



Project CoViS

Report on athletes and coaches' perceptions and beliefs about incidences of sexual harassment and reporting sexual harassment



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Introduction

Sexual harassment in sport

Sexual violence in sport has increasingly been recognized as a major safeguarding, human rights, gender equality, and sport integrity issues. Although sport is commonly promoted as a context for positive youth development, social inclusion, health promotion, moral education, and community participation, the same organizational characteristics that make sport influential in young people's lives can also create conditions in which harassment, abuse, exploitation, and violence remain hidden. Hierarchical relationships, strong dependence on coaches and support personnel, intensive training environments, travel, shared accommodation, physical contact, and cultures of silence may expose athletes, especially children, adolescents, women, athletes with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups, to heightened risk (Brackenridge, 2001; Vertommen et al., 2016). For this reason, sexual violence in sport should not be treated as a series of isolated incidents, but as a systemic problem requiring prevention, education, reporting mechanisms, institutional accountability, and cultural change.

Sexual violence in sport is usually understood as part of the broader spectrum of gender-based violence. The European Commission's strategic work on gender equality in sport defines gender-based violence as violence directed against a person because of that person's gender, or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. Within this broader framework, sexual violence includes sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, exploitation, grooming, and other unwanted conduct of a sexual nature. The International Olympic Committee consensus statement provides a useful conceptual foundation by defining safe sport as an athletic environment that is respectful, equitable, and free from all forms of non-accidental violence (Mountjoy et al., 2016). In the same framework, sexual harassment is understood as any unwanted and unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal, or physical, while sexual abuse refers to conduct of a sexual nature where consent is coerced, manipulated, absent, or impossible to give (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

The distinction between sexual harassment and sexual abuse is important, but in practice these behaviors often exist on a continuum. Sexual harassment may include sexist comments, sexual jokes, unwanted attention, intrusive questions, suggestive messages, exposure to sexualized material, or inappropriate touching. Sexual abuse involves more severe forms of sexual coercion, contact, or exploitation, particularly where there is an imbalance of power (Brackenridge, 2001; Mountjoy et al., 2016). In sport, such imbalances are common. Coaches, medical personnel, officials, senior athletes, club administrators, and other members of the



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athlete entourage may hold considerable authority over selection, training opportunities, competition access, scholarships, career progression, and social belonging. This dependence may make it difficult for athletes to resist, disclose, or report harmful behavior, especially when the perpetrator is respected, successful, or institutionally protected (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Hartill, 2009).

The emergence of sexual violence in sport as a policy priority has been gradual. At European level, political attention increased during the 2010s, with safeguarding minors in sport becoming linked to sport integrity and the protection of young athletes. The Council of Europe's Lanzarote Convention remains a key legal instrument for protecting children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, extending protection to a broad range of offences including sexual abuse, grooming, exploitation through prostitution, exposure to sexual content, and child abuse material (Council of Europe, 2007). The Convention is particularly relevant for sport because many athletes begin participation at a young age and develop long-term relationships with adults in positions of trust. It also highlights that prevention is not only about punishing offenders, but also about educating children, training adults who work with them, and creating institutional systems capable of recognizing and responding to risks (Council of Europe, 2007).

Empirical research shows that sexual harassment and abuse occur across different sports, competitive levels, and national contexts. Early studies in sport demonstrated that sexual harassment is not confined to elite sport, although elite environments may intensify risk due to increased dependence on coaches, greater performance pressure, travel, and the normalization of authoritarian coaching cultures (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009). Reviews and consensus statements indicate wide variation in prevalence rates, partly because studies differ in definitions, samples, measurement tools, age groups, and whether they assess lifetime experiences, childhood experiences, or experiences within a specific sport period (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The CoViS proposal notes that reported sexual harassment prevalence rates in sport range from 19% to 92%, while sexual abuse prevalence rates range from 2% to 49%, illustrating both the seriousness of the problem and the methodological complexity of estimating prevalence.

Large-scale European studies have strengthened the evidence base. Vertommen et al. (2016), in a study of interpersonal violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium, showed that violence against children in sport is not exceptional and includes psychological, physical, and sexual forms. The CASES project further extended this work across several European countries and reported high levels of interpersonal violence against children inside and outside sport, including contact sexual violence (Hartill et al., 2021). Such findings are



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important because they challenge the assumption that sport is automatically protective for children. Instead, sport can be protective when appropriate safeguarding structures exist, but risky when power is concentrated, boundaries are unclear, reporting is unsafe, and institutions prioritize reputation over athlete welfare (Hartill et al., 2021; Vertommen et al., 2016).

A central issue in the literature is that sexual violence in sport is underreported. Athletes may remain silent because of shame, fear of not being believed, fear of retaliation, emotional dependence on the perpetrator, concern about losing their place in the team, loyalty to the club, or fear of damaging their sport career (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Hartill, 2009). Children and adolescents may not recognize certain behaviors as abusive, particularly when grooming has normalized boundary violations over time. Grooming is a process through which perpetrators build trust, isolate the victim, desensitize them to inappropriate behavior, and manipulate them into secrecy (Brackenridge, 2001). In sport, grooming may be disguised as special attention, extra coaching, emotional support, selection opportunities, or privileged treatment. This makes education about boundaries, consent, power, and reporting procedures essential not only for athletes, but also for parents, coaches, support personnel, and administrators (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Gender is a crucial dimension of sexual violence in sport, but the issue should not be reduced only to female victimization. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and male perpetrators are more commonly reported in the literature (Fasting et al., 2011; Fasting et al., 2014; Mountjoy et al., 2016). However, research on male athletes has challenged assumptions that boys and men are not vulnerable. Hartill (2009) highlighted the sexual abuse of boys in organized male sport and argued that masculine sport cultures may silence male victims by making disclosure particularly difficult. Male athletes may fear stigma, questions about masculinity or sexuality, ridicule, or exclusion (Hartill, 2009). Thus, prevention strategies must be gender-sensitive without being gender-exclusive. They must recognize the disproportionate risks faced by female athletes, while also ensuring that boys, men, LGBTQ+ athletes, and athletes with disabilities are included in safeguarding systems (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

The coach–athlete relationship has received particular attention because it combines trust, authority, dependency, and emotional closeness. Coaches often play a formative role in young athletes' lives, shaping not only performance but also identity, motivation, self-worth, and belonging. This relationship can be positive and developmentally supportive when built on respect, autonomy, care, and clear ethical boundaries. However, when boundaries are blurred and authority is unchecked, the coach–athlete relationship can become a context for manipulation and abuse (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009). Fasting and



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Brackenridge (2009) argued that coach education is central to prevention, because coaches need to understand how power operates, how boundary violations develop, and how to create safe training climates. Sand et al. (2011) further showed that authoritarian coaching behaviors may be associated with increased risk of sexual harassment, suggesting that prevention should address broader coaching cultures, not only explicit sexual misconduct.

Research with female athletes and sport students in Europe provides important evidence for the CoViS project. Fasting, Chroni, Hervik, and Knorre (2011) examined sexual harassment toward female sport participants in three European countries and found that a substantial proportion of women had experienced sexual harassment in sport. Fasting, Chroni, and Knorre (2014) also examined experiences of sexual harassment among European female sport science students in sport and education settings, highlighting that both sport and educational environments may expose young women to unwanted sexual behaviors. These studies are particularly relevant for CoViS because they provide comparative European evidence and demonstrate that sport-related sexual harassment is not limited to one national context (Fasting et al., 2011, 2014).

In Greece, research has documented high levels of sexual harassment in sport. Chroni and Fasting (2009) reported that 71.5% of women who were active in sport, either at international level, national level, or as exercisers, had experienced some form of sexually harassing behavior from a man. The CoViS proposal also notes that among sexually abused athletes, 41% of females and 29% of males reported that the abuse occurred within the sport environment. More recently, Chroni and Kavoura (2022) analyzed how cases of sexual violence in Greek sport became publicly visible following the disclosure by Olympic medalist Sofia Bekatorou, which contributed to the Greek #MeToo movement. Their analysis shows that disclosure can open public debate, but also reveals how long cultures of silence, institutional denial, and victim-blaming may persist before survivors are heard (Chroni & Kavoura, 2022).

The Balkan and South-East European context presents specific challenges. In Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, sport is culturally important and closely linked to national identity, yet sexual violence in sport remains under-researched and insufficiently regulated. The CoViS project identifies a major evidence gap in these countries, particularly in relation to comprehensive data on sexual harassment, abuse, exploitation, and sexual violence against young athletes. In Serbia, OSCE-based evidence indicates that sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of violence against women, but this evidence does not provide sport-specific prevalence estimates (Babović & Reljanović, 2020). In Bulgaria, national and international data show that women experience physical, sexual, and professional-context harassment, but again sport-specific evidence remains scarce. This lack of reliable, sport-specific evidence limits the capacity of policy makers and sport organizations to design targeted prevention strategies.



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The consequences of sexual violence for athletes can be severe and long-lasting. Survivors may experience anxiety, depression, shame, guilt, sleep problems, loss of trust, social withdrawal, reduced self-esteem, eating disturbances, impaired performance, and dropout from sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Vertommen et al., 2016). Some athletes may continue participation but experience sport as unsafe, coercive, or psychologically damaging. Others may disengage entirely, losing access to the social, developmental, and health benefits that sport can provide. Sexual violence also harms teams, clubs, and sport systems by undermining trust, inclusion, integrity, and the educational value of sport (Hartill et al., 2021; Mountjoy et al., 2016). Therefore, prevention should be framed not only as victim protection, but also as a necessary condition for ethical sport development.

Athletes with disabilities may face additional vulnerability. Dependency on coaches, assistants, carers, transport providers, or medical personnel may increase exposure to abuse and reduce opportunities to report safely. Communication barriers, social isolation, disbelief, and lack of accessible reporting mechanisms can further silence athletes with disabilities (Mountjoy et al., 2016). LGBTQ+ athletes may also face heightened vulnerability due to stigma, discrimination, threats of outing, or hostile team climates. Intersectionality is therefore essential in safeguarding policy: gender, age, disability, sexuality, migration status, socioeconomic background, and prior victimization may combine to increase risk and reduce access to support (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Vertommen et al., 2016).

The literature increasingly emphasizes that prevention must move beyond awareness-raising alone. Awareness is necessary, but insufficient if athletes do not know how to report, if adults do not know how to respond, or if institutions lack clear procedures. Effective prevention requires codes of conduct, safeguarding officers, mandatory training, independent reporting channels, athlete-centered complaint procedures, trauma-informed support, monitoring systems, and sanctions for misconduct (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Mountjoy et al., 2016). Sport organizations must also address informal cultures that enable abuse, such as normalized humiliation, excessive obedience, secrecy, sexualized joking, and the belief that athlete welfare is secondary to performance success (Brackenridge, 2001; Sand et al., 2011).

Digital tools can contribute to prevention and reporting, but only when embedded within trustworthy safeguarding systems. Online reporting platforms may reduce barriers by allowing confidential or anonymous disclosure, providing information about rights and procedures, and directing victims to support services. However, digital reporting cannot replace institutional responsibility. Athletes will only use such tools if they believe reports will be handled safely, confidentially, and fairly. Therefore, digital reporting systems should be accompanied by education, clear protocols, referral pathways, data protection procedures, and accountability



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mechanisms. The CoViS project's plan to combine online educational resources with a reporting platform responds directly to this need.

Training is another central component. Coaches, sport medicine professionals, administrators, parents, and athletes need differentiated education. Coaches and support personnel require training on professional boundaries, power relations, consent, grooming, bystander intervention, trauma-informed communication, and reporting duties (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Mountjoy et al., 2016). Athletes need age-appropriate education about bodily autonomy, acceptable and unacceptable behavior, peer harassment, digital harassment, and where to seek help. Parents need guidance on warning signs, communication with children, and how to respond to disclosures. Sport organizations need institutional training on safeguarding policy implementation, complaint management, and monitoring (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

The train-the-trainers model proposed in CoViS is consistent with the need for sustainable capacity-building. By training multipliers in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, the project can extend impact beyond the immediate consortium and embed knowledge in clubs, federations, schools, and community sport organizations. This is particularly important in contexts where formal safeguarding structures are underdeveloped. Multipliers can act as local advocates, educators, and connectors between athletes, families, clubs, and support services. However, such models require quality assurance, ongoing supervision, and updated materials to avoid superficial implementation. The CoViS methodology, which combines empirical research, co-created training material, awareness events, policy recommendations, and a reporting platform, is aligned with the literature's emphasis on multi-level safeguarding interventions.

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that sexual violence in sport is a persistent, underreported, and multidimensional problem. It is shaped by gender inequality, power imbalances, authoritarian sport cultures, weak safeguarding structures, and limited reporting mechanisms (Brackenridge, 2001; Hartill, 2009). Although European and international policy attention has increased, major gaps remain, particularly in Balkan countries where sport-specific data and systematic prevention protocols are limited. The CoViS project is therefore well positioned to address an important evidence and practice gap by collecting empirical data, developing educational resources, training multipliers, raising awareness, and creating a reporting platform. Its contribution lies in linking research, education, digital tools, and institutional engagement to promote safer, more inclusive, and more accountable sport environments for young athletes.



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The present report

Conducting a needs analysis in the participating countries is a necessary first step for the CoViS project because sexual violence in sport remains a serious but insufficiently documented problem in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. Although international and European literature shows that sexual harassment, abuse, exploitation, and sexual violence occur across sports, levels of competition, and athlete groups, the availability of reliable country-specific and sport-specific evidence remains limited. This is particularly important in the Balkan context, where the proposal identifies a lack of comprehensive data, limited prevention structures, insufficient awareness, and the absence of systematic reporting mechanisms. Therefore, a needs analysis will allow the project to move beyond general assumptions and develop interventions that are grounded in the realities, experiences, and institutional conditions of each participating country. The need for such analysis is reinforced by the wide variation in prevalence rates reported in the literature. Sexual harassment prevalence in sport has been reported to range from 19% to 92%, while sexual abuse prevalence ranges from 2% to 49%, largely due to differences in definitions, measurement tools, samples, and research designs (Mountjoy et al., 2016). This variation demonstrates that sexual violence cannot be understood adequately without contextualized data. In the participating countries, existing evidence suggests that the problem is present and potentially widespread, but the available information is fragmented. For example, Greek studies have reported high levels of sexual harassment among female sport participants, while data from Serbia and Bulgaria indicate broader societal concerns regarding sexual harassment and gender-based violence, without offering precise estimates for sport settings (Babović & Reljanović, 2020; Chroni & Fasting, 2009; Chroni & Kavoura, 2022). Thus, a needs analysis is essential to establish a clearer picture of the nature, frequency, forms, and perceived causes of sexual violence in sport in the specific national contexts addressed by CoViS.

