



ITALY GENERAL REPORT

# ABUSE AND VIOLENCE IN SPORT

ALL THE DATA FROM THE FIRST  
QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE  
ITALIAN STUDY

 Nielsen

a **ChangeTheGame** project



with the contribution of



SAPIENZA  
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



FIRST PART  
**SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS**



By the  
Scientific Committee  
led by Prof. Mike Hartill

# Scientific analysis of the data

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## **1. Abuse and Violence in Sport, the first quantitative and qualitative Italian study: the Scientific Committee**

### **Mike Hartill**

**Department of Social Sciences Centre for Child Protection & Safeguarding in Sport, Edge Hill University Ormskirk, Lancashire**

Mike Hartill (Department of Social Sciences Centre for Child Protection & Safeguarding in Sport, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire) has delivered programmes on child welfare in sport since 2002 and recently authored a research monograph titled *Sexual Abuse in Youth Sport: a Sociocultural Analysis* (Routledge, 2016). His current research includes two EU-funded projects: VOICE, a collaboration between eight European countries focusing on the experiences of victims of sexual abuse in sport, and CASES (Child Abuse in Sport: European Statistics), a study on the prevalence of child abuse in sport in six European countries (both funded by the EU's Erasmus+ programme). Professor Mike Hartill is an academic expert on issues related to sexual violence in sport. He collaborates with many international organisations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the IOC, ENGSO Youth, German Sport Youth, Sport Austria, Sport England, the Unit for the Protection of Minors in Sport, the English Football Association and various other sports governing bodies. Most recently, as an expert on the protection of minors in sport, he contributed to the Independent Review into Child Sexual Abuse in Football 1970-2005 conducted by Clive Sheldon QC. Mike Hartill is also a founding member of the Sport England Safeguarding Advisory Panel, a member of the FA Survivor Support and Safeguarding Advisory Group, a member of the Everton FC Safeguarding Committee and a trustee of the Male Survivors Partnership (MSP).

### **Daniela Simonetti**

**Journalist, essayist, founder of ChangeTheGame**

In 2018 Daniela founded ChangeTheGame, the first Italian association for the prevention of and fight against all forms of violence in sport that assists victims free of charge, on a legal and psychotherapeutic level. A member of FIGC's Minors Protection Commission, she has been collaborating with the Baseball and Softball Federation for a long period of time. She participated in the process of establishing a global entity against abuse in sport promoted by FIFA and with The Army of Survivors (TAOS) international association. She collaborates with the Department of Sport of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, with Terre des Hommes, with the Candido Cannavo Foundation and with the Vero Volley consortium. Together with the Italian Centre for the Promotion of Mediation (CIPM), the ChangeTheGame association won the tender for the Department of the Family of the Presidency of the Council of

Ministers for the Giochiamo d'Anticipo (Let's Play in Advance) project, which provides training courses throughout Italy for parents, athletes and coaches, toolkits for the prevention of violence and produced a commercial with over one hundred athletes of the national teams of various sports. She wrote the first investigative book on abuse in sport titled *Impunità di Gregge* [Herd Impunity], winner of the International City of Como Prize with Dacia Maraini on the judging panel. In 2023 Daniela Simonetti won the Harmony Award #StopViolence and the International Simply Woman Award.

### **Paolo Emilio Adami**

**Medical Specialist in Sports and Exercise Medicine, PhD in Human Movement and Sports Sciences, Medical Manager of Health and Science Department at World Athletics, Monaco**

Paolo Emilio Adami is a specialist in Sports and Exercise Medicine. He is the Medical Manager of the Health and Science Department of World Athletics, based in the Principality of Monaco.

He is responsible for the organisation of health and medical services during the World Athletics Series events and the track and field programme at the Summer Olympic Games, designs and carries out research projects in the field of health, sports medicine and sports sciences and promotes walking, running, jumping and throwing among the general population for the purpose of improving health. Prior to joining World Athletics, he worked as a consultant for MedEx (Medicine and Exercise), a medical partner of Scuderia Ferrari Formula 1 and WEC Endurance Racing teams. Until 2017 he worked as a consultant for the Department of Sports Cardiology at the Institute of Medicine and Sports Sciences of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), in Rome, Italy. His research interests include exercise-induced cardiovascular adaptations, the prevention of sudden cardiac death, pre-participation assessment of elite, Olympic, and Paralympic athletes, the cardiovascular effects of drugs and performance-enhancing substances, and the use of exercise for health improvement and disease prevention. Until 2017, he volunteered in the European non-governmental sports organisation ENGSO Youth, first as a member of the committee, then as vice-chair and finally as chair of the committee.

### **Benedetta Barchielli**

**Legal and Forensic Psychologist**

Benedetta has specific training on clinical aspects and interpersonal violence. She is currently pursuing her PhD at the Department of Clinical, Dynamic and Health Psychology of Sapienza University of Rome. Her research focuses on ethical aspects within the clinical relationship. She is a member of the Laboratory of Interpersonal

Violence of the Department of Human Neuroscience at Sapienza University of Rome, where she conducts research on the issues of aggression and gender-based violence from a clinical and prevention perspective. She deals with issues related to aspects of violence in different clinical and social contexts with a victimological perspective. This approach highlights the victims' experiences and consequences, offering a comprehensive, person-centred perspective. She is an expert in Criminology for the Faculty of Law and Expert Analysis Methodology in the master's degree in Legal, Forensic and Criminological Psychology at Sapienza University of Rome. She has had numerous research papers published in national and international journals and participated in national and international conferences.

### **Rocco Briganti**

**General Manager of Specchio Magico Cooperativa Sociale Onlus**

**Head of International Relations, Development, Planning and Budgeting CISMAl**

Rocco has an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, a PhD in Educational Sciences, a master's degree in European planning and a long experience working with local authorities mainly in the third sector and with non-profit organisations.

Today he is the general manager of Specchio Magico Cooperativa Sociale Onlus, a highly innovative and competent association working in the field of child abuse and maltreatment. Their various noteworthy activities include the realisation/modelling of the PORCOSPINI PROJECT, relevant and significant national and international practice on the theme of primary prevention of sexual maltreatment and abuse.

A CISMAl member since 2017, responsible for international activities, development and budget, ISPCAN (International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect) member and recent scientific director of ISPCAN Milan 2021. He was in the scientific management team of the Italian Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents (AGIA) in the recent second edition of the National Survey on Maltreatment of Children and Adolescents in Italy by AGIA, CISMAl, Terre des Hommes and has been in the scientific management team of the Regional Maltreatment Index since 2019, by CESVI. A member of the international network KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE, Rocco deals with Child Safeguarding Policy at a national level with particular attention to the sports dimension. Together with the Bergamo Health Protection Agency and the Bergamo Police Headquarters, he curated the Atalanta Good Behaviour project for Atalanta Bergamasca Calcio and BEST Bergamo Sport and Territory with Volley Bergamo 1991 in partnership with CESVI.

He is a representative of the Operational Unit of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Sports Department, which gave rise to Battiamo Il Silenzio (Let's Break the Silence), a first-of-its-kind initiative in Italy for the protection of minors in sports.



### **Stefano Ferracuti**

#### **Department of Human Neuroscience, Sapienza University of Rome, Sant'Andrea Hospital**

Professor of Forensic Psychopathology at the Department of Human Neuroscience of Sapienza University of Rome. Director of the II level master's degree in Clinical Criminology, Legal Psychology and Forensic Psychiatry (CRIPSIFO). Former head of the Lazio Region for the management of the data flow of Judicial Psychiatric Hospitals. Level I Medical Director at the University Hospital of Rome Sant'Andrea, in the Risk Management, Quality and Accreditation Unit. With the Occupational Medicine of the same hospital, he carries out assessment and counselling activities for healthcare personnel. Stefano regularly works as an expert and consultant for the Criminal Court. Author/co-author of over 200 scientific publications in national and international peer-reviewed scientific journals.

### **Paolo Ferrara**

#### **Director General of Terre des Hommes Italia**

Trained as a lawyer, Ferrara discovered civil engagement through one of the many sliding doors moments in his life, earning his master's in Economics and Non-Profit Management at Bocconi University. He has dedicated himself to communications, fundraising and planning on the not-for-profit scene for 20 years with a particular focus on promoting the rights of children and young people through research, reports, campaigns, events and tireless PR and partnership work.

For Terre des Hommes, he designed and carried out campaigns on the right to education (Io sono presente / I am present), against violence and maltreatment towards children (Io proteggo bambini / I protect children and Invisibile agli occhi / Invisible to the eye) and the promotion of the rights of girls, with the award-winning Indifesa (Helpless) campaign.

Within the Indifesa campaign:

- He conceived and oversaw the Indifesa Report, the only report produced in Italy on the State of Girls, now in its eleventh edition, for which he also supervises the Scientific Committee;
- He planned and created the Youth Webradio Indifesa Network against discrimination and gender stereotypes;
- He built Io Gioco Alla Pari / I play equal – School for rights and skills gym, a series of webinars for high school students about female empowerment;
- He created the Indifesa monitoring office which, through a series of surveys, listened and continues to listen to over 30,000 boys and girls across the whole of Italy about discrimination and gender-based violence, stereotypes, bullying and cyberbullying.



He was part of the Department of Sport's technical committee for the creation of the first policy for the protection of minors in sport and coordinates the activities of Terre des Hommes on child protection in sport, collaborating with different sporting associations. Alongside ScuolaZoo, he created the Sport monitoring office in 2021.

### **Fabio Iudica**

**Cassation Lawyer and Lecturer in Sports Law  
CAS Arbitrator**

A partner at Studio Legale Associato Iudica-Carbone in Milan; Lecturer in charge of the Lucio Colantuoni Postgraduate Course in Sports Law and Sports Justice at the University of Milan; Adjunct Professor of Corporate Law at the University of Milan-Bicocca; President of the Federal Court of the Italian Athletics Association; Member of the Ad Hoc Division of TAS for the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games.

Scientific Director for Olympialex – an innovative platform for sports law containing judicial resources and case law, thousands of indexed and fully searchable documents, constant updates on the most relevant national and international sports law trends and news.

Co-Founder of CSDS (Centro Scientifico Diritto Sport / Sports Law Science Centre), which was established in 2017 thanks to a collaboration between professionals working in sports law, with the aim of creating opportunities for stakeholders in the sector to exchange ideas as well as promoting training/academic activities related to sports law and the sports industry in general on a national and international level.

### **Sara Landi**

**Systemic-Relational Psychotherapist Accredited EMDR Practitioner  
National Head of FIGC-SGS Psychological Area  
Trainer on UEFA C Licence football coaching courses**

Since 2006, Landi has worked as a consultant for the Youth and School Sector of the Italian Football Federation, and since 2016 has held the position of Director of Psychology. Some of the macro-objectives that the Youth and School Sector aims to achieve include promoting inclusion and active participation of all members of the system, encouraging fair play and correct behaviour on and off the pitch, promoting healthy lifestyles, getting boys and girls excited about football so that they stick with sports for their entire lives, and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to play in a healthy, safe environment managed by trained and competent adults. The organisation of all activities is inspired by two documents dedicated to the rights and

needs of children and young people with particular reference to sport and football: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UEFA Grassroots Charter.

Sara is an experienced EMDR therapist: a structured psychotherapeutic approach which facilitates the treatment of different psychopathologies and problems related to both traumatic events as well as more common but emotionally stressful experiences.

### **Alessandra Marzari**

**Doctor, CONI Golden Star for sport, President of Consorzio Vero Volley, co-founder of ChangeTheGame, San Patrignano ambassador**

A doctor at the Niguarda hospital in Milan, Alessandra Marzari's main professional motivations are sport and innovation. From the original slogan of Vero Volley, of which Alessandra Marzari is president, "Cultura sportiva" (Sports Culture), followed by "Sport, Innovazione, Responsabilità sociale" (Sport, Innovation, Social Responsibility) a few seasons ago, a new slogan has now been introduced: "Driven by Values" focuses on the importance and the necessity to be inspired by values. It is a real mission because Alessandra Marzari is an example of the continuity and consistency that have always been a part of Consorzio Vero Volley. In its 15 years of life, the Consorzio has demonstrated its belief in principles like courage, forward thinking, resilience, loyalty, consistency, and responsibility. This was a challenge that President Alessandra Marzari wanted to take up and one she was the first to launch. Consorzio Vero Volley – which has always worked alongside ChangeTheGame – has prioritised protecting the psychological and physical well-being of their athletes. In September 2022, the organisation changed its logo while ensuring continuity with its history and reinforcing its principles.

The new slogan will accompany the institutional and social initiatives of Consorzio Vero Volley and will drive the first teams, the youth academy, management and all of the organisation's activity. Everyone at the Consorzio has a duty to show and demonstrate the real meaning of being "driven by values".

### **Paola Pendino**

**Magistrate**

Paola Pendino, a Magistrate and Chamber President at the Court of Milan, has dedicated herself to fighting violence against women in all its forms for 31 years of her long career, dealing with many very complex cases.



During her recent assignment to the Legislative Office of the Ministry of Justice, she was part of the commission in charge of the drafting of implementation decrees of the “Cartabia Reform” (Legislative Decree no.150 of 10 October 2022), which introduced a significant overhaul of the entire criminal trial process and the related penalty system.

She works with ChangeTheGame, an association fighting against all forms of violence in sport. Paola gives speeches on the relationship between sporting activity, its influential figures, children, and the risk of paedophilia. Among the topics dealt with by Pendino are the role of guarantee figures, protection offered by the law, the boundaries that should not be crossed in relationships between minors and adults, and the evaluation and understanding of some symptomatic indicators of abuse or bullying.

### **Stefania Pizzolla**

#### **Director of Communications, Sporting Events, Studies and Research of the Department for sport of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers**

An expert in social policy, Stefania Pizzolla has worked in public administrations and at a European level on inclusion policies, child and adolescent policies, social and work reintegration interventions for vulnerable people, equal opportunities, measures to combat poverty and policies to promote the rights of children and adolescents and the definition and organisation of training initiatives for the protection of children from violence, abuse and maltreatment.

Stefania has published various surveys, studies, and research papers and overseen integrated communication campaigns, conferences and seminars for the Italian Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents, the management authority for the National Operational Plan for Inclusion Department of Sport.



# **Abuse and violence in sport: Italy General Report**

## **2. Introduction by Professor Mike Hartill**

The phenomenon of child abuse within sport started to receive attention at the end of the 1980s. From the end of the 1990s, some countries slowly started to introduce policies to protect children in sporting contexts. In recent years, however, there has been an unprecedented level of focus on the topic of abuse and violence towards children and young people in sport due to the emergence of a large number of cases, such as in English football and American gymnastics. Strategic responses to this social problem are crucial and must be based on solid evidence regarding the extent and nature of the abuse. This is the first study that analyses child abuse in sport in Italy. The results indicate a clear need to take action and make changes in this important area of children's lives. Over a decade has passed since UNICEF acknowledged the need to improve data collection in the field of violence towards children in sport, including "the prevalence, the forms and the impact of violence in sport all over the world" (Brackenridge et al., 2010: 23). Government authorities, however, mostly ignored this appeal. The lack of such data supports and enables narratives of denial and minimisation that have been evident in the sports sector for many years. After decades of inactivity, despite requests for change from survivors and supporters, most sporting organisations now publicly agree on the fact that the safety and well-being of children in sport is of primary importance. This important study carried out by ChangeTheGame, however, proves that this cannot be taken for granted. The data does indicate that many people who have played sport in Italy, around four in ten, have experienced a form of abuse or interpersonal violence at least once during their childhood (before turning 18 years old) within a sporting context. Many experienced abuse for a sustained period of time. Few individuals sought help following such experiences. These results are worrying for anyone who cares deeply about the benefits of taking part in sport for health, well-being and the development of children and youngsters. This study clearly indicates the need to change the game.

## **3. Literature review**

Taking part in sporting activity entails numerous benefits for children and teenagers (Janssen and Leblanc, 2010). Playing sport does not only promote physical and mental well-being among children and teenagers, but it also helps them to learn how to cooperate with their peers, develop emotional management skills and boost self-esteem (Holt & Sehn, 2007; Slutzky and Simpkins, 2009; Merkel, 2013). Furthermore, getting involved in youth sport promotes the development of physical attributes

that will last a lifetime (Kjonnixsen et al., 2009), triggering positive effects on their health as adults. Every year, however, a significant number of youth athletes find their participation in sport is interrupted for various reasons, including being the victim of interpersonal violence (Cervello et al., 2007). The study of violence towards male and female athletes, despite the growing attention from the scientific community, remains insufficient and in some countries, such as in Italy, it is something that has never been investigated. Previously, violent behaviour in sport was mostly associated with crowd violence and aggression shown by players on the pitch, while in recent years, there has been a significant change in the conceptualisation of the phenomenon (Parent and Fortier, 2017). Research has identified and investigated several forms of violence in a sporting context that were previously entirely overlooked, including neglect (understood as failing to meet the basic physical or psychological needs of a minor), sexual, psychological or physical abuse. The broadening of this perspective allows for a more complete understanding of the negative experiences that athletes may face in sport. The analysis of specific forms of abuse perpetrated within a sporting context was initially directed towards sexual abuse (Kari Fasting et al., 2011; Mergaert et al., 2016; Hartill, 2013). In recent years, the focus has been extended to include other forms of interpersonal violence (IV), with various studies, predominantly of a qualitative nature, investigating emotional abuse, excessive training, physical punishments, humiliation, bullying and the pressure exerted on young athletes by coaches and the system itself. A retrospective study (Vertommen et al., 2015) attempted to determine the prevalence of interpersonal violence in sport by using a representative sample of adults from the Flanders region and the Netherlands and asking them if they had been exposed to negative and harmful events before turning 18 years old. The study revealed an overall prevalence of psychological violence affecting 38% of subjects. Levels of physical and sexual violence were lower, but not negligible (11% and 14%, respectively). In the United Kingdom, Alexander and his colleagues (2011) reported levels of prevalence as high as 75% for emotional damage caused by abuse and 24% for physical harm among athletes under the age of 16. This data is to be assessed with caution as the response rate among the sample size that was originally identified was very low (under 1%). A Dutch study that examined undesirable behaviours in sport, including verbal, physical and sexual violence (Tiessen-Raaphorst et al., 2008), showed that one in five participants over the age of 12 declared that they had been a victim (11%) or witness to undesirable behaviour, including verbal aggression (12%), physical aggression (6%) and sexual harassment (1%). In a Canadian study, a specific tool was used to investigate violence towards athletes with the goal of identifying the prevalence of all types of interpersonal violence (neglect, psychological violence, physical and sexual violence) perpetrated by peers, coaches and parents. The study involved 1,055 male and female athletes aged between 14 and 17 and provided an estimated prevalence of 79% for psychological violence, 40% for physical violence and 28% for sexual violence (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2022).

