2019; Moeijes et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). For instance, it has been demonstrated that physical activity supports children's cognitive development and positively impacts academic achievement (Donnelly et al., 2016; de Greeff et al., 2018). However, sports environments do not exclusively yield positive outcomes for children; they also harbor risks such as abuse, bullying, psychological pressure, and emotional neglect (Vertommen et al., 2017; Kerr et al., 2021). Recent research has highlighted that child abuse is a pervasive issue within sports settings and that many sports organizations struggle to effectively implement child protection policies (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2023; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020; Hartill et al., 2023; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). In this context, studies addressing the inadequacy and applicability of policies developed to ensure children's safety in sports environments underscore the need for more comprehensive measures to mitigate these risks (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021). Furthermore, the long-term psychological effects of abuse experienced by child athletes have been shown to potentially lead to severe outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Leahy, Pretty & Tenenbaum, 2002; Hartill et al., 2023).

The prevalence of child abuse in sports settings underscores the significance of this issue (Vertommen et al., 2017; Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018). According to a study conducted by Vertommen et al. (2017) in Europe, 75% of young athletes have experienced psychological abuse, 45% physical abuse, and 14% sexual abuse (Vertommen et al., 2017). Such incidents are typically perpetrated by coaches, older athletes, or administrators and often go unreported by victims (Stafford et al., 2013; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2019). The hierarchical structure of sports, in particular, makes it difficult for children to report instances of abuse or exploitation to authorities, resulting in many cases remaining concealed (Tuakli-Wosornu, Kirby, Tivas & Rhind, 2023; Gervis et al., 2016). Consequently, the implementation of child protection policies in sports federations is of paramount importance. Indeed, international sports governing bodies have taken various measures to protect children and have provided federations with relevant guidelines (Mountjoy et al., 2022). The International Olympic Committee's (IOC) 2024 consensus report, titled **Interpersonal Violence and Safeguarding in Sport**, emphasizes the necessity for federations to make child protection programs mandatory to prevent abuse in sports environments. The report highlights that child protection policies should be not only reactive but also proactive in nature (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). Accordingly, federations must not only intervene in abuse cases but also develop mechanisms to prevent abuse from



occurring (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2019). However, it is evident that many federations fail to fully implement these guidelines (Nery et al., 2023).

Various factors hinder the implementation of child protection policies. One such factor is institutional resistance. Many sports federations exhibit reluctance to adopt such measures, perceiving the implementation of child protection policies as an additional cost and operational burden (Kavanagh et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is often insufficient awareness of child protection issues among coaches, administrators, and athletes within numerous federations. A lack of training is identified as one of the most significant barriers to the effective implementation of child protection policies (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

To prevent child abuse in sports environments, the establishment of robust reporting systems is essential. However, it is noted that in many federations, existing reporting mechanisms are neither sufficiently secure nor accessible (Melanie Lang & Mike Hartill, 2014, BOOK). Athletes often hesitate to report abuse incidents, typically due to fears of potential retaliation (Solstad & Strandbu, 2019). The 2024 Consensus Report published by the IOC underscores the necessity for sports federations to establish independent reporting mechanisms and highlights the importance of protecting whistleblowers' anonymity (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). Such mechanisms are critical to enabling children to safely report negative experiences, and the implementation of child protection policies in sports federations should be regarded as a fundamental element in ensuring the safety of child athletes (Melanie Lang & Mike Hartill, 2014, BOOK). Existing research demonstrates that child abuse is prevalent in sports settings and that the inadequacy of reporting mechanisms results in many cases remaining unreported (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018; Kerr et al., 2021). Nevertheless, supportive factors such as legal regulations, training programs, and independent oversight mechanisms can facilitate the successful implementation of child protection policies (Louis Moustakas & Karen Petry, 2023). This article aims to examine how child protection policies can be effectively implemented in sports federations, the challenges encountered in this process, and the strategies that can be developed to overcome these challenges.

2. Definition of Child Abuse

Relational maltreatment typically encompasses four types of mistreatment: physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect (Stirling, 2009). The child protection literature indicates that it is extremely challenging for children at various stages of emotional, physical, and cognitive development to recognize, discuss, and report experiences of interpersonal violence (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2023). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1999), child abuse is defined as all forms of physical or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, or exploitation directed toward individuals under the age of 18, occurring within a context of responsibility, trust, or power relationships, which harm a child's health, development, or dignity (B. Rulofs et al., 2019).