A further reason for conducting a needs analysis is that sexual violence in sport is often underreported. Athletes may avoid disclosure due to fear of retaliation, shame, lack of trust in authorities, concern about losing their place in the team, emotional dependence on coaches or support personnel, or uncertainty about whether certain behaviors constitute harassment or abuse (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Hartill, 2009). These barriers may be intensified in small sport communities, where athletes, coaches, officials, and families are closely connected and where reporting may be perceived as threatening the reputation of the club, the coach, or the athlete. In the participating countries, the proposal highlights the problem of non-recognition and non-reporting of gender-based violence in sport as a central challenge. A needs analysis can therefore identify not only experiences of harassment and abuse, but also



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the psychological, cultural, organizational, and procedural barriers that prevent athletes from speaking up.

The needs analysis is also necessary because prevention strategies must be adapted to local sport cultures and institutional realities. Although European and international documents provide valuable definitions, principles, and safeguarding recommendations, their implementation depends on the specific structures, resources, and readiness of national sport systems. The proposal notes that in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, there is limited evidence of comprehensive policies, shared protocols, systematic monitoring procedures, or centralized bodies responsible for the prevention of sexual violence in sport. A needs analysis will help determine what types of policies, educational tools, reporting procedures, and institutional partnerships are currently available, what is missing, and what forms of support are most urgently needed by athletes, coaches, sport medicine professionals, clubs, federations, and policy organizations.

In addition, the needs analysis will ensure that the educational resources developed by CoViS are relevant, culturally sensitive, and practically useful. The literature shows that effective prevention requires more than generic awareness-raising. Athletes need to understand consent, boundaries, grooming, peer harassment, digital harassment, and reporting options. Coaches and athlete support personnel need training on power relations, professional boundaries, bystander responsibilities, trauma-informed responses, and safeguarding procedures (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Mountjoy et al., 2016). Parents and sport organizations also require guidance on warning signs, disclosure, referral pathways, and institutional accountability. By collecting data directly from athletes and coaches in the participating countries, the project can identify the specific knowledge gaps, misconceptions, fears, and practical needs that should be addressed in the online modules, videos, podcasts, case studies, and reporting platform.

The needs analysis is particularly important for ensuring that the voices of vulnerable and underrepresented groups are included. The proposal places emphasis on young athletes, female athletes, athletes with disabilities, and individuals who may have experienced exclusion, marginalization, or previous negative experiences in sport. The literature similarly indicates that vulnerability to sexual violence may be shaped by age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, dependency on adults, and unequal power relations (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Vertommen et al., 2016). A carefully designed needs analysis can capture the experiences and concerns of these groups and ensure that the project does not reproduce a one-size-fits-all model of safeguarding. Instead, it can support the development of inclusive, accessible, and athlete-centered resources.



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Finally, conducting a needs analysis will strengthen the evidence-based and policy-oriented character of the CoViS project. The findings will provide the empirical foundation for the development of training resources, awareness activities, policy recommendations, and reporting mechanisms. They will also allow the consortium to identify measurable priorities, define realistic indicators, and evaluate whether the project responds to actual needs rather than assumed ones. In this sense, the needs analysis is not merely a preliminary research activity; it is the methodological bridge between the problem identified in the literature and the practical interventions proposed by CoViS. By documenting the current situation in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, the project can contribute to European knowledge on sexual violence in sport while also producing locally relevant tools for prevention, reporting, and institutional change.

Quantitative study

Method

Participants

The study sample consisted of 184 athletes, all of whom provided valid data for the main demographic variables. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 63 years old ($M = 24.16$, $SD = 8.12$). Participants were predominantly female, with 124 female athletes (67.4%) and 60 male athletes (32.6%). Athletes reported substantial sport experience, with years of involvement in sport ranging from 1 to 50 years ($M = 13.09$, $SD = 7.11$), indicating that the sample included participants with both limited and extensive athletic backgrounds. Participants also represented a broad range of sport positions and disciplines, suggesting heterogeneity in sporting experience.

Competitive level was reported for all participants. Based on the participants responses, the largest proportion of participants belonged to the recreational level category ($n = 114$, 62.0%), followed by first league category ($n = 52$, 28.3%), the national team category ($n = 17$, 9.2%), and the second league or lower category ($n = 1$, 0.5%). These results suggest that the sample was primarily composed of athletes from the recreational category.

Measures

Demographic and sport-related information. Participants were asked to provide demographic and sport-related information. Specifically, they reported their sex, age, type of sport, years of involvement in their sport, and their position in the team or specific sport discipline. Sex was assessed with two response options: male and female. Age and years of



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sport involvement were reported using open-ended questions. Participants also indicated the sport they practiced and their playing position or sport discipline using open-ended responses. Finally, participants reported the highest competitive level they had achieved, choosing among four categories: second league or lower, first league, national team, and recreational level.

Experiences of sexual harassment. Experiences of sexual harassment were assessed using a self-report scale measuring the frequency with which participants had experienced different forms of sexually inappropriate, offensive, or coercive behaviours. The scale included items referring to verbal, non-verbal, visual, and physical forms of sexual harassment. Participants were asked to indicate how often they had experienced each behaviour. The items covered a broad range of experiences, including sexual harassment through insults or the spreading of rumours, sexualized behaviour such as labeling, gestures, humiliation, offensive comments, or other unwanted behaviour, and exposure to sexually explicit or inappropriate material, such as being shown pornographic material. Other items assessed more direct or invasive behaviours, including someone exposing intimate body parts, insults or mockery based on the participant's sex, sexual blackmail or coercion into sexual contact, and unwanted or inappropriate physical touching. Additional items referred to sexual remarks, aggressive phone calls, or unwanted photographs, as well as comments about the participant's body, clothing, marital status, or sexuality. An open-ended "other" option was also provided so that participants could report additional experiences not captured by the listed items. Responses were provided on a four-point frequency scale: 1 = never, 2 = once or twice, 3 = several times, and 4 = often. Higher scores indicated more frequent experiences of sexual harassment. Depending on the analytic strategy, responses may be examined at the item level or combined to create an overall indicator of exposure to sexual harassment, provided that internal consistency and dimensionality are supported.

Harassment myth acceptance. Harassment myth acceptance was assessed using an adapted to harassment version of the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale developed by McMahon and Farmer (2011). The scale measures the extent to which participants endorse stereotypical, inaccurate, or victim-blaming beliefs about rape and sexual assault. The updated version was designed to assess more subtle and contemporary rape myths and includes 22 items organized around four domains: "She/he asked for it," "She/he didn't mean to," "It wasn't really harassment," and "She/he lied." The items reflect common beliefs that may minimize sexual violence, excuse perpetrators, or shift responsibility onto victims. For example, the "She/he asked for it" dimension includes statements suggesting that a victim's behavior, clothing,



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alcohol use, or sexual history makes them partly responsible for what happened. The “She/he didn’t mean to” dimension includes beliefs that excuse the perpetrator’s behavior by attributing it to misunderstanding, loss of control, or miscommunication. The “It wasn’t really harassment” dimension captures beliefs that deny or minimize assault when there was no physical resistance, visible injury, or use of force. Finally, the “She/he lied” dimension assesses beliefs that women often exaggerate, misinterpret, or falsely report rape. Participants responded to each item on a Likert-type agreement scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Perceived ability to report harassment. Perceived ability to report harassment was assessed using the perceived behavioral control measure from Sundstrom et al. (2018), developed within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior. In this context, perceived behavioral control refers to participants’ beliefs about whether they feel capable of taking action when witnessing sexual harassment or sexual misconduct. The construct reflects both self-efficacy, that is, confidence in one’s ability to intervene, and controllability, that is, the extent to which reporting is perceived as feasible despite potential barriers. The scale captures participants’ confidence and perceived capacity to act as active bystanders. Items typically refer to whether respondents believe they are able to recognize problematic situations, intervene safely, support the person targeted, or take action to prevent sexual harassment or sexual assault. For example, item content includes statements such as “I am confident in my ability report sexual harassment”. Responses are provided on a Likert-type agreement scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree with higher scores indicating stronger perceived ability or control to report.

Intentions to report sexual harassment. Participants’ intentions to report incidents of sexual harassment or potential sexual assault were assessed using items adapted from Sundstrom et al. (2018). The scale measures the extent to which participants intend to take action by reporting inappropriate sexual behavior if they witness or experience such incidents in their team environment. The items reflect both personal intentions to report and positive beliefs about reporting as a preventive action. The scale included four items. Two items assessed participants’ personal reporting intentions, such as “I intend to report the next time I witness a potential sexual assault” and “I intend to report sexual harassment at some point while being in my team.” The remaining items assessed favorable evaluations of reporting and planning, including “Reporting is a good way to prevent a sexual assault from happening” and “Planning ways to report is good.” Participants responded to each item on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicated stronger intentions to report sexual harassment or potential sexual assault, as well as more positive beliefs about reporting as an appropriate and preventive response.



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Procedure

The quantitative study design and procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki for research with humans. Data was collected using an online self-report questionnaire. The survey was distributed electronically to participants through relevant sport clubs, teams, and/or sport-related networks. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. They were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers and were encouraged to respond honestly based on their personal views and experiences. Following this information participants were asked to provide their consent to take part in the completion of the survey. Participation was anonymous, and no directly identifying information, such as names or contact details, was collected. All responses were treated as confidential and were used only for research purposes. Data were stored securely and analyzed in aggregate form, so that individual participants could not be identified in any report or publication. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were also informed that they could skip any question they did not wish to answer.

Results

The preliminary quantitative analysis provides encouraging evidence that the project has successfully reached a diverse sample of participants across the participating countries and has generated useful baseline evidence on experiences, perceptions, and intended responses related to safeguarding and harassment in sport. The dataset included 184 respondents, with representation from Bulgaria ($n = 52$; 28.3%), Greece ($n = 68$; 37.0%), and Serbia ($n = 64$; 34.8%). The sample was predominantly female, with 124 female participants (67.4%) and 60 male participants (32.6%).

Experiences with harassment

The frequency analysis of items measuring experiences with harassment showed considerable variation to the extent to which participants reported having experienced or observed the situations assessed. For Insults and Spreading Rumors, approximately two-thirds of the sample reported that the situation had never occurred, while 32.6% reported that it had occurred at least once. More specifically, 6.0% reported that it occurred once, 16.8% a few times, and 9.8% often. This suggests that although the majority of participants did not report this experience, a meaningful minority had encountered it repeatedly.



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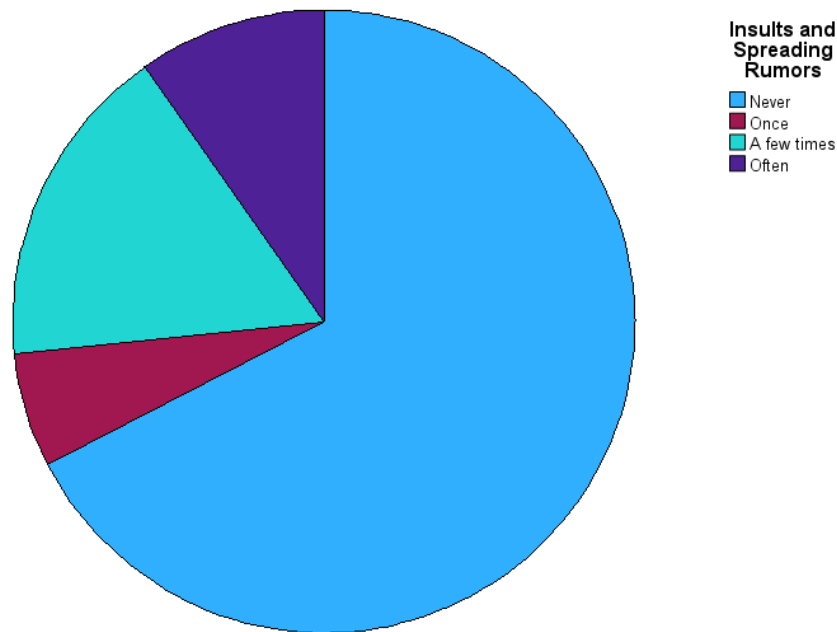


Figure 1. Frequency of insults and spreading rumors

Sexualized Behavior including labelling, gestures, humiliating, offensive and unwanted behavior, was one of the most frequently reported items. Half of the respondents indicated that the situation had never occurred, while the other half reported that it had occurred at least once. Notably, 24.5% reported that it occurred a few times and 13.0% reported that it occurred often. This finding suggests that B2 reflects a relatively common experience in the sample and may represent an important priority area for project activities.



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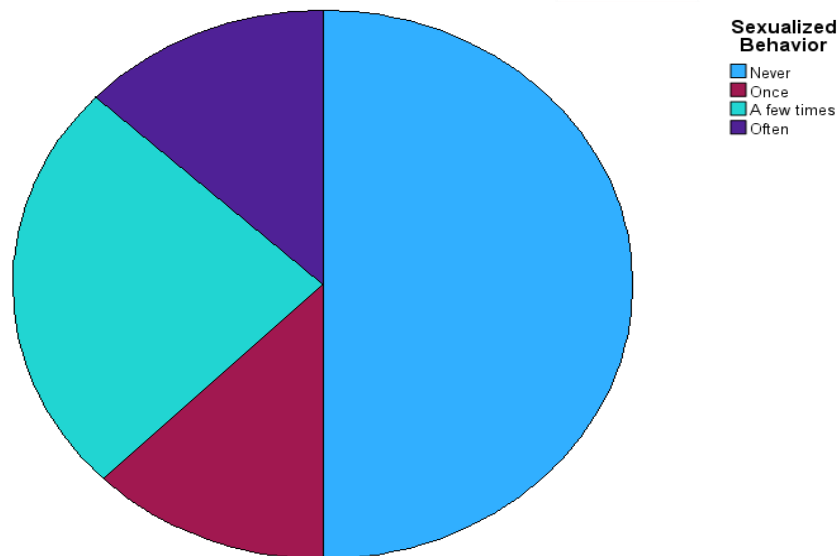


Figure 2. Frequency of sexualized behavior

For Showing Pornographic Material, the majority of participants, 89.7%, reported that the situation had never occurred. Only 10.3% reported any occurrence, with 2.2% reporting it once, 6.5% a few times, and 1.6% often. This indicates that B3 was among the least frequently reported situations, although its presence among a smaller group of participants still highlights the need for targeted awareness and prevention measures.