#### 4. Research in Italy

This study refers to the Child Abuse in Sport European Statistics (CASES; Hartill et al., 2021) project. The CASES project aimed to generate reliable data on the prevalence of interpersonal violence, abuse and maltreatment experienced by “children”, who are defined as people under the age of 18, within or outside of sport through a survey covering over 10,000 individuals in six European countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. The research group had already begun the Voices for Truth and Dignity (VOICE; Hartill, 2015) project to improve the understanding of sexual violence in sport through testimonies by survivors of sexual abuse, addressing the issue with a qualitative approach. This research, based on CASES and VOICE, adopts the definition of “interpersonal violence” (IV). IV consists of the intentional use of physical force or power by an individual or a small group of individuals against other people (Krug et al., 2002). Interpersonal violence can be physical, sexual, psychological or it can involve deprivation or neglect. In particular, as reported by Vertommen and colleagues (2022), within sport it is necessary to distinguish between behaviours which are considered to be part of the game and what goes beyond ethical limits into deliberate or non-accidental violence. According to the United Nations, any type of “physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1989; article 19) must be considered interpersonal violence. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2011) maintains that so-called “light” forms of interpersonal violence, especially towards children, are unacceptable, including behaviours that other people could define as harmless or inoffensive, such as unwanted looks, comments or whistles. As this type of violence is in relation to minors (under 18 years old), it will be referred to in this report as IVAC (Interpersonal Violence Against Children). Unlike the CASES project, this research is based purely on events within a sporting context, regardless of any possible additional experiences outside of a sporting context.

Information on the extent of interpersonal violence in Italian youth sport is significantly lacking. The general aim of this study is to describe the experiences of interpersonal violence among young people taking part in recreational sport and athletes in national and international competitions. The specific goals are (1) to provide an overview of the general estimates relating to the prevalence of interpersonal violence in sport in Italy; (2) to examine the prevalence of specific categories of interpersonal violence, age and gender differences and the overlaps among forms of interpersonal violence; (3) to provide an overview of the perpetrators of violence in sport; (4) to identify pathways for support and help for victims of violence in sport.

## 5. Quantitative study

### 5.1 Methodology

The sampling and data collection were performed by Nielsen, a market research company operating in Italy (<https://www.nielsen.com/it/>) which has access to a panel and used CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) methods involving the filling out of a questionnaire over the web via a link. The panel is a convenience sample of the Internet population. The members of the panel were invited to take part in the study via email. The briefing letter contained information on the content of the web survey, a link to a site with information on the methodology of the study, a list of counselling services and a hyperlink to the questionnaire itself. Respondents could only proceed after accepting the request for informed consent. The convenience sample was a group of Italian athletes between the ages of 18 and 30 who, as minors (under 18s), took part in organised sport – that is, they played in a league, club or sports team with training and organised competitions. We have taken the CASES definition of organised sport: “every recreational or competitive sporting activity that is voluntary, takes place within the context of a club or organisation outside the school curriculum, and involves an element of training or instruction by an adult, including sport camps and organised extracurricular sporting activities at school, [but excludes] physical education (PE) [lessons at school]”. The time taken to complete the questionnaire was between 10 and 30 minutes.

### 5.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on the one used for the CASES project. The CASES study used an online questionnaire for adults (aged 18 to 30) designed to collect information on their sport experiences prior to the age of 18. With reference to the literature and studies carried out by Alexander et al. (2011), Vertommen et al. (2017; 2020) and Ohlert et al. (2018), the aim of the questionnaire was to operationalise the broad definition of interpersonal violence into concrete items exploring the respondents’ experiences inside sport. The questionnaire was designed to capture not only overtly violent or abusive acts against children, but also behaviour and experiences that may be normalised or tolerated, inside sport (and other) contexts, and which, as a consequence, may well not be considered as violent or harmful by the individual or ‘victim’ at the time of experience. Therefore, the concept of (self-perceived) violence was not the primary criteria for respondents to consider. Instead, the survey sensitised respondents to include experiences they felt to be negative, hurtful, or harmful. Each of the four categories of interpersonal violence was introduced with one or more statements and respondents asked to indicate if they had experienced similar situations.



Some examples of items for the interpersonal violence categories: physical violence (e.g. I was asked, instructed or forced to do physical exercise as a form of punishment); contact sexual violence (e.g. I was kissed by someone/I was asked, instructed or forced to kiss someone); explaining before each item to indicate any behaviours with physical contact that was unwanted (and/or in ways they now feel inappropriate), non-contact sexual violence (e.g. I was asked, instructed or forced to undress or perform sexual acts on myself for the pleasure/gratification of another person or other people); psychological violence (e.g. I was criticised for my appearance); neglect (e.g. I received inadequate supervision while taking part in sports, which put me at risk). The questionnaire also asked for information about gender, age, any disabilities, the sport played, the sports facilities, evaluation of the sports experience, the level (e.g. amateur, international, etc.), victimisation and request for help.

## **5.3 Results**

### **5.3.1 Sample**

A total of 1,446 athletes met the inclusion criteria and took part in the online survey. The main demographic profile of the sample was as follows (**TAB. 1**):

**Age:** the respondents were aged 18-30, with an average of 24.80 years (standard deviation = 3.4)

**Gender:** 49.2% (711) of respondents were male and 50.4% (729) were female. 0.4% (N=6) of the respondents did not identify with a gender category or did not disclose their gender. Due to the lack of representativeness, their responses have been excluded from some of the gender-based analyses.

**Disability:** 3.4% (40) of the respondents stated they had a disability. 2.2% stated that they had participated only in sports for people with a disability, 27.4% had participated in both non-disabled and disabled sports, and almost 70.4% had not participated in any sports for disabled people.

**Table 1** Demographic details of the sample



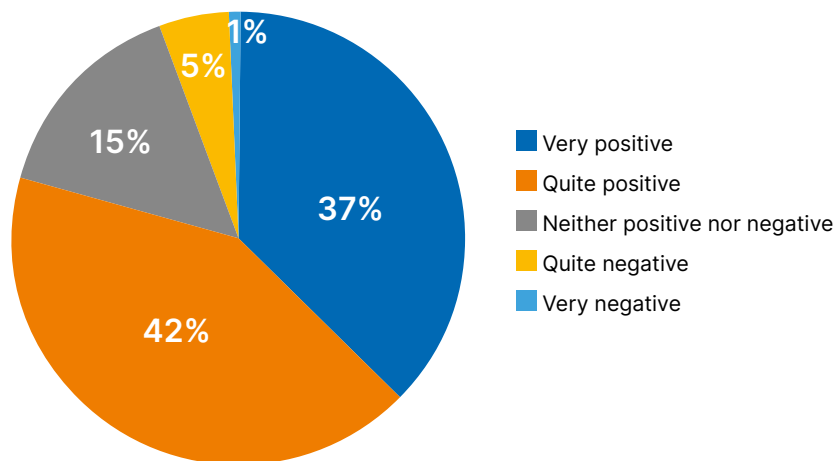


<b>Age</b>	18-24	719	49.8%
	25-30	726	50.2%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	711	49.2%
	Female	729	50.4%
	Non-binary	4	0.3%
	Undisclosed	2	0.1%
<b>Disability</b>	Disabled	40	3.4%
	Non-disabled	1397	96%
	Undisclosed	9	0.6%

### 5.3.2 Characteristics of sport participation (experience, level reached, sports facilities)

The majority stated that their overall experience in youth sports was quite positive (42%) or very positive (37%). 5% said their experience was quite negative and for 1% it was very negative. 15% deemed their experience to be “neutral” **(FIG. 1)**.

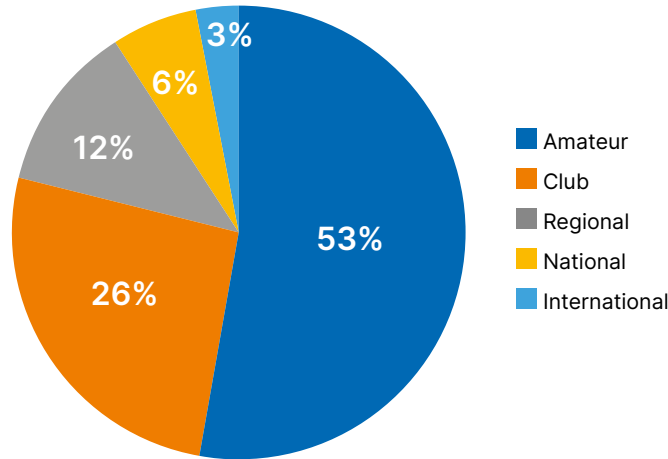
**AVERAGE VALUES OF OVERALL EXPERIENCE IN SPORT**



**Figure 1** Overall experience in sport (%)

Respondents were asked for their highest level of participation in youth sports. As shown in **FIG. 2**, over half played at a recreational level (53%) and around a quarter at club level (26%). The other quarter had participated at higher competitive levels, including regional (12%), national (6%) and international (3%)

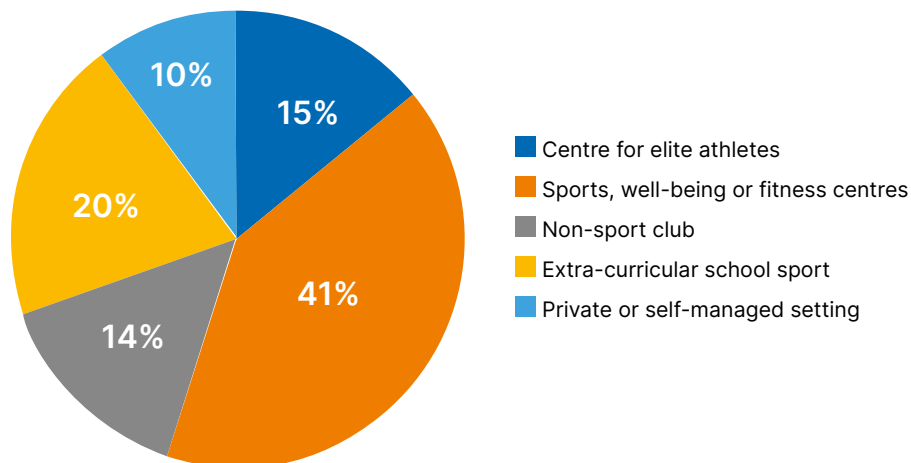
**AVERAGE VALUES OF PARTICIPATION AT VARIOUS COMPETITIVE LEVELS**



**Figure 2** Level of participation in sport (%)

Just under half of the sample used sports facilities within sports, well-being or fitness centres (41%). 20% took part in sporting activity outside school, 15% attended centres for elite athletes, 14% used non-sport clubs and, finally, 10% played in private and/or self-managed settings (**FIG. 3**).

**AVERAGE VALUES FOR SPORTS FACILITIES ATTENDED**



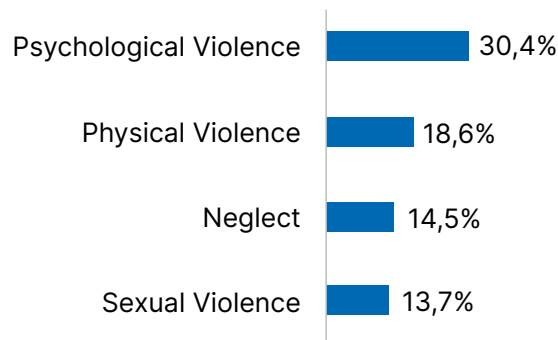
**Figure 3** Sports facilities attended (%)

**5.3.3 Prevalence of interpersonal violence against children inside sport**

This paragraph contains data on the prevalence of interpersonal violence against children inside sport. It is worth reiterating that all participants were aged 18-30 and



had participated in organised sport before the age of 18. 38.6% (558) of the sample said they had experienced violence when playing sport before the age of 18. The most common form of IV inside sport was psychological violence (30.4%), followed by physical violence (18.6%), neglect (14.5%), non-contact sexual violence (10.3%) and contact sexual violence (9.6%). 19.4% of the sample said they had experienced multiple acts of violence (**FIG. 4**).



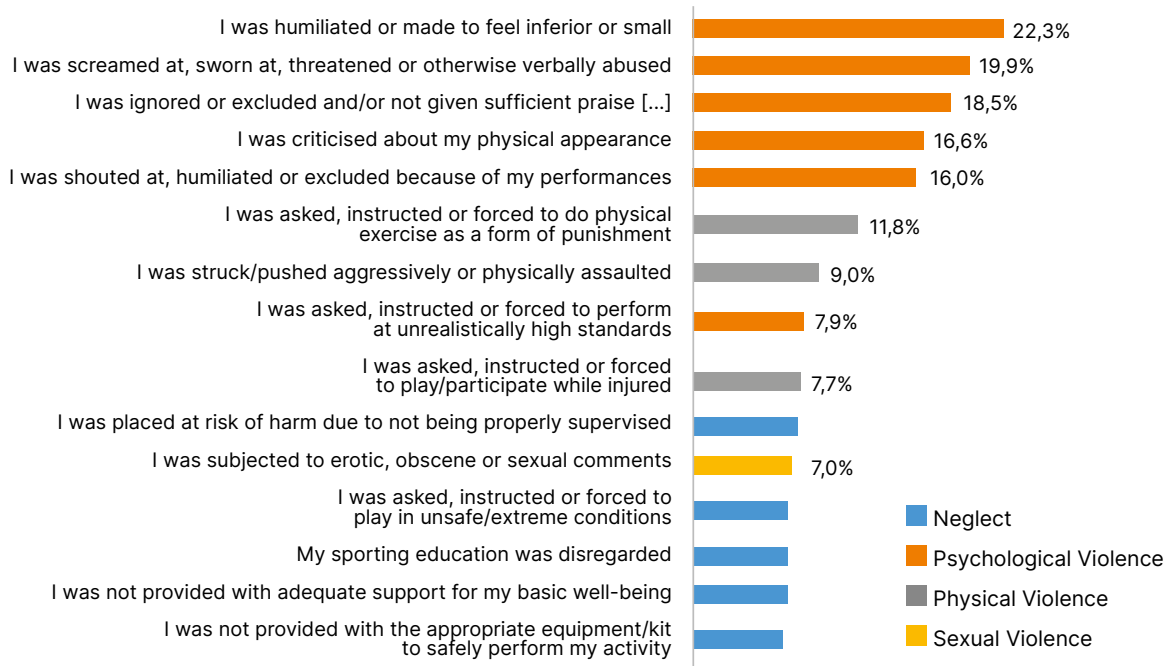
**Figure 4** Prevalence of IVAC in the sample

19.4% of those who said they had experienced at least one act of violence said they had experienced multiple forms of violence. 14.5% of those who had experienced psychological violence said they had also experienced physical violence. 10.5% of those who had experienced psychological violence said they had also encountered neglectful and negligent behaviour. 7.3% of those who reported physical violence had also encountered contact sexual violence, with 7.7% experiencing non-contact sexual violence. 9.1% of those who reported neglectful behaviour also encountered physical violence. Other overlaps are shown in **Table 2**.

	Physical violence	Contact sexual violence	Non-contact sexual violence	Psychological violence	Neglect
Physical violence		7,3%	7,7%	14,5%	9,1%
Contact sexual violence	7,3%		6,2%	7,2%	6,2%
Non-contact sexual violence	7,7%	6,2%		8,0%	6,9%
Psychological violence	14,5%	7,2%	8,0%		10,7%
Neglect	9,1%	6,2%	6,9%	10,7%	

**Table 2** Overlap of IVAC categories

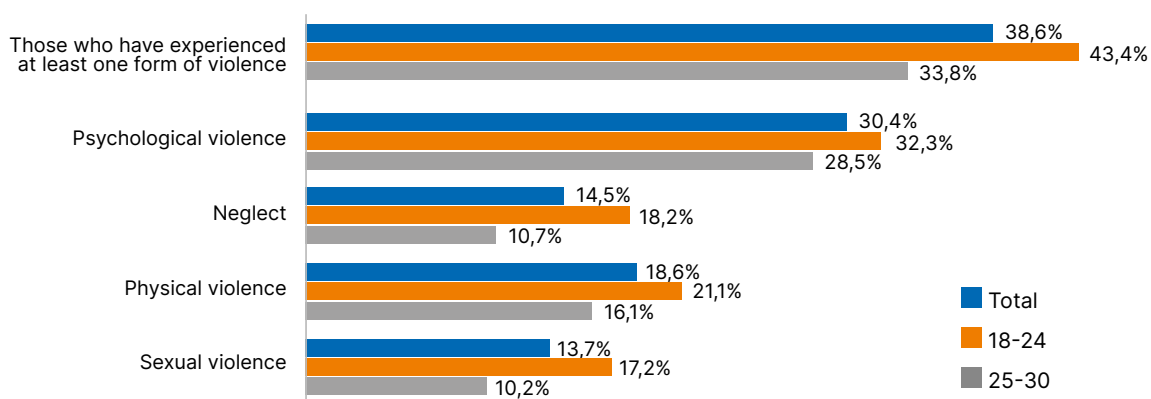
The 15 most widespread types of behaviour are set out in Figure 5. The results indicate that the most common form of IVAC experienced inside sport is psychological violence, acts of which are more widespread than other categories.



**Figure 5** Most widespread IVAC behaviour types

### 5.3.4 Prevalence of interpersonal violence reported based on current age

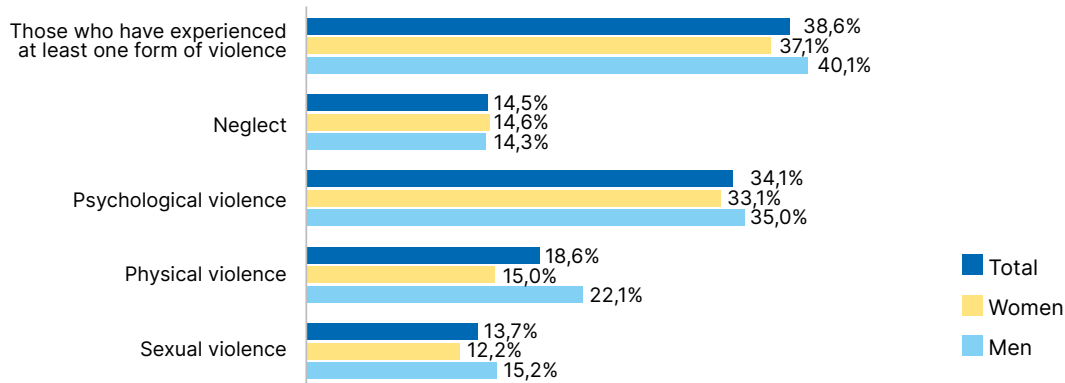
43.4% of 18–24-year-olds state that they have been victims of violence during sporting activity, along with 33.8% of 25–30-year-olds. 32.3% of 18–24-year-olds have encountered psychological violence, 18.2% acts of neglect, 21.1% physical violence and 17.2% sexual violence. 28.5% of 25–30-year-olds have encountered psychological violence, 10.7% acts of neglect, 16.1% physical violence and 10.2% sexual violence (**FIG. 6**).