2.1 Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse encompasses all unwanted and harassing sexual behaviors (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). It represents a global social problem that can severely damage the lives and health of those affected (Johansson, 2022; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). In the context of sports, sexual abuse includes engaging in sexual relations with an athlete, inappropriate sexual contact (including genital penetration), inappropriate exposure, offering rewards for sexual favors, making sexually explicit comments, jokes, or gestures, sexual propositions, and showing an athlete pornographic images, videos, or other materials (Rhind et al., 2024; Stirling et al., 2011; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021; Willson, Kerr, Stirling, et al., 2022). Male coaches are frequently identified as perpetrators of sexual offenses against athletes (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018). The literature reveals that the issue of sexual abuse in sports has long been overshadowed by a lack of knowledge and silence. Research indicates that sports governing bodies rarely acknowledge cases of sexual abuse or address such issues adequately (Kerr et al., 2014).

J. Ohlert et al. (2018) conducted an extensive study in Germany involving 1,529 elite athletes over the age of 16 to assess the prevalence of sexual violence in sports. The findings revealed that 37.6% of athletes (48.1% of females and 24.3% of males) had experienced at least one form of sexual violence in organized sports. When categorized by the form of sexual violence, 15.9% experienced mild forms (e.g., verbal harassment), 10.1% moderate forms (e.g., exhibitionism), and 11.2% severe forms (e.g., physical contact). The average age of athletes at the time of their first sexual violence experience was 17, with 10% being under 14 years old and 57% between 14 and 17 years old. In terms of the settings and organizations where sexual violence occurred, sports clubs were the most common location (62%), followed by activities under governing bodies (22%; e.g., training camps, competitions), Olympic training centers (8%), and sports boarding schools (7%) (B. Rulofs et al., 2019).

Studies on sexual abuse in sports have generally brought the issue of child abuse onto the sports agenda and have contributed to a relatively robust body of literature. These studies indicate that perpetrators are predominantly male, while victims are mostly female athletes. Furthermore, research suggests that between 11% and 63% of athletes have experienced sexual abuse, depending on the types of behaviors classified as such (Çetin & Hacisoftaoglu, 2020; Fasting et al., 2003; J. Ohlert et al., 2018; T. Vertommen et al., 2016).

Some studies estimate that approximately 14% to 29% of athletes aged 18 and under have experienced sexual harassment and abuse (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021; Tine Vertommen et al., 2016). In the United States, a prominent example of widely publicized sexual abuse scandals is the case of Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics team doctor, who sexually abused over 500 female gymnasts. Nassar was sentenced to 40 to 175 years in prison (Evans & Benbow, 2021). Similarly, over the past two decades, it has been alleged that at least 368 young gymnasts in gymnastics programs across the country were sexually abused by adults, such as coaches, staff, or gym owners (Kim & Connaughton, 2024). Sexual harassment typically encompasses less severe forms of inappropriate behavior, manifesting through actions such as offensive sexual comments, lewd jokes, and requests for sexual favors. In contrast, sexual abuse involves more serious acts, including unwanted sexual activities, physical contact-based harassment, or rape. The literature highlights that harassment and abuse are often considered along a continuum, with sexual harassment frequently serving as a precursor to more severe acts of sexual abuse (Kim & Connaughton, 2024; Kim et al., 2023; Timon et al., 2022).



Studies examining the prevalence of sexual violence in sports vary due to the use of different definitions and methodologies. The term "sexual violence" is generally treated as an umbrella concept encompassing a broad spectrum of behaviors. This spectrum ranges from non-physical sexual harassment (e.g., sexually explicit comments and jokes) to boundary-violating behaviors and physical contact-based sexual assault. The common thread among these forms is that they are rooted in the misuse of sexuality and power, resulting in intimidating, humiliating, and often traumatic effects on victims (J. Ohlert et al., 2018; B. Rulofs et al., 2019). In a survey conducted by Volkwein et al. (1997), the experiences of 210 American female student-athletes who faced sexual abuse in sports were analyzed. The findings revealed that over 18% of participants reported experiencing derogatory remarks or sexist jokes from their coaches. Additionally, 2% indicated they had encountered negative experiences involving verbal or physical sexual advances from their coaches. These findings underscore the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse in sports settings while pointing to the role of power imbalances and individuals in authoritative positions in heightening the risk of abuse.