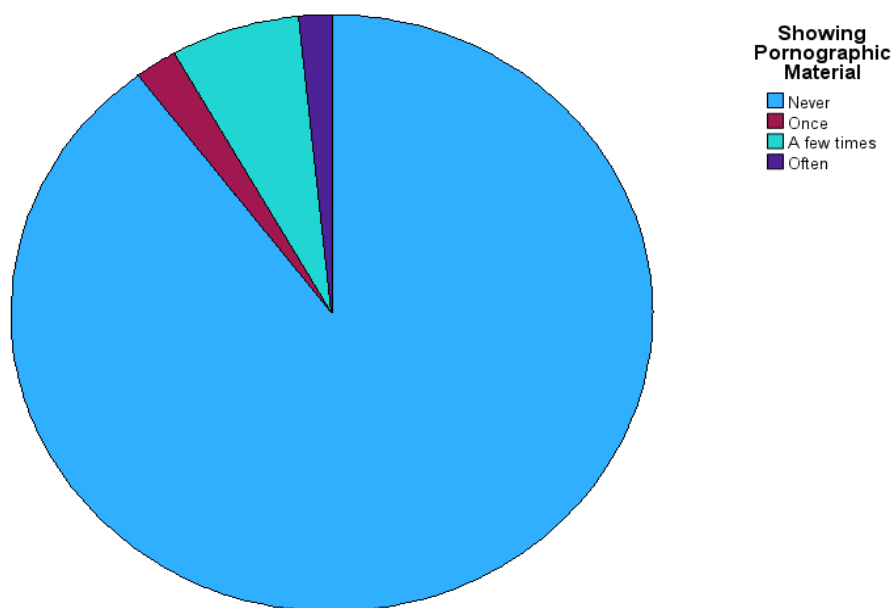


Figure 3. Frequency of showing pornographic material



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A similar pattern was observed for Exposing Intimate Body Parts, where 84.2% of participants reported that the situation had never occurred. However, 15.8% reported at least one occurrence, including 4.9% once, 7.6% a few times, and 3.3% often. Although less frequent than other harassment behaviors, this item still points to a non-negligible level of exposure within the sample.

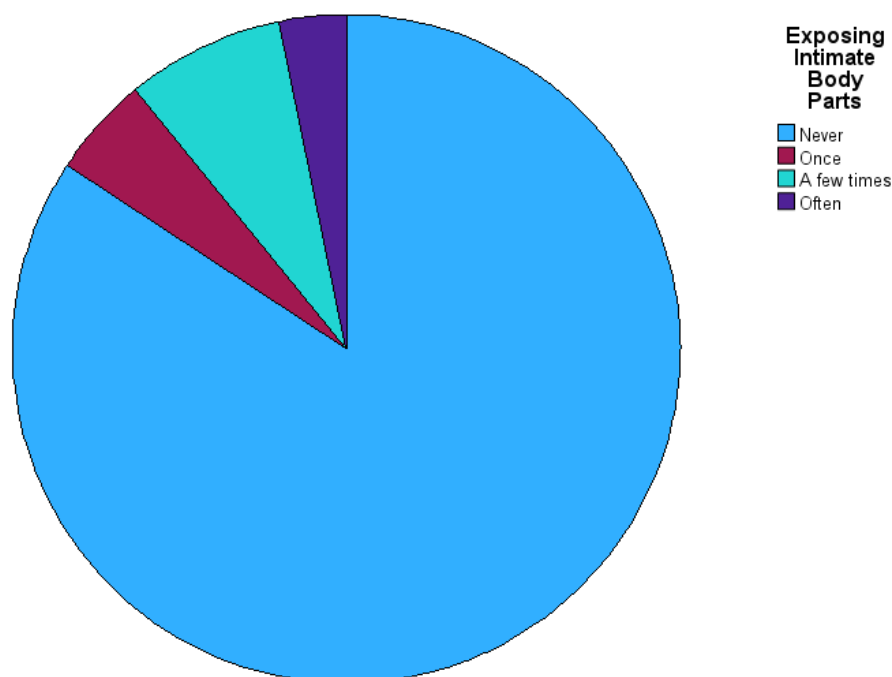


Figure 4. Frequency of exposing intimate body parts

Insults or Mockery based on Sex was also relatively common. While 56.0% of participants reported that the situation had never occurred, 44.0% indicated that it had occurred at least once. In particular, 13.0% reported that it occurred once, 21.7% a few times, and 9.2% often. This suggests that this harassment behavior represents another important area for intervention, especially because nearly one in three participants reported repeated exposure.



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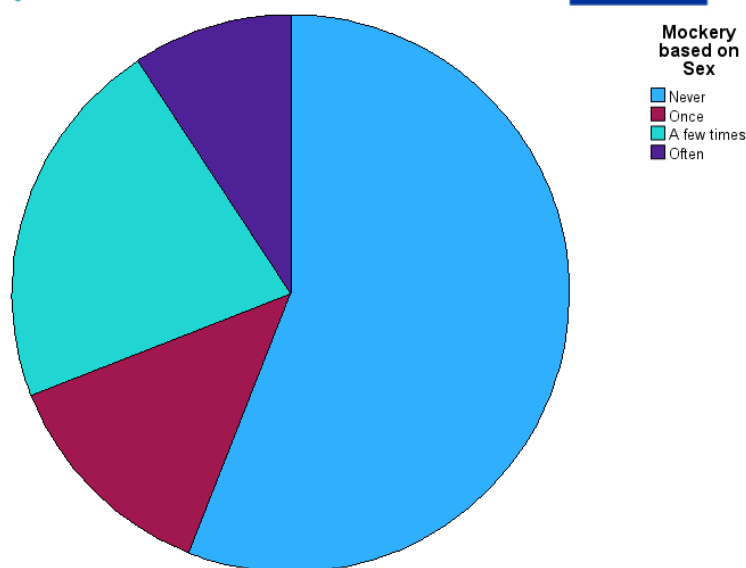


Figure 5. Frequency of mockery based on sex

For Sexual Blackmail and Coercion into Sexual Contact, most respondents, 88.0%, indicated that the situation had never occurred. A smaller proportion, 12.0%, reported that it had occurred at least once, with 3.3% reporting once, 6.5% a few times, and 2.2% often. Thus, this harassment behavior appears to be relatively uncommon in the present sample, but it remains relevant for prevention because some participants reported repeated experiences.

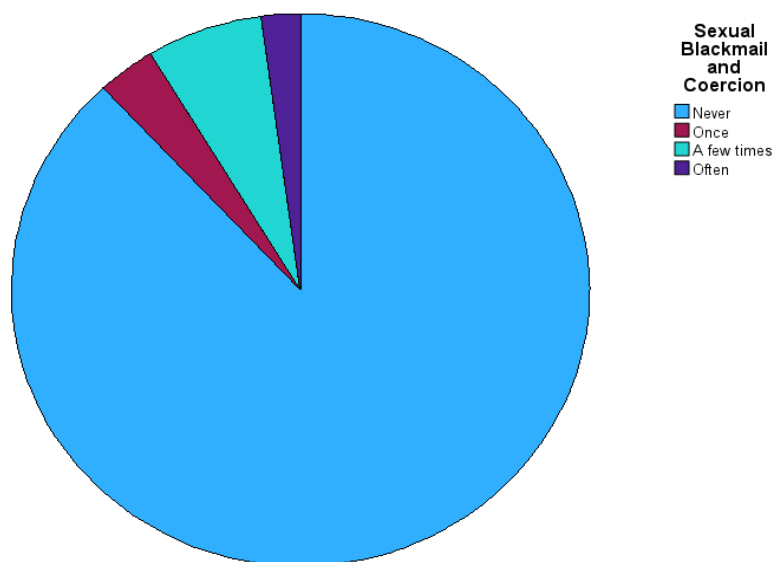


Figure 6. Frequency of sexual blackmail and coercion

For Unwanted and Inappropriate Physical Touching, 77.7% of participants reported that the situation had never occurred, whereas 22.3% reported at least one occurrence. Specifically,



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10.3% reported that it occurred once, 9.8% a few times, and 2.2% often. This indicates a moderate level of occurrence compared with the other items, suggesting that this harassment behavior should be addressed within the broader safeguarding education framework.

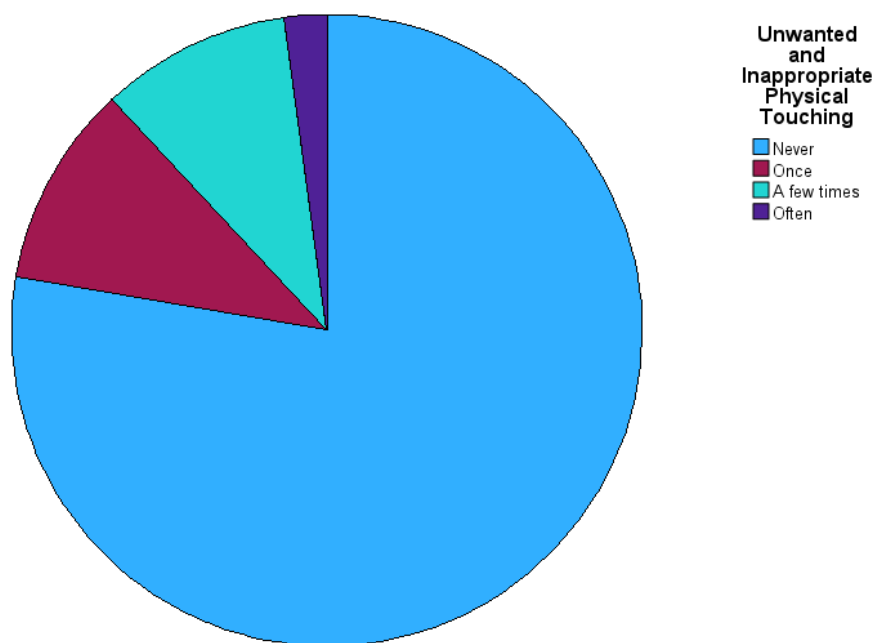


Figure 7. Frequency of unwanted and inappropriate physical touching

For Sexual Remarks, Aggressive Phone Calls or Photographs, 85.3% of participants reported that the situation had never occurred. However, 14.7% reported at least one occurrence, including 4.9% once, 8.7% a few times, and 1.1% often. This places this harassment behavior among the less frequently reported items, although a small but important group of participants reported repeated exposure.



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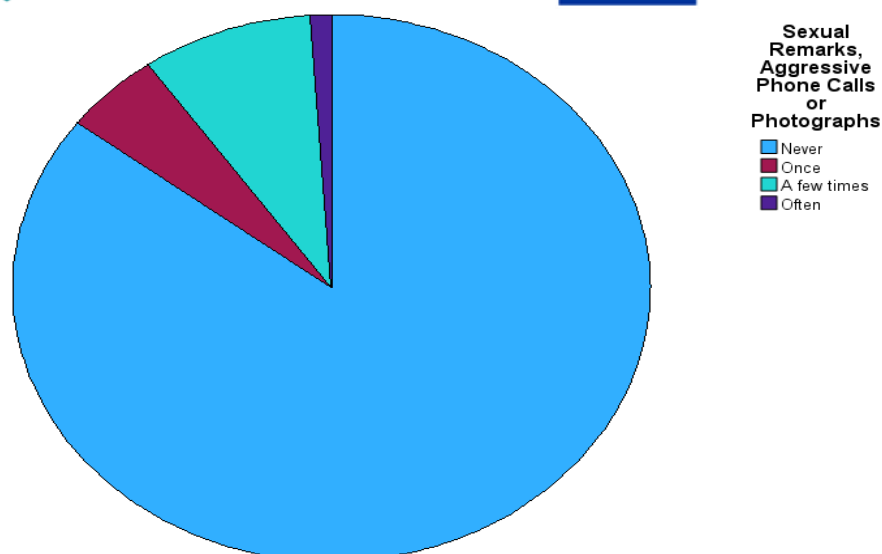


Figure 8. Frequency of sexual remarks, aggressing phone calls or photographs

Finally, Comments about Body, Clothing, marital Status or Sexuality was among the most frequently reported items, with 48.9% of participants indicating that the situation had occurred at least once. Specifically, 11.4% reported one occurrence, 25.0% reported that it occurred a few times, and 12.5% reported that it occurred often. This pattern suggests that this harassment behavior is a particularly relevant issue in the sample and should be considered a key priority in subsequent project activities, training materials, and prevention strategies.

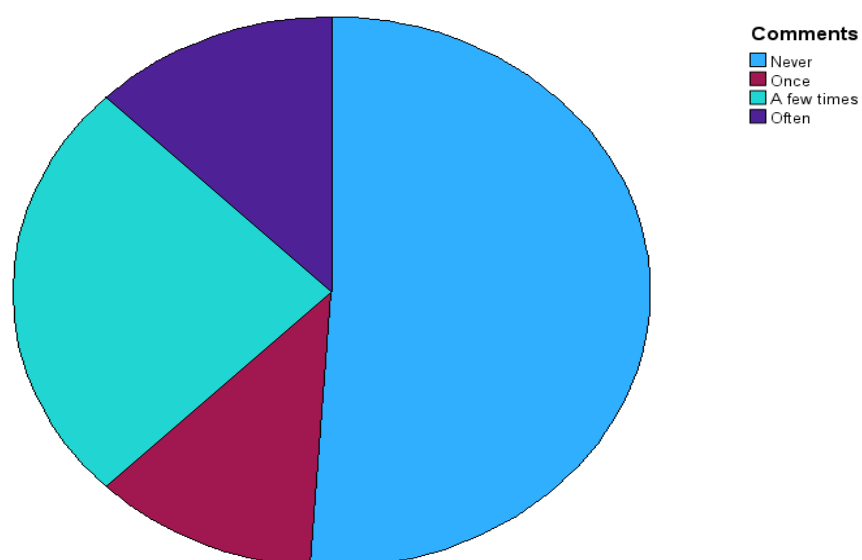


Figure 9. Frequency of harassment comments



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Overall, the highest levels of reported occurrence were found for Sexualized Behavior, Comments about Body, Clothing, marital Status or Sexuality and Insults or Mockery based on Sex, followed by Insults and Spreading Rumors. These items appear to reflect the most prevalent concerns in the sample. In contrast, B3, B6, B8, and B4 were less frequently reported, although they were not absent. The findings therefore support the need for a broad prevention approach that addresses both common and less frequent forms of problematic experiences in sport settings.