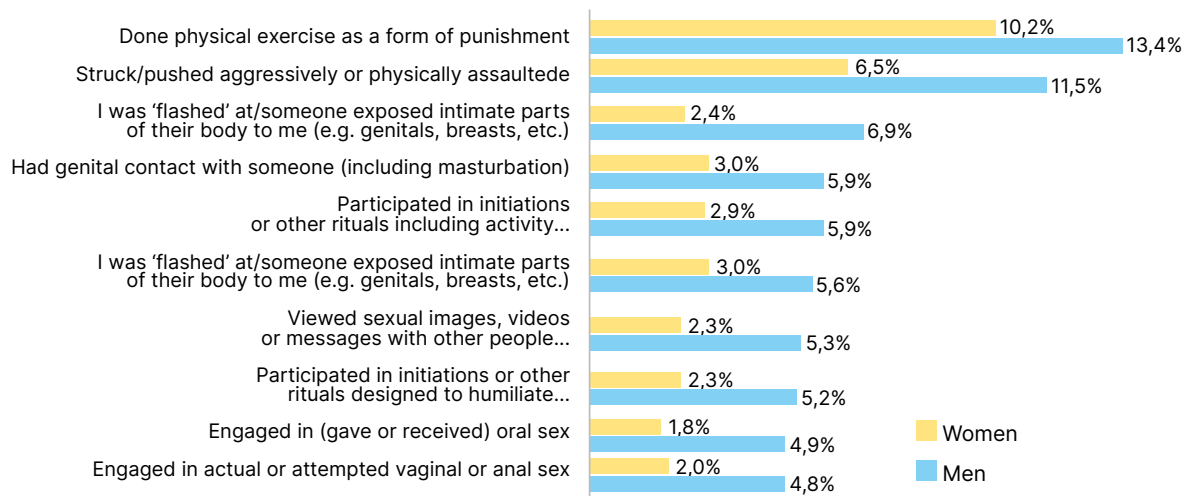
**Figure 6** Prevalence of IVAC by age group

### 5.3.5 Prevalence of interpersonal violence reported based on gender

In the sample, men are found to have experienced psychological, physical and sexual violence more frequently than women. Neglect is the only category experienced more frequently by women than men (**FIG. 7**). The largest variation between men and women is seen in acts of physical aggression and sexual violence (**FIG. 8**)

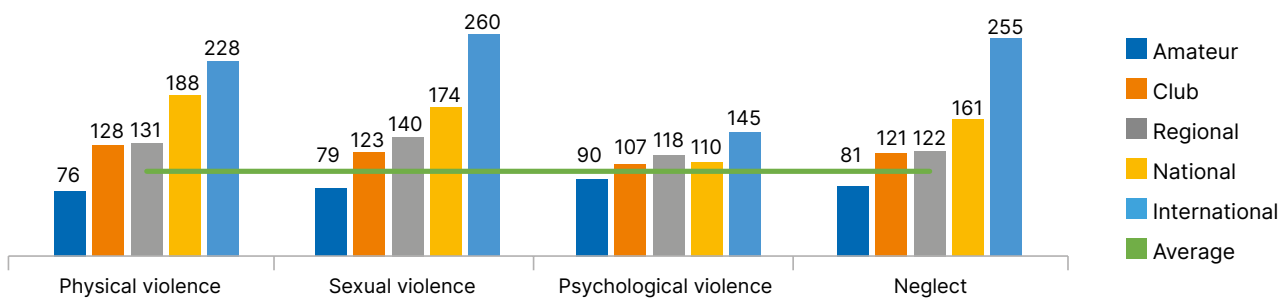


**Figure 7** Prevalence of IVAC by gender



**Figure 8** Prevalence of IVAC behaviour types by gender

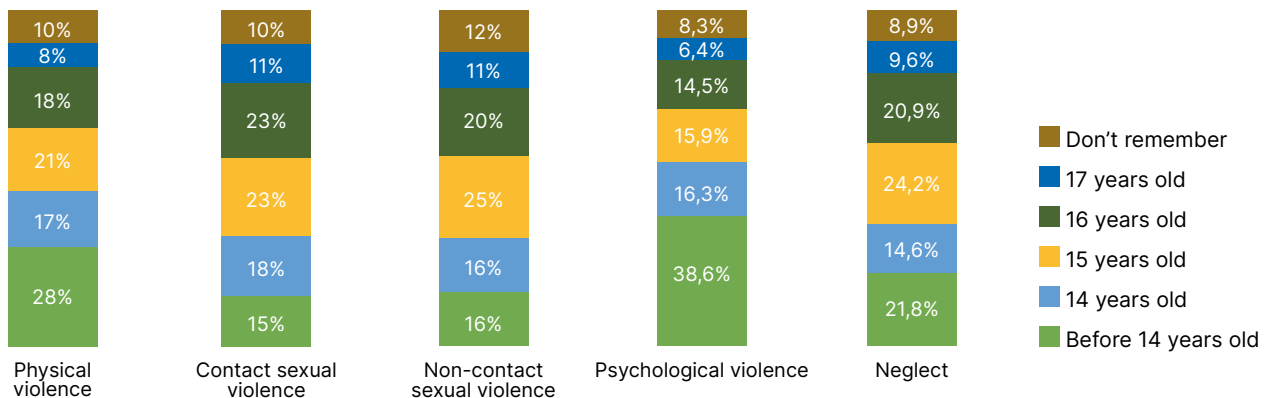
### 5.3.6 Prevalence of interpersonal violence in relation to competitive level



**Figure 9** Concentration of IVAC according to level reached

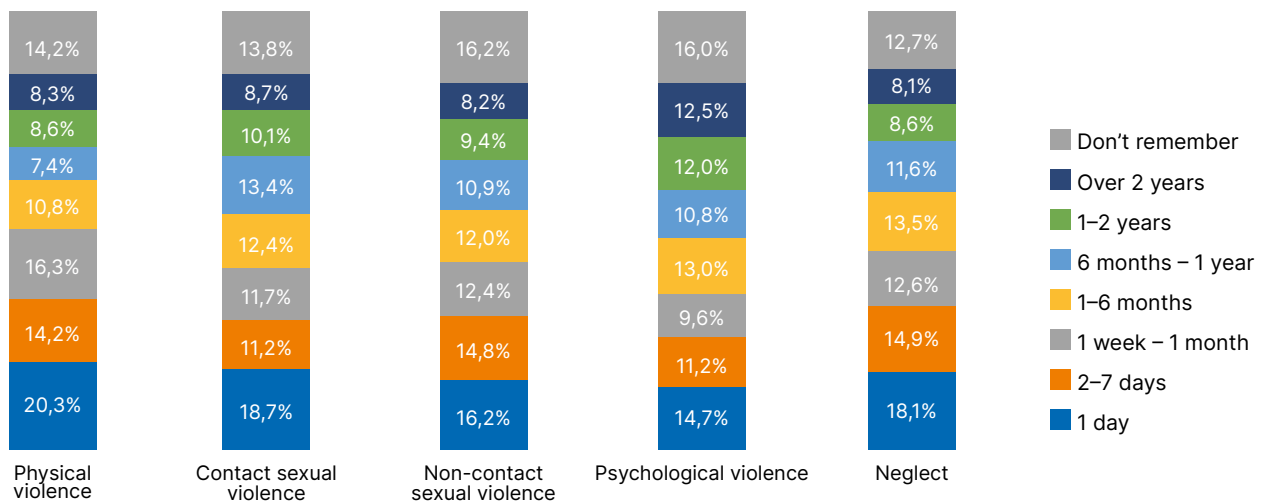
### 5.3.7 Characteristics of interpersonal violence against children inside sport (age, frequency and duration)

The respondents stated that for instances of physical violence (28%) and psychological violence (39%), the negative and harmful actions started before they were 14 years of age. Sexual violence and neglect have a higher percentage among 15-year-olds (23% and 24.2%, respectively) and 16-year-olds (20% and 20.9%, respectively) (**FIG. 10**).



**Figure 10** Ages at which IVAC was experienced

In relation to the duration of the negative experience, across all categories of IVAC, the most common response was one day (14.7% to 20.3%). Psychological violence presents the highest percentage of cases lasting over two years (12.5%). The time frames are similar for the various categories. The second most common response (16.3%) for physical violence indicates a period varying from one week to one month (**FIG. 11**).



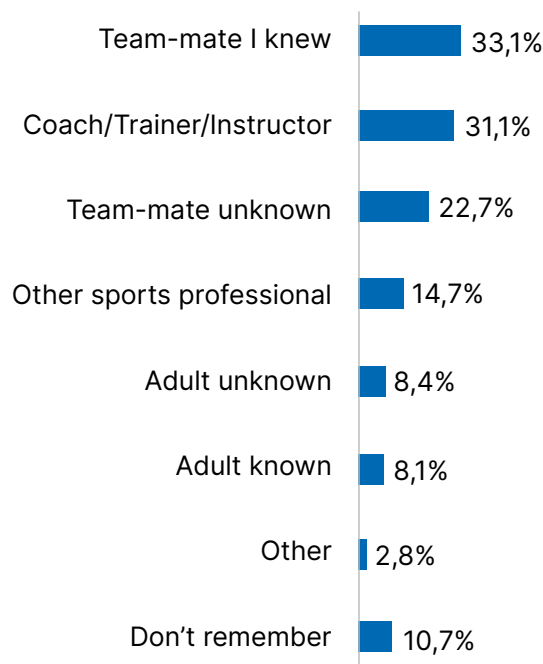
**Figure 11** Duration of IVAC

### 5.3.8 Characteristics of ‘perpetrators’

In relation to their most serious experience, respondents were asked to state the role/ position held by the person or people responsible. In line with the CASES project, the terms ‘perpetrator’ or ‘offender’ were not used in the questionnaire, as the purpose was not limited to identifying acts punishable by law, but also to identify normalised behaviour that is encouraged or tacitly endorsed by adults (for example, adults ignoring young children and/or adolescents using sexist, racist or homophobic language), or normalised in the dynamics between peers.

In order to align with international literature, the term ‘perpetrator’ will be used throughout this report in reference to those people identified by respondents as being responsible for their negative experiences.

However, the application of the term ‘perpetrator’ may be limited and unjustified. In 33.1% of cases, the perpetrator of the negative action was a known team-mate, while in 31.1% of cases it was a coach, trainer or instructor. There is a greater prevalence of team-mates (36.8% vs 27.8%) responsible for negative acts among men, while the most frequent response among women was coaches and trainers (35% vs 27%). Other categories of perpetrator include other adult sports professionals (14.7%), unknown adults (8.4%) and known adults (8.1%) (**FIG. 12; TAB. 3**).



**Figure 12** Perpetrator types (%)

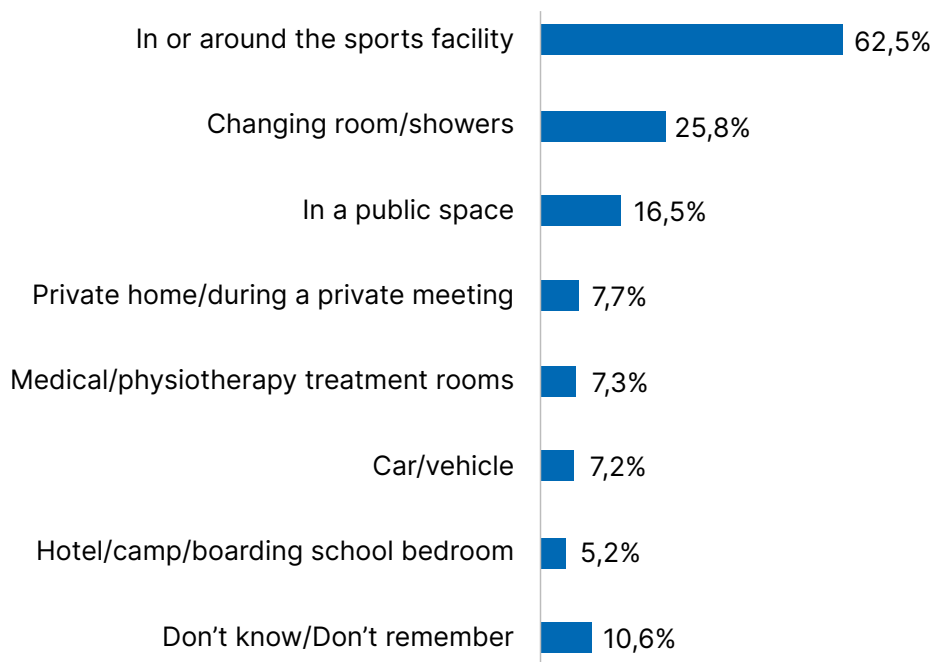
**Table 3** Perpetrators by gender (%)



	Men	Women
Team-mate I knew	36,8%	27,8%
Coach/Trainer/Instructor	27,0%	35,0%
Team-mate unknown	25,6%	18,2%
Other sports professional	15,0%	14,0%
Adult unknown	8,6%	8,5%
Adult known	7,7%	8,7%
Other	2,9%	2,8%
Don't remember	8,9%	14,5%

### 5.3.9 Location of violence experience

The type of location identified most frequently by respondents was in or around the sports facility (62.5%), followed by changing rooms and showers (25.8%) and public spaces (16.7%). In or around the sports facility (67.9%) is mentioned most often as a place of psychological violence, followed by private homes, medical treatment rooms, and cars and vehicles with 7.7%, 7.3% and 7.2%, respectively.

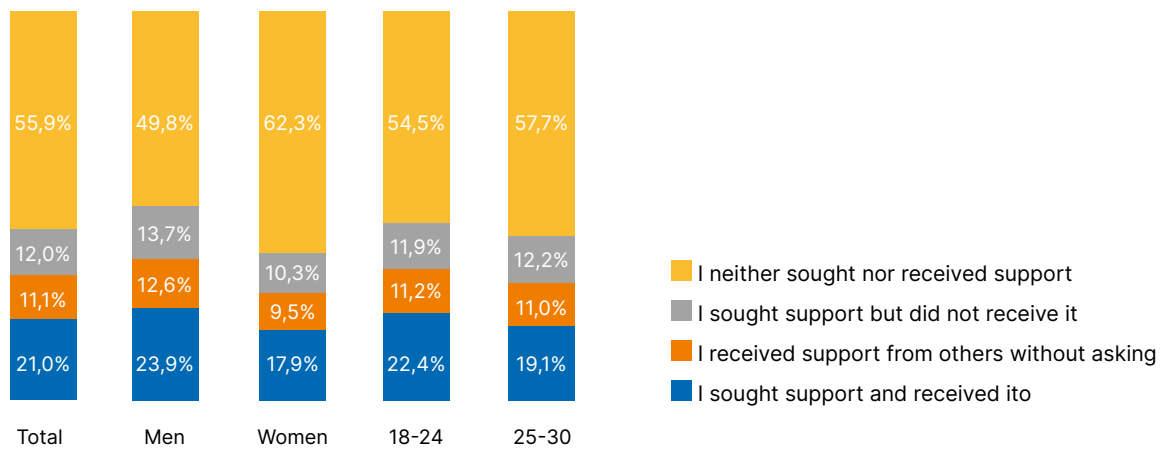


**Figure 13** Location of IVAC experience (%)

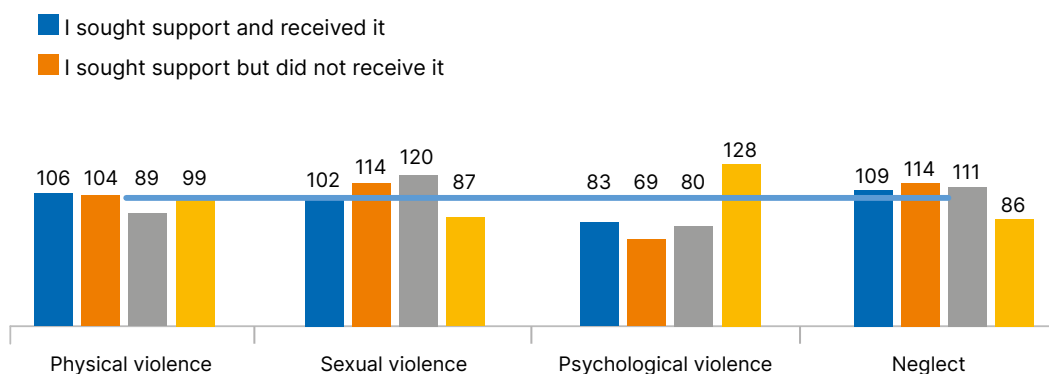


### 5.3.10 Requests for support

Respondents were asked whether they had sought support for the negative events they had experienced or if they had received support without asking. The majority of respondents in the two age groups, 18-24 (54.5%) and 25-30 (57.7%), had neither sought nor received support, a trend especially visible among women (62.3%). The proportion of those who did not seek support following an instance of psychological violence is 1.3 times over the average. However, the proportion of those who received support without asking after an instance of sexual violence is 1.2 times over the average.



**Figure 14** Distribution of requests for support

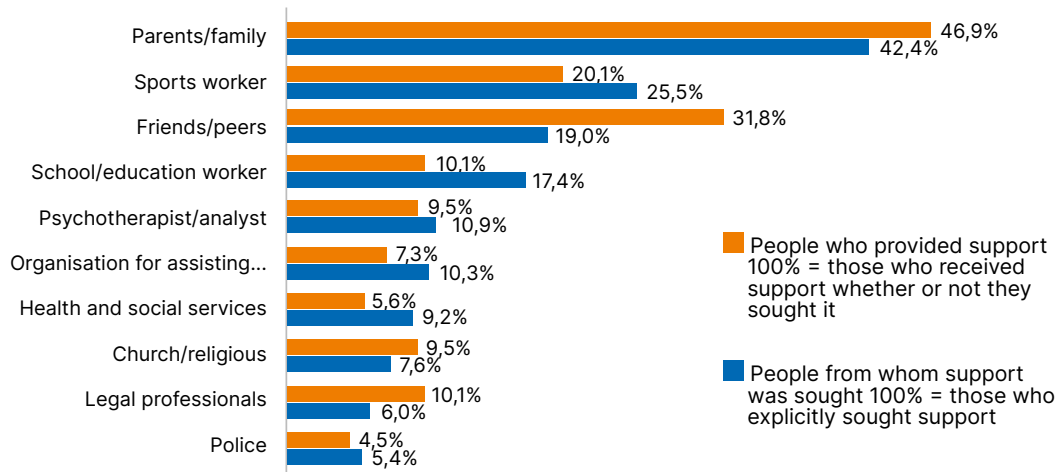


**Figure 15** Concentration of requests for support

46.5% of those who did not seek support thought such behaviour was acceptable or tolerable, while 30.1% did not want to appear weak. 25.3% did not know who to turn to, while 17% feared the consequences. 3.2% were ordered not to talk about what had happened. For the respondents who sought and/or received support, family (46.9% and 42.4%) and friends (31.8% and 19%) were the main sources of help and support.



Support was sought within the sport context in 25.5% of cases. 10.9% of cases turned to mental health professionals and just 6% sought legal assistance (**FIG. 16**).



**Figure 16** People who provided support and people from whom support was sought (%)

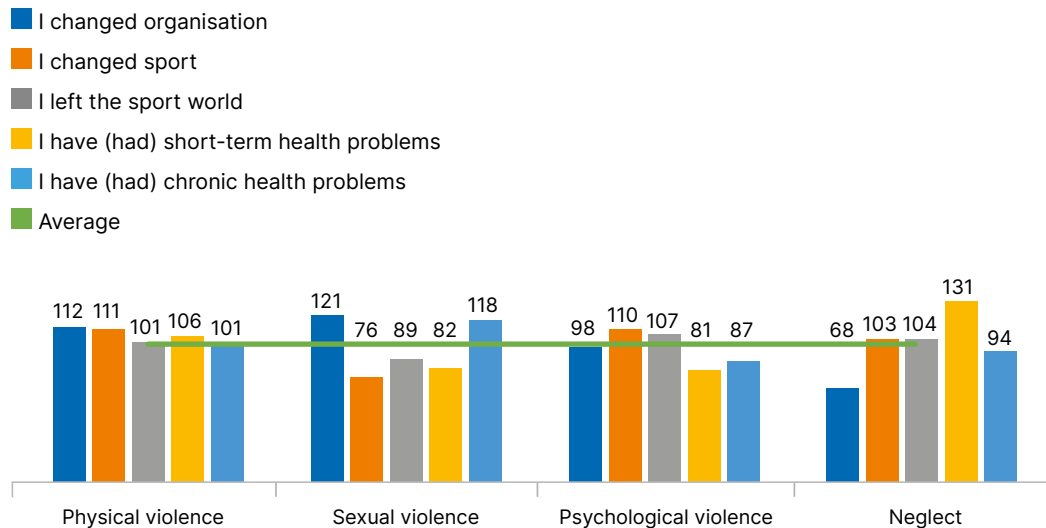
### 5.3.11 Consequences

22.2% of the respondents who said they had experienced IV changed their sports organisation, 29.9% left the sport in question, 32.3% left the sport world completely, 12.9% have had short-term health problems, 6.5% have had chronic health problems and 20.4% said they have not had any consequences. More specifically, women chose to change sport (32.6%) or leave the sport world (37.4%) more often than men, with 27.4% and 27%, respectively (**FIG. 17**).



