

Leveling the Playing Field: Combating Discrimination in Sports Diplomacy

By Aieshah Balmori, Beatrice Borrelli, Alexandra Gérard, Ivan Kascelan, Katarina Marinkovikj, Niko Matsuoka, Daniel Mois, Alina-Mihaela Olăreanu, Phan Thi Hai Yen, Ana María Sánchez Antelo, Asher Stein, Imogen Wymer, Pereira Soares Aline Gil, Céleste Nonnenmacher

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sport has the power to change the world. It's a language that crosses all boundaries, bringing hope in times of despair. The Lisbon Treaty of 2009 paved the way for acquiring specific competence in the realm of sports by the EU; according to Article 165 (2), the development of the European dimension in sports will be achieved by maintaining the moral and physical integrity of athletes, particularly the youngest, and by encouraging fairness and transparency in competitions (Katarzyna Anna Iskra & Olivier Yves Alain Renard, 2023). This legal framework is particularly important as a subject of analysis, since sport can help ameliorate complex sociopolitical conflicts and has a major positive economic impact on the Union. It has great potential to challenge racial barriers and can scoff at all forms of prejudice, racism, discrimination and inequality. Most concretely, sports have always played a key role in EU and member state foreign policy: its accessible nature and wide appeal have made it a primary tool in the bloc's efforts to deepen soft power and facilitate cultural exchange.

But the world of sport remains imperfect; it is also a 400 billion-euro industry where inequity and bigotry persist. We present in this policy brief three distinct (though certainly overlapping) endemic issues in the world of sport, and suggest EU-level policy to combat them:

1. **Corruption and ineffective soft diplomacy**
2. **Gender inequality**
3. **Racism and discrimination**

Firstly, sport has a huge potential **as a tool of soft power and cultural influence**, however, the unleashing of this potential has not been fully unpacked in overcoming social problems and cleavages, such as corruption.

Regarding **gender inequality**, we identify six striking policy failures. All in all, women are:

1. less likely than men to participate in sports;
2. less likely than men to become coaches;
3. underrepresented in leadership roles;
4. face inequalities in the labor market;
5. comparatively ignored by the media;
6. subject to unacceptable rates of physical, sexual and psychological violence.

Lastly, regarding **racism and discrimination**, we highlight the inadequacy of the current EU directives in addressing these issues in sports, particularly concerning racism, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination.

PROBLEM #1: Corruption & Ineffective Soft Diplomacy

Historically, sport in Europe has served as a powerful means for fostering peaceful international relations by promoting a sense of shared European identity. Nevertheless, the EU adopted its first concrete sport-diplomacy strategy less than ten years ago, in contrast to the well-established stature of the US and China in the last century. To address this shortcoming, **Article 165 TFEU** gave the EU some limited competencies in the field of sport: the first was the **High-Level Group (HLG) on Sport Diplomacy**, established by the European Commission in 2015. Since then, the EU has taken its first strategic steps by adopting, in 2016, the **inter alia Council Conclusions on Sport Diplomacy**. This led to the first practical steps into sports diplomacy, notably with the 2018 launch of the **EU-Japan Policy Dialogue on Education, Youth and Sport**. The EU also launched **Erasmus+**, which has become one of the most important contemporary appendages of EU soft power. Nevertheless, the cooperation between member states should be strengthened with the final purpose of collectively promoting EU interests and values on a global scale.



Corruption scandals and money laundering have cast a shadow on the EU's ability to leverage sports as a positive force in international relations.

On the other hand, in recent years the EU has faced internal challenges that have diverted attention and resources away from sports diplomacy. The **increasing politicization of sports events** has become a core contributor to the weakening efficacy of soft power. Major tournaments and competitions, once seen as opportunities for amelioration through friendly competition, have become arenas for geopolitical rivalries and controversies. Instances of boycotts, protests, and disputes over hosting rights have tarnished the image of sports as a neutral ground for diplomacy.