With respect to the actors involved in the harassment, valid responses were provided by 144 participants, while 40 participants had missing responses. Among those who responded, the most frequently selected category was “Other”, reported by 52 participants, corresponding to 36.1% of valid responses. This was followed by teammates, reported by 44 participants or 30.6% of valid responses. Coaches were identified by 30 participants, representing 20.8% of valid responses, while other staff members were reported by 18 participants, corresponding to 12.5% of valid responses. These findings suggest that the situations captured by this follow-up item were not attributed to a single actor group. Instead, they appear to involve a broader range of individuals within the sport environment, including peers, coaches, staff, and other persons. This supports the need for safeguarding actions that address the wider sport context rather than focusing exclusively on one group.

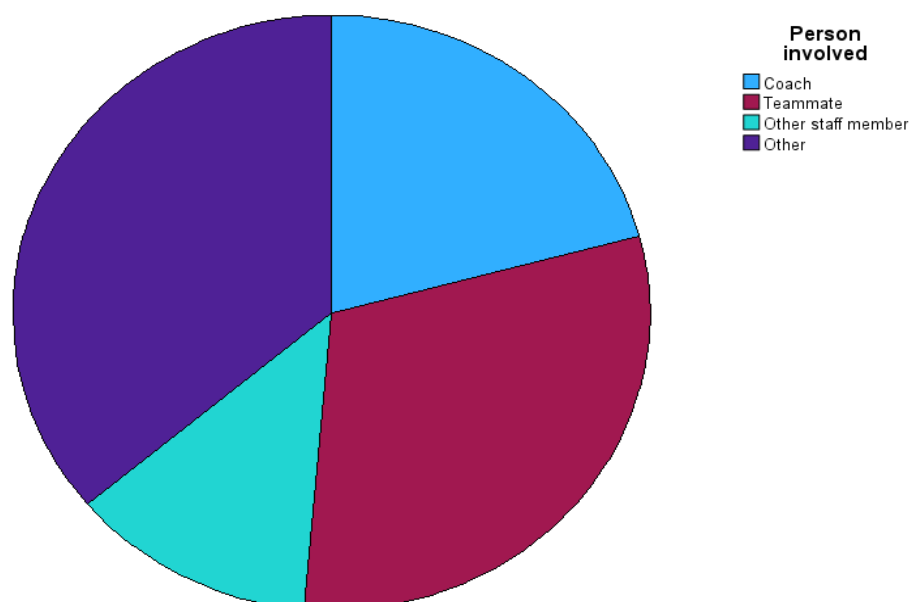


Figure 10. Frequency of persons involved in harassment



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With respect to reporting the incident to someone, valid responses were available for 150 participants, while 34 responses were missing. The results showed an equal distribution between the two response options. Specifically, 75 participants answered “No” and 75 participants answered “Yes”, with each category representing 50.0% of valid responses. This balanced distribution indicates that participants were evenly divided on this issue. From a project perspective, this finding suggests that the topic addressed by B2a may reflect an area where experiences, awareness, or perceptions differ substantially among participants. Therefore, future training and awareness-raising activities should consider this variability and provide clear guidance to support a shared understanding across participants and sport settings.

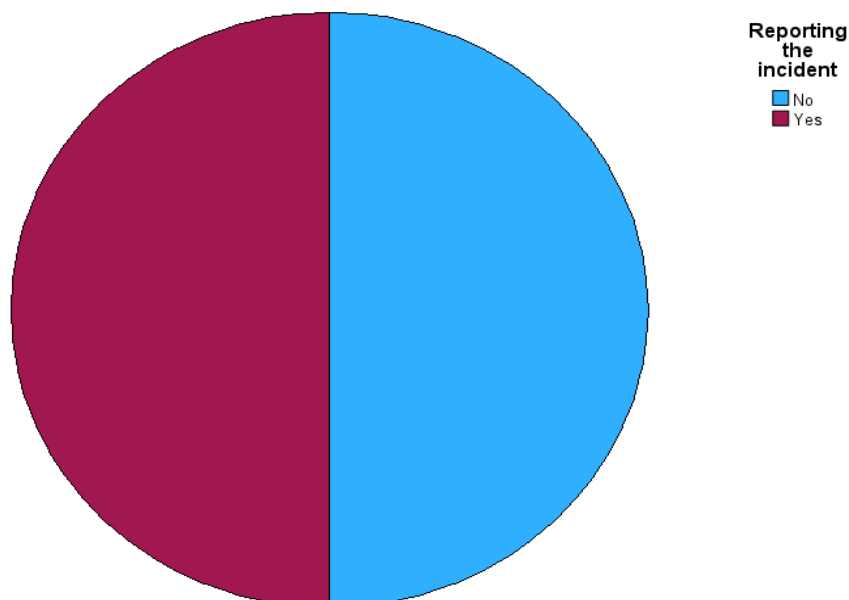


Figure 11. Frequency of reporting the incident

With respect to whom they reported the incident, valid responses were provided by 79 participants, while 105 responses were missing. Among those who responded, the majority selected the Teammate to report, with 59 participants, corresponding to 74.7% of valid responses. A smaller proportion selected Family (13 participants; 16.5% of valid responses), while 4 participants preferred to report to Coach (5.1%) and 3 participants selected to report to Club Officials (3.8%).



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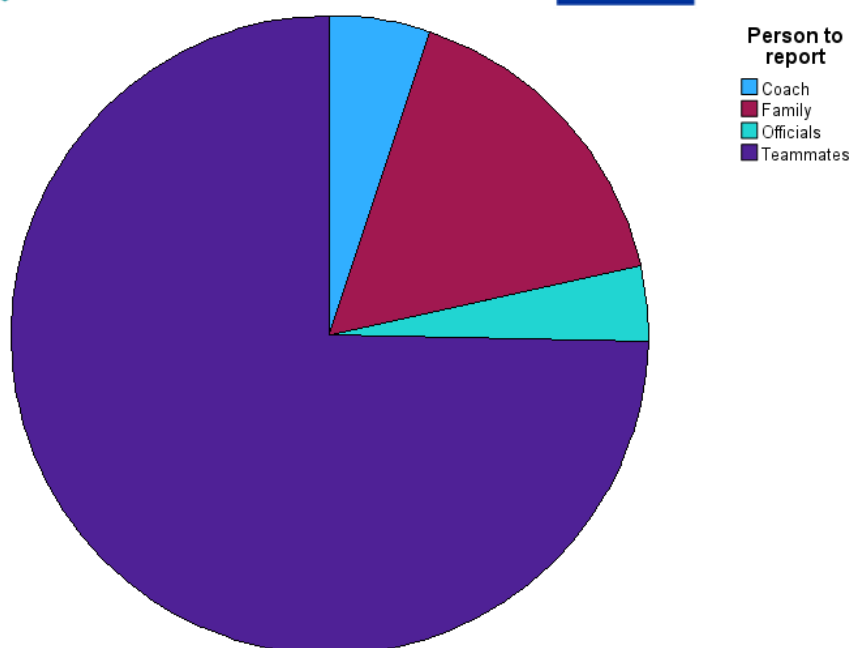


Figure 12. Frequency of persons that the incidence was reported

Perceptions about harassment

Based on participants responses, participants generally showed low to moderate endorsement of beliefs that minimize or justify harassment-related incidents. The lowest mean score was observed for Wasn't Harassment ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.97$), suggesting that participants were relatively unlikely to interpret the situation as “not harassment.” The item Asked for It also showed a relatively low mean score ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.08$), indicating limited agreement with victim-blaming explanations. Similarly, Didn't Mean It had a low-to-moderate mean score ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.82$), suggesting that participants were not strongly inclined to excuse the behavior as unintentional. The highest score among these perceptions was found for Lied ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.04$), indicating that doubts about the truthfulness of the person reporting the incident were somewhat more pronounced than the other minimizing beliefs, although still below the midpoint of a 1–5 scale.

Overall, the results indicated that, on average, participants did not strongly endorse negative or minimizing perceptions regarding harassment-related incidents. This is a positive finding for the project, as it suggests that the target group may already hold relatively supportive attitudes toward recognizing harassment and avoiding victim-blaming interpretations. At the same time, the fact that the average score was not at the lowest end of the scale shows that such beliefs are still present to some extent, particularly around whether someone may be lying. Therefore, the survey results support the need for educational activities that further strengthen participants'



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ability to identify harassment, challenge victim-blaming attitudes, and promote a safer and more supportive reporting culture in sport.

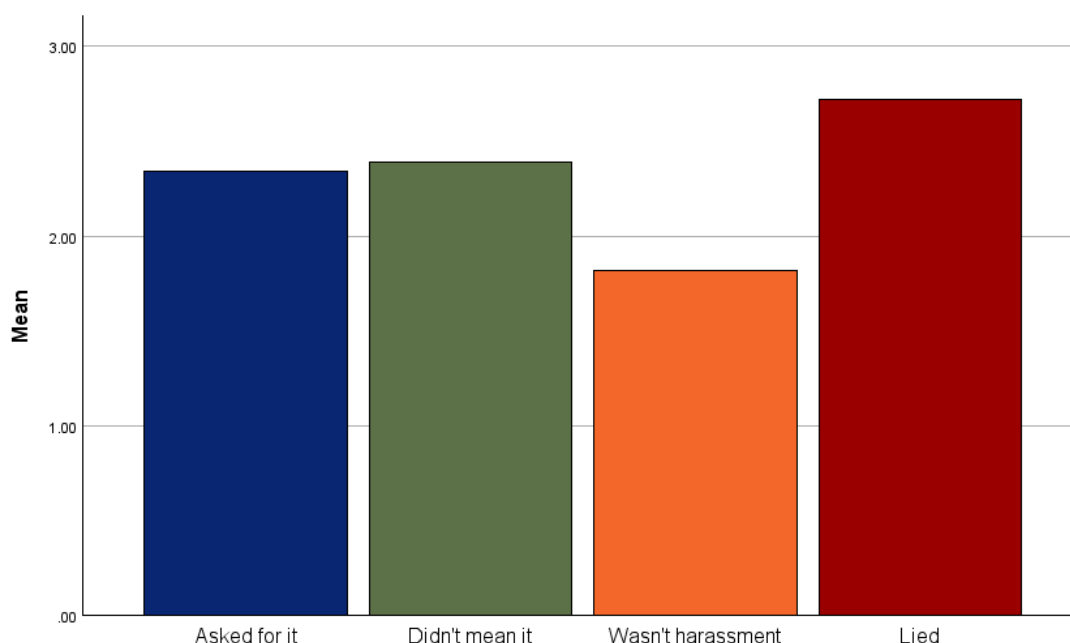


Figure 13. Means of variables related to perceptions of harassment

Perceptions of psychological safety

Based on the participants' responses, the safety experienced as a result of the team climate showed a moderate mean score ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.47$). This suggests that participants' perceptions of safety were neither particularly low nor very high, but rather around the middle of the scale. In practical terms, this indicates that although participants did not report a strong lack of safety, they also did not express a clearly strong sense of being safe. This is an important finding because it highlights safety as an area that requires further strengthening. The result suggests that project activities should continue to focus on creating safer sport environments, improving trust in reporting procedures, and ensuring that athletes feel protected and supported when they disclose or respond to harassment-related situations.

Perceived ability to report harassment

Based on participants responses, the perceived ability to response harassment showed a relatively high mean score ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.45$). This suggests that participants generally felt they had the ability, confidence, or control needed to act in response to harassment-related situations. In practical terms, this is a positive finding, as it indicates that many participants



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believe they can recognize, respond to, or report such incidents when necessary. However, the standard deviation indicates some variability in responses, meaning that not all participants felt equally confident or capable. This suggests that while perceived control is already relatively strong, further training may still be needed to ensure that all athletes and sport stakeholders know what actions to take, where to report incidents, and how to seek support safely. Overall, the results indicate a promising basis for intervention, because participants appear relatively ready to act, but project activities should continue strengthening practical skills, reporting knowledge, and confidence in handling safeguarding concerns.

Intentions to report harassment

Based on the participants' responses, the intention to report harassment variable showed a relatively high mean score ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.34$). This suggests that participants generally reported a strong intention to act, respond, or report when faced with harassment-related situations. This is a positive finding, as it indicates that many participants are already inclined to take action rather than remain passive. At the same time, the standard deviation shows some variability in responses, meaning that not all participants reported equally strong intentions. Therefore, although the overall level of intention is encouraging, project activities should continue to strengthen participants' willingness to act by increasing awareness, clarifying reporting pathways, building confidence, and ensuring that sport environments are perceived as safe and supportive. Overall, the findings suggest that participants show a promising readiness to respond to safeguarding concerns, but this readiness should be reinforced through targeted education and practical support (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the studied variables

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Experiences	.54	.64	1.220	.602
2. Asked for It	2.33	1.08	.447	-1.152
3. Didn't Mean It	2.39	.82	-.106	-.866
4. Wasn't Harassment	1.81	.96	1.104	.176
5. Lied	2.72	1.03	-.104	-1.080
6. Perceived ability	4.86	1.44	-.125	-.802
7. Intention	5.43	1.34	-.591	-.264
8. Safety	3.12	.46	.091	.685



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Correlations among the variables

The correlation analysis showed that experiences were significantly and positively associated with several minimizing perceptions. Specifically, higher levels of reported experiences were associated with stronger agreement with the beliefs that the person may have Asked For It” ($r = .40, p < .001$), that the person Did not Mean It” ($r = .31, p < .001$), and that the situation Wasn’t Harassment ($r = .45, p < .001$). These findings suggest that participants who reported more relevant experiences were also more likely to interpret or explain these situations in ways that may reduce their perceived seriousness. Experiences were also significantly related to intention to report harassment, but in a negative direction ($r = -.27, p < .001$). This indicates that participants reporting more experiences tended to report lower intentions to act or respond. This is an important finding for the project because it suggests that exposure to such situations does not necessarily translate into greater willingness to report or intervene. Instead, repeated or prior experiences may be linked with hesitation, normalization, uncertainty, or reduced confidence in taking action. The relationship between experiences and psychological safety was weak and not statistically significant ($r = .13, p = .064$), suggesting that reported experiences were not clearly associated with participants’ perceived sense of safety.