**Figure 17** Consequences of sport (%)

The prevalence of chronic health problems among those who experienced sexual violence is 1.2 times higher than the average. Short-term health problems are 1.3 times higher in cases of neglect (**FIG. 18**).



**Figure 18** Concentration of consequences by IVAC type

## 5.4 Discussion of data in view of international literature

The aim of this research was to provide an overview of the extent of interpersonal violence in youth sport in Italy by basing its methodological framework on the CASES project. The results revealed the existence of all types of interpersonal violence in Italian youth sport. The most prevalent form is psychological violence, followed by physical violence, neglect and sexual violence.

Among those who have experienced at least one form of violence in IVAC categories, male participants have higher rates of victimisation than women. In particular, there is a higher rate of physical violence. This aligns with previous studies (CASES, 2021; Vertommen et al., 2016; Alexander et al., 2021) who reported higher rates of physical violence among men than women. The same research has shown a higher prevalence of sexual violence against women, suggesting that there is a disparity between genders, but it is believed that episodes of sexual violence suffered by male victims may be underrepresented (Hartill, 2005; Vertommen et al., 2015) or considered non-violent. In fact, Hartill (2014) documented two cases of male victims of sexual assault conceptualising the term as “non-consensual sexual submission” instead of sexual abuse or violence in order to empower victims to define their own experiences and avoid secondary victimisation through the negative connotation of “abuse” (Hartill, 2014). This study, however, suggests a higher prevalence of men reporting negative situations related to instances of sexual abuse than women. This data could be explained by a



greater awareness on the issue. Be that as it may, Bjornsetha and Szabori (2018), in a literature review on studies that have addressed the issue of sexual violence in sport, indicate that this type of violence is equally widespread among girls and boys, and the gender differences on the type of violence can be traced in the different perspectives on the act of violence itself and on the disclosure of such events.

Peers and coaches have been identified as the main culprits. A study conducted by Parent et al. (2016) showed that, in a representative sample of adolescents (14-17 years old), the prevalence of sexual harassment by coaches in the year prior to the study was 0.4%, while the prevalence of sexual abuse by a coach in sporting-related scenarios was 0.8%. Existing data on violence perpetrated by individuals in positions of authority, trust or power (abuse and maltreatment) in sport comes primarily from studies focusing on sexual violence, with coaches as the main perpetrators. However, the study shows that other authority figures in sport, such as sports doctors, masseurs or other coaching staff can be perpetrators of violent acts and involve adults both known and unknown to them; in fact, in some studies it has been shown that even spectators or adults occasionally encountered seem to be responsible for a considerable proportion of reported incidents of sexual harassment (Gündüz et al., 2007; Rintaugu et al.; 2014).

In addition, in the present study there is a prevalence of peer perpetrators or teammates similar to other studies (Alexander et al., 2011; Elendu & Umeakuka, 2011; Gunduz et al., 2007; Vertommen et al., 2017). The literature offers two possible explanations for this: the time that young people spend with their peers or the overlap with bullying, which implies a high incidence of emotional abuse and includes high percentages of verbal aggression (Holt et al., 2017). The data relating to peer-to-peer violence provides important food for thought on bullying episodes within a sporting context and how it should be part of policies and prevention interventions.

About a quarter of those who indicated that they had experienced violence had experienced two or more types of interpersonal violence in sports. The present figure is lower than that found in the literature: in a study conducted by Vertommen et al. (2018) it was revealed that 50% of people who have suffered one form of interpersonal violence have also reported exposure to a second or third form. In addition, the study showed that experiencing multiple forms of violence, known as polyvictimisation, correlates with higher levels of psychological distress and lower quality of life scores, similar to the study by Parent et al (2021).

The study shows differences between the 18-24 and 25-30 groups, with a higher prevalence of interpersonal violence in the first group. The passage of time and possible memory loss regarding past sports experiences may have influenced this difference. Furthermore, due to the increased awareness and discussion of harassment

and abuse both in sport and in society at large, it can be hypothesised that younger participants perceive an increasingly (verbally) aggressive and less tolerant society, with these tendencies reflected in sport, and are now more aware of undesirable behaviours with greater ability to recognise and report them (Tiessen-Raaphorst et al., 2008). Previous studies substantiate this finding; in fact the study by Vertommen et al. (2016) showed that younger participants report more episodes of psychological violence during childhood than their older peers. Another alternative explanation could be traced back to the intensification of competition and commercialisation of youth sport in general (Collins, 2013; Lavalette, 2013). As in CASES, a higher prevalence in men in the various IVAC categories challenges the prevailing belief that debates in the field of sport focus primarily on the victimisation of female athletes, often leaving out male victims.

More than half of the sample, with a similar trend in men and women, and in age differences, did not seek help after experiencing interpersonal violence in sport. This result is similar to the results of the CASES project. In cases where help was sought, most respondents sought help mainly outside of a sporting context, opting for family or friends as confidants. However, there is a strong prevalence of requests in the sports field - 25% - while requests to mental health professionals is about 10%.

This figure may be linked to the consequences experienced by respondents, including to their health. 12.9% had temporary health problems and 6.5% had chronic problems, with a tendency to ask for help. The sporting consequences are mainly a change of sports organisation or sport itself, with the former greater in males and the latter in females, respectively.

## 5.5 Limitations

The present study used a retrospective design, while the use of longitudinal forms of study is recommended for this type of investigation. The use of a retrospective survey has made it possible to limit the emotional impact on a sensitive issue that requires a thoughtful and justified approach, including a population of young adults.

In addition, the involvement of reference adults for research consent was avoided. However, sampling is similar to other studies (Vertommen et al., 2016; CASES, 2021) and as such may have intrinsic limitations owing to the use of a panel. For example, internet usage leads to an underrepresentation of groups that do not have or have difficulty accessing it. Another limitation of this format is that fieldwork is stopped as soon as the desired number of participants has been reached, preventing the exact response rate from being determined. In addition, the validity of the recall of adverse childhood events is the subject of ongoing debate in the literature (Hardt & Rutter,

2004), as such reports can often result in a significant number of false negatives and measurement errors, while false positives are considered less likely. Based on this assumption, it is likely that we estimate that there is an underestimation of the actual frequency of interpersonal violence in sport. Despite this, being the first study of its kind in Italy, the study has a sufficiently large sample taken from the general population, with a balance of gender, age and sports.

## **6. Qualitative study**

### **6.1 Objective**

The qualitative analysis aimed to prioritise the voices of victims of interpersonal violence in sport to help the sporting community fight interpersonal violence and reinforce the integrity of sport. The purpose of the interviews was to provide contextual details about negative experiences congruent with the IVAC categories reported in the quantitative questionnaire.

### **6.2 Procedure**

Participants in individual interviews were recruited from those who stated that they were available for a follow-up interview after completing the CAWI survey. The interviews followed the in-depth interview model. The in-depth interview model is a method of qualitative research used to obtain detailed and in-depth information on a certain topic or experience. Different to structured interviews or closed-answer questionnaires, an in-depth interview provides the opportunity to explore the opinions, perspectives, emotions, and personal experiences of participants in more depth. During an in-depth interview, the researcher poses open and flexible questions that allow the participant to tell their own story and go into more detail about relevant aspects of the topic. The interviewer aims to create a comfortable and safe environment, so the participant feels free to express themselves openly and truthfully.

The questions were based on the topics in the questionnaire, but they allowed for the opportunity to explore other themes. Participants were asked to detail their experiences of negative events and violence in sport including the nature of the experience, differences between sports, different levels of sporting practice, responsibility for the behaviour, the frequency and duration of the experience, the impact of the experience, who was aware of the event, the explanations of athletes, and whether they were aware the experience had happened to others. The interviews were conducted over webcam and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Renewed consent was sought for the interview stage. Interviewees were told they could refuse to answer questions

and interrupt the interview at any point. All aspects of privacy, confidentiality, and boundaries were carefully explained to the interviewees. They were informed that the information provided would be used or cited in the presentation of data but that transcripts would not be attributable to the individual participant. Interviews were conducted by health professionals with experience in interviewing vulnerable groups. There were considerable ethical challenges in carrying out a study on the potentially abusive experiences of young people in sport. Despite the study not directly asking minors about violence in sport, it did raise questions about confidentiality, anonymity, and protection. Nielsen addressed these challenges through the ethical approval of the study: methodological considerations, safety and the well-being of survey respondents and interview participants were a priority for the research team.

### **6.3 Qualitative analysis methodology**

#### **6.3.1. Methodology**

Consensual Qualitative Research (CRQ) was used for the analysis. This method of qualitative research seeks to gather information to describe reality through opinion, insights, and context analysis. CRQ respects the characteristics laid down by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) that must be included in qualitative research. Data must be collected from natural contexts, the event must be described and not manipulated, the description of the process must concern the mere 'what is being witnessed' without explanations that go beyond what is observed, the analysis must be inductive with conclusions based on data and not on preliminary hypotheses, and the event has to be interpreted from the participant's point of view. CQR also falls within the properties identified by Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) who, like the aforementioned authors, define qualitative research as such: the description and not the explanation of the event is emphasised; reality is seen through the eyes of the participants; the complexities of the event must come to light through the experiences, stories, and behaviours of the interviewees; the process of identifying hypotheses is parallel to the research and are generated using data and do not give immutable empirical facts. CQR also respects the characteristics highlighted by Stiles (1993), according to which good qualitative research requires linguistic and not numerical data, that empathy towards the participant is an integral part of the method, and that the interpretation of the context and experience is polydimensional. The number of required participants ranges from a minimum of eight to a maximum of 15. Having under eight participants does not give a true representation of the event due to a restricted sample size. It is not necessary to have more than 15 participants because if the sample is stable, additional data would become superfluous and would not have an impact on the results. It would also be unrealistic, from a complexity point of view, to conduct this type of analysis for each individual participant.

### 6.3.2 Procedure

The members of the research group first worked individually to examine the interview transcripts, applying independent coding to the data in order to identify preliminary themes. The researchers then met up on multiple occasions to discuss the themes that emerged independently, with the aim of reaching a consensus on the categories, fields and principal ideas. Fields are groups of common concepts (i.e categories) that derive from the independently identified themes. The main ideas were developed with the aim of remaining true to the original data, providing details and integrating the data (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). In extracting the categories, fields and main ideas from the data, the research group shared, discussed, and negotiated their data analysis until they reached an agreement.

These preliminary results (i.e. fields, categories, themes) were shared with an external reviewer in order to obtain their opinion and to avoid possible groupthink influences among the researchers, ensuring a plurality of perspectives. After receiving feedback, the researchers reconvened multiple times to integrate the perspectives of the external reviewer and defined final categories using a consensus. The research team then used a procedure for cross-analysis to present an assessment of the prevalence of each category in the data, in order to consolidate the methodological soundness of the study.

### 6.4 Sample

Fifteen individual interviews were conducted through webcam with people who were victim to acts of violence when practising sport before reaching the age of 18. The sample did not include national or international athletes and therefore the findings only relate to those who practised sport at an amateur or low competition level (**FIG 18**).

Rhythmic/artistic gymnastics, dance	6
Football	6
Volleyball	3
Basketball	3
Rugby	1
Swimming	1

**Figure 18** Distribution by sport of the qualitative sample. Some respondents practised more than one sport.t.





For the majority of interviewees, negative experiences date back to childhood and for most these events characterised their first encounter with sport. The first negative events that the interviewees remembered - sometimes the only event - mainly took place when they were a child between seven and ten years old. The exceptions to this were events linked to sexual orientation and sexual abuse, which tended to happen in their early teenage years. These negative events almost always took place in small and medium sports centres, appropriately sized for the sporting level of the sample.

## 6.5 Results

*Three fields were identified: the victimisation process, the role of the group and violent acts.*

Category	Core Ideas
<b>Field 1: The victimisation process</b>	
Self-blame	"It's my fault as I'm not cut out for sport"
Making them feel wrong	Not respecting the "standard" for that sport
<b>Field 2: The role of the group</b>	
Emulation	Imitation of violent behaviour
Normalisation	Violence becomes part of sporting activity
<b>Field 3: Violent acts</b>	
Escalation of violence	Violence leads to more violence
Performance and expectations	Sporting activity only geared towards performance
Underlying reasons for violence	Lack of tolerance for frustration
Difficulty in seeking help	Fear of not being believed, fear of disappointing

**Tab X** Summary of the fields and the categories of qualitative analysis

### 6.5.1 The victimisation process

The first field covers aspects of the victimisation process, including the victims' experiences and the reporting of aspects that are intrinsic to interpersonal violence. The field is made up of two categories (a) self-blame (b) making the victim feel in the wrong. The first category, self-blame, can be traced in many interviews, producing a general category.

*Interview 1: "There were moments or situations when I would punch myself in the stomach, which is a silly thing. But I was punching myself in the stomach... And hard. I wanted to hurt myself because it was like a symbol: I was punching my belly because I hated it."*



*Interview 9: "Maybe it's also my fault for behaving differently. I understood that they saw me as the different and distinct one."*

*Interview 14: "At the age of six, I was quite scrawny and I admit I'm no good at football. At that age it was supposed to be a hobby for me and even though I'm now 30 years old, I still get flashbacks from those situations."*

The victim has an underestimated perception of themselves, attributing blame to their own victimisation. Fragility, according to the victim's perception, takes on the form of a "defect". The victim experiences a sense of guilt which arises from unfairly attributing to themselves the characteristics that, based on their perception, have led to them being in a position to suffer violence, with a persistent feeling that comes from a young age and that is played out once again in adulthood.

The interviewees perceived themselves as "different" children and identify personal and physical attributes that they believe are "flaws" or "faults". They describe themselves as too thin, too overweight or too small compared with their peers. Alternatively, they attribute their difficulties to socialising, to their ability in reference to sport and one interviewee highlighted the difficulties linked to accepting their sexual orientation.

The second category concerns the perpetrator's behaviour in terms of making the victim feel in the wrong.

*Interview 4: "It all started with the coach when she would always compare me and say, 'Look how that girl is doing it...'. She could do it because she weighed two or three kilos less. There was always a comparison between the other girls and me because it was a girls' team."*

*Interview 1: There was a thing with the diving board in which you would go up to it, jump and fall into a swimming pool full of foam and I was never able to do it. They never allowed me to go up. I remember one day I asked the teacher why I couldn't do it and his answer, 'Because you still haven't understood that you're fat!'"*

Psychological violence is difficult for the interviewees to decipher and rationalise. The most significant episodes involve evident and repeated moments of exclusion that fuel the idea of being "wrong", "out of place" and "unwanted" through repeated demeaning comparisons with other boys and girls who are better or more "suitable" than them, it being impossible for the victim to carry out the same training exercises as the group and being occupied with "fillers" instead, which are unrelated to sport and not being selected for a match with no explanation (or finding out at the next training session that a match has been played).

### 6.5.2 The role of the group

The second field relates to the role of the group. It is made up of two categories (a) emulation and (b) normalisation.

The first category, emulation, is traceable in many interviews, producing a general category.

*Interview 2: "Yes, she used to do it when I had to do the splits, which I never managed to do from the ground and she would say, 'See, it's because you're fat. You have to lose weight, see.' But she would say it to me in front of everyone, so the others would start laughing. There were two girls, in particular, who were perfect. At that age, you think that's what perfection is. They laughed at me too. They would take the mickey out of me and they went to my school, so they would tell people at school. That was awful as well because it was like a chain."*

*Interview 7: "At the time, I think it was quite common because in middle school there are children who turn into teenagers and in that phase they become brutal. Many think they're authorised to show everyone who's the strongest. There's this thing where you see the weak guy who appears weak to you or maybe more alone and so you pick on him and start mocking him. This was certainly very widespread at the time."*

The victim feels embarrassed and tends to isolate themselves from the group. They may also feel partly responsible for what is happening. It is often the coaches themselves displaying harmful behaviours, which seemingly legitimises violence by team-mates. In all cases gathered, there was never any sort of intervention by the coach, even when they were aware of the facts. Children often imitate the behaviour they observe (Huesmann G Taylor, 2006). Consequently, coaches and parents, by setting the rules and standards, have a significant influence on the behaviour of the majority of athletes, both in sport and in daily life (Bačanac et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2019). It is important to note that these socialisation processes often take place without the children being aware of them (Huesmann G Taylor, 2006).

The second category covers aspects of normalisation within the context.

*Interview 8: "It was routine for him (coach). He never did anything to avoid such situations. He always let it go as if it were normal, but it wasn't acceptable any more for me because it was always frightening and dangerous."*

*Interview 10: "I felt lucky because I was one of the ones who experienced it the least. I saw it as something normal in a normal context. It was routine. In that sort of social context, I would go to the football school and see others slapped. It was normal for me. It wasn't abnormal or an anomaly."*



Especially for the younger ones, it is common to believe that what they are going through is a “normal” situation. It is often the first and only sporting setting that they know and it is easy to think that it is more or less the same as in other situations. In the event of verbal or physical violence in which the majority of the group is subjected to aggressive behaviour, the hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that nobody objects. In the event of psychological violence, a form of denial often manifests in which the victim tries to avoid thinking about the situation, convinced that this will make it more bearable.

In almost all cases, violent episodes occur in the presence of team-mates during training. Only a minority occur in front of parents or spectators attending matches or competitions. It has emerged that instructors would use humiliation methods as leverage to encourage children to give more or they would use marginalisation in training in a bid to discourage the victim from continuing with the sporting activity.

For the majority, being mocked or offended in front of team-mates in training is an additional humiliating factor that allows the group to behave in the same way. Such incidents are aggravated by the very young age of the victim in which they are:

1. mocked for their physical attributes and character;
2. excluded from group activity; or
3. attacked for below-par performances.

In relation to the young age, it was difficult for the victim to understand and manage the situation with repercussions affecting their entire adolescence and, in the most serious cases, their adult lives too. In most cases, the coach was the perpetrator of violence. There is no shortage of accounts of insults between opponents, but these are classified as “unpleasant episodes”, rather than pure violence.

In team sports, the coaching staff’s behaviour endorses – more or less consciously – the same behaviour by the group. Even when insults and continuous shouting were directed at all male and female students and used as a “teaching tool”, the interviewees (especially those aged six to eight) remember feeling uncomfortable and wanting to stop the activity. Only in adulthood does the victim understand the intent to harm and apportion blame rather than to help, correct or foster improvement.

### **6.5.3 Violent Acts**

The third field includes the interviewees’ accounts of the episodes of violence of which they were victims and consists of four categories: (a) circle of violence; (b) performance and expectations; (c) motivations and (d) difficulty in seeking help.



The first category concerns the circle of violence.