Corruption scandals and money laundering within private sports federations and governing bodies have cast a shadow on the EU's ability to leverage sports as a positive force in international relations. The manipulation of matches for financial gain both tarnishes the authenticity of competitions and diminishes the credibility of the EU's soft power initiatives. To this extent, we can mention the significant suspicions of corruption in the choice of Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup by FIFA through bribes and vote-buyings. In order to combat the corruption issue, on the 26th of April 2022, **Europol** and **UEFA** met to identify new ways to investigate cases related to sports corruption, both expressing their strong commitment to tackling match-fixing during games. Since corruption is still ever present in sports, *"there is a need to focus on preventative measures as well as legal penalties"*¹ and *"support the development of common definitions and measurement frameworks for 'good governance' and its component parts."*²

[1] [Mapping of Corruption in Sport in the EU. A report to the European Commission – Executive Summary](#), Ecorys and Dr. Argyro Elisavet Manoli (Loughborough University). ECORYS. Directorate General for education and culture Youth and Sport. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018. ISBN 978-92-76-08748-9, doi: 10.2766/785734. European Union, 2018. Quoted on 02.12.2023.
[2] *IBID.*

Proposed Policy Options

Proposal #1: Policy option for the promotion of sports diplomacy by diminishing and potentially eradicating corruption.

The most important tool to battle corruption in sports is effective **communication, coordination and exchange of information** among key government entities (criminal justice and law enforcement authorities) and between sports betting entities and sports governing bodies. This encompasses the **strengthening of regulatory frameworks, enhancing oversight mechanisms and promoting ethical practices** to restore EU's sports diplomacy to a position of **trust and credibility** on the international stage. Furthermore, the EU can use sports as a **soft power tool** to promote its **core values, interests and ideologies** across the globe. The policy option proposal would thus consist of a **Transnational Body for Oversight and Regulation of Corruption**, and a new **campaign initiative to promote sports as a tool of soft power**.

Transnational Body for Oversight and Regulation of Corruption (TBORC)

To appropriately address corruption in sports, the EU needs to have a **supranational institution** with its headquarters in one member state, and an office in every other member state. The aim of this institution would be: **to conduct research and investigation on up-to-date corruption trends, and then propose solutions based on the data collected**. In an ever more globalized and digitalized world, it is important to **keep up to date** with the latest events and trends to develop **sufficient solutions** to the complex problem of corruption which often entangles various factors and actors. At the end of every year, each appointed office would submit a **detailed report** of the **situation in their member state country** to the main institution, accompanied by proposals and solutions. The main institution would keep in touch and forward **reports/suspensions/doubts** to **higher legislative authorities** if further investigation is needed. Such an institution aims to have **oversight** of any activities that go against the **values of sports conduct** and that **undermine the credibility** of sports in the Union. Having one main transnational EU institution that connects every member state is important because it would **enhance communication, coordination and flow of information between different member states regarding sports corruption**.

Campaign Initiative to Promote Sports as a Tool of Soft Power

Famous athletes are **role models** to many, especially younger generations. They have the **power to mobilize and influence the masses, portraying a positive image of the member state they're coming from, simultaneously of the EU**. This campaign initiative would encompass **heavy media coverage** broadcasted on TV, but also on social media (to reach young audiences) and in newspapers (to reach older generations as well). The media campaign would feature **famous athletes and sports teams** about the flag they are representing and would consist of **interviews and short videos**. For example, a short video of the life story of a tennis player from Czechia – how they started their career, what were their first national clubs/coaches, and how they managed to gain prominence on the international tennis scene. The interviews would ask questions like "What about home do you miss the most when traveling on tour?", "What is a place you would recommend for a tourist visit in your home country?" or "What is your favorite hometown dish?". These kinds of questions require answers that would **promote the EU's culture, values, traditions and strong sportsmanship spirit**.

PROBLEM #2:

Gender Inequality

Although women's participation in sports has risen considerably these past 50 years, they are still subject to inequalities with their male counterparts, in terms of discrimination, salary, representation and media coverage.