Also, the correlation analysis indicated that intention to report harassment was significantly associated with all key psychological variables. Specifically, it was positively and strongly related to perceived ability to report harassment ($r = .60, p < .001$), suggesting that participants who felt more capable of acting or responding were also more likely to report stronger intentions to do so. Intention was also positively related to psychological safety ($r = .19, p = .008$), indicating that feeling safer was associated with greater willingness to act, although this relationship was weaker than the association with perceived behavioural control.

In contrast, intention was negatively associated with the four minimizing or victim-blaming perceptions. Higher agreement with Asked For It was associated with lower intention ($r = -.39, p < .001$), as was agreement with Didn’t Mean It ($r = -.30, p < .001$), Wasn’t Harassment ($r = -.45, p < .001$), and Lied ($r = -.35, p < .001$). This suggests that participants who were more likely to justify the incident, minimize it, or question the credibility of the person reporting it were less likely to intend to respond or take action. The four perception about harassment variables were also strongly and positively correlated with each other. For example, Asked For It was strongly related to Didn’t Mean It ($r = .76$), Wasn’t Harassment ($r = .84$), and Lied ($r = .73$), all significant at $p < .001$. Similarly, Didn’t Mean It, Wasn’t Harassment, and Lied were strongly interrelated. This indicates that these beliefs tend to cluster together, suggesting the presence of a broader pattern of minimizing or victim-blaming perceptions. Perceived ability



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to report harassment was not significantly related to most perception variables, but it was positively associated with psychological safety ($r = .22$, $p = .002$). This suggests that participants who felt safer also tended to feel more capable of acting. However, the size of this relationship was modest, indicating that safety and perceived ability are related but distinct constructs.

Overall, the correlation findings support the importance of the project's focus on awareness, safety, and empowerment. The results suggest that stronger intentions to act are linked mainly to higher perceived ability and, to a lesser extent, to perceived psychological safety. At the same time, victim-blaming and minimizing perceptions are clearly associated with weaker intentions to respond. Therefore, project activities should aim to increase participants' confidence and practical ability to act, while also challenging beliefs that excuse harassment, deny its seriousness, or question the credibility of those who report it (Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis of correlations among the studied variables

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Experiences	.40**	.31**	.45**	.35**	-.15*	-.27**	.13
2. Asked for It		.76**	.84**	.73**	-.12	-.39**	.18*
3. Didn't Mean It			.65**	.64**	-.05	-.30**	.15*
4. Wasn't Harassment				.69**	-.13	-.45**	.17*
5. Lied					.01	-.35**	.15*
6. Perceived ability						.60**	.22**
7. Intention							.19**
8. Safety							

Determinants of intentions to report harassment

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictors of participants' intentions to act/respond in harassment-related situations. In the first step, the four perception about harassment variables were entered into the model: Asked For It, Didn't Mean It, Wasn't Harassment and Lied. This first model was statistically significant, $F(4,179) = 11.59$, $p < .001$, and explained 20.6% of the variance in intentions. This indicates that participants' perceptions of the incident, including victim-blaming or minimizing beliefs, were meaningfully related to their willingness to act. In the second step, perceived ability to report harassment and psychological safety were added to the model. The final model was also statistically significant,



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$F(6,177) = 35.58, p < .001$, and explained 54.7% of the variance in intentions. This represents a substantial increase in explained variance, showing that participants' perceived ability to act and their sense of safety added important explanatory value beyond their perceptions of the incident.

In the final model, perceived to report harassment emerged as the strongest positive predictor of intentions, $\beta = .54, p < .001$. This means that participants who felt more capable, confident, or in control of taking action were significantly more likely to report stronger intentions to respond. Psychological safety was also a significant positive predictor, $\beta = .15, p = .006$, indicating that participants who felt safer were more willing to act. Among the perception variables, two predictors remained statistically significant in the final model. The belief that the situation Wasn't Harassment negatively predicted intentions, $\beta = -.30, p = .003$, and the belief that the person Lied also negatively predicted intentions, $\beta = -.20, p = .013$. This suggests that participants who minimized the seriousness of the incident or questioned the credibility of the person reporting it were less likely to intend to respond or take action.

Qualitative study

Method

Participants

The study included 16 sport professionals from Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The full sample consisted of 9 women and 7 men, aged 25 to 56 years. The mean age of the total sample was 40.4 years. Most participants were coaches ($n = 15$), while one participant from Bulgaria was a referee. Participants represented a range of sports, including volleyball, basketball, swimming, handball, athletics, alpine skiing, orienteering, football, and mini football. In Greece, the sample included five coaches: three women and two men, aged 25 to 54 years ($M = 37.4$ years). The Greek participants were involved in volleyball, basketball, swimming, handball, and athletics. In Serbia, the sample included six coaches: four women and two men, aged 40 to 56 years ($M = 46.5$ years). All Serbian participants were identified as coaches, in a wide range of team and individual sports. In Bulgaria, the sample included five sport professionals: two women and three men, aged 29 to 41 years ($M = 34.2$ years). Four participants were coaches and one was a referee. The Bulgarian participants were involved in alpine skiing, orienteering, football, swimming, and mini football.



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Interview guide

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview matrix developed for the CoViS project. The guide was designed to explore coaches' perceptions, experiences, knowledge, and training needs in relation to gender-based violence and sexual harassment in sport. Before the interview began, participants were provided with a working definition of gender-based violence, which was described as harmful behavior directed at a person because of their gender or violence that disproportionately affects people of a particular gender. The definition included physical, sexual, psychological/emotional, and economic abuse, as well as threats, coercion, controlling behaviors, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Participants were also reminded that the interview would be recorded, that their responses would remain confidential, and that they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. The expected duration of the interview was approximately 30–45 minutes.

The interview matrix followed a semi-structured format, combining main questions with optional probes to encourage elaboration and clarify participants' responses. The first section focused on introduction and rapport building, asking participants to describe their coaching experience, the sport and level at which they coached, and the typical coach–athlete relationship in their setting. Subsequent sections examined coaches' understanding and perceptions of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in sport, including how they define inappropriate or gender-based behaviors, how prevalent they perceive such behaviors to be, and what contextual factors may contribute to their occurrence. Probes addressed issues such as power imbalances, gender norms, institutional hierarchies, lack of supervision, close physical contact, travel, training camps, locker rooms, and one-to-one situations.

The guide also explored participants' attitudes, beliefs, and perceived responsibilities. Participants were asked about their confidence in recognizing signs of gender-based violence, their perceived role in preventing such incidents, and the influence of cultural norms, team culture, and sport traditions on how harassment and violence are viewed. Additional questions addressed whether problematic behaviors are normalized in sport, whether a “culture of silence” exists, and how peers or colleagues typically respond to concerns.

A further section focused on experiences with incidents and reporting-related decision-making. Participants were invited to reflect, without identifying specific people or incidents, on situations that raised concerns about boundaries or inappropriate behavior. They were also asked about challenges coaches may face when responding to such situations, including fear of consequences, uncertainty about evidence, lack of procedural clarity, and relationships with staff or parents. The matrix then examined participants' knowledge of reporting procedures within clubs or federations, the factors that would influence their decision to report a suspected



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or confirmed incident, and the barriers that might discourage reporting, such as organizational inaction, fear of damaging careers, loyalty to colleagues, or lack of trust in reporting systems. Finally, the interview guide addressed training, policies, and recommendations for improvement. Participants were asked whether they had received safeguarding or gender-based violence training, how effective this training had been, and what elements were missing. They were also invited to propose improvements for preventing, identifying, and responding to gender-based violence in sport, including policy changes, cultural changes, education for coaches, athletes and parents, and stronger organizational structures. The interview concluded with an open question allowing participants to add further reflections or messages for policymakers and sport organizations.

Analytical design

The study adopted a qualitative analytical design informed by a pragmatic approach. This approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of the analysis was not only to understand participants' perceptions and experiences, but also to generate findings that could inform practical recommendations for safeguarding, prevention, education, and reporting procedures in sport. The analysis combined deductive and inductive elements, allowing the research team to explore predefined areas of interest while remaining open to new themes emerging from the data. All interviews/focus groups were transcribed verbatim. To preserve linguistic, cultural, and contextual meaning, transcripts were analyzed in the language in which the discussions were conducted. Native-speaking researchers with knowledge of the sport context were involved in the analysis, ensuring that culturally specific expressions, meanings, and examples were interpreted accurately. Qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo was used to organize transcripts, support coding, and manage the development of themes.

The analysis followed a template-based thematic approach. Initially, the research team familiarized themselves with the transcripts through repeated reading and note-taking. A preliminary coding framework was then developed based on the aims of the study, the interview guide, and relevant literature on gender-based violence, sexual harassment, safeguarding, and reporting in sport. This initial template included broad thematic areas such as perceptions of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, contributing factors in sport settings, coaches' or athletes' perceived responsibilities, experiences with inappropriate behavior, knowledge of reporting procedures, barriers to reporting, and recommendations for prevention and policy improvement.

The initial template was then applied to the transcripts. During this process, the research team remained open to inductively generated codes that captured issues not fully anticipated in the



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original framework. New codes were added when participants introduced culturally specific concerns, unanticipated barriers, or contextually important experiences. The coding framework was therefore refined iteratively, moving between the data, the developing themes, and the study aims. Similar codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters, and themes were revised to ensure that they were conceptually coherent, grounded in the data, and relevant to the research questions.

To strengthen analytical rigor, coding and theme development were reviewed collaboratively by the research team. Disagreements or uncertainties were discussed until consensus was reached. Where appropriate, a critical friend approach was used, with one or more researchers reviewing the coding structure, theme labels, and supporting extracts to challenge interpretations and improve the credibility of the analysis. Themes were assessed according to their relevance to the research aims, consistency across the data, contribution to understanding gender-based violence and sexual harassment in sport, and practical relevance for safeguarding policy and education.

The final themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure that they accurately represented participants' accounts. Illustrative quotations were selected to support the interpretation of each theme. When quotations were originally provided in another language, they were translated into English for reporting, while preserving the meaning and tone of participants' statements as closely as possible. Overall, the analytical design aimed to balance structure and flexibility: the initial template ensured alignment with the study aims, while the inductive refinement of codes allowed participants' own perspectives and culturally specific meanings to shape the final thematic framework.

Procedure

The qualitative study design and procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki for research with humans. Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions and/or interviews with participants involved in sport. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential treatment of the information provided. They were also informed that they were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. Written informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants completed a short demographic form.

At the beginning of each session, the moderator reminded participants of the purpose of the study and provided a common working definition of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in sport. Participants were encouraged to speak openly about their views,



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experiences, and perceptions, while also being reminded to respect the confidentiality of the discussion and to avoid disclosing identifiable information about other individuals. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular emphasis was placed on creating a respectful and supportive environment in which participants could express their opinions without fear of judgment.

The discussions were conducted either in person or online, depending on practical arrangements, and were held in the participants' native language. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews/focus groups followed a semi-structured format, allowing the moderator to cover the main topics consistently while also using follow-up questions and probes to elicit richer and more detailed responses. The guide included questions on participants' understanding of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in sport, perceived prevalence and contributing factors, personal and organizational responsibilities, experiences or observations of inappropriate behavior, reporting procedures, barriers to reporting, and suggestions for improving prevention and response mechanisms in sport.

Moderators used open-ended questions, active and empathetic listening, clarification prompts, and follow-up questions to support participants in elaborating their responses. The semi-structured format was selected because it allowed participants to describe their own meanings and experiences while ensuring that core topics relevant to the research aims were addressed across all sessions.

Results

The thematic analysis of the interviews and focus-group material from Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria generated seven interrelated themes. Across the three countries, participants described gender-based violence and sexual harassment in sport as a multidimensional problem shaped by interpersonal behavior, power relations, normalized sport practices, organizational weaknesses, and limited reporting mechanisms. These findings are closely aligned with the CoViS project rationale, which identifies the need to improve evidence, develop educational resources, train multipliers, raise awareness, and strengthen reporting mechanisms in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece.



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Theme 1: Professional boundaries and the normalization of questionable sport practices

The first theme concerns the difficulty of defining and maintaining professional boundaries in the coach–athlete relationship. Participants across the three countries recognized that sport requires trust, closeness, emotional support, and sometimes physical proximity. However, they also emphasized that these elements can become problematic when the coach’s role is not clearly defined or when behaviors traditionally accepted in sport are no longer appropriate.

Subtheme 1.1: Supportive closeness versus professional distance

Participants generally described the ideal coach–athlete relationship as supportive but clearly bounded. In Greece, one coach described the relationship in academies as “mainly friendly,” but added that this must happen “with boundaries” and with respect from both sides, especially when working with pre-adolescent and adolescent athletes. Similarly, a Bulgarian participant stated that “the relationship should always be professional, respectful, and clearly defined.” These views suggest that participants did not reject closeness itself, but argued that closeness should remain within a professional and educational framework.

Subtheme 1.2: Previously accepted practices as boundary violations

Several participants noted that some behaviors historically considered normal in sport are now recognized as inappropriate. A Greek coach referred to older practices such as celebratory touching, explaining that “in my generation, in the 1990s, we had as a celebration to touch each other’s buttocks. Now this does not happen; or if it happens, I believe it would be condemned.” Another Greek participant made a similar point when referring to a coach touching an athlete before entering the game, stating that “this, of course, is a form of harassment. It is not allowed.”

