

SAFEGUARDING (IN) SPORT

What is safeguarding?

In sport, safeguarding aims to protect the **well-being, rights, and dignity** of all participants, ensuring a safe and supportive environment. The focus is primarily on safeguarding individuals, but it also extends to safeguarding the values, integrity and culture of sport.

Safeguarding in sport refers to the measures, policies, and practices designed to ensure the safety, well-being, and protection of all participants (athletes, coaches, referees, sports administrators, volunteers, spectators, sport organisations etc). It encompasses creating a safe environment where everyone can enjoy sport free from unsafe sport practices or harmful behaviour.

In essence, safeguarding in sport is about protecting people from harm, preserving their dignity, and promoting a healthy and inclusive environment that aligns with the core values of sport.

What are unsafe sport practices and harmful behaviours?

Sports community uses varying terminology (e.g., harassment, abuse, and violence) with different linguistic meanings across academic, practical and cultural contexts. Discussions about these behaviours differ across countries and cultures, involving more than just variations in terminology. The current incidence and prevalence of transgressive behaviours in sports are framed differently across countries.

To establish a universal understanding and recognition of unsafe practices and harmful behaviours in sport, it is important to move beyond categorisation and adopt a holistic view by introducing the term “transgression” to cover various ways of crossing boundaries - be they legal, social, physical, psychological, or religious (Madsen, 2014).

What is the key reason for harmful behaviour in sport?

Harmful behaviours and unsafe practices are too often accepted and normalized in our sports communities, sometimes regarded as an acceptable means to achieving results. These so-called ‘truths’ are perpetuated by individuals and organizations within the sports community that hold perceived power. However, these power structures are shaped by societal interactions and traditional cultural norms, which may no longer align with evolving social standards and safeguarding efforts in sport. The following definition addresses these challenges holistically:

Transgressive behaviour describes “any form of misuse of a relationship of power violating someone’s access to safe sports” (Haandrikman & Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2024).

What can I do to make sport a safer place?

It is time to recognize unsafe practices and transgressive behaviours in sport and take transformative action through leadership at every level of the sports community. Reflect on the ‘truths’ you are perpetuating that shape and reinforce existing power dynamics. How can you influence the practices, perceptions, and regulations of safe sport to ensure they align with and advance broader social norms and safeguarding efforts? If you are not safeguarding your own teammates, colleagues or employees, ask yourself: how credible is my commitment to promoting safety within the sports community?