*Interview 1: "A fairly important place for kids and I remember this game in which we were playing quite badly, by that I mean the team just wasn't working, and he was very aggressive, so he was shouting, swearing at the children [...] He insulted me by swearing, cursing, saying to me: "You stupid idiot, you have to bend your legs because if you don't bend them you won't get it in the hoop" [..]. He felt like he was being made fun of, he took the chair, one of the folding chairs that was on the bench, and threw it on the court."*

*Interview 9: "Sometimes it was the case that in order to gain acceptance you picked on someone - you put yourself on the side of the bullies and insulted your friend. So let's say that in order to be accepted, I also got involved in bullying."*

In the second category, it is revealed that most of the interviewees did not have any competitive aspirations in sport and that it was just seen as a game and social activity; even when there were competitions and matches most of the interviewees had not set medium and long-term sporting goals.

*Interview 4: "I mean, it's not that there was a standard, it was the coach who cared about these other girls who were... they flew the flag for the club and they had a future because they had already been called up to the team above our age category. So she cared more about those girls and so she was always making this comparison: 'Look at those girls, how tall they are, how pretty they are, they have nice legs, beautiful muscles and these are things that you will probably never be able to have.'"*

*Interview 6: "In that moment it's as if they forget that we're human beings and they see you as an object to be destroyed. It's as if there are no values; they just have to make it in the sport, because there are people watching, their careers. It's about image and I also reckon it's about self-esteem. Maybe in those moments they're scared and they want to destroy you for the benefit of their own self-esteem in order to feel stronger."*

Sporting activity was seen as an opportunity for fun, a way for boys and girls to get to know one another and to foster a healthier lifestyle. In only one case had the activity been prescribed by a doctor. The choice of sport was based on where training took place, if their classmates/friends were involved, and sometimes due to family tradition (especially men and football).

According to the respondents, there are at least three triggers behind the negative events:

1. Students being selected at too young an age;
2. Excessive competition (between opposing teams and within the group itself);
3. Inadequate coaches.



According to the interviewees, the first two dynamics are fuelled by the system which is set up in such a way that associations only progress if they are successful and if the students are involved in competitive activity, contrary to reasons behind the choice to start a sport as mentioned above. It reveals that coaches (especially when they are also in charge of the association) tend to pick out players at an early age, discouraging those for whom they do not see a bright future in the sport. Coaches may be competent in the sport but not necessarily suitable for the educational side of sports coaching because they are focused only on sporting performance or they are unable to contain their frustrations in the face of an athlete's failure, and in any case lack specific educational training.

The third category identifies the possible reasons for the coaches' actions, according to the victims:

*Interview 2: "I mean, you really saw this competition as a means of getting one over on the other group [...] wanting to be better, better than everyone, doing everything for an article in the newspaper."*

*Interview 11: "Rumours get around. The root cause was a somewhat difficult family situation, the frustration of which she took out during training."*

*Interview 5: "I think it's just the fear of repercussions when it comes to insurance, insurance premiums and whatnot."*

When the aggressor is the coach, the victims identify two main reasons: personal and character problems that led them to 'unload' their frustrations on athletes, and being caught up in a violent cultural and social system, in which the bodily harm was not only tolerated but also even seen as an educational tool. When physical aggression by opponents occurs during matches the reason behind it is an excessive sense of competition, often fuelled by the coach and parents.

For the fourth category, concerning difficulties in asking for help, the following are reported:

*Interview 9: "I never considered it. I never thought about asking for help."*

*Interview 6: "No, because at home it's a matter of shame and also because you don't want to upset your family, because I realised that these things were small enough to deal with on my own, so why upset my family?"*

*Interview 14: "But from there I think I developed this totally unfair sense of guilt [...] Also, because registration was so expensive and I couldn't even go to training."*



For younger boys and girls, it is particularly difficult to explain to their parents that they do not feel comfortable in an activity that should technically be fun, to be played with friends and peers, and in which the children themselves may have asked to be involved in. Although shame is the prevailing feeling, many feared that they would not be believed. The difficulty of talking about it is a pain that is added to that of the violence suffered and for many constitutes a regret and a further sense of failure. In cases where victims are able to ask for help (about a quarter of respondents), the first people they turn to are their parents. Their peer group, when present and willing to help, is an important source of releasing tension and mitigating the effects of violence but is not perceived as being able to offer concrete help. None of the interviewees ever considered turning to educational figures or other adults.

Often it is 'luck' which provides the opportunity to discuss such matters, such as coming home with some bruises or a parent happening to appear while violent episodes occurred (especially verbal violence). In all of the cases, those who turned to their parents were later taken out of the sports club while in one case the police were contacted. A greater awareness seems to develop over the course of adolescence. Victims gain the necessary strength to resist and move away from the negative environment. Often the uncomfortable situations last for years before the victim decides to drop the sporting activity.

Adolescence and the change of school (from primary to junior high school) provide the opportunity – and the necessary strength – to oppose the violence and then stop the sporting activity. Out of the interviewees who did not mention to their parents the negative incidents they were subjected to while they were happening, few went on to do so in the following years.

## **6.6 Insights into the consequences of IVAC**

With regard to the consequences, no specific field was developed, but it is interesting to note the experiences of the interviewees in relation to what they went through following the violence.

*“Since then, team sports have been off limits for me because women always need to be perfect because the attire is tight. They make you feel wrong and they have their favourites.”*

*“I don't play team sports. Cycling, running, gym, Pilates. Nothing that you can do in a group. I go on my own with my music. I can't even watch them. For me, a group is like a herd.”*

Many of those who have been victims of more than one negative episode in different



sports and who have not found support among friends and family members have abandoned sport altogether and even today do not take part in any sporting activity. Among those who have continued, many have turned to sports where the risks of being judged or stigmatised are low as they are individual activities that can be carried out autonomously (running, gym, swimming) or activities where it is not necessary to use dressing rooms at the gym. Few of them continue to play the same team sport and those who do are often men who have had positive experiences at other sports clubs.

*“Despite the fact I’m now 30, I get flashbacks of certain situations... I didn’t think they’d scarred me that badly, but these flashbacks have made me understand how bad I felt while doing something that should be enjoyable for a child of six years old.”*

*“Comments about my weight really affected me. I felt awful and I’m still underweight now. I have nightmares about going back to that time. Inevitably, it scarred me.”*

The current fear for the interviewees is reliving those moments. Discussions which would have helped the victim to understand the illegitimacy of violent behaviour were lacking. The most serious consequences seem to affect those who received no help during their childhood in interpreting the episodes as incorrect and unacceptable, such as those who were discriminated against due to their sexual orientation, be it in a sporting context or other, and those who were subjected to physical and psychological violence and who grew up in cultural contexts (school and family) that were, if not violent, particularly closed and where such matters were not spoken about. The victims often relive those moments through intrusive thoughts in situations that are disconnected from sport (e.g. nightmares and anxiety). Many take measures to prevent the danger of reliving them, such as excessive weight control practices and avoiding all situations in which they feel observed and/or judged (competitive activity, environments with too many new people, etc.).

*“I went to a therapist for other reasons and one of the things that came up was my hypersensitivity towards injustice. I think that’s where it stems from.”*

*“It made me too sensitive to others – the weakest – suffering. It gives me a bad feeling in my stomach.”*

*“I look at people and I think of my neighbour who does swimming. Who knows what she is subjected to if her costume doesn’t fit the way it should. I empathise with girls of that age who get into sport. I see a girl with a gym bag and I wonder if she’s going there willingly.”*

Even those who claim to have overcome those moments without any particular consequences bear the marks. They describe themselves as hypersensitive to injustice



and struggle to forge friendships or trust people they do not know. Some report that they try to identify risky situations that may lead to embarrassment or discomfort in advance, even if unrelated to sport. It is also evident that there is a generalised mistrust of people in line with the idea that “the world is dangerous and hostile” and so it is necessary to protect yourself or react to counteract it.

*“I was different, cheerful, more open... I’m no longer the person I used to be. They ruined my childhood.”*

*“I learnt to be braver, to face up to things and not to stay in the corner. This also goes for saying no, grabbing my bag and leaving. I wanted to show that I was taking care of myself and not being submissive anymore.”*

Reprocessing in adulthood entails the bitter realisation that the person suffered injustice and that their childhood was at least partially ruined by those incidents. The regret at not being able to react and ask for help is rather widespread and the promise made to oneself was to never let yourself be treated like that ever again.

## **6.7 Discussion**

The interview passages reveal negative experiences linked to different sports, in which male and female athletes were subjected to punishments, public humiliation and psychological pressure from coaches and team-mates.

The interviewees highlighted the pressure to conform to fixed beauty standards, such as having a specific physique or legs of a certain type. These ideals affected their self-esteem and could lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure. Indeed, there were accounts of bullying and discrimination linked to physical appearance. The interviewees were subjected to negative comments, derision and social exclusion because of their bodies or their physical capabilities. Similar results are traceable in literature (Willson G Kerr, 2021; Çetin, 2022) in which accounts are told, through semi-structured interviews, of athletes reporting a prevalence in sporting contexts of negative verbal comments about their bodies, being subjected to weight monitoring, being forced to follow food and drink restrictions, facing public criticism about their own bodies and being punished whenever they did not meet the required standards. The participants discussed the effects of these experiences, which include normalising such behaviour, social comparison, the adoption of extreme weight-control measures, negative consequences on health, reduced sporting performance and reduced enjoyment in sporting activity. In this context, body shaming can be defined as a common emotional experience deriving from the perception that you have to meet cultural standards defined by narrow models and the discomfort created by this experience.



In addition, some experienced exclusion and a lack of recognition within their sporting activity. These individuals reported that they were not asked to participate in matches and were treated unfairly due to their physical appearance and/or their performance ability. Such evidence can be referred to as emotional abuse, as defined by Stirling and Kerr (2008), which includes systematic non-physical behaviour towards a child, such as shouting, humiliating, insulting and making comments that humiliate, degrade and intimidate the child. Similarly to other studies, the use of verbal and physical abuse is considered a means to punish an inadequate performance or training conduct in order to attain better performance and success (Stirling and Kerr, 2008), which is often considered typical of an environment that is geared towards performance. Male and female coaches believe that verbal and physical abuse is necessary to enhance young athletes' ability and it has been observed that coaches who employ abusive tactics often experienced abuse from their own coaches during their youth (Yabe et al., 2018). Some coaches, however, are often unaware of the damaging effect that their behaviour has on young athletes (Carlsson G Lundqvist, 2016). It is crucial for coaches to recognise that verbal and physical abuse can lead to young athletes quitting sport, which highlights the importance of adopting appropriate training practices. Although the interviews featured in this piece of research were conducted with a sample of amateur athletes, similar experiences have also been reported among elite athletes (Jacobs et al., 2017).

As highlighted by Stanford and colleagues (2013), children and teenagers experience a culture and mentality in sport that normalise training through discomfort, injuries and fatigue. The authors highlight how the coaches were often aware of the impact of rigorous training sessions and intentionally pushed young athletes to their absolute limit to make them stronger. However, some coaches were unaware of the impact on individual youngsters who had been conditioned to expect and accept a "sporting work ethic" that involved extreme training and competition. Although coaches may have created a training and competition culture that is at their endurance limit, the pressure to go beyond one's limit and to get back into training too quickly after an injury often came from the youth athletes themselves and their peers. Reasons such as blame, fear of embarrassment and desire not to disappoint others were often cited as motivational factors.

The widespread use of emotionally abusive behaviour by coaches in youth sport and the justification for such behaviour indicate that this issue is not limited to individual coaches or specific sports, but it rather stems from the institutional context in which such practices take place. The institutional context must trigger a change in terms of an athlete-centred approach covering their specific needs, and not just performance, through the critical application of a conceptual Foucauldian framework. They found that transformation was possible when coaches learnt how to critically examine and modify their way of thinking and playing sport, in particular in relation to the concept of developing mental resilience.

## 6.8 Future directions

The interviewees believe that these are not isolated cases, as dictated by their experience and the attitude of society in regard to “non-performers”.

Sporting associations, still today and maybe even more so, are constantly in search of talents and competition seems to have intensified, involving increasingly younger children. Some of those who have experienced physical violence believe that the number of such incidents has fallen sharply in recent years. None of the interviewees would discourage their future children from playing any type of sport and would let them choose freely. They would, however, take some precautions to protect them such as opting for a club and activities with open training sessions, not asking their children so much about the outcome of the activity, but how they feel and how they are doing to keep the communication channel open at all times and to take their child away from the activity at the first sign of distress.

*“Ideally you need someone to check and every now and then go to training unexpectedly to see what is happening. It could even be a parent, as a representative.”*

*They should do empathy tests and try to find out how an instructor would act in certain situations.”*

*“I don’t think it’s rare, but it’s like the mafia: you don’t talk about these things and that’s wrong.”*

Sports staff must receive appropriate training. It is essential to check that the coach and sporting professionals have the necessary psychological skillset to treat sport as an educational tool. The problem of violence relates to the world of sport and to society as a whole. It is therefore necessary to: (1) provide adequate training for coaches and sporting professionals, not just from a sporting perspective, but also psychologically and pedagogically, particularly when interacting with children of primary school age; (2) check how training sessions are being run and sanction inappropriate methods, including via random and undercover visits; and (3) transmit the true values of sport in a more effective way. At a more general, across-the-board level, it is necessary to shift the focus from performance to participation and to transmit the values of inclusion.

## 6.9 Limitations

Despite the strengths of this research, it is necessary to consider some of the limitations of a qualitative study. Given that the interviewees were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, there could be a risk of non-representative selection. This means that the results could not be generalised to the entire population involved in violence in sport. Given that a qualitative study is based on participants' subjective experiences, there could be a lack of objectivity in data collection, which would therefore make it difficult to compare and analyse results accurately and coherently. The interviews are open to interpretation and hinge on the interviewees' memory, which could lead to possible misunderstandings or inaccuracies relating to data collection. In addition, participants were asked to remember past events, which could be influenced by memory errors or the tendency to alter information as time passes. It is important to consider these limitations when interpreting and analysing the results of this qualitative study.

## 7. Final comment on the results by Prof. Mike Hartill

### 7.1 Prevalence of interpersonal violence (IV) inside sport

The primary aim of the study was to estimate the prevalence of interpersonal violence against children inside Italian sport. The study has revealed that 39% (n=558) of respondents have had at least one experience of IV in sport before the age of 18. This means that approximately 4 out of 10 children who participate in a sport will experience some form of IV inside sport.

The international definitions of child abuse and interpersonal violence identify four main forms or categories: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and neglect. The following trends were apparent among the respondents who have experienced IV in sport:

- Psychological violence: 30% (n=167/440)
- Physical violence: 19% (n=106/269)
- Neglect: 15% (n=84/210)
- Sexual violence: 14% (n=76/198)
  - Non-contact sexual violence (NCSV): 10% (n=57/149)
  - Contact sexual violence (CSV): 10% (n=54/139)

While it is useful and important to identify and distinguish between the various forms and categories of IV, children often experience more than one form of IV. For example, 7% of those who have experienced contact sexual violence (CSV) have also experienced psychological violence. Overall, 19% of those who have experienced IV

inside sport have experienced multiple forms of violence.

In keeping with data from other countries, children participating in Italian sport experience psychological violence more often than the other types of IV. But the prevalence of all categories of IV is concerning and unacceptable and must be tackled urgently by the government, sporting authorities and policymakers.

## 7.2 Age

The younger age group (18-24) in the sample experienced higher levels of IV across all categories compared to the older age group (25-30). There are several possible explanations for this. Firstly, it may actually indicate an increase of IV inside sport in recent years. Secondly, it may be down to memory and the fact that for the younger age group in the sample, these events are more recent and, therefore, more likely to be remembered. Thirdly, it is plausible that increased interest in the issue of child abuse and the protection of children in recent years has prompted the younger respondents to deem certain behaviours and practices inappropriate, negative, unacceptable and potentially harmful, having been seen as normal and accepted in the past.

## 7.3 Gender

The male respondents in the sample experienced higher levels of all categories of IV in sport, except neglect, than their female counterparts. There is a very small difference between men and women in the categories of neglect, psychological violence and sexual violence in sport. The largest differences between men and women are found in acts of physical and sexual violence.

Overall for physical violence (22% and 15%), these results confirm the findings of previous studies (including CASES) which show that boys face a significantly greater risk of physical violence inside sport than girls. However, these results should be interpreted with caution as they may also be associated with the types of sport in which the men and women of this sample participated as children. Some traditionally male-dominated sports, such as football, rugby and basketball, involve more physical contact and physically aggressive competition compared to other sports, and this may be a factor in the amount of physical violence experienced by respondents (albeit off the field of play). In all three of the examples above, male participation was much higher than female (e.g. 63% of men had participated in football before the age of 18, compared to 8% of women).

Overall for sexual violence (15% and 12%), the difference is relatively small. Similarly, in the CASES study sexual violence inside sport was more prevalent among boys but the difference was not statistically significant. However, public debate and policy development are often influenced by the general assumption (or myth) that girls are



at a significant risk of sexual violence, whereas boys – particularly those who are strong and athletic – are not. Although general prevalence data indicates that girls are at greater risk of sexual violence than boys, this data (and other studies) show that this may be a problematic and erroneous assertion to make in the context of sport. Policymakers must be aware of this, especially considering that participation in sport is generally higher among boys than girls, and particularly in some sports.

#### **7.4 Level of participation**

As in other studies, these results show that the risk of experiencing interpersonal violence is evident at all levels of participation in sport. However, they also indicate that the risk increases as the level of competition increases. As the intensity of their participation in sport goes up, the children spend an increasing amount of time in the company of others competing with or against them (i.e. other children or young people), or who play a supporting role in their participation (i.e. adult volunteers, officials and professionals). This familiarity naturally leads to relationships of trust that may then be manipulated for personal gratification at the expense of others. Higher performance levels also tend to isolate children more from others (both peers and adults) as they pursue their dreams of excellence. Such factors offer more opportunities for acts of violence to be carried out unnoticed. Furthermore, the higher a child's performance, the greater the incentive to not deviate from a routine condition or do/say something that could jeopardise their chances of "making the team". These levels of risk should influence policies but we must remember that the vast majority of children participate at "novice", amateur or club level.

#### **7.5 Age of onset**

Among those who said they had experienced interpersonal violence inside sport before the age of 18, the experiences started most commonly before the age of 14 (39% for psychological violence, 29% for physical violence, 22% for neglect). More than half (56%) of those who have experienced contact sexual violence (CSV) and non-contact sexual violence (NCSV) did so before the age of 16 (33% before 15 and 15% before 14).

#### **7.6 Duration**

Within each category of IV, 15-20% of the respondents indicated that the experience had lasted one day. Therefore, for a significant majority, the behaviour they experienced was not an isolated event. For between a quarter and a third of respondents, the



behaviour they experienced lasted at least 6 months, while for 8-12% of the sample, the experience lasted more than 2 years, showing that such behaviours are patterns and not isolated incidents.