Subtheme 1.3: Ambiguous affection and informal behavior

A recurring issue was the ambiguity of physical affection, such as hugging, kissing, touching, or overly familiar communication. A Greek swimming coach recalled seeing a coach kiss a young child and explained: “I would never do that, to kiss a child of that age... I do not think it is within the role of the coach.” In Bulgaria, participants similarly noted that offensive jokes or comments are sometimes normalized even when they should not be. In Serbia, this ambiguity was captured in the phrase: “The boundary is porous.” Overall, the findings show that participants saw a need to distinguish warmth and encouragement from behaviors that violate personal and professional limits.



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Theme 2: Sexual harassment as a continuum of behaviors

Participants did not define sexual harassment narrowly as only explicit sexual assault. Instead, they described a continuum of behaviors ranging from verbal and non-verbal conduct to unwanted physical contact, emotional manipulation, stalking, and exploitation of authority. This broader understanding is important because many behaviors that precede or accompany abuse may appear subtle, indirect, or normalized.

Subtheme 2.1: Verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic behaviors

In all three datasets, sexual harassment included verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Serbian participants referred to “sending verbal and nonverbal messages of an inappropriate nature,” “verbal references or associations related to sex,” and “inappropriate looks.” Bulgarian participants similarly defined harassment as “unwanted comments, jokes, hints, or physical actions of a sexual nature.” Greek participants also recognized that harassment is not limited to touching. One Greek coach stated that harassment includes saying something that moves beyond the legitimate role of the coach: “Not only touching. Of course, what you say is also very important.”

Subtheme 2.2: Unwanted physical contact

Unwanted physical contact was the most easily recognized form of sexual harassment. Participants referred to inappropriate touching, hugging, kissing, touching body parts, and physical contact in locker rooms, showers, or hotels. A Greek participant explained that “to touch you anywhere” may be inappropriate, especially when it exceeds normal encouragement or support. She added that repeated hugging between coaches and female athletes may appear innocent, but “it is better, in my opinion, not to be repeated.” Serbian participants also referred to “unusual touching in the shower after training,” while Bulgarian participants mentioned “unwelcome physical contact.”

Subtheme 2.3: Sexualized comments about body, gender, or appearance

Participants also viewed comments about body, appearance, gender, or sexuality as forms of harassment. In Serbia, one participant described verbal abuse involving comments about girls’ courage and comparisons of girls to animals, such as “mare” or “cow.” Another Serbian participant defined sexual harassment as “any behavior that insults a person’s appearance or body parts.” In Greece, participants similarly referred to comments about how girls look, what they wear, or whether they are physically weaker than boys as behaviors that may become gendered harassment.

Subtheme 2.4: Exploitation of admiration and dependency

The coach’s authority and the athlete’s admiration were also identified as part of the harassment continuum. A Greek participant explained that young athletes often admire their coach and that



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“many little girls fall in love with their coach.” She stressed that this admiration must not become “an object of exploitation” and that it is unacceptable for a coach to “exploit his position and enter into a relationship with an athlete, especially a younger one.” This was echoed in the Serbian data, where participants referred to creating intimacy through activities that exclude other team members, suggesting a grooming-like dynamic.

Theme 3: Power, dependency, and structural risk factors in sport

The third theme concerns the structural conditions that may facilitate gender-based violence and sexual harassment in sport. Participants across the three countries repeatedly identified power imbalance, lack of supervision, physical proximity, travel, changing rooms, and one-to-one situations as risk factors.

Subtheme 3.1: Coach authority and athlete dependency

Participants viewed the coach’s authority as central to the problem. A Bulgarian participant stated that “a major factor is the power imbalance between coach and athlete,” especially when young athletes depend on adults. In Serbia, one participant noted that “coaches are always the ones who hold the greatest power.” Greek participants also emphasized the coach’s authority and status. One Greek coach explained that when the coach is simultaneously “coach, administrator, and everything,” he may feel that “no one controls him.”

Subtheme 3.2: Lack of supervision and accountability

Lack of oversight was repeatedly described as a risk factor. Participants pointed to situations where coaches, athletes, or peers are not visible to others, and where no clear person is responsible for monitoring behavior. Greek participants referred to changing rooms, toilets, showers, and hotels as places where incidents may occur without the coach being able to observe them. Serbian participants linked the problem to the absence of effective legal or organizational mechanisms. Bulgarian participants also highlighted “lack of clear rules and oversight” as a source of risk.

Subtheme 3.3: Travel, hotels, locker rooms, and one-to-one situations

Travel and accommodation were identified as sensitive contexts. Greek participants referred to sport missions and hotels, noting that boundaries must not be crossed when athletes are away from parents or guardians. A Greek coach stated that in hotels “we must not go beyond the limits,” for example by being in the room of an athlete. Bulgarian participants similarly referred to travel, camps, locker rooms, and one-to-one situations as environments where supervision is more limited and clear rules are required.



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Subtheme 3.4: Physical proximity and sport-specific contact

Physical proximity was also considered important, especially in sports involving contact or close body positioning. A Greek swimming coach explained that physical contact is particularly relevant in swimming because athletes are very close to one another, adding that “someone may physically abuse an athlete... I think mainly physical contact plays a role.” However, participants did not suggest that physical contact should be eliminated from sport; rather, they stressed that it must be appropriate, necessary, transparent, and bounded.

Subtheme 3.5: Competitive pressure as a possible amplifier

Some participants saw competitive pressure as an additional factor. A Greek volleyball coach argued that in critical matches or championships, stress and pressure may make athletes and coaches more likely to judge, criticize, or behave inappropriately. A Bulgarian participant also stated that “the higher the level and the pressure for results, the greater the risk that some boundaries may be crossed.” However, this view was not universal. Another Greek participant argued that competition level does not matter and that abuse “has to do with the person” rather than the level of competition. Therefore, competitive pressure should be interpreted as a possible amplifier rather than a consistent cause.

Theme 4: Vulnerability and unequal protection of athletes

The fourth theme captures participants’ perceptions that some athletes are more vulnerable than others. Vulnerability was associated with age, gender, disability, family background, socioeconomic status, and dependence on the coach or club.

Subtheme 4.1: Minors and young athletes

Across all three countries, minors were identified as particularly vulnerable. A Bulgarian participant stated that “children are more vulnerable because they are influenced by the opinions of adults.” Serbian participants similarly referred to “minor female athletes” and adolescents as frequent targets. In Greece, one coach argued that younger children are vulnerable because they may not easily understand “what someone is trying to do.” This highlights the importance of age-appropriate safeguarding education.

Subtheme 4.2: Girls and women athletes

Female athletes were repeatedly identified as a high-risk group. A Greek coach stated that “people of the female gender” and young people are “much more vulnerable.” Serbian participants also described women and girls as frequent targets, not because they are inherently weak, but because they are more often placed in subordinate positions in sport. Bulgarian participants referred to outdated gender norms and different treatment of boys and girls as contributing factors.



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Subtheme 4.3: Athletes with disabilities

Greek coaches explicitly identified athletes with disabilities as vulnerable. One participant stated that “people with disabilities” are more vulnerable, while another suggested that the level of vulnerability may depend on the type of disability and the athlete’s ability to recognize or report inappropriate behavior. This finding supports the need for accessible safeguarding education and reporting mechanisms.

Subtheme 4.4: Family and socioeconomic vulnerability

Participants also linked vulnerability to family and social background. A Greek basketball coach argued that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or less supportive families may be more exposed because perpetrators can identify “which are the vulnerable children” and those whose parents may not intervene. Bulgarian participants similarly referred to athletes with serious family problems, while Serbian participants linked vulnerability to the athlete’s identity and social status.

Theme 5: Recognition of warning signs and interpretive uncertainty

The fifth theme concerns coaches’ perceived ability to recognize signs of abuse or harassment, as well as their uncertainty about how to interpret ambiguous situations. Participants generally believed that experience helps recognition, but they also acknowledged that signs may be hidden, indirect, or difficult to interpret.

Subtheme 5.1: Behavioral and emotional warning signs

Participants described behavioral and emotional changes as important warning signs. A Greek participant stated that abuse may affect a child’s performance, explaining that a player who is in good condition may suddenly show reduced performance, leave quickly from training, avoid contact with teammates, or try to return home immediately. She added that “the fear can be seen in the eyes of a child.” Bulgarian participants similarly referred to anxiety, withdrawal, and avoidance of certain people, while Serbian participants described recognizing distress and discomfort in athletes.

Subtheme 5.2: Experience as a facilitator of recognition

Several coaches felt that professional experience helped them recognize problematic situations. A Greek swimming coach stated, “I am 100% sure that I can see it... I have learned to recognize it,” adding that experience helps him identify when a child feels uncomfortable. A Serbian participant similarly said, “I am very confident, because I went through the same thing myself.” These responses suggest that recognition is often based on practical experience rather than formal training.



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Subtheme 5.3: Difficulty interpreting ambiguous situations

Despite confidence, participants also recognized uncertainty. A Bulgarian participant stated that “it is extremely difficult to be 100% confident” because the topic is complex. Another Bulgarian participant noted that some situations “can be interpreted in different ways.” In Greece, one coach said that it may be difficult to know whether one is exaggerating or misreading a situation, especially because even affectionate gestures such as hugging a child may be misunderstood.

Subtheme 5.4: Fear of false accusation

A related issue was fear of false accusation or acting without adequate evidence. Participants did not use this fear to deny the problem, but they described it as a real barrier to action. A Greek coach noted that in serious cases, the possibility of misinterpretation can create legal, parental, and professional consequences. Serbian and Bulgarian participants also referred to uncertainty regarding evidence and concern that someone may be wrongly accused.

Theme 6: Reporting barriers, institutional mistrust, and culture of silence

The sixth theme was one of the strongest cross-partner findings. Participants did not only discuss whether sexual harassment can be recognized; they also questioned whether it can be safely and effectively reported. Reporting was hindered by fear of consequences, unclear procedures, lack of trust, weak organizational response, loyalty to colleagues, gossip, and victim-blaming.

Subtheme 6.1: Unclear or inaccessible reporting procedures

Participants frequently reported uncertainty about what steps should be followed. Serbian participants stated that procedures are often unclear or absent, with one saying that “there are no clear procedures either within the club, or at the national or international level.” Bulgarian participants also noted that “sometimes clear procedures are lacking” and that “everyone should know who they can turn to and what steps follow after a report is submitted.” In Greece, some coaches reported that they had not received clear guidance or training, while others knew of federation-level mechanisms, suggesting uneven safeguarding readiness.

Subtheme 6.2: Fear of consequences and retaliation

Fear of consequences was another major barrier. A Greek participant referred to “retaliation from the other coach we report” and the possibility that the reporting person may “lose our job.” Serbian participants also referred to fear of consequences, while Bulgarian participants stated that fear of consequences, lack of trust, and concern that there will be no real response are major barriers to reporting.



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Subtheme 6.3: Distrust in systems and insufficient organizational response

Participants often doubted whether organizations would act effectively. A Serbian participant summarized this mistrust with the question: “Who would believe me?” Another said that colleagues “turn a blind eye.” Bulgarian participants referred to “lack of trust in the system” and “lack of trust in reporting systems.” In Greece, one coach acknowledged that incidents may never become known if the victim feels ashamed or fears damaging the team climate.

Subtheme 6.4: Culture of silence, gossip, and normalisation

Participants described a culture in which problematic behaviors may be tolerated, ignored, or treated as part of sport. A Serbian participant stated that “culture cannot be changed overnight” and that a comprehensive movement is needed to introduce new rules and patterns of behavior. Another described not a culture of silence but a “culture of gossip,” where people discuss cases informally but hesitate to act. In Greece, one coach was asked about a culture of silence and noted that some sports environments may avoid allowing incidents “to be heard” or “to go outside.”

Subtheme 6.5: Victim-blaming and protection of reputation

Some participants pointed to the tendency to shift responsibility away from the perpetrator. A Serbian participant referred to “the normalization of such behavior and shifting the blame onto the victim.” This was consistent with the broader CoViS rationale, which identifies non-recognition and non-reporting as central barriers to combating sexual violence in sport.

Theme 7: Education, protocols, independent structures, and safeguarding culture

The final theme concerns participants’ recommendations for prevention. Across Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, participants emphasized that safeguarding cannot depend only on individual coaches’ judgement. It requires systematic education, clear protocols, organizational accountability, independent reporting structures, and a culture of zero tolerance.

Subtheme 7.1: Education for coaches, athletes, and parents

Participants strongly supported education. A Serbian participant stated that education “should come first,” because when coaches, athletes, and parents know what is acceptable, they can respond more easily to inappropriate behavior. A Bulgarian participant recommended “more training for coaches, athletes, and parents, clear reporting procedures, and access to specialists.” A Greek coach similarly called for “seminars for coaches,” discussions from the federation, and protocols given before the beginning of the competitive season.



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Subtheme 7.2: Codes of conduct and practical examples

Participants wanted practical guidance rather than abstract information. Bulgarian participants requested practical examples and clearer instructions on what to do. Serbian participants also called for clearly defined rules of conduct, responses to violations, and sanctions. Greek participants likewise emphasized the need for protocols and clear expectations before the season begins.

Subtheme 7.3: Designated safeguarding structures

A repeated recommendation was that clubs and federations should have designated responsible persons or safeguarding officers. Bulgarian participants stated that reports should go through management or a designated person within the club. Serbian participants, however, warned that such systems must be independent. One stated that “the reporting system must be completely independent of the organization,” because organizational leaders could otherwise influence the process.

Subtheme 7.4: Organizational accountability and sanctions

Participants viewed clubs and organizations as responsible for creating safe environments. A Greek coach stated that the responsibilities of coaches and clubs are “quite large,” although they form part of a wider combination of family, school, and society. Serbian participants emphasized sanctions, legal mechanisms, and psychological assessment of coaches. Bulgarian participants argued that organizations should actively promote “a culture of respect, safety, and zero tolerance of violence.”

Subtheme 7.5: Cultural change in sport

Finally, participants recognized that prevention requires cultural change. This includes challenging the idea that harsh language, jokes, humiliation, physical familiarity, or silence are simply part of sport. A Bulgarian participant stated that sport should be a place where people develop not only physically but also as individuals, and that “the safety and dignity of every athlete should be a priority.” This reflects the central implication of the cross-partner findings: safeguarding must become part of sport culture, not an optional add-on.

The cross-partner analysis shows strong convergence across Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. Participants across all three countries recognized sexual harassment and gender-based violence as multidimensional problems that include verbal, non-verbal, physical, psychological, and relational behaviors. They also recognized that many problematic practices are embedded in sport culture and may be normalized as part of coaching, competition, discipline, humor, or tradition.