Firstly, **women are still subject to the gender wage gap**. Even though the Treaty of Rome purported the "right to equal pay for women and men for equal work or work of equal value"¹, the European Commission pointed out that women in the EU continue to earn less than men with the average gender pay gap standing at 13% (European Commission, 2023). Actually, "83% of sports now award men and women equal prize money, with cricket, golf and football displaying the greatest pay gaps"².

Second, **women are the victims of gender-based discrimination**, especially in sports that are traditionally related to men. Consider a recent experiment where participants watched clips of elite female and male football players, one group watching the videos unmodified and the control watching with player gender obscured by blurring: the study demonstrated that "participants rate men's video higher, but only when they know they are watching men"³. These discriminations can also lead to violence, psychological pressure and sexual harassment and abuses.

Thirdly, **women are underrepresented in sports leadership and educative positions**. Between 20% and 30% of all sports coaches in Europe are women (Ivana Katsarova, 2019). This lack of female models is concerning, as they can be a source of inspiration for others to "realize similar achievements"⁴ or a way to obtain "insight and advice"⁵ on how to access such an environment.

Finally, **women receive less visibility in the sports media**, which reduces their ability to attract sponsors and thus increases their profits. Indeed, "more than 85% of the coverage is dedicated to male athletes"⁶. Also, there is a very limited number of women working in the field of sports media.

To face these issues, the European football governing body UEFA proposed a development program for the 2020–2023 period, in order to develop women's football at the national level, by providing financial support and oriented expertise. Besides, the European Commission published its gender equality strategy for 2020–2025, with the aim to promote "women's and girls' participation in sport and physical activity"⁷, so as the "gender balance in leadership positions within sports organizations"⁸. However, these issues are still prevalent in the world of sports, and a lot still needs to be done to overcome them.

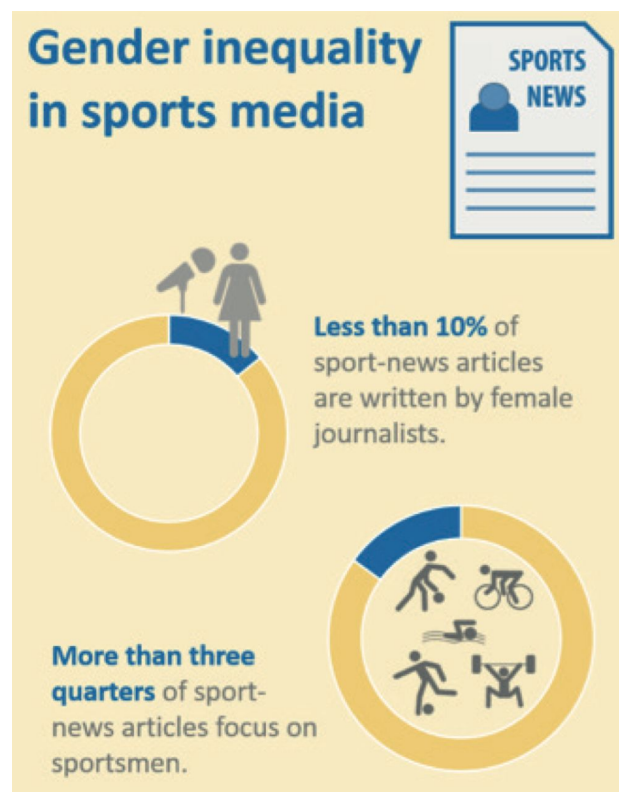


Photo Source: European Union and the Council of Europe (https://m.ec.europa.eu/fin/fin-forecast-gender-equality-sport-media_en?fbclid=IwAR13071940)

[1] [Equal pay for equal work in spirit of Treaty of Rome on business and women - Rules on pay transparency](#), EUR-Lex, Access to European Union Law, 12/07/2023. Quoted on 04.12.2023.