## 7.7 Locations

The results indicate that IV was experienced most frequently in or around the sports facility. Changing rooms and shower areas are targeted in particular, along with other areas providing opportunities for isolation. However, the results also show that a significant proportion of these incidents take place in public spaces; in other words, the behaviour is not hidden. Again, this may indicate the normalisation of interpersonal violence across sporting contexts. The qualitative data offers a more in-depth perspective on this:

*“If you didn’t do the exercise properly, you’d have to do your punishment in front of all the others, like push-ups or laps. If you messed up, she’d put the other girls on the sideline and throw balls at whoever had got it wrong. They’d then have to pick them up for at least a quarter of an hour.”*

*“The coach didn’t do anything, but it was clear. The others would talk about me as if I were a girl in front of everyone.”*

## 7.8 Perpetrators

As in other studies, the majority of acts of IV are perpetrated by team-mates (or peers). The results show that team-mates (known or unknown) are responsible for 56% of the experiences reported by this sample. Coaching staff are responsible for 31% of these experiences, while 15% can be attributed to other members of sports staff and 8% to known adults. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of experiences of IV inside sport come from within the sport itself, rather than from outside. Unknown adults are responsible for just 8% of such experiences.

This also highlights a problematic culture within sport, despite policies often focusing on preventing “dangerous” individuals from entering sport. In this regard, there are some differences between the genders. Team-mates/peers (known and unknown) are the perpetrators in over 60% of cases for men, but only 45% of cases for women.

However, for women, coaches are the perpetrators in 35% of cases, compared to 27% for men. This may reflect hyper-masculinist cultures within male sport that place a particular value on the ability to inflict and suffer violence. It may also indicate a sporting environment in which the traditional concepts of femininity are prevalent, combining with hyper-competitive training regimes and predatory coaches to leave

female athletes vulnerable to a range of IV experiences, as highlighted by the respondents interviewed:

*“She had a model. You had to have a certain physique. Your legs had to be a certain way. If you didn’t make it, it would be because you didn’t look like the rest of them. She’d say to me, ‘Look what nice legs the others have...’”*

*“The instructors came to competitions and would touch you under the guise of checking your position.”*

## **7.9 Requests for support and assistance**

The majority of respondents who had experienced IV inside sport had not sought support (56%). It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of men said they had sought and received support than women (24% vs 18%), which goes against the notion set out in more general studies (although focusing on sexual violence). Respondents in the youngest age group were also more likely to seek support (22% vs 19%).

The reasons given for not seeking support send out important messages to policymakers. 47% of those who did not seek support thought their experiences were acceptable or tolerable, 30% said they did not want to appear weak and 17% feared the consequences. This reflects the dominant culture in Italian sport and what is generally considered acceptable behaviour and common practice. The sporting authorities must address this issue and ensure that behavioural guidelines or protocols (based on children’s rights) are communicated effectively (to children and parents alike) and implemented. It is generally thought that children are so fragile that they cannot be involved in delicate issues such as acknowledging their emotional and physical limits. But the exact opposite is true. If sport is safe and welcoming to children, they will feel safe when dealing with complex issues.

## **8. Insights from the qualitative survey**

### **8.1 Fragility as a weakness**

*“It started from my embarrassment about those extra kilos. I was already someone who hid themselves, and if that’s the way I saw myself...” (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

*“They used to tell me, ‘You’ll do fine because you’re pretty.’ I always had to do more to escape that.” (F, 25-30, rhythmic gymnastics)*

*“I’ll admit I was a scrawny child and not good at the sport.” (M, 25- 30, football)*





*"She had a model. You had to have a certain physique. Your legs had to be a certain way. If you didn't make it, it would be because you didn't look like the rest of them. She'd say to me, 'Look what nice legs the others have...'" (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

## **8.2 No one did it for the competition**

*"I started artistic gymnastics because all of my friends at school did it." (M, 18-24, artistic gymnastics)*

*"For us at six years old, it was about going to play football. For them it was searching for new talent." (M, 25-30, football)*

*"I loved being part of a team. It's nice to become a group, develop your team spirit, play in matches and test yourself. However, this was ruined because often after we'd finish training, we'd have to console a girl who was crying." (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

## **8.3 Humiliation hurts more if it happens in front of team-mates**

*"If you didn't do the exercise properly, you'd have to do your punishment in front of all the others, like push-ups or laps. If you messed up, she'd put the other girls on the sideline and throw balls at whoever had got it wrong. They'd then have to pick them up for at least a quarter of an hour." (F, 24-30, volleyball)*

*"The coach didn't do anything, but it was clear. The others would talk about me as if I were a girl in front of everyone." (M, 24-30, volleyball)*

## **8.4 Parents and coaches often supported extreme levels of competitiveness**

*"Gli allen "The coaches wanted to get to the top and would stop at nothing to get there. They didn't care about the children, just the score. It wasn't fun anymore. It wasn't a passion or a hobby." (M, 31- 34, artistic gymnastics)*

*"They lose human understanding. They've got to destroy you." (F, 25-30, rugby)*

*"There was chaos before a match. It was all to be better than the other group or to get an article in the paper." (F, 31-34, artistic gymnastics)*

*"'You paid me and I'll make him great for you...' A parent is happy with that, but I would pay for my child to have fun!" (M, 25-30, football)*



*“Being in a sports environment wasn’t a good experience. It’s not relaxed. The most blatant example are often perfectly calm mothers who would insult other people’s kids from the sidelines. It’s like an outlet. You absolutely have to win, and that idea comes from your family and coaches.” (F, 18-24, volleyball)*

*“Lots of coaches don’t do it full-time, but as a second job. Maybe they don’t understand it should be fun for everyone, including themselves.” (F, 24-30, volleyball)*

### **8.5 Psychological violence devalues and marginalises the victim**

*“They don’t want a normal girl who’s maybe quite good but fat and makes the team look bad. It’s better to have a pretty girl.” (F, 18- 24, artistic gymnastics)*

*“When there were matches, they wouldn’t even call me.” (M, 31-34, football)*

*“I’d just started secondary school and my mum had a tumour. She had it until I was 16 and then she died. He knew about it. He was Protestant and started this game with me about which was the better religion. I remember car journeys during which he would say, ‘Do you believe your mum is in Heaven? You know that’s made up by the Pope? Do you think the Virgin Mary was a virgin? She was a whore! How do you believe that stuff? How did your parents raise you?’” (M, 18- 24, basketball)*

*“You lose your friendships too, those who started out with you. My friend and I stopped talking.” (F, 31-34, basketball)*

*“It wasn’t a nice atmosphere in the changing room. I couldn’t wait to get out... They’d make jokes about sex. I wouldn’t respond. I’d freeze. I realised I’d been dragged into it, and I felt awful.” (M, 31-34, swimming)*

### **8.6 Verbal abuse cuts deep**

*“There was a coach there that asked a lot of us. He was ex-Serie A. He used to shout, swear, and the more you were struggling the more he would pile it on. He didn’t criticise you physically, but mentally. He’d shout: ‘you can’t run because you’re shit! Because you’re a pussy!’” (M, 18-24, basketball)*

*“He’d shout at me more because I wasn’t good. I have this image of me getting back in line and hiding from him.” (M, 25-30, football)*

*“The coach didn’t want me to be involved. He’d make constant jokes because I’d come*



*from dance. He'd keep saying, 'What's the point of putting you on?'" (F, 25-30, rugby)*

*"It started with the coach. She'd always compare me to the other girls. From then on, everyone thought they could do the same." (F, 28-25, volleyball)*

*"It affected the group. The coach had their favourites and you were just a stupid little idiot." (M, 25-30, basketball)*

*"I don't know what the coaches' normal voices were like. They were always shouting." (M, 30-34, football)*

*"I was seven to nine at most. I turned up to the exam and plain faced in front of everyone, she said: 'How can you show up here? You can't even manage to do a cabriole.' My mum heard and asked why. She replied saying they can't allow favouritism. She took me home." (F, 18-24, artistic gymnastics)*

### **8.7 Physical violence affects boys especially and can fall under the umbrella of bullying**

*"The first day we spoke about full-backs, I got something wrong, and they pushed me, they shook me, they shouted in my face. We were little. They didn't explain. It's not nice. Being hit became routine." (M, 31-34, football)*

*"Every time I'd go home, these older lads would give me a nosebleed, or they'd leave bruises on my neck and back. It wasn't a nice situation. The coach knew and he'd just say that they were good boys." (M, 25-30, football)*

### **8.8 Sexual abuse experienced as guilt and inappropriate contact**

*"You try to find an answer. Why me? The more you do, the more you do wrong. Was it my fault? In the end, I thought it's the system that's rotten. It's everyone above you. You take as much as you can and then you either give in or you leave [...] I stopped doing this sport for a bit, then I moved but also because I was tired of that part of it." (F, 25-30, dance)*

*"He did teach you but he used that as an excuse to cling to you. After two or three lessons, he asked for my number and tried it on with me. With that I quit." (F, skiing, 24-30)*



### **8.9 Violence is normalised and isn't classed as wrong**

*"Sometimes I'd say I was leaving, but I wouldn't have known how to do it. I also took it for granted. I knew training was like that and that was it." (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

*"I was surrounded by children who would get slapped. I didn't get slapped as much so I thought I was lucky. I never told anyone because to me it was normal." (M, 31-34, football)*

*"I'd cover my ears. I'd try not to hear it and after a while I didn't hear it anymore." (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

### **8.10 Children found it difficult to speak up**

*"I had a really bad experience because my parents knew nothing. I always tried to find an excuse but as they knew nothing about it, they'd say if you make a commitment, you have to keep it up. I dragged myself through for a large part of my teenage years, at least three years. It was my fault because I didn't know how to talk to my parents." (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

*"I'd tried so many sports... If I'd told my mum, it would've made things worse. You have to make yourself enjoy something." (M, 31-34, swimming)*

*"When I think about it, I still have a horrible feeling in my stomach. My dad would say 'Let's go to training' and I'd sit there watching the TV and without turning around I'd say 'No, no, no'. I knew he wanted to take me to make me spend time with other kids." (M, 25-30, football)*

*"I stopped going because once there was a really bad storm during training and when we finished, the coaches left us there on our own, in the rain. They left. It was that that convinced the parents, not the slaps that no one knew about." (M, 31-34, football)*

### **8.11 Awareness comes with age**

*"As I grew up, there came a point when I couldn't take it anymore. There was this crossfire dynamic, and I would respond in kind. I loved basketball but I hated him. Bye, I don't want to see you anymore." (M, 18-24, basketball)*

*"As I was growing up, I was already at an age where you start to rebel, where you start to realise, and that's when we started talking to each other." (F, 31-34, basketball)*



*“Growing up saved me and I was able to stop.” (M, 31-34, swimming)*

### **8.12 Many stop practising team sports**

*“Since then, team sports have been off limits for me because women always need to be perfect because the attire is tight. They make you feel wrong and they have their favourites.” (F, 18-24, artistic gymnastics)*

*“I don’t do team sports. Cycling, running, gym, Pilates. Nothing that you can do in a group. I go on my own with my music. I can’t even watch them. For me, a group is like a herd.” (M, 31- 34, swimming)*

### **8.13 Consequences of trauma**

*“Those episodes you experienced at a certain age stay with you for life.” (M, 25-30, volleyball)*

*“Despite the fact I’m now 30, I get flashbacks of certain situations... I didn’t think they’d scarred me that badly, but these flashbacks have made me understand how bad I felt while doing something that should be enjoyable for a child of six years old.” (M, 25-30, football)*

*“Comments about my weight really affected me. I felt awful and I’m still underweight now. I have nightmares about going back to that time. Inevitably, it scarred me.” (M, 24-30, volleyball)*

*“I went to a therapist for other reasons and one of the things that came up was my hypersensitivity towards injustice. I think that’s where it stems from.” (F, 24-30, artistic gymnastics)*

*“It made me too sensitive to others – the weakest – suffering. It gives me a bad feeling in my stomach.” (F, 24-30, volleyball)*

*“I look at people and I think of my neighbour who does swimming. Who knows what she is subjected to if her costume doesn’t fit the way it should. I empathise with girls of that age who get into sport. I see a girl with a gym bag and I wonder if she’s going there willingly.”  
(F, 24-30, volleyball)*

*“I was different, cheerful, more open... I’m no longer the person I used to be. They*



*ruined my childhood.” (M, 25-30, football)*

*“I learnt to be braver, to face up to things and not to stay in the corner. This also goes for saying no, grabbing my bag and leaving. I wanted to show that I was taking care of myself and not being submissive anymore.” (F, 25-30, volleyball)*

#### **8.14 Awareness of not being isolated cases**

*“Things are no different in smaller towns.” (F, 24-30, volleyball)*

*“I don’t think it’s rare, but it’s like the mafia: you don’t talk about these things and that’s wrong.” (M, 25- 30, football)*

*“I think the situation is getting worse for women.” (M, 25-30, football)*

#### **8.15 Increased awareness of violent acts**

*“I’d be there to understand if the boy is being isolated, if he’s being mistreated or insulted.” (M, 31- 34, football)*

*“My daughter is seven. She wanted to start ballet and after two weeks the teacher said she’s not suited to it. I didn’t bat an eyelid and I said to her: Let’s go home! She hasn’t got much self-esteem. They don’t even realise they can do damage.” (F, 31-34, basketball)*

*“If they had asked me about how I felt and not just how the match went, maybe I would’ve said something. ‘Who won?’ they’d ask. They didn’t ask how I felt. I try to be more sensitive and empathetic.” (M, 31-34, football)*

*“Now if a coach slaps you, it’s unacceptable. They’re more exposed to criticism. If a child gets slapped, they go home and tell someone about what happened.” (M, 31-34, basketball)*

#### **8.16 A need for child protection training**

*“Ideally you need someone to check and every now and then go to training unexpectedly to see what is happening. It could even be a parent, as a representative.” (F, 24-30, volleyball)*

*“They should do empathy tests and try to find out how an instructor would act in certain situations.” (M, 24-30, volleyball)*

## **9. Discussion by Prof. Mike Hartill**

The results clearly show that interpersonal violence against children in sport is a serious and widespread problem in Italy. As we have indicated, it is important to remember that (in line with other studies) these are low-threshold measurements: this means that all occurrences reported by respondent contribute equally to the overall rates. Future analyses will break down and deepen the data further. Although this is an interim report, some immediate conclusions and observations can be drawn from these findings.

- While based on adult opinions, the participants were all young adults. Therefore, we can confidently say that these events and behaviours are not ‘historic’ but actually represent the current situation of Italian youth sport. Data shows that current strategies, policies and approaches are not sufficient to prevent interpersonal violence in sport. We have learned, from research and from victims’ testimonies, that in the absence of specific policies and procedures, child abuse (by action or omission) can proliferate if left unchecked.
- All forms of violence against children have harmful effects; however, sexual violence in sport receives by far the most media attention, while other forms, such as psychological violence, are often ignored or considered part of the ‘price to pay’ for playing a sport. As such, this study provides important data on all forms of interpersonal violence against children in sport, including acts that could be considered relatively harmless, drawing attention to cultural practices and behaviours that are often considered a normal part of the game, as well as acts that may meet or exceed the threshold of criminal activity
- Suffering abuse and neglect in childhood can have serious and lasting consequences for victims and their families. These consequences can manifest themselves in different ways, but the impact is often extremely detrimental to both the individual, the local community and the sports involved. In addition, children who are abused in one setting are at greater risk of being abused in another. Consequently, a safe sports environment can provide a positive and safe place for a child who is experiencing abuse in other areas of their life, but this is highly dependent on a trained workforce, who are sensitive to the potential for abuse as well as the signs and consequences. Therefore, violence against children has a very high cost to public health and public health services. As a result, investing in the wellbeing and protection of minors in sport is in turn a long-term investment in public health.

- Children are often made to feel guilty about the abuse they have suffered. Sometimes they are explicitly threatened to keep quiet, and more commonly they simply understand that they must “keep the secret”. Therefore, sports organisations must serve as advocates for children, especially those who have been abused, and speak on their behalf. It is vital that abused children hear clear messages from sports authorities and leading sports figures declaring that they are not to blame for the abuse they have suffered or may be subjected to, and that they will be listened to and taken seriously. Around the world, sports organisations have covered up cases of abuse, especially sexual abuse, to protect their reputations. In addition to being immoral, this is also a false economy, since when such practices are inevitably discovered, the reactions of the media and the public are always negative and would have been avoidable had the organisation adopted a transparent approach from the beginning. Denying and playing down child abuse leads to further silencing of victims (and ‘witnesses’) as they give the green light to abusive behaviours and tell the child that their experience is not valid. This can be just as damaging as the original abuse. Italian sports authorities need to take this data seriously and use it to openly acknowledge the problem of child abuse in sport and as an opportunity to speak directly to children, young people and survivors of abuse.

- These prevalence rates should be compared with organisational data on both official reports of child abuse and cases of exclusion of persons found guilty of such actions (whether they are malpractices that violate the protocols/ethics of a governing body or reach a higher level of criminal behaviour).

This comparison will highlight the discrepancy between children’s actual experiences and the extent to which an organisation detects such abuse and takes appropriate corrective action. Inaction is no longer an option for a sports organisation that aspires to provide a safe environment for children. Governing bodies have ignored the situation for too long. A robust whistleblowing monitoring system to inform policy approaches is both ethical and strategically prudent. Therefore, given that the Italian sports authorities now have some initial baseline data, a crucial next step is to start systematically monitoring reports and case management outcomes.

- However, official reports should not be confused with self-reporting data such as those provided here by ChangeTheGame. Underreporting is always a problem in child abuse data, which means that official data will always be an underestimation of the true scale of the problem. Therefore, responsible organisations (individually or collectively) should invest in longitudinal studies and systems that collect and aggregate both official reports and self-reporting data. This would ensure that policies are developed based on evidence rather than assumptions or social myths. Sport offers a context where children are exposed both to people intending to harm them and to normalised cultural practices that include peer violence (or ‘bullying’) and harmful exercise regimes which pose a threat to children’s health and wellbeing. Policy responses must therefore





aim for holistic cultural change rather than limited protection and must be based on robust evidence and relevant expertise, including the competence of experts with direct experience.

## **10. Conclusion**

The various types of violence that may occur in sport can be experienced by any athlete at any time, regardless of age, discipline, level of competition, or nationality. As research progresses on the individual, environmental, and organisational risk factors that contribute to violence in sport, both governments and sports organisations at all levels are gaining a greater understanding. From here, educational plans and policies can be implemented in order to promote change. Abusive or misogynistic behaviour in sport is often justified by attributing it to what is commonly referred to as 'sporting culture'. A cultural shift is therefore needed in order to make sport as a whole a safer place to grow, play and develop healthy and constructive relationships.

The commitment to safe sport must be supported by the heads of sports organisations in order to create safer environments for all concerned. However, respect, effective communication, safety, and healthy relationships between athletes and within teams will have the greatest positive impact on the majority of athletes and positive effects on mental health. It is important to promote initiatives aimed at creating safe sport, and these efforts must be supported by the highest levels of decision-making within sports organisations. Only in this way will it be possible to create safer environments and protect the wellbeing of all athletes.

Changing sporting culture is a crucial process that requires ongoing efforts to ensure a positive and safe sporting experience for all athletes.

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SECOND PART  
**COMMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS  
OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE**



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## **Franco Arturi**

### **General Director of Fondazione Candido Cannavo per lo Sport**

There are certain words that the sporting world, especially its institutions, find hard to use. Or rather, they don't use them at all. I'm talking about terms such as abuse, violence, maltreatment, but also the code of silence and paedophilia. Yet these deviant, often criminal, behaviours are unfortunately a part of this huge movement and have been since the beginning, both in Italy and the world. The reason for this guilty silence is simple, and in some cases despicable: one does not want to jeopardize the very image of sport, its appeal to young people, its success system that means prestige, honours, money, recruitment. Sometimes, those who are less affected can downplay the situation, blinded by cultural deficits and positive prejudices. How can an activity that is synonymous with inclusion, education and well-being hide these ugly truths?