At the same time, the findings show that sexual violence in sport is not only an issue of individual misconduct. It is also connected to structural features of sport: power imbalance,



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dependency, emotional closeness, lack of supervision, weak institutional procedures, travel, locker rooms, one-to-one situations, and unclear reporting channels. Minors, girls, athletes with disabilities, and athletes with limited family or social support were viewed as particularly vulnerable.

The main cross-country implication is that prevention must be systemic. Coaches may play a central role in recognizing early signs and setting boundaries, but they cannot carry the safeguarding burden alone. Clubs, federations, parents, and policy bodies must create the conditions for safe disclosure, independent reporting, clear procedures, and meaningful follow-up. This directly supports the CoViS project design, especially its focus on empirical evidence, training resources, awareness-raising, reporting mechanisms, and policy recommendations for Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece (Table 3).

Table 3. Themes and subthemes of qualitative study

Theme	Theme description	Subthemes	Subtheme description
1. Professional boundaries and normalized sport practices	Participants described the coach–athlete relationship as supportive and trust-based, but also potentially risky when professional boundaries are unclear.	<i>1.1 Supportive closeness versus professional distance</i>	Coaches need to be approachable and supportive while maintaining clear professional roles.
		<i>1.2 Previously accepted practices as boundary violations</i>	Behaviors once considered normal in sport, such as certain forms of touching or celebrations, are now recognized as inappropriate.
		<i>1.3 Ambiguous affection and informal behavior</i>	Hugs, kisses, jokes, and informal communication may be perceived differently and can cross personal boundaries.
2. Sexual harassment as a continuum of behaviors	Sexual harassment was understood as a broad continuum that includes verbal, non-verbal, physical,	<i>2.1 Verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic behaviors</i>	Inappropriate comments, sexual jokes, gestures, looks, and messages can constitute harassment.



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	psychological, and relational behaviors.		
		2.2 <i>Unwanted physical contact</i>	Touching, hugging, kissing, or bodily contact beyond what is necessary for coaching may violate athlete boundaries.
		2.3 <i>Sexualized comments about body, gender, or appearance</i>	Comments about appearance, body parts, femininity, masculinity, or gendered performance can become forms of harassment.
		2.4 <i>Exploitation of admiration and dependency</i>	Coaches may misuse athletes' trust, admiration, or emotional dependence to create inappropriate intimacy.
3. Power, dependency, and structural risk factors in sport	Participants linked sexual harassment to sport-specific structures such as authority, dependency, limited supervision, and private spaces.	3.1 <i>Coach authority and athlete dependency</i>	The coach's power over selection, performance, and belonging may make athletes reluctant to resist or report misconduct.
		3.2 <i>Lack of supervision and accountability</i>	Weak monitoring, unclear responsibilities, and limited organizational control can allow harmful behaviors to remain hidden.
		3.3 <i>Travel, hotels, locker rooms, and one-to-one situations</i>	Private or semi-private sport contexts create increased opportunities for boundary violations.
		3.4 <i>Physical proximity and sport-specific contact</i>	Some sports require close physical interaction, making clear rules about appropriate contact essential.
		3.5 <i>Competitive pressure as a possible amplifier</i>	High performance pressure may intensify stress and boundary-crossing, although participants did not see it as a universal cause.
4. Vulnerability and unequal	Certain athletes were seen as more	4.1 <i>Minors and young athletes</i>	Children and adolescents may lack the maturity,



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protection of athletes	vulnerable due to age, gender, disability, family support, social status, or dependence on adults.		knowledge, or confidence to recognize and report abuse.
		<i>4.2 Girls and women athletes</i>	Female athletes were perceived as particularly exposed due to gendered power relations and sexist norms in sport.
		<i>4.3 Athletes with disabilities</i>	Athletes with disabilities may face greater dependency, communication barriers, or difficulties in recognizing and reporting misconduct.
		<i>4.4 Family and socioeconomic vulnerability</i>	Athletes from less supportive or socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds may have fewer protective resources.
5. Recognition of warning signs and interpretive uncertainty	Coaches believed they could identify signs of harm, but also expressed uncertainty about interpreting ambiguous situations.	<i>5.1 Behavioral and emotional warning signs</i>	Fear, withdrawal, avoidance, reduced performance, and changes in mood may indicate that something is wrong.
		<i>5.2 Experience as a facilitator of recognition</i>	Coaches felt that years of working with athletes helped them detect discomfort or behavioral changes.
		<i>5.3 Difficulty interpreting ambiguous situations</i>	Some behaviors or reactions may be difficult to interpret without context or direct disclosure.
		<i>5.4 Fear of false accusation</i>	Coaches worried about acting without enough evidence or wrongly accusing someone.
6. Reporting barriers, institutional	Reporting was hindered by fear, unclear procedures, lack of trust,	<i>6.1 Unclear or inaccessible reporting procedures</i>	Participants often did not know exactly where, how, or to whom



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mistrust, and culture of silence	reputational concerns, and weak organizational responses.		incidents should be reported.
		<i>6.2 Fear of consequences and retaliation</i>	Athletes, coaches, or bystanders may avoid reporting because of fear of punishment, job loss, exclusion, or backlash.
		<i>6.3 Distrust in systems and insufficient organizational response</i>	Participants doubted whether clubs, federations, or authorities would respond effectively or fairly.
		<i>6.4 Culture of silence, gossip, and normalization</i>	Incidents may be discussed informally but not formally reported, allowing harmful behaviors to continue.
		<i>6.5 Victim-blaming and protection of reputation</i>	Responsibility may be shifted to the victim, while clubs or organizations may prioritize reputation over safeguarding.
7. Education, protocols, independent structures, and safeguarding culture	Participants called for systematic safeguarding education, clear rules, trusted reporting systems, and stronger organizational accountability.	<i>7.1 Education for coaches, athletes, and parents</i>	Prevention should involve all key actors so they can recognize, prevent, and respond to harassment.
		<i>7.2 Codes of conduct and practical examples</i>	Clear behavioral rules and real-life examples are needed to clarify what is acceptable and unacceptable.
		<i>7.3 Designated safeguarding structures</i>	Clubs and federations should appoint responsible persons or safeguarding officers to manage concerns.
		<i>7.4 Organisation accountability and sanctions</i>	Organizations must act consistently, apply sanctions, and avoid leaving safeguarding to individual judgement.
		<i>7.5 Cultural change in sport</i>	Long-term prevention requires changing sport



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			cultures that normalize silence, hierarchy, humiliation, or boundary violations.
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Discussion

The present report aimed to provide an evidence-based overview of athletes' experiences, perceptions, and intended responses in relation to sexual harassment, abuse, and safeguarding in sport. The rationale for conducting this needs analysis was grounded in the limited availability of systematic evidence in the participating countries, despite indications that sexual harassment and abuse in sport remain important but under-recognised problems in Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The CoViS project was designed precisely to address this gap by generating empirical evidence, raising awareness, developing educational resources, training multipliers, and supporting reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment in sport. Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings converge in showing that harassment-related experiences are present in sport settings, that athletes vary in how they interpret such incidents, and that willingness to act depends strongly on perceived control, safety, awareness, and trust in available support structures.

Quantitative study

The quantitative findings provide an important baseline picture of athletes' experiences and psychological responses. The frequency results showed that some harassment-related situations were reported by a substantial proportion of participants, particularly items Sexualized Behavior, Insults or Mockery based on Sex, and Comments about Body Clothing and Sexuality, where almost half of the sample reported at least one occurrence. This suggests that problematic behaviors are not isolated or exceptional events but form part of the lived experience of a meaningful proportion of young athletes. This aligns with previous evidence showing that harassment and abuse in sport can occur across different levels, sports, and contexts, and that prevalence rates vary widely depending on definitions, measurement tools, and populations studied (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Vertommen et al., 2016). The IOC consensus statement similarly emphasizes that harassment and abuse in sport includes sexual, physical, psychological abuse and neglect, and that they are enabled by power imbalances, organizational cultures, and weak safeguarding systems.



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The follow-up findings also showed that relevant incidents were attributed to different groups within the sport environment, including teammates, coaches, other staff members, and other individuals. This is a particularly important result because it suggests that safeguarding cannot be limited to coach education alone. Although coaches occupy a powerful position in sport, peer athletes and other members of the sport entourage may also contribute to unsafe or harmful environments. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that interpersonal violence and harassment in sport may involve multiple perpetrators, including coaches, peers, and other authority figures (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Hartill et al., 2023). This evidence has already identified the need to address the wider sport environment rather than focusing only on individual incidents or single actor groups.

The descriptive statistics for the perception about harassment variables indicated relatively low endorsement of beliefs that minimize, excuse, or justify harassment. Participants were generally unlikely to agree that the person “asked for it,” that the behaviour “was not harassment,” or that the perpetrator “did not mean it.” However, the comparatively higher score for “lied” suggests that doubts about the credibility of those reporting harassment may remain more pronounced than other minimizing beliefs. This is important because disbelief, victim-blaming, and ambiguity about what constitutes harassment are known barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. In sport, these barriers may be intensified by loyalty to the team, fear of retaliation, dependency on coaches, and concerns about reputation or selection. The findings therefore suggest that educational activities should not only define harassment but also address myths around false reporting, victim credibility, consent, coercion, and responsibility.

In general, the findings related to perceptions about harassment suggested that, overall, participants did not strongly endorse negative or dismissive perceptions of harassment-related incidents. This is encouraging and indicates that the target group may already have a relatively supportive baseline orientation. However, the score was not at the lowest possible level, which means that problematic beliefs are still present to some extent. From an intervention perspective, this points to the need for targeted awareness-raising rather than only general information provision. Training should explicitly challenge common minimizing narratives, such as “it was only a joke,” “they misunderstood,” “they provoked it,” or “they are exaggerating.” This is consistent with safeguarding literature arguing that prevention requires cultural change and not only individual knowledge acquisition (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

The findings for psychological safety were also informative. The mean score suggested a moderate rather than strong sense of safety. This indicates that participants may not necessarily feel unsafe, but they also do not clearly perceive the sport environment as fully protective or supportive. This is especially relevant because safeguarding depends not only on the existence



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of rules, but also on whether athletes believe that they can report concerns without negative consequences. The CoViS needs analysis identified the lack of comprehensive evidence, insufficient prevention measures, limited resources, and weak knowledge exchange as key challenges in the partner countries. The moderate safety score therefore reinforces the need to develop visible, trusted, and accessible reporting and support mechanisms.

The relatively high mean score for perceived ability to report harassment was a positive finding. Participants generally felt that they had the ability or confidence to act in harassment-related situations. This is important because perceived ability is a central determinant of behavioral intention in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In practical terms, athletes who believe they know what to do, how to respond, and where to seek help are more likely to intend to act. However, the variability in responses suggests that not all participants feel equally capable.

The correlation analysis further clarified the psychological pattern underlying intentions. Intentions were strongly and positively associated with perceived behavioral ability and weakly but significantly associated with safety. At the same time, intentions were negatively associated with victim-blaming and minimizing perceptions. This means that athletes were more willing to act when they felt capable and safe, and less willing to act when they interpreted the situation in ways that reduced its seriousness or questioned the credibility of the person reporting it. This pattern is consistent with behavior-change theory, which suggests that intentions are shaped by perceived capability, perceived barriers, and beliefs about the behavior and its consequences (Ajzen, 1991). It also aligns with safeguarding evidence showing that reporting is strongly influenced by trust, perceived consequences, and the perceived legitimacy of the complaint.

The correlations involving experiences with harassment were particularly important. Participants who reported more experiences tended to show stronger endorsement of some minimizing perceptions and lower intentions to act. This may suggest a process of normalization: repeated exposure to problematic behavior may make athletes more likely to view it as part of sport culture, less likely to label it as harassment, or less confident that action will lead to meaningful change. This interpretation is consistent with literature showing that harmful behaviors in sport can be embedded in cultures of silence, obedience, toughness, and tolerance of authority. It also strengthens the rationale for early prevention, because the aim should be to prevent problematic behaviors from becoming normalized within clubs, teams, and peer groups.

The regression analysis provided the strongest evidence for intervention priorities. The first model showed that perception variables explained a meaningful proportion of variance in intentions. However, when perceived behavioral ability and psychological safety were added,



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the explained variance increased substantially to 54.7%. This indicates that willingness to act is not explained only by whether athletes reject victim-blaming beliefs. It is also strongly dependent on whether they feel capable of acting and safe enough to do so. In the final model, perceived behavioral ability was the strongest positive predictor, followed by psychological safety, while “was not harassment” and “lied” remained significant negative predictors. This suggests that project resources should combine four elements: clear definitions of harassment, myth-challenging education, practical response training, and safe reporting pathways. Such a combined approach is consistent with the CoViS objective to develop educational resources, train multipliers, and involve sport organizations.

Qualitative study

The qualitative findings complement and deepen the quantitative results by showing how athletes, coaches, and sport stakeholders make sense of harassment, reporting, and safeguarding in everyday sport contexts. Across the interviews and focus groups, participants appeared to recognize sexual harassment and abuse as serious issues, but they also described uncertainty, hesitation, and contextual barriers that may prevent athletes from speaking up. This is consistent with the project rationale, which highlighted non-recognition and non-reporting of gender-based violence in sport as central problems to be addressed through education, data collection, educator training, and reporting mechanisms.

A first important qualitative theme concerned awareness and recognition. Participants' accounts suggested that many people in sport may recognize extreme forms of abuse but feel less certain about ambiguous behaviors, verbal comments, boundary violations, grooming, or repeated inappropriate interactions. This helps explain the quantitative finding that the perception “was not harassment” negatively predicted intentions. If athletes are uncertain whether a behavior qualifies as harassment, they may be less likely to report it or intervene. This aligns with the IOC consensus statement, which emphasizes the need for clear definitions, education, and policy implementation so that athletes and support personnel can identify harassment and abuse early rather than only after severe harm has occurred (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

A second theme related to normalization and sport culture. Qualitative participants appeared to describe sport environments where inappropriate comments, jokes, pressure, or unequal power relations may be dismissed as normal parts of training, discipline, or team culture. This interpretation fits the quantitative association between experiences and minimizing perceptions. When athletes are repeatedly exposed to problematic behaviors without clear institutional responses, they may become less likely to interpret them as serious or actionable. Previous



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European evidence has shown that interpersonal violence in sport is not rare and may be shaped by organizational and cultural conditions, including authority structures and tolerance of harmful practices (Vertommen et al., 2016; Hartill et al., 2023).