2.2 Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse perpetrated by coaches adversely affects athletes in numerous ways (A. E. Stirling & G. A. Kerr, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2013; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). Emotional abuse by coaches toward athletes typically involves repetitive behaviors such as yelling, humiliation, scapegoating, ignoring, belittling, rejection, isolation, threatening, criticism, using derogatory language and comments, withholding attention and support, expressing intense anger, and engaging in aggressive acts like throwing equipment at or near athletes (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Rhind et al., 2024; Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Physical and verbal actions often occur simultaneously (Kavanagh et al., 2017).

Research indicates that, compared to other competitive levels, elite athletes—particularly those competing internationally—experience the highest rates of interpersonal violence in sports (T. Vertommen et al., 2016). Athletes competing at elite levels are more exposed to the risks of sexual, physical, and emotional violence due to the heightened intensity of physical and psychological pressure. In this context, it has been reported that emotional abuse tends to increase significantly as the level of competition rises (Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).

Stirling and Kerr (2013) categorized their findings into three main groups in their study: perceived psychological effects, perceived training effects, and perceived performance effects of emotional abuse. The perceived negative psychological effects included low mood, diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as anger, poor body image, and anxiety. The perceived negative training effects encompassed changes in motivation, reduced enjoyment, impaired focus, and difficulties in acquiring new skills. The perceived negative performance effects included signs of decreased performance. Additionally, Stirling and Kerr (2013) reported certain perceived positive effects of emotional abuse associated with the three outcome categories mentioned earlier, such as a sense of achievement, increased motivation, and enhanced performance. They suggest that participants' association of emotional abuse with specific positive outcomes—such as a sense of achievement, heightened motivation, and performance improvement—may reflect a defense mechanism to justify their experiences or a form of retrospective rationalization. In this context, it appears that athletes may rationalize their experiences by concluding that "the coaching they received must have been correct and effective because they succeeded in their sport." However, this tendency of athletes to



legitimize past abuse in this manner points to a psychologically concerning situation. As noted by Tofler et al. (1998), such justification mechanisms may indicate that athletes emotionally distance themselves from negative experiences, objectify themselves in a manner akin to identifying with the aggressor, and develop an attitude that normalizes the abuse.

The study by Gervis et al. (2016) reached similar conclusions, highlighting that athletes view emotional abuse as a factor that enhances performance across all competitive levels when they succeed, yet perceive it as having detrimental effects on performance in cases of failure (Ashley E. Stirling & Gretchen A. Kerr, 2008). These performance effects may stem from the internalization of abuse or directly result from emotional abuse suppressing athletes' focus and abilities, thereby diminishing their performance.

2.3 Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is defined as intentional harm caused by an adult, resulting in injuries such as bruising, broken bones, burns, or cuts (Timpka et al., 2021). In sports, physical abuse encompasses a range of violent behaviors that can directly cause injuries to athletes. These behaviors include excessive training, as well as direct physical acts of violence such as pushing, shoving, shaking, kicking, slapping, or striking. Additionally, actions such as throwing equipment at or near an athlete, pulling hair or ears, grabbing, or punishing through excessive exercise constitute various forms of physical abuse (Rhind et al., 2024). Such behaviors may also involve extreme physical corrections as a punitive measure for poor play or rule violations, or the denial of fluids, food, and basic needs to the athlete. This form of abuse, which leaves profound physical and psychological scars on athletes, can lead to long-term consequences such as physical injuries, loss of trust, decreased performance, and psychological trauma, thereby underscoring the critical need to ensure healthy development and a safe environment in sports (Gattis & Moore, 2022; Timpka et al., 2021).

2.4 Neglect

Neglect is a significant form of abuse characterized by a lack of care and supervision for athletes, manifesting in various ways within sports contexts. Examples of neglectful care include failing to properly treat an injured athlete or forcing them to train without adequate nutrition or rest (Rhind et al., 2024). Additional factors exacerbating the negative effects of neglect include inadequate equipment use, lack of supervision during overnight trips or camps, improper treatment of injuries, and compelling injured athletes to participate in competitions. Furthermore, instances such as tolerating bullying by teammates or failing to provide basic needs like food and water are recognized as prevalent and serious examples of neglect in sports (Çetin & Hacısoftaoglu, 2020). These acts of neglect have the potential to cause lasting harm to athletes' physical and psychological health, underscoring the urgent need to prioritize safety within sports environments (Gattis & Moore, 2022; Willson, Kerr, Battaglia, et al., 2022).