[2] [Gender Pay Gap in the EU increases to 13% in Final Deal](#), European Commission - Statement, Brussels, 14.11.2023, STATEMENT/23/5692. Quoted on 04.12.2023.

[3] [Gender information and perceived media discrimination with professional soccer and football](#), Carlos Gomez-Gonzales, Helmut Dietl, David Berril & Cornelia Nesselroder, The Author(s), Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group, 11/07/2023, Sport Management Review, DOI: 10.1080/14413523.2023.2233341. Quoted on 04.12.2023.

[4] [GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORTS: IS GROWING UP CHANGING THE GAME?](#), European Parliament, EPRS, European Parliamentary Research Service, Author: Ivana Katsarova; Graphics: Samy Chahri, Members' Research Service, PE 646192 – March 2020. Quoted on 04.12.2023.

[5] [IBID](#).

[6] [IBID](#).

[7] [COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025](#), EUR-Lex, Access to European Union Law, European Commission, Brussels, 05.03.2020, COM(2020)152 final, Document 52020DC0152.

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[8] [IBID](#).



Proposed Policy Options



Proposal #2: Policy for Gender Equality

The general population is mainly **unaware** of the discrimination, vulnerability and abuse of women in sports. As a solution, we propose a heavily covered **media campaign** to raise awareness of women's discrimination in sports and promote the role of women as leaders. In addition, we believe this would further encourage the participation of young women in sports.

The campaign will consist of two parts: **coverage of the problem** and **coverage of the solution**.

To raise awareness, the proposed policy option would fund **broadcast interviews** and **short movies** to educate the general public on the specific ways in which women are discriminated against in sports. The first steps to solving a problem are **acknowledgement** and **dialogue**. The interviews are an opportunity to hear first-hand, **real-life stories** of girls and women who were faced with difficulties in their careers; in-person interviews are a powerful tool because they convey **emotion** which can make an impact on the audience. Interviewees can be famous sports women but also any other female athlete that would be willing to share their story. By raising awareness we can educate ourselves and learn how to hold ourselves, and our communities **accountable**. The women who speak up in interviews would **encourage** the rest who face/witness similar issues to **speak up** instead of staying silent. **Speaking up, reporting injustices, and holding the perpetrators accountable for gender-related discrimination in sports would directly reduce the problem and would convey a clear message that we say no.** The interviews and short movies would be broadcasted across the EU and covered by (social) media to elevate audience exposure.

The second part is coverage of the solution which encompasses the **encouragement of women's participation in sports and creating a safe space in sports for girls/women**. The policy proposal is the launching of women's **sports events**, in both a field and a conference setting. The events would feature **prominent leaders** from women's sports who would share their success stories and encourage young girls to participate by creating **safe networks**. The field events will be held at sports centers/courts where young girls and women get the chance to meet and play with successful sportswomen. The conference would encompass a more formal setting where different solutions to sports discrimination will be verbally discussed. All of it is going to be publicly broadcasted and covered by the media as well, to promote a **healthy space for sports** where all women are welcome and safe, but also to show **enthusiasm for improvement** and give hope to young girls that we are working on transforming our sports system.



PROBLEM #3:

Racism and Discrimination

Sport can be a potent force in the fight against discrimination and racism. As a domain that transcends geographical, cultural, religious and social boundaries, it has the power to build bridges with marginalized groups where other schemes have failed (Katsarova, 2021). Indeed, sport can present itself as a social configuration that enhances social inclusion (Marivoet, 2014) through the creation of a single 'sporting community' that operates under a unified institutional and ethical framework (Katsarova, 2021).

Outside of the sporting field, the EU has tried to establish a legal framework to combat discrimination. The general principles of non-discrimination and equality are affirmed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and reinforced in articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on the EU, and articles 10, 19 and 67 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. This legal arsenal is accompanied by several directives and framework decisions, such as the Racial Equality Directive, the Victims' Rights Directive and the Framework Decision on Combating Racism and Xenophobia (Katsarova, 2021), all aimed at increasing individual protection.



