

## Article

# Discrimination in Youth Sport: Exploring the Experiences of European Coaches

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**Abstract:** Discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation remains a critical concern across Europe, including within the sphere of youth sports. Research has shown that youth sports can be a fertile environment for discrimination and bullying and that coaches play a key role in preventing or mitigating discriminatory situations. Given the crucial role of coaches, it is therefore important to build our understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and needs of those coaches concerning discrimination in sports. Against this background, this paper presents the results of an applied survey of 174 European youth sport coaches conducted as part of the INCLUDE project. In particular, this survey focuses on the experiences of coaches when witnessing and reporting discrimination, as well as their perspectives on what needs to be done in the policy and educational areas to combat issues of discrimination. Results show that 25% of coaches witness discrimination on a monthly basis and that fans or spectators are perceived as the most common perpetrators. To combat the issues, coaches report a need for greater policy support, funding, training, and awareness raising. To conclude, we discuss the practical, policy, and research implications of these findings.

**Keywords:** sport; physical activity; discrimination; racism; sexism; coaches; leisure; prevention; education



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## 1. Introduction

Across Europe, discrimination in all its forms remains a critical issue, especially within sport. Though sport organisations and sport policymakers extoll the virtues of sport and its ability to promote inclusion, tolerance, and life skill development [1–3], sport can be an aggressive, exclusive, or even discriminatory environment. As Elias and Dunning [4] pointed out nearly 40 years ago, emotional release and violence are often tolerated or even approved of in sport and this can bleed into various forms of discriminatory behaviour. In fact, negative or discriminatory behaviour is widely reported both anecdotally and scientifically within the sport sector [5–9] and, more broadly, traditional sport clubs are often less accessible to minority groups [10,11].

Though available sport-specific data are sparse, existing data hint at the extent of the problem. Kick it out—English football’s equality and inclusion organisation—notes that reports of discriminatory behaviour across all levels of football in the 2022–23 season increased by over 65% compared to the previous season. Likewise, results from the Outsport project find that 90% perceive homophobia or transphobia to be a problem in sport [5]. And experimental work has similarly found that sports clubs respond less frequently to enquiries received from individuals with “foreign-sounding names” [9]. In summary, these barriers and incidents severely limit the social and developmental potential often associated with sport.

To address this, both policy and research highlight the need to raise awareness and knowledge amongst stakeholders in the sport sector [8,12], while also establishing clear reporting and remedy mechanisms [12,13]. At the front line of this are sport coaches,

who often have the most immediate and direct contact with sport participants, including not only athletes but also fans, parents, and officials. Coaches are not only expected to support sport skill development but are (increasingly) called upon to foster a safe inclusive atmosphere for all participants [8,14,15]. Indeed, sport coaches are an essential target group for any sport-based anti-discrimination work; with between 5 and 9 million coaches in Europe, they represent a professional group roughly equivalent in size to primary school teachers [16]. Following from this, several awareness, education, and support mechanisms have been developed to assist coaches in tackling these challenges. For instance, thematic organisations such as FARE or Kick it Out raise awareness and provide anti-discrimination materials to sport organisations. Elsewhere, a number of education programmes have also emerged within sport, looking to raise awareness and support proactive behaviours against discrimination [17–19].

Despite this, education initiatives often face challenges in meaningfully raising awareness or changing attitudes [17,20]. At their worst, anti-discrimination education may simply reproduce generalisations or stereotypes, leaving coaches poorly prepared to deal with the nuance and complexity of real-life situations [20]. And, even when education is effective and coaches can properly identify discriminatory behaviour, coaches may struggle to adequately handle or report incidents. In many cases, coaches may not be aware of organisational policies concerning discrimination, safeguarding, or participant care, there may be insufficient support provided for those policies, or such policies may simply be non-existent [13]. In short, as Tuakili-Wosornu [21] and colleagues note in the safeguarding context, there is a need for individuals and organisations to be ready to recognise, report, respond to, and remedy incidents.