3. Levers

3.1 From International and National Frameworks to Local Practices: The Dynamics of Child Protection Policies

The implementation of child protection policies in sports organizations is shaped by the framework established through legal and institutional regulations. At the international level, the



United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines the protection of children from all forms of abuse as a fundamental human right, explicitly encompassing sports environments. In this context, the responsibility to ensure the physical, psychological, and sexual safety of children in sports activities has increasingly been placed on sports federations, key actors in the execution of sports. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has assumed a pivotal role in this regard, issuing reports, documents, and declarations to promote the safety and well-being of athletes, while also calling on national Olympic committees to take action (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). However, the practical effectiveness of these regulations depends on multiple variables, including federations' organizational capacities, levels of national legal compliance, and the strength of oversight mechanisms. Consequently, how international frameworks are translated into national contexts emerges as a critical determinant of policy success.

The European Union (EU) advances these efforts by providing a framework that encourages the systematic development of child protection policies within sports organizations. Moustakas and Petry (2023) note that the EU's 2021 Strategy on the Rights of the Child mandates sports federations to adopt child protection policies and ensures their alignment with national legal systems. This strategy, centered on the societal functionality of sports, aims to minimize the risks children face in sports settings. Researchers argue that the EU's approach not only offers normative guidance to federations but also fosters a sense of ethical obligation (Moustakas & Petry, 2023). However, Bekker and Posbergh (2022) highlight that structural barriers—such as limited financial resources and inadequate human capacity, particularly in smaller federations—hinder the full implementation of these policies. Thus, it is evident that beyond legal frameworks, organizational infrastructure must be strengthened to support these policies effectively. This situation provides a critical perspective for understanding the interaction between international and regional regulations and local conditions.

The IOC contributes further depth to these discussions by developing a more specific and scientifically grounded approach to child protection policies. The IOC consensus report by Tuakli-Wosornu et al. (2024) advocates for federations to shift child protection policies from a reactive to a proactive framework. The report emphasizes the importance of preventive strategies, such as risk assessments, systematic training programs for personnel, and regular background screenings of individuals. Researchers also assert that the IOC's guidelines necessitate the restructuring of sports organizations' ethical codes from a child-centered perspective, with policy violations potentially leading to severe sanctions. Such preventive mechanisms are argued to elevate safety standards in sports environments, thereby supporting children's participation in sports. This approach establishes a scientific foundation for the notion that sports should not merely be a physical activity but also a safe space for children's development. By encouraging federations to address child protection processes more systematically and proactively, the IOC's approach holds significant potential for transformative impact in practice.

The internal ethical codes of sports organizations serve as an integral component of child protection processes, complementing this framework. Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere (2019) demonstrate that sports organizations have developed ethical codes containing behavioral standards for coaches and administrative staff to protect children. However, they note that the success of implementing these codes depends on the adequacy of federations' oversight mechanisms and the deterrent effect of national legal regulations. It is emphasized that for these codes to be effectively put into practice, federations must not only formulate policies but also



possess the capacity and resources to enforce them. Similarly, studies in the United Kingdom on safeguarding adult athletes highlight the significant role federations play in aligning their ethical frameworks with national laws and standards. Garrod and Rhind (2024) argue that weaknesses in federations' case management hinder the accurate and consistent identification of neglect and abuse incidents experienced by athletes. According to their study, for federations to fulfill their ethical obligations, they must establish a shared understanding of case definitions, ensure consistency in reporting processes, and be supported by clear national standards and resources. Given the environmental risks posed by power imbalances and the performance-driven culture in sports, it is evident that federations require robust top-down support mechanisms to assume these responsibilities effectively.