“24% of individuals have experienced racist harassment” - 2017 FRA Minorities & Discrimination Survey

Despite an extensive legal framework, discrimination, particularly in the forms of homophobia and racism, remains prevalent in sports. According to a 2017 FRA 'Minorities and Discrimination Survey', 24% of individuals reported exposure to racist harassment in sports, and 90% of respondents from a 2018 Outsport Survey said they perceived homophobia and transphobia to be a problem in sports. This is likely to be a considerable understatement of the real figures, as a follow-up FRA survey in 2018 indicated that 64% of victims of racist violence did not report the incident to the police or any other organization (Katsarova, 2021).

Notwithstanding this undeniable failure of the existing legal framework, there is a tendency to ignore discrimination in sports which has translated to a lack of political will among Member States. The EU's "Anti-discrimination" directive has been blocked by the Council since 2008 (Krivade, 2022). Furthermore, while 64% of EU citizens regard sport as a means of combating discrimination, this popular sentiment is not reflected in EU programs, which generally fail to include specific objectives related to the fight against discrimination through sport (Yenbou, 2021). Clearly, the realm of sport has not been used to its full potential in existing European policy. Erasmus+ has made some minor progress in this field, but as an educational program with a unique ability to promote diversity its mechanisms to prevent and combat discrimination in sport must be developed further.

Proposed Policy Options

Proposal #3: Raising awareness and fighting discrimination.

Combatting discrimination in sports should be a priority not only on a European level but also globally. We argue that a multi-faceted approach could be the solution to the issues of discrimination and segregation. Moreover, we claim for the strengthening of the collaboration between member states. Indeed, the EU has to guarantee people solid EU's anti-discrimination directives, with the final purpose of enhancing inclusivity and integration and fighting discrimination.

NEW ANTI-DISCRIMINATION DIRECTIVES

The EU is paying great attention to segregation and discrimination, but **we advocate for more European anti-discrimination directives**, specifically on the sports field. Indeed, "Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union, and Articles 10, 19 and 67(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU"¹, together with "The general principles of non-discrimination and equality"², which are also reaffirmed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, aim to fight discrimination, but in a very general way. Thus, **we highlight the need for more sport domain-specific directives against every form of discrimination**. Furthermore, within the scope of the EU, **Directive 43/2000/EC** applies to any racist incident occurring within *employment, self-employment, education, vocational training, social protection, and access to goods and services*. In **sports, this encompasses publicly accessible competitions, meaning events that the public can pay to attend live in stadiums or watch on TV** (UCD, 2023). However, it is imperative to not only formulate specific guidelines for discrimination based on gender, race, and sexuality in the sports context but also to **establish sanctions**. The EU is prompt in imposing embargoes and political and economic sanctions on member states that commit such offenses when there are human rights violations. **Concerning sports**, whether due to the competitive and entertaining atmosphere or mere frivolity, acts of racism **have occurred repeatedly in sports arenas without appropriate judicial measures being taken**. For this reason, **we claim for the fostering of a reporting mechanism to investigate impunity and apply sanctions if necessary**.

INCLUSION AND INTEGRATION

Even if "the Gay Games and the European Gay and Lesbian Multi-Sports Championships have helped raise awareness"³, we claim they might not be the best solution for mitigating prejudice and discrimination. Instead, we believe that the EU should work and **invest more in inclusivity, integration, and education**. Moreover, we argue that creating Games and Championships specifically for lesbian, gay, and LGBTQ+ individuals may contribute, in contrast to the expectations, to increase **stigmatization and exclusion**. To address this, by highlighting these specific events, the risk is to reinforce "differences" from what is conventionally considered "normal". Hence, we claim for the improvement of the national education systems to **raise awareness about racism and discrimination**.