Given the crucial role played by coaches in fostering safe inclusive sporting environments, understanding their experiences with discrimination and capturing their perspectives on potential solutions is vital to building appropriate and responsive educational resources and policies [22]. Using a survey of 174 coaches from five European countries, this short research report seeks to answer three distinct but related questions. (a) What experiences do coaches have witnessing discriminatory incidents? (b) What experiences do coaches have reporting discriminatory incidents? (c) What do stakeholders in sport need to do to reduce discrimination?

Moving forward, this study progresses in three further steps. First, the background and methodology of the survey will be presented in more detail. Second, the core results, especially as it relates to the above research questions, will be outlined. Finally, these results will be contextualized and discussed with a view to developing recommendations for research and practice.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Background

The following data collection took place against the backdrop of the Erasmus+ funded INCLUDE project (#101050474). As a six-partner five-country pan-European cooperation, this project aims to support youth sport clubs in actively tackling discrimination and broadening the opportunity to participate in sport for youth from all backgrounds. Ultimately, this project led to the development of a curriculum for inclusive sport academies and clubs, as well as a gamified e-learning platform. As such, the main target groups of the project are grassroots, non-professional, amateur clubs, and academies, particularly coaches and young people aged between 12–18 years. To understand the needs of those target groups and identify challenges to tackle existing barriers linked to discrimination in the field of youth sport, an online survey was undertaken to identify the crucial role of coaches as well as the fundamental need to combat issues of discrimination.

Over two years from 2022 to 2024, the partners developed and tested a curriculum of digital training modules aligned with coaches' needs and expectations. To support the development of the programme, the partners conducted extensive data collection with coaches and sports stakeholders, including through the online survey presented in this

paper. Ultimately, a toolkit and e-learning curriculum were developed and piloted Europe-wide. The e-learning course, as well as a description of the curriculum, can be found via [www.include-project.eu](http://www.include-project.eu).

## 2.2. Data Collection

The online survey was created in English by the consortium of the project and translated into Greek, German, and Italian. The aim of the survey was to obtain a holistic overview of coaches' experience with discrimination in sports in each country, including as it relates to their experiences witnessing, dealing with, and reporting discrimination. The survey was handed out digitally to sports professionals, coaches, and trainers connected to partner organisations in Greece, Italy, Ireland, Austria, and Germany in the summer of 2023. As the project relies on a consortium of sport-focused organisations, convenience sampling was used to reach out to sport coaches and professionals within the networks of these respective organisations. As such, the main target groups of the survey were grassroots, non-professional, and amateur clubs as well as academy staff and sport coaches working with adolescents. Overall, the survey consists of 21 questions with 15 closed and 6 open-ended questions, all referring to different levels of discrimination experiences in sports. All data were collected and stored anonymously and informed consent was obtained by respondents.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

The survey data were collected by the partner organisations and translated into English. The authors then collected all 174 responses in two Excel spreadsheets and divided them into closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions consisted of five yes/no questions and ten multiple-choice questions and formed the first section of the survey. The first part of the questionnaire focused on the experience and/or witnessing of discriminatory abuse whilst coaching, managing, or watching sport as well as the reporting of discriminable behaviour. The second part of the questionnaire emphasised the involvement of different organisations and stakeholders in anti-discrimination measures. Given the nature of the data collected, analysis was conducted mainly through descriptive statistical tests (e.g., sums and means) for each question as well as a content analysis of the open-ended answers, thus allowing us to provide an accessible overview of coaches' experiences and insights on this topic.

## 3. Results

The following results are divided into two distinct sub-sections. First, some of the main results from the closed questions, which focus on experiences with and responses to discrimination, are presented. Afterward, the second sub-section demonstrates the results of the latter part of the questionnaire, including six open-ended questions focusing on the role of different stakeholders in combating discrimination in sports.

### 3.1. Experiences and Responses to Discrimination

#### 3.1.1. Frequency, Types, and Perpetrators of Discriminatory Abuse

For the survey, we broadly understand discriminatory abuse as verbal, physical, or emotional behaviours against a person based on the group to which they are perceived to belong. However, no formal definition was provided within the survey as we did not wish to predispose the answers received from the coaches. Based on the results, over 60% ( $n = 111$ ) had witnessed discriminatory abuse at some point during youth sport events or training. Of that, 35 individuals identified themselves as minorities and the vast majority, 82.3%, reported witnessing discriminatory abuse. As for the 139 respondents not identifying themselves as minorities, 58.3% reported witnessing discriminatory abuse.