But the reality is that not everyone has well-oriented values when it comes to their approach to young people. Those who have been working on these issues for years, unfortunately constantly sailing against the wind, are not shocked by the data that Nielsen's study revealed. However, I assume that the general public would be painfully surprised. "How is that possible?" many will wonder. Where were the coaches, local and national managers, and even the parents when this psychological and physical violence was being perpetrated? We obviously weren't listening carefully. We used to accept training behind closed doors, the strange silence of our children and athletes, and their dropping of activities, without asking the right questions. We only thought about improving performance or aiming towards a shirt or a medal.

Sport has never been just about that, and the numbers before us are the painful and incontrovertible testimony to that.

The news brings us a trickle of abuse cases almost daily. If it's not a big scandal, a single incident can almost go under the radar. However, the numbers add up and the victims bear those scars for life. We can already hear the chorus of down-players and their claims about an army of honest volunteers and workers who are being vilified in this way. This is a rhetorical exercise that needs to be exposed. Pointing the finger at a few bad apples or inept people is certainly not the same as tarring everyone with the same brush. Sport must be brave enough to raise its head and look into the eyes of the population of offenders that pollute the industry, and leave behind the corporate defence once and for all. The regulations of the various federal justice systems need to be reviewed. Coaches need to be asked about their antecedents, and pedagogy and psychology need to be taught, something that hasn't been done as of yet. Finally, at a central level, a telephone line should be set up to collect complaints from athletes, families, and people of good intent who are aware of the situation.

The statistical inquiry before you is the result of years and years of commitment on behalf of ChangeTheGame. They have fought against everyone and everything on these issues and have found some collaborators along the way. One of which is the Department for Sport, or rather the State. This has made us slightly more optimistic. Only the truth can heal. If these statistics hurt, we need to correctly diagnose the problem in order to start the treatment.

**Stefania Pizzolla****Director of Communications, Sporting Events, Studies and Research of the Department of Sport of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers**

Sport and physical activity are essential for the well-being of everyone. They are also essential for the socialisation and inclusion of vulnerable people. Boys and girls spend a lot of their time in a sporting context and this context is considered today as one of the principal educational spheres, alongside family, school and other contexts in which children meet. Adult figures play an extremely important role in these situations. Coaches often become very close to their young athletes and are therefore not only an example to follow but also irreplaceable adult role models.

Among other things, sport plays a formative as well as an educational role for boys and girls in the sharing and practice of values such as respecting rules, loyalty, healthy competition, working together for a common goal, and ethics. Passion and commitment can start to feed off each other in this context, defining a new approach to external experiences as well.

Guaranteeing minors the right to practise sport and do so in a safe and healthy environment are some of the fundamental goals that the Department for Sport has placed at the heart of its activity.

In 2020 the Department set up a working group that 26 businesses and associations joined. Together they put together the “Policy for the protection of minors in sport with particular focus on practices against maltreatment and abuse”, with the aim of increasing the number of protection measures in place for minors and improving detection, protection, and care interventions, with a view to ensuring their best interests. This led to the #BattiamollSilenzio campaign, which sought to provide the entirety of the sporting world with a comprehensive set of tools, from the Policy to online training, operational procedures, forms, and a library with the material supplied by different bodies to the reference points of local networks. This was done to support the sporting world along a path towards the protection of children and the prevention of any form of abuse and violence, to break the silence over this issue together, and, at the same time, to not leave the world of sport on its own.





With this in mind, the “Protection of children’s rights in sport. The role of coaches and sports directors” guide was produced in collaboration with the Italian Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents and the Sport e Salute’s School of Sport to provide yet another tool for reflection and training for coaches, starting from the rights of children, as established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), to general well-being and protection. In this context, as early as the spring of 2021, there was a need to give a more objective form to the issue of child abuse and violence in the world of sports and to collect data on the phenomenon.

This is why the Department wanted to support ChangeTheGame’s proposal for a rigorous inquiry based on an already established global methodology to allow a first, science-backed glimpse of the phenomenon in its many forms.

The general aim of the inquiry is to collect data that can help the sporting world understand the phenomenon and develop effective child protection policies.

The research was entrusted to NIELSEN and follows the CASES (Child Abuse in Sport: European Statistics) methodology for the quantitative investigation, allowing a comparison to be made with other countries. Discussion within the network involved in the research and methodological rigor were essential elements of the study. The aim was to combine the quantitative research with qualitative research, using a small sample to enrich the results that emerged from the data. This is a cross-section that gathers evidence retrospectively, that is, from experiences of child athletes who are now adults and reflects how that person felt in a specific moment. This data is a starting point to continue exploring the topic. The inquiry has already provided so many insights for future work. Even in sports, violence comes in different shapes and ways. The perpetrators may be team-mates or a coach. Pressure and expectation from family can also play a significant role. In sport, those who witness violence, even the less serious forms of it, remain in silence and the victim continues feeling alone. Therefore, the intervention response must take into account these complexities and cannot be one-size-fits-all. It must consider the training of coaches and trainers to ensure they have the tools to carry out their educational role in youth groups in which violence and abuse can happen. It must call on sporting managers to implement measures, which are also provided for by law, to ensure maximum protection for persons under the age of 18 and take clear measures against the perpetrators. It must make the adult world, including family, reflect on the expectations that are held towards teenagers and children, and the weight this bears on them, a weight that can also lead to disordered behaviour.

All parties can and must do their part. Our duty is to work to ensure that children are at the centre of sport. It should be a space where they can build their self-esteem, learn to respect rules and learn to function in a group and a team. A space that can and will protect them.

**Paolo Ferrara****Director General of Terre des Hommes Italia**

A few years ago, during the presentation of the Child Safeguarding Toolkit developed in cooperation with Terre des Hommes, UEFA President Alexander Čeferin defined child safeguarding for Europe's top football governing body as follows:

*“the organisation’s responsibility to ensure that football is a safe, positive and enjoyable experience for all children and that all children are kept safe from harm (including abuse) when involved in football, at all capacities and at all levels”*

The dimension of well-being in sport can be found in three adjectives which should always be inextricably linked: safe, positive, enjoyable, for all and at all levels of ability.

And yet, leafing through the data from the report on Abuse and Violence in Sport, which comes in addition to the work we have been doing for years with AGIA and CISMAL on the maltreatment and abuse of minors, these terms seem to emerge as poles of irreconcilable dichotomies, that reverberate their harmful impact on the development of our sons and daughters. “Enjoyment” ends up being inexorably opposed to “sporting performance” instead of being, as it should be, its natural prelude. “Safety” comes up against informality and voluntarism, which end up becoming the excuses for the lack of rules, codes of conduct and protection policies and not, as could and should be the case, the incubators of a culture that is “protective” of the youngest members of the sporting “community”. “Positivity”, far from being welcomed as a stimulus to improve performance, as an emotional cradle that facilitates learning and allows one to recover from the falls that every athlete suffers in their development, is deemed an inhibitor of “competitiveness”.

Mending these dichotomies is crucial and this research tells us so urgently and in its own dramatic way. This is demonstrated by the data on violence suffered and perceived (and therefore real and lacerating in the boys’ and girls’ evolutionary journey) as well as the voices we hear in the qualitative interviews, where the mismatch between desires and reality, between the athletes’ experiences and expectations and the behaviour of the group or adults responsible, is laid bare.

The consequences of these wounds are seen in the psychological health of the victims – their insecurities, anxiety, distrust, fears and intrusive thoughts. They may also be gauged on a systemic level, through the abandonment of the sport, the choice to turn to other sports or organisations, and most likely – though the research does not and cannot tell us this – the loss of an inestimable wealth of athletes who, had they been supported appropriately, could have both enjoyed and provided great satisfaction in sport.



A joint effort from all the actors involved is required in order to suture these wounds. This entails checks, raising awareness and, above all, training – essential tools needing investment at all levels.

Here it becomes a real team game, involving institutions (and I am thinking of the wonderful work carried out by Italy's Department of Sport with Battiamo il Silenzio or the growing commitment of the Italian National Olympic Committee [CONI] and Sport e Salute), associations, sports clubs, athletes (because, as research reminds us, it is often among peers that violence takes place) and even parents, but it must also involve and open up to schools, social services, local associations and the police.

**Coaches, managers, parents** and relevant **adults** are called upon to be aware that they are dealing with children and young people who are going through an evolutionary phase, made up of ongoing needs and changes, specific in nature. They must learn to recognise what is “normal” and what is “not normal” in the various stages of development, knowing how to pick up on any signs of discomfort and identify situations of potential harm. But it is also up to them to build a climate of peaceful participation, an open and engaging environment and healthy cooperation so policies and tools can be developed and monitoring implemented to effectively protect children.

The **athletes** themselves, though being minors, must be enabled to take the lead both in the definition of the “rules” and in their implementation and monitoring. Full awareness of the unsafe conduct and types of abuse that they could become involved in, both as victims and as perpetrators, must develop in line with the different developmental stages they go through, allowing them also to harness their own resources and be able to protect themselves, in an environment that knows how to “listen” and “value” them despite the differences in roles and talents.

**Local associations** are indispensable partners, supporting the work of sports organisations. With them, it is possible to structure training courses for managers, coaches, parents and children; they are often an indispensable resource for running counselling services, even on demand; they can play an important role in raising awareness and activating local resources; they can accompany sports organisations in drafting policies and regulations, adjusting them to their specific context.

**Social services, institutions** and the **police** are the necessary local point of reference in the event of “alerts”, but they can also become partners for the launch of training courses, awareness-raising and intervention in support of the most delicate situations.

**School** and other “**educational agents**” in the local area can become, in turn, the breeding ground for values that put sport and the practice thereof back at the centre, first and foremost as a place of positive socialisation, inclusion, dealing with rules

and other people, as well as of well-being for every boy and girl, be they children or young people. Italy's world of sport remains an essentially healthy world to which we can entrust our children, but this research clearly shows us the signs of a malaise that we must have the courage to grapple with and tackle, with the right tools and constructive teamwork. From now on, no one will be able to say that they do not know which way to turn. To stand by and watch, never more so than now, would be an act of profound irresponsibility and blindness that we cannot and must not allow ourselves.

### **Rocco Briganti**

**General Manager of Specchio Magico Cooperativa Sociale Onlus  
CISMAI, ISPCAN board of directors**

Collecting data in general is always a complex task in any field. Collecting data on maltreatment and violence further complicates the task. Collecting data on maltreatment, violence and abuse during childhood poses a challenge of extreme complexity, sensitivity, professionalism and expertise.

CISMAI and Terre des Hommes, under the guidance of the Italian Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents, are leading this revolutionary urgency that will soon see a third national investigation rolled out, with the aim of structuring a definitive data collection system on this topic. This is in line with historic initiatives to map out the phenomenon, a tool internationally recognised in Italy, including through ISPCAN (International Society for Prevention against Child Abuse and Neglect) and the World Health Organization in the World Perspectives dossier.

The opportunity to carry out this further piece of research has allowed a fundamental step forward to be taken, once again, towards a new challenge – a new form of prevention and protection from violence in a sporting environment for our young male and female athletes. This initiative further confirms and supports the commitment on a national scale by big, proactive and passionate businesses that have accompanied the birth of Battiamo Il Silenzio, the first national initiative on the creation of a Child Safeguarding Policy model in the world of sport, under the guidance of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers at the Department of Sport. This insight and our common, coordinated and cohesive commitment offer potential that is yet to be expressed and realise its full, significant results.

Adopting methodologies, classifications and definitions of a scientific nature from such relevant studies on the international stage such as CASES and VOICES ensures an extremely respectful ethical and protective approach, with the idea of potentially developing the tool on a national level.

The adoption of a validated international survey therefore prepares and allows for the prospect of increasingly refining a system for prevention, protection and safeguarding.

The intention, therefore, is to connect this initial pioneering start with a more responsive, accurate and effective piece of research into abuse, maltreatment and violence within the framework of national sporting experiences. The intention is to forge a sports culture that is able to combine rights and discipline, respect and activities, protection and health with hard work, enjoyment and professionalism. Dichotomies often help to create boundaries and generate frameworks within which one can feel comfortable and once surpassed, the same definitions can degenerate into harmful, damaging and dangerous phenomena. The boundaries of prevention, protection and safeguarding minors in sport are non-negotiable. These cardinal points cannot disregard an experience in the world of sport that could/should be considered respectful of the developmental dimension in all areas and that could/should be defined as an opportunity for personal and, simultaneously, collective and civic growth.

The ecological model highlights that the fields of reference for youngsters and the concentricity around minors require sport to be a tool for social promotion, inclusion and cohesion, and a reference point with – it is to be hoped – adult role models.

Generations evolve and the settings, contents and adults involved need to evolve as well in order to be classified as adult role models. This evolution can and must be strategic.

We are facing and tackling new challenges for families, new challenges for schools, new challenges for sport, new challenges for professionalism and different disciplines, be they sporting or not. Sport and sporting activities must come up with new methodology and processes to meet ever-growing needs and demands, to promote and ensure well-being and to enhance their impact on upholding children's rights. "Sacrifice" does not mean violence. "Consistency" and "discipline" are not synonyms for depriving someone of their rights. Let's not confuse competitiveness with maltreatment, but, as stated previously, try to strike the right balance.

Having someone who will welcome and listen to you creates the opportunity to report. Knowledge of the phenomena linked to violence towards minors allows for early identification, calls for help and all forms of prevention. Give violence a name, define it, classify it, codify it and learn how to recognise it. Italy has taken steps in this regard and is doing so thanks to the unwavering hard work by our organisations to carve out an even more accurate definition and therefore ability to decode it in order to respond in an increasingly precise and timely manner.

This piece of research provides us with consistent data and, at the same time, it



strongly supports us in questioning professionals and the sports sector, not just in the most serious cases, but also regarding the extent of negative sporting experiences in its various forms. The data and its qualitative findings tell us about the environment and spaces, relationships and communication, language, customs and habits, practices, methodologies, general training and specific training on the subject at hand.

Violence towards children and adolescents is a public healthcare problem with immediate effects and long-term repercussions. It is a deeply serious social scourge. As stated in article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, state members must adopt “all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse”.

Article 39 of the same convention sets out that state members should take all necessary measures to facilitate the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of every minor who has been subjected to negligence, exploitation or maltreatment. Recovery and reintegration must take place in appropriate conditions that promote the health and respect the dignity of the minor. State members must therefore implement all actions and interventions aimed at addressing the serious consequences that violence causes to individuals in their developmental phase.

This challenge opens up key scenarios for activation. It highlights the urgent need to equip adults, to define procedures and policy, and to build and structure knowledge and awareness relating to targeted and effective actions. Feeling good allows you to do better but the opposite is not always true. Feeling good within a sporting experience is not something that can be deduced, only reported. Adults, families and coaches must not assume the right to interpret; they must simply listen, ask and facilitate a significant and respectful experience. Physical, psychological and verbal violence and maltreatment must never be mistaken for a method, approach, discipline or modality. There is no justification or excuse. This allows the individuals to come out of power dynamics, subordination, fear and consequently opens the door to seek help. Let's train the world of sport to win against violence and beat silence.

Let's safeguard the intention of sport and of all the organisations across the country that ensure youngsters can have access to a memorable experience as an engine for their own growth. Let's recognise the effort by all those who put time and passion into ensuring positive opportunities and experiences by supporting them in improving the system.

Sport is about well-being and health. Violence and maltreatment are the absolute antagonists to healthy, fair, inclusive and sporting growth!

**Paolo Emilio Adami****MD, PhD, Medical Manager of Health and Science Department World Athletics (Monaco)**

The academic and scientific world has only recently begun to deal with the effects of harassment and abuse in sports in light of national and international scandals which have attracted the attention of the media and the public. In this regard, the world of sport is very belatedly acknowledging that it is not exempt from such deplorable phenomena and that it in fact reflects the prevalence of such behaviour in society. The wall of silence and reticence has finally collapsed thanks to athletes who have had the courage to share their traumas and denounce the shortcomings of a system which has failed to safeguard them, protect them and allow them to focus exclusively on their passion or sports career. It required the commitment of the scientific and medical world in this context, using the theme of the medium and long-term effects of abuse and harassment on sports performance and on the health of the victims of these phenomena. First the International Olympic Committee [1] and then the International Sports Federations [2,3] addressed the topic by creating the concept of 'Safe Sport'. Through this, international research groups have been able to demonstrate that there is a clear link between those who are victims of harassment or abuse and the frequency of injuries in sports [4], depression [5], suicidal ideation [6], and other risky behaviours such as the use of psychotropic substances, doping substances or alcohol [4]. As is often the case, it is necessary to have quantifiable information and tangible data in order to persuade sports institutions to promote preventive policies and actions that protect not only athletes, but all those who work in the world of sport. The project promoted by ChangeTheGame and presented here is fundamental because it contributes to bringing together an international cultural and scientific movement, which has been able to succeed in Europe thanks to funding from the European Commission [7], with Italian data. The aim is for sport to truly become a safe space in which everyone is welcome and from which everyone can benefit. Once the reaction to the data presented in this report has died down, the hope is that sporting institutions, national federations and all sports organisations will:

- (1) strive to create a culture of respect for the individual who plays or works in sports;
- (2) take action to prevent abuse and harassment;
- (3) create mechanisms for victims to report what happened without fear of retaliation or retribution;
- (4) help victims with treatment and support;
- (5) educate all those involved in the world of sport to recognise the different forms of harassment and abuse and make them aware of the tools available to protect victims;
- (6) carry out checks on the professionalism of people working in sport, using tools already employed in other contexts, such as criminal record certificates. New procedures or tools are not necessary in order to achieve this - it would suffice to take

an example from what has been carried out in other contexts and whose success can be evidenced in quantifiable terms.

This report is a unique opportunity for Italian sport. Through this data we must build a sporting culture that respects individuals and allows everyone to be part of sport in a risk-free manner, with the sole aim of getting the maximum benefit in terms of health, social relationships, cultural and societal growth.

**Sara Landi**

**National Head of FIGC-SGS Psychological Area**

When we speak about maltreatment and abuse in childhood, it is impossible not to take into consideration the effects on the lives of the victims in the short, mid and long term. Nowadays, all longitudinal and retrospective studies agree in considering that the social and health consequences of the various forms of violence on individuals in their developmental age can be very serious and cover a wide range of physical, psychological and/or psychopathological issues. Such consequences are complex and vary in magnitude from case to case. They vary based on the age of the victim and their specific attributes, the type, duration and seriousness of the abuse incidents, the level of familiarity between the abuser and the victim and the type of support received by the latter. In more specific terms, the damaged caused is greater:

- the younger the age of the victim;
- if the maltreatment is hidden;
- if the maltreatment is repeated over time;
- if the protective response to the victim in their family or social context is delayed or does not happen at all;
- if the traumatic event remained unprocessed; and
- if the connection between the victim and abuser is close, significant and based on an uneven power relationship.

Abuse phenomena are never the product of a single factor, but they are developed from the combination of multiple elements on an individual, relational, community and societal level. An onslaught of harmful and intrusive factors during a delicate development phase can certainly have a deep and negative influence on the formation of children's and teenagers' personalities, generating conditions of extreme emotional vulnerability and confusion which, over time, could be linked to a range of symptomatic manifestations. Among the most common are anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, compromised emotional regulation, relational difficulties, somatisation, post-traumatic and dissociative disorders, behavioural disorders and the adoption of risky behaviours.