[1] Fighting discrimination in sport. EPRS-European Parliamentary Research Service. Author: Ivana Katsarova Graphics: Samy Chahri Members' Research Service. PE 696163. July 2021. Quoted on 03.12.2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696163/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)696163_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696163/EPRS_BRI(2021)696163_EN.pdf)

[2] IBID

[3] IBID

Recommendation against Corruption

- **Encourage “good governance” in sports organizations:** To this extent, the EU can promote principles of good governance, specifically in the field of sports. The EU can encourage **sports organizations to be more transparent, accountable and ethical**. Moreover, since sports organizations' decisions are mostly moved by money, the **EU can guarantee each sports organization a reward for each goal reached**. In addition, as regards the goals, at the beginning of each year, Sports Organizations and the country they are from can establish some goals in terms of, for example, transparency and accountability that must be pursued. Finally, based on how many goals have been achieved, the country will reward the sports organizations. On the other hand, the **reward gained cannot be used in any way by the sports organizations, but it should be reinvested in fields related to the protection of their members and athletes**. For instance, the reward could be used to organize prestigious events that have the final purpose of educating the audience about gender equality and inclusivity.

Recommendations for Gender Equality

- **Equitable Media Coverage:** Implement a comprehensive media outreach strategy with the aim of increasing coverage of female sports across various platforms, such as national television, digital media, and newspapers. For doing this, stakeholders, such as broadcasters, sponsors, and sports media outlets would be aware of the importance of equitable coverage and their positive consequences for sports and society.
- **Education on gender equality:** Equally essential is fostering robust gender equality education from an early age. This will allow better media coverage of female sports. In addition, we propose to include soccer, which is conventionally and quintessentially considered a sport for men, as compulsory courses in the school curriculum, to allow children to take part in the socialization process and to understand there is no sport only for women or for men.
- **Apply a simplified procedure and provide additional assistance to the establishment of women's sports associations:** The often complicated procedure can be an obstacle to the establishment of sports organizations. Given that, when it comes to women's sports organizations, there is already less representation, the **administrative procedure should be facilitated and additional financial and administrative assistance should be provided**.

Recommendations against Discrimination

- **Creation of new funding, both on a European and national level, exclusively directed to Sports Organizations to improve reporting mechanisms in the field of sports:** This funding should be used by each national and European sports organization to **implement reporting mechanisms** and guarantee individuals the freedom to report any kind of abuse or discrimination based on any grounds, such as sex, race, color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation, **specifically in the field of sports**.
- **Athletes, spectators, the public, and sports organizations should be first educated and then included in campaigns that aim to promote inclusion and diversity as an added value. To this extent, we propose the engagement of famous athletes as Role Models in social campaigns and initiatives, such as through TikTok and Instagram, to speak out actively against any form of discrimination. Specific articles against discrimination should be published in the first pages of the newspapers. In addition, NGOs and Advocacy Groups must be part of this transition.**

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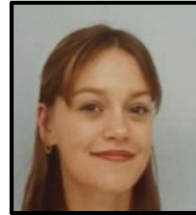
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Meet the Team



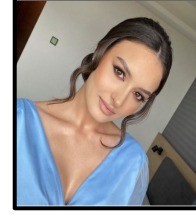
Aieshah Balmori
57718367@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Graphic Designer
Writer



Céleste Nonnenmacher
47474887@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Researcher
Writer



Beatrice Borrelli
66901863@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Coordinator
Writer



Alina-Mihaela Olăreanu
38343078@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Presenter



Alexandra Gérard
71783582@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Writer



Phan Thi Hai Yen
30380033@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Researcher



Ivan Kascelan
13586715@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Writer



Ana María Sánchez Antelo
82251912@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Researcher



Katarina Marinkovikj
31238329@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Writer



Aline Gil Pereira Soares
47796112@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Graphic Design
Presenter



Niko Matsuoka
38190157@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Graphic Design
Researcher



Asher Stein
85366735@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Presenter



Daniel Mois
66901863@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Presenter



Imogen Wymer
14220007@fsv.cuni.cz
European Politics and Society
Writer