Most participants witnessed discriminatory abuse once a year or less ( $n = 62$ ), followed by once a month ( $n = 22$ ). Racism and sexism received the most mentions as the specific type of abuse witnessed, with racism being mentioned 33 times and sexism as well as

discrimination based on sexual orientation 32 times. Ableism was reported 13 times in total. In terms of discriminatory abuse, fans were perceived as the most frequent perpetrators ( $n = 87$  times), followed by spectators ( $n = 72$ ), players ( $n = 49$ ), and referees ( $n = 30$ ).

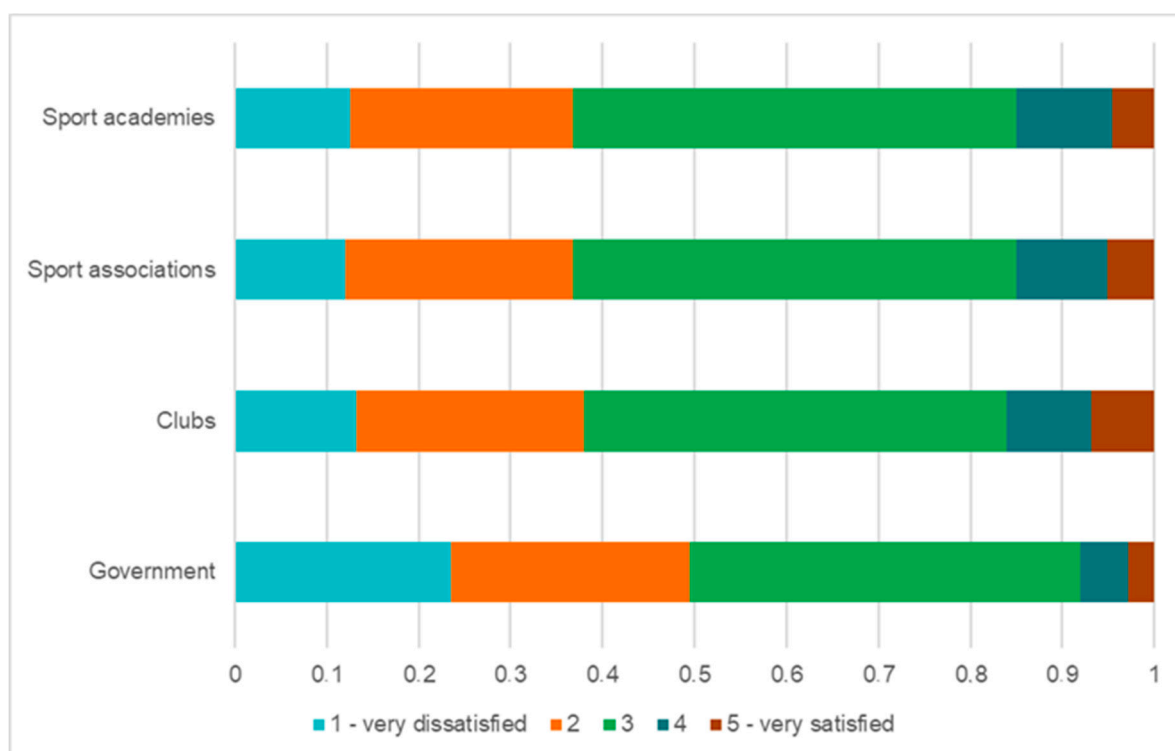
### 3.1.2. Reporting Discrimination

Related to the witnessing of discriminatory abuse, the survey also asked coaches if and how they reported incidents. However, more than half of those witnessing an incident did not report it to either a responsible person at the venue, a sports association, or an NGO ( $n = 73$ , 65.7%). Hence, only 38 people reported witnessing discrimination. The people reporting the incident were then asked about their satisfaction with the reporting. On a scale from one to five, where five is very satisfied and one is very dissatisfied, almost half of the respondents ( $n = 18$ ) were very dissatisfied or not satisfied. Only six people replied as being satisfied or very satisfied with the outcome of the reporting. Furthermore, the respondents who did not report the incidents were asked for their reason not to do so. Overall, 21 people did not know how to report discrimination in the sports setting, while 19 thought it would not change anything if they did report it. In terms of becoming a target, eight people raised their concerns that reporting discrimination could result in becoming a target themselves. Further reasons mentioned in this regard were the fact that it was a public event ( $n = 1$ ) or that there was no trust in the reporting mechanism ( $n = 1$ ). In open responses, one person even gave insights into their own experience of discrimination in sports, illustrating that being a young gymnast in the case of the assault, the phenomenon was almost daily, making them initially feel it was part of the training. When it was reported to the parents, appropriate action was taken according to the person.

### 3.1.3. Tackling Discrimination

Considering the addressing and solving of discrimination, coaches were asked whether enough is being done to tackle discrimination in youth sports. Looking at the different stakeholders, we see that the respondents feel there is not enough being done when it comes to tackling discrimination and that academies, sports associations, clubs, and governments all have a large role to play in making youth sport more inclusive. At the governmental level, almost half of the respondents are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the current work on anti-discrimination in sports ( $n = 86$ ). Only 10 people responded as being satisfied or very satisfied in this regard. On the sports stakeholder level, a similar picture was created. Most respondents were very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the current anti-discrimination work of sport academies ( $n = 45$ ) and sports associations ( $n = 55$ ) as well as clubs ( $n = 66$ ). Only sport clubs present a higher level of satisfaction, with a total of 16% of the respondents being satisfied or very satisfied with their current anti-discrimination work. Overall satisfaction per stakeholder is illustrated in Figure 1.