A third theme concerned barriers to reporting. Participants' accounts suggested that athletes may hesitate to disclose harassment because they fear negative consequences, disbelief, reputational damage, loss of opportunities, or conflict with coaches, teammates, clubs, and families. These qualitative findings are strongly aligned with the quantitative results showing that safety was a significant predictor of intention. Even when athletes recognize a situation as problematic, they may not act unless they believe that the reporting environment is safe, confidential, and responsive. This is particularly relevant in sport systems where formal safeguarding structures are weak or inconsistently implemented. The project proposal noted the absence or limited availability of policies, protocols, monitoring methodologies, and central bodies responsible for safeguarding in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece.

A fourth theme related to the role of coaches, staff, peers, and organizations. The qualitative data suggested that safeguarding is a shared responsibility and that athletes often look to adults, coaches, sport medicine personnel, club staff, and organizations to define acceptable behavior and respond to concerns. This aligns with the quantitative finding that incidents may involve different actors within the sport environment. It also supports the project's emphasis on training not only athletes but also coaches, multipliers, sport organizations, and other stakeholders. Previous safeguarding literature similarly argues that prevention requires whole-system change, including codes of conduct, education, reporting structures, monitoring, and accountability (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The CoViS project also recognizes that coaches and staff should support the holistic development of young athletes, not only sport performance.

A fifth theme concerns the need for practical, trusted, and accessible resources. Participants' views indicated that general awareness is not sufficient; athletes and sport stakeholders need concrete tools, examples, procedures, and guidance on what to do when harassment occurs. This finding is highly consistent with the regression analysis, where perceived behavioral control emerged as the strongest predictor of intention. In other words, athletes are more likely to act when they have actionable knowledge. Therefore, the qualitative results support the development of training modules, scenario-based learning, reporting guides, videos, and multiplier activities that translate safeguarding principles into everyday practice. This is also consistent with the project's stated aim to develop resources, tools, recommendations, dissemination materials, and a reporting platform.

The sixth theme highlighted the multiple barriers that prevent athletes from reporting sexual harassment or seeking help. Participants' accounts suggested that reporting is not simply a



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matter of individual willingness, but is strongly shaped by fear, uncertainty, and trust in the sport environment. Athletes may hesitate to disclose incidents because they fear not being believed, being blamed, damaging their reputation, losing their position in the team, or experiencing negative consequences from coaches, teammates, or sport organizations. This finding aligns closely with the quantitative results, where safety significantly predicted intentions to act, while the belief that someone may have “lied” negatively predicted intentions. In other words, participants are more likely to intend to respond when they feel safe, but less likely to do so when there is doubt about whether reports will be believed or taken seriously.

This theme is also consistent with previous safeguarding research showing that harassment and abuse in sport are often underreported due to power imbalances, dependency on coaches, fear of retaliation, loyalty to the team, and lack of confidence in organizational procedures. The finding therefore reinforces the need for reporting systems that are not only formally available, but also perceived as trustworthy, confidential, protective, and independent. This means that education should explicitly explain how reporting works, what happens after a report is made, who receives the information, how confidentiality is protected, and what measures exist to prevent retaliation. Strengthening trust in reporting procedures is therefore central to improving athletes’ willingness to act.

The seventh theme concerns the need for structured education, clear protocols, and a broader safeguarding culture within sport organizations. Participants’ views suggest that athletes, coaches, staff, and clubs require more than general awareness of sexual harassment; they need practical guidance, shared definitions, clear behavioral expectations, and accessible procedures for prevention and response. This theme strongly aligns with the quantitative finding that perceived ability to report harassment was the strongest predictor of intentions. Participants were more likely to intend to act when they felt capable of doing so, which indicates that education should focus on concrete skills rather than abstract information only. This theme also supports the development of a whole-organization safeguarding approach. Training should help athletes recognize harassment, understand boundaries, challenge victim-blaming beliefs, support peers, and know where and how to report. At the same time, coaches and staff should be trained in professional boundaries, safe communication, appropriate responses to disclosures, and their responsibilities in creating safe sport environments. Protocols should include codes of conduct, reporting pathways, referral procedures, confidentiality rules, and follow-up actions. This is consistent with international safeguarding recommendations, which emphasize that preventing harassment and abuse in sport requires education, policies, reporting mechanisms, accountability, and cultural change, rather than isolated awareness campaigns alone.



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Taken together, the qualitative findings suggest that the problem is not only a lack of information but also a lack of shared language, trust, confidence, and institutional clarity. Athletes may know that sexual harassment is wrong, but they may still be unsure whether a specific behavior should be reported, whether they will be believed, whether the organization will act, or whether reporting will create further harm. This helps explain why perceived safety and perceived behavioral control were central predictors in the quantitative study. The qualitative evidence therefore strengthens the practical implications of the survey: prevention efforts should move beyond awareness-raising and should create safer, more transparent, and more accountable sport environments.

Implications of education

Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings, the educational component of the project should be designed as a practical, evidence-informed safeguarding program that goes beyond general awareness-raising. The results showed that participants generally reported positive intentions to act, but these intentions were strongly shaped by perceived ability to report harassment, perceived safety, and the extent to which participants rejected victim-blaming or minimizing perceptions. Therefore, the education should aim to help athletes and sport stakeholders: recognize sexual harassment and abuse, challenge harmful myths, feel confident about how to respond, and trust that reporting can be safe and meaningful.

The educational content should include the following core modules.

1. Understanding sexual harassment, abuse, and safeguarding in sport

The first module should establish a shared understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, abuse, and safeguarding in sport. This is essential because both the survey and qualitative findings showed that some participants may struggle to identify or label certain behaviors as harassment. The module should explain different forms of harassment and abuse, including verbal, non-verbal, physical, digital, psychological, and power-based forms of misconduct. It should also clarify that harassment can occur not only between coaches and athletes, but also among teammates, staff members, volunteers, medical personnel, and other individuals in the sport environment.

This content could be scenario-based and adapted to everyday sport situations, such as inappropriate comments, unwanted touching, sexual jokes, private messaging, pressure to tolerate uncomfortable behavior, misuse of authority, and boundary violations. The IOC consensus statement emphasizes that harassment and abuse in sport include multiple forms of non-accidental violence and are often linked to power imbalances and organizational cultures, which supports the need for clear definitions and context-specific examples.



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2. Recognizing early warning signs and ambiguous situations

A second module could focus on recognizing early warning signs, especially because the qualitative findings suggested that athletes may recognize severe incidents more easily than subtle or ambiguous behaviors. The training should therefore help participants distinguish between acceptable sport interaction, poor communication, boundary violations, grooming behaviors, harassment, and abuse.

This module should include short case studies where participants decide whether a behavior is acceptable, concerning, or reportable. It should also cover situations that are often normalized in sport, such as comments about the body, pressure to accept intrusive behavior, coach favoritism, repeated private contact, jokes with sexual content, and behaviors dismissed as “team culture.” This is particularly important because the quantitative results showed that the belief that a situation “was not harassment” negatively predicted intentions to act. If participants cannot identify harassment, they are less likely to intervene or report it.

3. Challenging victim-blaming and minimizing beliefs

The educational program should include a specific module addressing victim-blaming, disbelief, and minimization. The quantitative findings showed relatively low endorsement of these beliefs overall, but the perceptions about harassment variables were negatively associated with intentions to act. In the regression analysis, the beliefs that the situation “was not harassment” and that the person “lied” remained significant negative predictors of intention. This indicates that education should directly address myths that reduce willingness to support victims or report concerns.

This module should challenge common misconceptions, such as: “they provoked it,” “it was only a joke,” “the person misunderstood,” “they are exaggerating,” “false reports are common,” or “the person did not mean it.” It should explain how these beliefs create silence, discourage disclosure, and protect harmful behavior. It should also encourage participants to adopt a supportive first response when someone discloses harassment: listen, believe, avoid blame, ensure safety, and refer the person to appropriate support. UNESCO has highlighted that violence against women and girls in sport is often underreported because of fear of stigma, exclusion, and reprisal, which reinforces the importance of addressing disbelief and victim-blaming in education.

4. Building perceived behavioral control: what to do, how to act, where to report

The strongest quantitative finding was that perceived ability to report harassment was the main predictor of intentions to act. Therefore, the educational content should be highly practical. Participants should leave the training knowing exactly what steps they can take if they experience, witness, or receive a disclosure of harassment.



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This module should include clear guidance on:

- how to respond in the moment;
- how to support a teammate or peer;
- how to document concerns safely;
- who to contact inside and outside the sport organization;
- how to use reporting channels;
- what information is needed when making a report;
- what confidentiality means and where its limits are;
- what to do when the alleged perpetrator is a coach, staff member, or person in authority.

The Council of Europe's child safeguarding resources identify education of stakeholders as a key action in the primary prevention of violence and abuse in sport. The project's training should therefore include practical tools such as flowcharts, reporting maps, "what to say" scripts, role-play exercises, and country-specific referral pathways.

5. Creating safety and trust in reporting

Because safety was a significant predictor of intention, education should also address the conditions under which athletes feel safe to speak up. This module could explain what a safe reporting environment looks like and what sport organizations must do to protect athletes from retaliation, exclusion, or reputational harm.

The content should cover confidentiality, anonymous reporting where available, safeguarding officers, independent reporting options, protection from retaliation, and follow-up after a report. Athletes should also learn that reporting does not always require them to handle the situation alone. Coaches and staff should be trained on how to receive reports appropriately, avoid dismissive responses, and activate safeguarding procedures. This module is especially important because the qualitative findings suggest that athletes may hesitate to report due to fear of consequences, lack of trust, or uncertainty about whether they will be believed. IOC safeguarding guidance highlights the importance of reporting mechanisms, case-management procedures, and the role of safeguarding officers in responding to harassment and abuse concerns.

6. Bystander intervention and peer responsibility

The frequency findings suggest that incidents may involve not only coaches or staff, but also teammates and other people in the sport environment. Therefore, education should include a module on bystander intervention and peer responsibility. Athletes should be trained not only to protect themselves, but also to recognize when a teammate may be at risk and to respond safely. The module should present different levels of intervention, such as direct intervention when safe, distraction, delegation to a trusted adult, documentation, and delayed support after



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the incident. It should also emphasize that bystanders should not put themselves or others at further risk, but they can play a crucial role in interrupting harmful behavior and supporting reporting. Recent bystander-training work in sport has emphasized helping coaches and sport participants recognize signs of harassment and abuse and respond appropriately.

7. Roles and responsibilities of coaches, staff, clubs, and sport organizations

The qualitative findings highlighted that safeguarding is a shared responsibility. Therefore, education should not target athletes only. Separate but connected training should be developed for coaches, athlete-support personnel, club administrators, volunteers, and parents where relevant.

For coaches and staff, the content should focus on professional boundaries, appropriate communication, safe use of digital media, responding to disclosures, mandatory reporting duties where applicable, and creating a team climate where athletes feel respected and protected. For sport organizations, the content should focus on policies, codes of conduct, recruitment and screening, safeguarding roles, complaint procedures, record-keeping, referral pathways, and monitoring. IOC guidance for international federations and national Olympic committees emphasizes that safeguarding policies should include definitions, reporting mechanisms, case-management procedures, and education for stakeholders.

8. Digital and social media harassment

Given the increasing role of digital communication in young athletes' lives, the educational materials should also include online harassment and digital boundary violations. This content should address inappropriate private messaging, pressure to share images, online sexual comments, image-based abuse, stalking, doxxing, impersonation, and abuse through social media platforms. Safe Sport International has recently highlighted online abuse as a growing safeguarding risk in sport, including sexual harassment, threats, stalking, doxxing, and image-based abuse.

This module should be especially practical, helping athletes and coaches understand safe communication rules, appropriate coach-athlete messaging, privacy settings, screenshot/documentation practices, and reporting routes for online incidents.

9. Cultural change and positive sport climate

Finally, an educational program should include content on creating a positive and respectful sport culture. The quantitative finding that experiences were associated with stronger minimizing perceptions and lower intentions to act suggests that repeated exposure may contribute to normalization. Education should therefore challenge the idea that harassment is part of sport culture, team bonding, discipline, or humor. Such a module could promote respect, dignity, consent, inclusion, athlete voice, and shared responsibility. It should encourage clubs



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and teams to develop explicit norms about acceptable behavior and to create regular opportunities for athletes to raise concerns. The focus should be not only on preventing serious incidents, but also on changing everyday behaviors and communication patterns that allow unsafe climates to develop.

Limitations and Conclusion

The present needs evaluation has limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the quantitative study did not include a measure of social desirability. Examining a sensitive issue such as sexual abuse may have prevented participants from disclosing abuse or making them reluctant in providing honest answers to the psychological variables. Future investigations should include social desirability measures to account for reluctance in disclosing sensitive information. Secondly, a convenience sample was recruited in the partner countries limiting the potential of the report to generalize to the total population. Thirdly, the number of participants in both studies was rather small and the results should be interpreted with caution as they may not reflect the whole population in the partner countries. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods findings provide a coherent evidence base for the development of educational material. The quantitative study identified the prevalence of relevant experiences, the importance of victim-blaming and minimizing beliefs, and the central role of perceived ability to report harassment and psychological safety in predicting intentions to act. The qualitative study explained how these patterns may emerge in real sport contexts, where ambiguity, normalization, fear of consequences, and weak reporting structures may reduce athletes' willingness to speak up. These findings are consistent with international evidence showing that harassment and abuse in sport are complex, relational, and organizational problems rather than isolated individual incidents (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Hartill et al., 2023).

The findings therefore strongly justify the emphasis on education, awareness-raising, training of multipliers, involvement of sport organizations, and reporting support. Future activities should focus on helping athletes recognize harassment, challenging myths and victim-blaming attitudes, strengthening practical response skills, and ensuring that reporting systems are perceived as safe, confidential, and effective. In doing so, the project can contribute not only to improved individual knowledge but also to broader cultural and organizational change in sport.

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