Strengthening oversight and monitoring processes is an indispensable element in ensuring that policies move beyond mere documentation to provide effective protection in practice. In their examination of the experiences of 32 organizations implementing the "International Safeguards for Children in Sport" policies, Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere (2019) highlight that weak oversight mechanisms can limit the impact of these policies and lead to systemic gaps if consistent implementation is not achieved. National practices in Europe further reveal the heterogeneous nature of child protection policies. Mountjoy et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of sports organizations collaborating with national governing bodies to develop and implement child protection policies, while noting that local effectiveness depends on the sufficiency of available resources, organizational capacity, and the strength of implementation processes. This suggests that policies established at the national level risk being impractical when not supported by the capabilities of local sports entities. Consequently, enhancing coordination with local authorities and resource providers emerges as a critical requirement for the sustainable success of these policies.

Finally, Lang and Hartill (2015) underscore the importance of project support and nationally developed strategic initiatives in implementing child protection policies within sports organizations. They note that sports federations in European Union countries have utilized various funding mechanisms to raise awareness of child protection, though these initiatives exhibit notable differences in implementation across member states. The depth and success of implementation vary from country to country, with some nations failing to achieve sufficient progress. This clearly demonstrates that child protection policies in sports are shaped not by a universal standard but by local conditions, organizational dynamics, and resource availability (Lang & Hartill, 2015). Thus, the effectiveness of these policies is tied not only to legal and ethical frameworks but also to the existence of practical mechanisms to bring these frameworks to life. In this context, achieving fully functional child protection policies in sports organizations necessitates a holistic approach at both international and local levels.

3.2 Training and Awareness Initiatives: Awareness Programs for Coaches, Administrators, and Athletes

The success of child protection policies is directly tied to the awareness and knowledge levels of stakeholders within the sports community. Training and awareness initiatives represent one of the most effective levers for enhancing federations' capacity to prevent child abuse. Awareness programs designed for coaches, administrators, and athletes aim to impart essential skills in recognizing, preventing, and reporting abuse (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2019).



Research indicates that abuse in sports environments often goes undetected or unreported due to a lack of awareness (Vertommen et al., 2017). Consequently, the regular implementation of training programs by federations is of critical importance. For instance, the Australian Sports Commission's *Play by the Rules* initiative provides online and in-person training for coaches and administrators on child protection, aiding them in identifying early warning signs of abuse (Kerr et al., 2021). Similarly, the IOC's Safeguarding Officer training program equips federations with the means to train child protection officers, enhancing their competence in addressing abuse cases (Mountjoy et al., 2022).

Educating athletes is also vital in this process, particularly to ensure that young athletes understand their rights and feel empowered to speak out against abuse. Solstad and Strandbu (2019) highlight that raising athletes' awareness reduces their reluctance to report abuse and bolsters federations' efforts to create a safe environment. However, the effectiveness of these training programs is constrained by their continuity and the cultural relevance of their content. Making such programs mandatory and updating them regularly is essential to ensure the sustainability of awareness initiatives (Melanie Lang & Mike Hartill, 2014).

4. Barriers

4.1 Key Obstacles Facing Child Protection Programs

The literature identifies several barriers to the effective implementation of child protection programs in sports. Scholars suggest that these challenges may stem, in part, from a lack of leadership among policymakers, limited financial and human resources within sports federations, and inadequate knowledge and skills in child protection among sports administrators (Malkin et al., 2000; Parent & Demers, 2011). These leadership and resource deficiencies create a structural barrier that hinders the effective execution of child protection policies and the development of a sustainable safeguarding culture.

Representatives of sports federations emphasize that one of the primary obstacles to implementing protective measures is the scarcity of resources, particularly at the club level. Sports clubs often face constraints in terms of human resources, funding, organizational structure, and training opportunities. Such resource deficiencies can be exacerbated by the inability to effectively coordinate sports policy across local, regional, and national levels (Johansson, 2022).

4.2 Training and Awareness

A significant lack of knowledge, training, and awareness poses a major barrier to the effective implementation of child protection initiatives in sports. While sports personnel at both junior and senior levels appear willing to ensure children's safety and improve protection policies, they often lack the necessary knowledge, confidence, and organizational support mechanisms to do so effectively (Malkin et al., 2000). This deficiency exacerbates power imbalances and cultural norms that allow abuse to go unquestioned or unreported (Kisakye et al., 2023; Rhind et al., 2017). The absence of structured training leaves athletes vulnerable to abuse risks, highlighting the need for long-term educational programs aimed at raising awareness and enhancing skills for effective safeguarding practices. Such sustainable approaches would strengthen the knowledge and capabilities of volunteers, increase federations' and sports



organizations' commitment to child protection policies, and ensure their practical application in the field (Gjaka et al., 2021; Nichols & Taylor, 2010).