Related to this, we note that the responses underscore that anti-discrimination training can be one potentially valuable way to tackle discriminatory behaviour. In total, one-third ( $n = 57$ ) responded that they have participated or were offered diversity or anti-discrimination training/information in either their sport clubs ( $n = 44$ ), sports academies ( $n = 9$ ), sports associations ( $n = 5$ ), or other stakeholders such as schools, the workplace, and other organisations in the field of sport and anti-discrimination ( $n = 6$ ). Moreover, over 80% of the respondents ( $n = 151$ ) are currently interested in participating in a diversity and anti-discrimination training session, while only 13% are not interested in doing so ( $n = 23$ ). Still, the necessity of such programmes is recognised by almost 95% of the participants who agree that such training is needed ( $n = 165$ ).



**Figure 1.** Responses per stakeholder for the question “is enough being done to tackle discrimination in youth sports by the following...”.

### 3.2. The Role of Stakeholders in Fighting Discrimination

#### 3.2.1. The Role of Governments

Governments take a crucial role when it comes to tackling discrimination in youth sports and beyond. After all, governments can play a crucial role in implementing policies or programmes such as incident reporting hotlines, training programmes, or allocating funding. For our survey respondents, the most frequent replies concerning actions the government could take against discrimination in sport concerned promotion and/or raising awareness of the issue. To counteract discrimination, education needs to start in schools and sport clubs. The teaching of coaches as well as anti-discrimination workshops were seen as fundamental to combat discrimination in society. According to a Greek coach, governments should “organize training seminars and related events for clubs, sports associations, students and teachers of Physical Education in schools, academies at the national level, as well as to provide motivation to achieve the creation of an institution and related activities around this particular piece”. Specific workshops, for instance, compulsory disability awareness training in primary schools or female empowerment workshops, make it possible to visualize the relevance of the topic and raise people’s awareness.

Continuous communication and awareness-raising of the topic were other major aspects of responses. In particular, campaigns on TV, radio, and social media could increase awareness and motivate associations to engage in training courses or activities in this regard. Another aspect mentioned was the issue of funding. According to the survey participants, governments need to invest more money in anti-discrimination strategies in sports. Campaigns as well as smaller NGOs working in this field need financial security provided by the state to ensure long-lasting effects. Lastly, policies should be implemented such as a centralized monitoring system as well as anti-discrimination policies. This could also include ways of punishment if sport stakeholders do not adhere to such policies.