Children – victims of abuse, maltreatment, unfair punishments and bullying – experience a distortion of feelings of trust in themselves and in others as well as in expressing their emotions. We must consider that the most detrimental effects of being maltreated for a child depend not only on the seriousness of the actions (taken or omitted by the adults responsible) but also and above all on the **betrayal of trust**. Children expect total protection from those who should be taking care of them. If this does not happen, they feel deeply disappointed and experience distressing feelings that negatively impact their development and interactions with the world. Distortions in the attachment bond also have an effect on the development of self-representation and representation of others, impacting self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as social skills such as cognitive, emotional, relational and communicative abilities, which enable individuals to adapt well in different social contexts. Studies and clinical practice reveal that self-representation in maltreated children is more fragile and negative, characterised by less processing and awareness of the sense of self. Compared to the representation of others, constant experiences of being victimised can lead to the development of dysfunctional emotional relationships, a lack of emotional investment in others and withdrawal from relationships. Maltreated children's perception of others and the external world is essentially negative, hostile, threatening and unreliable.

Unfortunate childhood experiences can also damage the proper development of emotional competence, which is the complex psychological ability that allows us to understand and be aware of our own and others' emotions, the ability to regulate emotions, a sense of emotional self-efficacy and empathetic engagement. The literature has highlighted how maltreated children show greater difficulty in recognising facial expressions and emotional situations, as well as greater intensity in expressing unpleasant emotions (Cigala and Mori, 2012).

Children who are victims of maltreatment and abuse often experience feelings of guilt and shame, accompanied by the development of dysfunctional attribution styles (attributing internal, stable and global causes to events). Such experiences have a particularly strong social and relational element given that they are elicited from interactions and comparisons with others. Above all, experiences of physical maltreatment and sexual abuse can lead to children perceiving their own body as different from others', to feel embarrassed about showing it and to hide signs and bruises, deeming them to be a result of their own inadequacy. Shame, shyness and embarrassment end up reinforcing the feeling of being inadequate and "different". School refusal, selective mutism and learning disorders then become possible "solutions" to escape the dangers of social interactions.

Children who are the victims of sexual abuse by adults that they trust and on whom they depend materially and emotionally experience the abuse of power first-hand. A child involved in this type of situation is often alone and disorientated. The violence



suffered is almost always accompanied by the abusive adult's request to keep a painful secret. Children, who are incapable of making sense of what is happening and oscillating between ambivalent feelings and thoughts towards their abusers, also become victims of the fear of speaking out.

When the phenomena of maltreatment and violence occur in youth sporting contexts, there are serious and impactful consequences on the well-being and development of young athletes, just as there are multiple forms of child abuse that we can identify in the world of sport at various levels.

In this context, the rhetoric that promotes the sports world as clean, healthy and with good educational intentions often hides a truth that is evident to all: at an increasingly young age, young athletes find themselves in a system based on the logic of results, a logic not only accepted, but often shared by coaches and club officials, often with the complicity of parents. In many situations, the young athletes experience a lack of attention on their needs and recognition of their value is only based on their performance level. They are often subjected to gruelling training practices which not infrequently become real forms of maltreatment, especially in sports where achieving top performance occurs at a preadolescent age or where financial aspects are more important. All too often in the world of sport there is a predominant trend in the representation of gender relations to convey a macho ideology, creating environments where aggression and violence risk becoming integral aspects of being a "real man". Let's think about the exhortation to resist in spite of pain and to continue without stopping or showing weakness (e.g. "a real man doesn't give up" or "don't be a wuss!"), which are examples of values that are frequently associated with the notion of being a champion. These premises are difficult to overcome the young athletes' bodies become tools for work and experimentation aimed at constantly improving performance and attaining success. If the body becomes a means for achieving results at any cost, at the risk of exclusion, resorting to supplements and doping substances becomes a less-than-improbable hypothesis. Then there's the widespread practice of selection at an early age, which inevitably leads to the exclusion of those who seem to have less chance of excelling and, in the absence of guidance or other opportunities, fuels the phenomena of sports abandonment with significant consequences on maintaining active lifestyles and the psychophysical development of children and youngsters.

Deprivation of free time, training methods that take the form of physical and psychological violence (intimidation is often confounded with stamping authority while humiliation is confounded with the spirit of sacrifice), dietary restrictions, failure to respect post-injury recovery times, being confined for long periods in sports training centres far from family and loved ones, as well as the involvement of the minor in sexual activities that they cannot understand and to which they cannot give their consent.



The consequences of abuse can be short-term and long-term and leave very deep scars. In physical terms, trauma, injuries, dramatic weight loss, sexually transmitted diseases and a significant deterioration in sports performance are all possible consequences. From a psychological point of view, maltreatment can lead to the onset of eating disorders, anxiety disorders and/or depressive symptoms, often related to feelings of inadequacy and guilt, as well as low self-esteem. Severe and prolonged experiences of abuse can lead to relationship problems and isolation, difficulty expressing one's feelings and emotions, and the sufferer giving up sport.

On the other hand, the greater the **factors of protection within and outside the family**, in addition to the individual resources, the less intense and pervasive the damage caused by the different forms of violence will be. **The presence of adults who are able to read the signals, provide listening and support and gradually break down the wall of deafening silence that surrounds the young victims can drastically decrease the unfortunate outcomes of unpleasant experiences and constitute a decisive factor of resilience.**

For this reason, when we talk about protection, we must see it as an integrated and systemic set of choices: on the one hand, preventive actions, necessary to minimise the possibility of damage or abuse, and on the other hand, response/reaction actions to ensure that, should problems arise or reports should be made, they are handled appropriately and promptly. The conscious use of policies and good practices within each context and sporting event is the framework within which to introduce awareness-raising and information programmes intended for all adults, the continuous training of professionals, safe recruitment programmes for collaborators and continuous collaboration between all the components of the youth sport system.

Every young athlete has the right to practise sport while having fun, in total safety and in a healthy environment managed by qualified adults. For this reason, all professionals in various capacities involved in youth practice and the families of young athletes have the individual and collective responsibility to monitor and ensure that the places and services they benefit from are safe, protected and managed competently. The knowledge of good practices for the safeguarding and protection of minors, their application and the sharing of possible implications and interpretations are therefore essential requirements to carry out any mandate in the youth field with seriousness and competence. We must always bear in mind that whether the rights of children and young people are actually upheld depends to a large extent on adults assuming the responsibilities necessary for their implementation (*recognition, promotion, guardianship and protection*).

Through our behaviour, each of us always has the opportunity to choose and act by promoting a positive sporting culture, both on and off the field. However, that is not



enough. We need to go beyond the personal level in order to have an impact on a social level. It is not enough to act virtuously in the first person; we must encourage a correct approach in others as well, that is, to embody a proactive behavioural model. We need to be aware that we are all interconnected and play an active part in a single system, and that we are called to encourage role responsibilities in all the different actors of the youth sports context through concrete actions.

In this regard, the FIGC, through its Youth and School Sector, which is increasingly interlinking its experience with the path taken by FIFA and UEFA, have introduced an extensive project which aims both to act from a preventive perspective and to offer active support to the youth clubs in Italy. The work programme began in 2020 with the implementation of the first actions at the foundation of the entire process: the creation of specific policies and codes of conduct and a digital platform dedicated to the topic ([www.figc-tutelaminori.it](http://www.figc-tutelaminori.it)). This has allowed the sharing of ad hoc management tools, an interactive basic training course, training and information content available to professionals and non-professionals, and an easy-to-use reporting form. To date, there are about 60 people trained and employed by the Youth and School Sector throughout the country, with different roles in the protection of minors. These include regional delegates, legal-regulatory experts and psycho-pedagogical area representatives, coordinated by a dedicated national office and a specific federal commission within the Youth and School Sector. Prevention, Training and Support are the three key words. It is to be hoped that before long all the federations will unite in this crucial commitment to safeguard the well-being of children and teenage athletes.

### **Fabio Iudica**

#### **CAS arbitrator and lecturer in sports law**

The following observations can be made from the study on interpersonal violence in sport in Italy that ChangeTheGame commissioned from Nielsen.

1. A study on violence against minors, setting out the nature of the physical, sexual (with and without contact), psychological and private acts of violence is certainly beneficial and, therefore, appreciated.
2. In a world like sport, where sports justice – unlike criminal justice – finds itself deprived of its most effective weapons (e.g. telephone interceptions or audio/visual surveillance), it is essential to highlight and draw public attention to a phenomenon that is harmful not only (and particularly) to the victims, but also to the sport itself.
3. Federal prosecutors and justice bodies are attempting to combat this phenomenon in any way they can. However, with regulations designed for offences relating to situations in particular competitions, it is an unprecedented phenomenon and so is proving particularly challenging.
4. Having been given to 1,400 individuals aged between 18 and 30 who had participated

in individual or group sporting activity with a sports association before adulthood, the questionnaire offers an initial overview of the situation in Italy (and elsewhere), enabling the federal prosecutors of sports federations and, consequently, their justice bodies to act as decisively and effectively as possible.

5. Additionally, there is the possibility to establish ongoing, productive dialogue between Public Prosecutor's Offices (namely, the Milan office, for the time being) and the general prosecutors of the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI), having signed an important protocol in January 2023 for mutual collaboration during investigations, thanks to ChangeTheGame.

6. The importance of the study also stems from the fact that the sample is not made up of national or international athletes – who are likely more able to protect themselves – but rather people who have played sport at lower levels. And it is precisely in these environments and the lesser-known federations where the most unpleasant incidents can lurk.

7. The analysis of the experiences of the athletes interviewed – particularly those who have experienced (verbal and emotional) psychological violence – is telling. The industry experts (i.e. federal judges and prosecutors) clash with the perception of the subjects, which is often underestimated; many types of violent behaviour are not even recognised as such, but instead considered “normal”, which makes the task of those seeking to expose such behaviour even more difficult and the victims less aware of their negative experiences.

8. The study represents a “cross-section” which, although limited to a certain number of respondents, at least succeeds in conveying the importance of the phenomenon in its context and placing people at the centre of the sports world. This work should help to raise the awareness of sports federations, so regulatory measures can be put in place as soon as possible to rectify the serious shortcomings that still exist (such as the four-year prescriptive period for offences involving physical, sexual or psychological violence, or the incapacity of a victim reporting an offence to take part in the sports disciplinary procedure), as well as training programmes to educate instructors, coaches and athletes.

9. Besides the numbers, what emerges from the study is that a significant percentage of those who have participated in sport have experienced at least one act of any kind violence, whether physical, psychological, sexual, etc. The sporting environment – and the sports facility in particular – is seen to be a “sheltered” environment where such acts are widespread and where silence often reigns.

10. This is why the aforementioned task of raising the awareness of sports federations, alongside federal prosecutors and justice bodies, could be pivotal.

11. What has emerged so far, with particular regard to rhythmic/artistic gymnastics, appears to be the tip of the iceberg.

12. The violence is often psychological and perpetrated within a group, with the aim of humiliating an individual athlete.

13. Sports federations should “monitor” instructors and coaches (focusing in particular

on male individuals deemed to be more “dangerous”) and observe team-mates. But this effort will be completely in vain unless the athletes who fall victim have the strength and courage to report such behaviour to the relevant federal prosecutors.

14. There are two reasons why uncovering acts of violence is so complex. On the one hand, victims often struggle to communicate and seek support and, on the other hand, those who do seek support often do not receive it.

15. One of the reasons victims do not receive support is the tendency of those who should listen (including federations) to play down matters. Another reason is that they do not know who to turn to within the sport, which is why a training programme would be very important.

16. From a subjective point of view, the analysis carried out reveals that the negative episodes date back to early childhood, while in terms of environment, these forms of violence are more widespread in small centres and small sports clubs and associations. The measures recommended above, therefore, should be implemented especially at such times and in such environments.

17. We must also ask what impact the clubs’ or coaches’ desire for success has on episodes of violence being perpetrated against athletes. And how much responsibility do parents have in all this? Are we always certain that it is easy for parents to become aware of the violence experienced by their children?

18. Analysing specific cases, it is often apparent that “young victims” are very adept at hiding their problems from their parents, conscious that, should their parents become aware of the problems, the young athletes would be forced to leave their favourite sport, as well as the coach/instructor with whom they have often built a dependent relationship. This is why a monitoring programme is also required in facilities and sports halls, alongside the training measures.

19. In conclusion, therefore, the sports federations and – within the scope of their responsibility – the federal prosecutors and justice bodies of each federation should develop a plan that simultaneously includes training measures based on imparting information and raising awareness, a monitoring programme and a penalty system, to encourage a healthy and clean sport.

## **ChangeTheGame**

### **Volunteer organisation preventing and tackling abuse and violence in sport**

by Alessandra Marzari and Daniela Simonetti, with contributions from Paola Pendino.

The impressive, indefatigable effort driven by ChangeTheGame in recent years has produced extraordinary, unprecedented results: awareness, inclusion, proposals and projects that have brought about important initiatives to effectively implement a lasting, collective response to all those types of abuse that have blighted – and continue to blight – the world of sport for too long.



Although the steps were small at first, with persistence, persuasion and, above all, the awareness that we could not afford to wait any longer, they gathered pace – occasionally having to jockey for position – and the progress became unstoppable.

And so, from the initial limited training courses, attended mostly out of curiosity for the subject at hand, the organisation has grown steadily, garnering increasing interest to become a leading mouthpiece at local and national level, and managing to complete the first – and, so far, only – major study on the prevalence of the phenomenon of abuse in sport.

Macroscopically, the results of the study are alarming, with around just ten proceedings for sexual abuse and/or harassment and paedophilia recorded by the federal prosecutors of the National Sports Federations (FSN) and Associated Sports Disciplines (DSA) each year. This is even more stark when compared with the data published annually by the CONI General Prosecutor's Office for Sport.

While the data is neither consistent nor comparable, it is however plausible that the number of incidents reported in sport is considerably lower than the acts of abuse perpetrated.

This leads to objective reflection on the inadequacy of the tools available to the sports world to combat a phenomenon that, unfortunately, is widespread, and on the need to implement countermeasures. This is where the institutions became involved, having been coveted and championed by ChangeTheGame. The Milan Prosecutor's Office and CONI "took to the field", taking the positive step of signing the first operational protocol to exchange essential information, so defining the proceedings within their respective competence: criminal trials, launched in light of victims reporting incidents, and sports disciplinary proceedings which, too often, lack essential awareness of the facts due to insufficient communication between the two administrations.

Since the protocol was signed in January this year, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the CONI General Prosecutor's Office have been able to operate in synergy to respond to the demands for justice for the victims and professionals involved within reasonable, prescribed time frames. In turn, this can only benefit the relevant sports federations, as they are in a position to provide better and more timely protection to their members, whether athletes, instructors, coaches or partners. The first productive exchanges of information were recorded the day after roll-out, which can only be viewed as clear evidence of the success of the long-awaited and much needed collaboration. The protocol signed in Milan has also positively influenced other prosecutor's offices across the country, testament to the admirable – and now indispensable – "restoration" project put in place by ChangeTheGame. The interest shown by the State through the Department of Sport is further recognition of the value and approach adopted by the

organisation that continues to push for the elimination and disclosure of phenomena characterised by various types of abuse: physical, psychological, verbal, material. Only lasting collective awareness, which can be achieved through the tireless task of providing information and training, will break down the wall behind which the rightful reactions of victims and the relevant institutions have been confined for too long: silence. The die is cast, but it will require the commitment of all to ensure the path can no longer be abandoned as we pursue one single goal: the truth. The truth of everyone and for everyone.

## **Partners**

### **Department of Sport of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers**

The Department of Sport is the support structure for the political authority tasked with sport-related functions. The Department's responsibilities include fulfilling legal and administrative obligations; proposing, coordinating and implementing regulatory, administrative and cultural initiatives in the field of sport; managing international relations with bodies and institutions specialising in sport; and performing functions associated with the prevention of doping and violence in sport. It has supervisory duties over various bodies, including CONI and the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP), and powers of direction, management and control over the company Sport e Salute S.p.a.

It is responsible for implementing investment projects to build sports facilities as part of operational plans for urban and regional redevelopment and to organise national and international sporting events. It also promotes study, research and analysis activities in the sports sector, as well as communication initiatives.

### **Terre Des Hommes**

Since 1960, Terre Des Hommes has been at the forefront of protecting boys and girls around the world from any form of violence or abuse and ensuring their right to health, education and a life without any religious, ethnic, political or gender-based discrimination. In Italy, the Terre des Hommes Foundation, in particular, operates through awareness and advocacy projects, studies and campaigns seeking to influence the legislative framework relating to the protection of children's rights, and through measures designed to provide direct support to children experiencing hardship and vulnerability, unaccompanied foreign minors, underage victims of violence. Terre des Hommes is also active in the sports sector at national, European and international level, promoting the protection of children in sport. In Italy, Terre des Hommes participates



in the Department of Sport technical roundtable for a Policy for the Protection of Minors and in the Battiamo il Silenzio campaign. Furthermore, through memoranda of understanding and partnerships, it works alongside a number of sports federations providing training proposals for the safeguarding of minors and promoting a culture of respect and inclusion in sport.

### **Specchio Magico Cooperativa Sociale Onlus**

An organisation with over 15 years of experience in the primary prevention of child maltreatment and abuse at national and international level. An expert in formulating Child Safeguarding policies, with a specific policy for the protection of minors in the sports sector.

### **CISMAI**

The Italian Coordinating Body for Services against Child Maltreatment and Abuse, a 30-year-old organisation and now a professional association, with over a hundred centres at national level and as many individual members.

A national flag-bearer in the issues of preventing, protecting and safeguarding children against maltreatment and abuse.

A member of the scientific board of the Survey on Child and Adolescent Maltreatment led by the Italian Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents; a Country Partner of ISPCAN, the International Society for Prevention against Child Abuse and Neglect

### **Candido Cannavo Foundation for Sport**

Established on the initiative of the RCS MediaGroup and supported by the management and editorial staff of La Gazzetta dello Sport, the Candido Cannavo Foundation for Sport is now in its fifteenth year. A non-profit organisation, it follows in the footsteps of the great editor of the Italians sports newspaper, working tirelessly on tangible projects in several areas of social solidarity.

In this instance, sport is a vehicle for upholding the values of inclusion, to benefit the weakest and most marginalised. There are three key areas of interest: prisons, disability, and the culture of rules and emancipation, especially for women. With the help of contributions provided by RCS, sponsors and a number of private donors, the Foundation has carried out over one hundred projects in these areas of interest,



both in Italy and abroad, and also serves as the confluence for proactive individuals, businesses and organisations of various kinds.

### **The Vero Volley Consortium**

The Vero Volley Consortium comprises 46 teams, 56 coaches and instructors, 180 managers, 34 sports halls and – in conjunction with the School Project – involves 52 classes, for a total of 1,259 children. Independently of its own federation, the Consortium has launched a series of initiatives designed to prevent the phenomenon of sexual abuse in sport: supporting training courses on the subject for the Consortium's coaches; introducing a handbook of rules that coaches are required to sign; and requesting criminal record and impending prosecutions certificates before any of its staff are hired to the organisation. Following the sensitive approach of its president, Alessandra Marzari, the Consortium pays constant attention to girls and boys, and has become a point of reference in Italy for sporting and, above all, human growth.

THIRD PART  
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**





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### ***Daniela Simonetti***

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