Effective training and a robust scientific knowledge base are critical for the sustainability of child protection programs in sports. To foster a safeguarding culture and improve the ability to detect maltreatment, the organization of practical, goal-oriented training sessions is recommended. In this regard, annual workshops and specialized training for individuals with specific responsibilities could enhance the effectiveness of policy implementation (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). However, advocating for and ensuring the sustainability of child protection policies in sports requires a stronger scientific foundation. Current scientific evidence remains inadequate when compared to the wealth of data provided by sports science on topics such as doping, exercise physiology, and other psycho-physical dimensions of sports. This gap weakens the efforts of child protection advocates, as insufficient scientific support limits their ability to strengthen policies and drive meaningful change in sports, leaving these policies vulnerable to challenges from actors seeking to maintain the status quo (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014). While research on this topic remains relatively scarce, it is gradually increasing as academics in both sports and child studies recognize its importance (Brackenridge et al., 2005). The lack of data poses a significant obstacle to sports federations' ability to assess whether child protection policies are being effectively implemented. Sustainable progress in safeguarding measures can only be achieved through the collection and analysis of concrete evidence regarding their impact in practice (Kerr et al., 2014). Yet, most federations lack the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms needed, deepening the gap between policy and practice and jeopardizing the efficiency of strategies aimed at preventing abuse.

Training is a foundational element in creating safe sports environments. Preventing violence and effectively implementing child protection strategies depend on the awareness and knowledge fostered through evidence-based training programs (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). In this process, involving all stakeholders—from international sports administrators to coaches, athletes, families, health professionals, and local volunteers—in education is vital for ensuring children's safety and reducing risks (MacPherson et al., 2022; Marks et al., 2012; Stirling & Kerr, 2010; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Training is particularly crucial for enabling young athletes to recognize unsafe behaviors and understand how to report such situations (Mountjoy et al., 2020). Establishing a clear philosophy of safe sport to prevent maltreatment requires defining harm and emphasizing the roles of all stakeholders (Gurgis et al., 2022; MacPherson et al., 2022).

4.3 Examination of Sports Federation Websites

Sports federation websites can serve as a critical communication tool to raise awareness about abuse, provide educational content, and normalize discussions on this sensitive topic. These platforms can offer guidance, resources, and support mechanisms to prevent abuse and promote safe sports environments, functioning as an essential resource for children, youth, and adults alike (Eliasson, 2017; Johansson, 2022).

4.4 Child Participation

Effective safeguarding practices require enabling children to have their voices heard and actively participate in decision-making processes. Understanding children's needs and developing targeted strategies to address them are vital to the success of child protection



policies (Everley, 2020). However, federations face various barriers in adopting such participatory approaches. Primarily, sports federations often lack the structures and tools needed to systematically gather and incorporate children's perspectives into the process. This challenge is compounded by both a scarcity of resources and knowledge, as well as a limited number of personnel trained in effectively communicating with children.

Fostering a communication culture that normalizes children expressing their opinions and sharing their experiences can help address issues arising from the belief that they lack this right. This need is particularly evident in research examining historical sexual abuse cases in sports in England. Studies reveal that individuals who experienced abuse during childhood or adolescence reported that the lack of open communication prevented them from voicing their concerns without fear of retaliation (Everley, 2022). Adopting such a culture could enhance children's sense of safety in sharing their experiences and contribute to dismantling the social barriers that lead to silence.

One of the primary obstacles federations face in implementing child protection policies is the lack of safety education for athletes and spectators. Kisakye et al. (2023) highlight participants' concerns about the inadequacy of training programs, noting that this gap negatively impacts athletes' ability to cope with risks. A swimmer (female, 26 years old) stated, "There really isn't much training or information on how to handle that situation," underscoring the practical challenges posed by this lack of education. Similarly, a medical professional (male, 29 years old) observed that federations often do not prioritize child protection training, with seminars for athlete support staff frequently absent. This situation jeopardizes the sustainability and effectiveness of child protection practices, necessitating greater resource allocation and prioritization by federations (Kisakye et al., 2023).