### 3.2.2. The Role of Sport Clubs and Academies

Similarly, when asking the participants what sports clubs need to do to help tackle discrimination in youth sports, the main answers were the education of different stakeholders as well as the awareness raising of the issue. Educational programs such as anti-discrimination training, workshops, or courses are needed for staff, coaches, and athletes as well as parents. As an Irish coach stated, "I think sports clubs are doing a lot with the resources they have. But to continue this they need to continually upskill their coaches". The upskilling and continuous education of everyone is a key component to promoting long-lasting inclusion. Likewise, respondents highlighted how academies should conduct awareness-raising seminars and foster the visibility of the issue to a greater extent. As a Greek participant stated, the sport academies need to "give equal weight to building social skills and values, beyond the sports part and put some relevant activities and seminars for athletes-coaches-organizational members in their monthly program, requesting (and at the same time putting as a question if there is no response) the relevant guidance-support from the competent partner bodies".

Beyond providing training and awareness-raising materials, some respondents highlighted the need for club or academy policies to deal with discriminatory behaviour more stringently. For instance, an Italian respondent highlighted the need to "spread and promote a non-discriminatory policy". Concrete recommendations in this respect included background checks for hired coaches, as well as reporting and disciplinary policies, with some even hinting toward the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy on the club level. Based on this, discriminatory behaviour could lead to sanctions or even exclusion from the sports club.

### 3.2.3. The Role of Sport Associations

Sport associations, like governments themselves, play an important role in setting sport-specific regulations and distributing funding to clubs. As such, they are also considered a crucial actor in the anti-discrimination area. And much like the sports clubs, sport associations are seen as needing to provide educational workshops on anti-discrimination for their staff. Acknowledging their central role in setting standards and distributing funding for a certain sport, respondents further recognized the role of associations in coordinating activities between clubs and providing sufficient funding. In addition, the education of parents and volunteers was mentioned, stating that workshops created by marginalized groups have the effect of emphasizing that sport has an educational role. One Italian coach stated that "offering experiences of those who have experienced discrimination to make them understand what it means and avoid it". Finally, as with clubs and academies, some policy-related solutions were proposed, including a no-tolerance policy on discriminatory behaviour.

### 3.2.4. Education and Training

Reflecting the importance of education and training in this field, as well as the pedagogical goals of the INCLUDE project, the survey lastly asked the participants about the most important content to include when developing a training program for youth coaches and staff about inclusion and fighting discrimination. According to the survey, the most important items to include were specific training activities and general awareness of discrimination and diversity and content on specific marginalized groups, such as women, LGBTQIA+, or people with disabilities. As one Irish coach put it, there is a need for "a person-centred approach. One size doesn't fit all. Every person has a place in the community."

For instance, some of the specific training activities mentioned included hands-on activities to foster team building and unconscious bias training. The need for specific educational tools for young people was also mentioned. As one Irish participant stated, "reaching out to young people is the best place to make changes for the future."

Relatedly, participants also offered insights on the types of people and experiences that should be included in training. Numerous responses hinted at the need to offer real-world examples and “include people that have experienced discrimination” within educational materials. Similarly, one Irish participant stated that there should even be “a liaison officer from a minority group on the executive”. Furthermore, cooperation with psychologists was also mentioned in the context of educational or training offers.

#### 4. Discussion

Through the survey conducted as part of the INCLUDE project, we have worked to further map out coaches’ experiences and perspectives related to discrimination in sport, while also capturing their perceptions about potential actions to be taken. Obviously, we do recognise that this study has limitations, especially as it concerns a relatively small sample size and potential biases generated by the convenience sampling approach. After all, sport organisations engaging in anti-discrimination work may be predisposed to sampling coaches who are already discrimination aware. Having said that, as the tracking of coach information is notoriously uneven across Europe, it is often difficult to engage in more representative forms of sampling for this group. Nonetheless, we would most certainly encourage larger work to be done with this group related to this important topic.