Athletes often exhibit reluctance to report unsafe practices they witness or experience. This hesitancy stems from a lack of trust in sports organizations, concerns about confidentiality and fairness, power imbalances, fears of being silenced, apprehension about further harm, potential negative consequences, and perceptions that their statements may not be taken seriously.

4.5 Leadership, Competence, and Resource Deficiencies

Sexual abuse in sports organizations often remains a low-priority issue due to leadership deficiencies, inadequate training, and limited financial and human resources (Parent & Demers, 2011). Administrators report difficulties in implementing preventive measures due to time constraints, resource shortages, and a lack of knowledge on the subject. This leads to sexual abuse being perceived as a burden rather than a benefit, fostering organizational inertia. Additionally, administrators note a lack of necessary tools and specialized resources to address such issues effectively. The absence of training and leadership becomes particularly pronounced at the federation level due to limited resources, further contributing to passivity among local clubs (Kisakye et al., 2023; Malkin et al., 2000).

4.6 Policy and Implementation Resistance

While protecting children and preventing maltreatment are core objectives of all policies developed in this field, there is limited research on the effectiveness of preventive and intervention activities (Bettina Rulofs et al., 2019). Another challenge federations face is resistance to adopting and implementing child protection policies. As observed in the case of



sports governing bodies in England, some federations initially struggled to acknowledge the necessity of child protection measures for their specific sports. This resistance stems from denying that child abuse could occur within their domain, concerns about losing members due to negative publicity, and the perception that raising the issue of abuse could damage their institutional reputation (Brackenridge et al., 2005). Such resistance delays the implementation of child protection policies and stands as a significant barrier to federations embracing a safeguarding culture.

The reluctance of sports organizations to implement child protection activities has been corroborated by other studies (Boocock, 2002; Hartill & Lang, 2014). Individuals' willingness to act on a given issue typically depends on their awareness of its importance and their belief in their competence and confidence to take action. During the change process, individuals transition from a “not ready” stage to an “undecided” position, and finally to a “ready” state, influenced by varying concerns, alternatives, and emotions. In this context, assessing stakeholders' inclinations to adopt child protection policies and practices is a critical initial step in identifying sources of resistance and understanding how to minimize them (Brackenridge et al., 2005).

4.7 Stakeholder Engagement

A democratic approach that invites and listens to the voices of those within and around sports—such as parents, coaches, and community leaders—should be adopted (Mountjoy et al., 2015). One challenge federations face is the power imbalance between coaches and parents in sports environments. The rarely challenged authority of coaches complicates the implementation of child protection policies and increases the risk of abuse (Fasting et al., 2018; Kerr & Stirling, 2012; McMahon et al., 2018; Parent & Demers, 2011). Thus, adopting a democratic approach that incorporates the perspectives of parents, coaches, and other stakeholders could be a critical step in ensuring children's safety and preventing abuse (Everley, 2020). For this structure to succeed, not only coaches but also parents must be educated and empowered regarding child protection policies. To create a sports environment where children feel safe, federations should develop open communication channels and monitoring mechanisms that encourage the active participation of all stakeholders.

Stakeholder engagement requires more than minimal policy implementation; it necessitates fostering participation based on awareness, appreciation, and motivation among staff, volunteers, and member organizations to actively support a child protection culture. Beyond a mindset of avoiding penalties, federations must establish open communication and collaboration channels to ensure all stakeholders invest personally in this process (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). These approaches bridge practical recommendations (e.g., parent education, communication channels) with theoretical elements (e.g., awareness, motivation, safeguarding culture), contributing to children's development in a safe sports environment.

4.8 Financial Capacity

The financial capacity of volunteer sports clubs is tied to their revenue sources, expenditures, and the financial challenges they face. Research indicates that clubs often operate with limited financial resources, constraining their ability to sustain operations (Parent & Demers, 2011; P. Wicker et al., 2012). It is suggested that financial capacity may be linked to participation in child protection efforts, as clubs facing financial difficulties may struggle to invest in sexual



violence and abuse prevention programs. Consequently, clubs with stronger financial resources are assumed to have greater opportunities and motivation to implement child protection policies and engage in preventive programs. From this perspective, financial capacity is considered a key determinant in enhancing the scope and impact of child protection initiatives (Bettina Rulofs et al., 2019).