Overall, much like previous projects or initiatives [5,6], our results further confirm the extent to which discrimination—as well as other forms of negative or abusive behaviours—pose a challenge in the field of sports. Nearly 60% of respondents indicated witnessing discrimination, with around 28% even noting witnessing it at least once every three months. Perhaps even more concerning, many of those who witnessed abuse did not go on to report it, most often either because they did not know how to report it or felt it would not lead to anything. In turn, this directly connects to many of the other findings and recommendations within the survey. For one, only one-third of the coaches had received anti-discrimination training or information, highlighting a clear missed opportunity for sport associations, clubs, and academies to educate coaches on how to recognise, deal with, and report discrimination. Indeed, it is most likely that coaches did not receive such training because of a lack of proactivity from these organisations, as nearly all respondents recognized a need for it and would be interested in participating in such training.

Flowing from this, coaches proposed some clear directions for the content and form of training, including providing general awareness as well as directly integrating experiences of discrimination. Furthermore, coaches recognised that this training should be holistic. The survey underlined the fact that anti-discrimination training should start at a young age already and needs to be included on all stakeholder levels. The target groups of these educational workshops are not only coaches but also their parents, athletes, staff, and volunteers.

Yet, if coaches do not know how or feel confident in reporting incidents, this is also because of the many significant perceived gaps in policy or implementation within the sport organisations that would typically be responsible for handling such issues. In terms of funding, the results show a high need for funding on a regional, national, and European level to provide the necessary training courses for coaches and stakeholders to learn how to deal with discrimination and how to best include minority or marginalized groups. On the policy level, overall guidelines at the national as well as international level for coaches are needed, when tackling discrimination and seeking to promote and develop inclusive sporting practices. It is also apparent that there is a need for low-threshold solutions in terms of reporting discriminatory behaviour both quickly and anonymously. Whether on the pitch, during training or as a spectator, sports clubs, academies, and associations need to find solutions to this matter. Finally, it is interesting to note that open-ended answers did not generally address providing pathways or support integrating more coaches from diverse backgrounds. Though diversity and representation within sporting actors are considered important—that diverse individuals should create and take space within the sport [23]—this was not a salient feature of the open-ended responses. Though this outcome

may be related to the wording or context of the survey, this could also signal a potential blind spot for the coaches surveyed.

Looking forward, these results point to clear implications for practice and research. From a practical perspective, there is a clear need for sport leaders and policymakers to deal with discrimination in sport in a much more active engaged manner. Mandating anti-discrimination education for key stakeholder groups, providing clear policy guidelines, and establishing reporting mechanisms are obvious recommendations that flow from this work. Likewise, sufficient stable funding needs to be allocated to ensure adequate implementation of such measures. Sport organisations, however, do not need to start from scratch here. There are numerous educational materials and policy guidelines already available, including as they relate to analogous areas such as intercultural education [24], anti-racism [17], and athlete safeguarding [21]. The project associated with this paper has likewise developed online learning materials and attempts to respond to the needs identified by this survey and other research within the project. As for research, the field would clearly benefit from a more comprehensive exploration of how discrimination is experienced and dealt with from the perspectives of all stakeholder groups. In particular, here, we highlight the need for further work that engages with how coaches, as well as volunteers and staff, witness, perceive, and deal with discrimination. As these individuals are often at the front lines of delivering and managing sport, their insights on this topic can significantly influence the conception of educational tools and the adaptation of policy measures. For instance, understanding what influences attitudes and awareness of discrimination amongst coaches is a key concern for future research, as knowledge of what makes coaches more discrimination blind or aware is crucial to developing effective awareness and training campaigns. This is especially relevant considering our results, which show higher reported levels of reported discriminatory abuse amongst minority coaches. Parents should also be added as a specific target group, as they play a key role in modelling tolerant open-minded behaviour and often also double as spectators who set the tone as attendees of youth sport events and are at the heart of important relationships between athletes and coaches [25].

## 5. Conclusions

This paper highlighted the results of an applied survey of 174 European youth sport coaches and focused specifically on the experiences of coaches when witnessing and reporting discrimination, as well as their perspectives on what needs to be done by various stakeholders to combat issues of discrimination in sport. The results show that 25% of coaches report witnessing discrimination monthly and that fans or spectators are viewed as the most common perpetrators. Yet, most coaches are hesitant to report discrimination, with 65% witnessing but not reporting incidents. This points to a significant need for more training to support coaches in preventing, identifying, and reporting discrimination, as well as a need for robust effective reporting mechanisms to be in place.

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