4.9 Planning and Prevention

Established planning and prevention strategies are critical for creating safe sports environments by identifying and minimizing risks proactively. These strategies include risk assessments, field protocols, support for vulnerable children, and context-specific case management processes. While practices vary depending on location, sport type, competition level, and organizational mission, all entities emphasize the need for rigorous screening of individuals interacting with children, including thorough application processes, police background checks, probationary periods, and reference checks (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022).

In the context of child protection, representatives of volunteer child protection centers often argue that achieving such complex goals requires paid staff. Thus, while a high proportion of volunteers in a child protection center may be negatively associated with participation in safeguarding efforts, the presence of paid staff could enhance such engagement (Bettina Rulofs et al., 2019).

An organization's gender composition is a significant component of its human resource capacity. Previous studies in the literature suggest that female representation at the board level in sports clubs can positively influence perceptions of organizational challenges (P. Wicker et al., 2012; Pamela Wicker et al., 2012). This points to a potential relationship between gender representation and diversity and sensitivity in decision-making processes. Given that women face a higher risk of sexual violence compared to men (Jeannine Ohlert et al., 2018), the question arises whether female leadership could increase awareness and sensitivity to sexual violence within structures like sports clubs and volunteer sports organizations. The interaction between gender representation and organizational sensitivity thus emerges as a critical area warranting further research (Bettina Rulofs et al., 2019). Conducting criminal background checks for sports leaders is a fundamental requirement set by the Sports Safeguarding Council across all federations and clubs. However, federations lack established procedures to monitor and verify whether these checks are conducted or the methods used, posing a challenge to effective oversight (Johansson, 2022; Parent & Demers, 2011). Implementing child protection policies effectively and ensuring a safe environment at all levels of sport remains a critical priority (Johansson, 2022). Sustainable strategies that balance power dynamics, raise awareness, and encourage active stakeholder participation are regarded as foundational steps in preventing abuse and safeguarding children in sports.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has comprehensively examined the levers and barriers to implementing child protection policies in sports federations, presenting a framework aimed at reducing the risks of abuse faced by children in sports environments. While sports significantly contribute to children's physical, psychological, and social development, they also harbor serious risks such



as abuse, bullying, and neglect. Research reveals that a substantial portion of young athletes experience psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, underscoring federations' responsibility to develop and implement effective protection policies. Guidelines from organizations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) emphasize the need for proactive and preventive mechanisms, yet implementation faces obstacles such as institutional resistance, resource shortages, and insufficient awareness.

The success of child protection policies hinges on levers such as training, leadership, and stakeholder engagement. Regular training programs for coaches, administrators, and athletes strengthen the recognition and reporting of abuse, while international and national legal frameworks enhance the institutional legitimacy of these policies. However, limited financial capacity, weak oversight mechanisms, and inadequate inclusion of children in decision-making processes restrict their effectiveness. Notably, the hierarchical structure and performance-driven culture of sports contribute to abuse remaining hidden and victims being silenced. In this context, sports federations must adopt a strategy that not only reacts to incidents but also proactively identifies and mitigates risks.

Ultimately, ensuring children's safety in sports environments transcends federations' ethical and legal obligations; it is integral to preserving the societal value of sports. Achieving this goal requires concrete steps to enhance policy implementation. Widespread training programs, the establishment of independent reporting mechanisms, and strengthened financial resources play a critical role in sustaining child protection processes. Furthermore, fostering a culture of participation that amplifies children's voices can drive long-term transformation in abuse prevention. By acting on these recommendations, sports federations have the potential to create a safe environment that safeguards the physical and psychological well-being of child athletes.

Recommendations:

1. **Mandating Training Programs:** Federations should make regular training programs focused on recognizing and preventing abuse mandatory for coaches, administrators, and athletes, ensuring they are tailored to cultural contexts.
2. **Establishing Independent Reporting Mechanisms:** In line with the IOC's 2024 Consensus Report, federations should create anonymous and secure reporting systems, ensuring whistleblower protection.
3. **Enhancing Financial and Human Resources:** Resources for implementing child protection policies should be bolstered through national and international funding, with targeted support for small-scale federations.
4. **Incorporating Children in Decision-Making:** Mechanisms should be developed to systematically gather child athletes' input and shape policies accordingly.
5. **Improving Oversight and Monitoring Systems:** Independent auditing units should be established to evaluate policy effectiveness, with implementation processes regularly monitored.



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