LGBTQI+ Youth Participation in Sport Governance



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Introduction

The present policy paper is the result of the combination of ENGSO Youth's previous work on "Youth Participation in Sport Organisations", which addresses the challenges and opportunities for meaningful and effective youth participation in sports organisations, with a focus on youth participation in sport organisations' decision-making processes[1], and the exchange and cooperation with IGLYO - the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth & Student Organisation. The data, publications and guidelines IGLYO shared with us were crucial to finalise ENGSO Youth's position paper and the beginning of a partnership to provide more accessibility to LGBTQI+ youth in sport.

Youth participation in decision-making processes constitutes a longstanding discussion with the youth sector and revindication amongst young people, who demand the necessary representation in order to effectively and meaningfully fulfil the right to participate in our democratic societies.

Nevertheless, whilst youth constitutes a key stakeholder in many areas of activity, and especially in sport, young people remain largely underrepresented when it comes to decision-making in sport clubs and organisations. Moreover, we quickly realised that if we shift our focus to LGBTQI+ Youth, the overall picture gets worse and rather blurry considering the lack of data – particularly within Europe – on the participation and representation of LGBTQI+ youth in sport organisations.

As such, whilst data availability constitutes at the moment the biggest limitation to a more comprehensive guide for sports organisations to enhance the participation of LGBTQI+ youth in decision-making processes, the current policy paper intends to provide a first impetus to the matter, hoping to initiate and promote a more inclusive, equitable and representative sports environment. In doing so, it also contributes to the advancement of the European Union "LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025"[2], as well as the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027[3] and, more concretely, its European Youth Goals number #2 (Equality of All Genders) and #3 (Inclusive Societies).

In doing so, we will focus on the overall spectrum of LGBTQI+ Youth[4]. Although aware that the contexts, experiences, lives and needs of LGBTQI+ Youth might differ significantly between both lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, among others, the current lack of data regarding specifically representation in decision-making processes limits this first document. For this reason we are focusing on a first overall picture with the intention of providing a better overview in the future, with deeper insights on data from several sport organisations.

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[1] For further information on ENGSO Youth position regarding the definition of Youth participation, please see our position paper "Youth Participation in Sport Organisations: Quo Vadis".
[2] LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025.
[3] EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027.
[4] LGBTQI+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex. It can also encompass terms such as asexual, non-binary and/or pansexual.

Likewise, the current paper also focuses on LGBTQI+ Youth participation in decision-making processes of grassroots sport organisations, which constitutes the main base of representation of ENGSO Youth. In some cases, both grassroots and elite sport are represented by the same umbrella organisation at national level. Nevertheless, whilst communication and inspiration between both levels often happens, which might lead to future developments in both fields, this document will only focus on grassroots sport.

State of Play

Civic engagement reaches higher values through sport participation, as sport activities are highly popular and frequent leisure activities. Sports clubs are among the preferred organisations for long-term voluntary commitment and youth participation[5].

Whilst this engagement must be inclusive, ensuring LGBTQI+ Youth are equally encouraged and supported to participate actively in these organisations, LGBTQI+ Youth often encounter unique challenges in sports environments, including discrimination, exclusion, and a lack of representation.

Although the current European landscape with regards to data availability and research on the general participation of LGBTQI+ Youth in sport is slowly developing, "studies on social exclusion of gender-identity minorities in sports mainly adopt a qualitative approach and focus on Anglophone countries"[6], whilst not providing the necessary insights specifically on the participation of LGBTQI+ Youth in sport organisations decision-making processes.

Nevertheless, from the data available at European level that focus broadly on LGBTQI+ participation in sport[7], two different perspectives can be found:

- Negative aspects - LGBTQI+ Youth often face significant barriers within sports. These often include discrimination, exclusion, abuse, bullying, stigma, lack of inclusive policies, infrastructures and a welcoming environment[8]. Discrimination ranges from nonverbal to verbal and physical discrimination, and even violence[9]. This in turn leads to many LGBTQI+ Youth dropping out of sports activity as they don't feel welcomed nor represented. In fact, the 2019 Outsport survey study reveals that 20% of LGBTQI+ people refrain from participating in sport due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and 82% have witnessed homo-/transphobic language in sport in the last 12 months before the study[10].

[5] See Eurobarometer surveys on youth participation (2001; 2007;2013;2015; 2018; 2022; 2024).
[6] Birgit Braumüller, Tobias Menzel and Ilse Hartmann-Tews, 'Gender Identities in Organized Sports – Athletes' Experiences and Organizational Strategies of Inclusion' (2020).
[7] Other than participation in decision-making processes.
[8] Joana Oliveira et all, 'Barriers and Motives for Physical Activity and Sports Practice among Trans People: A Systematic Review' (2022). COM Website Article: "Breaking barriers: the LGBTQIA+ community".
[9] Päivi Berg & Marja Kokkonen: "Et olis sekaryhmät, unisex-pukuhuone ja et opettajia olis jotenkin perehdytetty asiaan" - Sateenkaarinuoret, koululiikunta ja liikuntaharrastukset (2020).
[10] Outsport Survey 2019.

- Positive aspects - Physical activity and sport constitute important social practices that contribute to both mental and physical health improvements, 'but also to personal empowerment and social connectedness for both people belonging to hegemonic social status groups and minority groups'[11]. The overall social environment in which sport practices usually take place can contribute to both physical and mental health improvements[12]. Indeed, youth sports constitute a driver for social inclusion and lifelong skills development.

For this reason, sport organisations are considered crucial for public welfare. Nevertheless, for these positive effects to occur, the social environment within sports needs to be aware and informed about the different gender identities, it needs to be inclusive and welcome in the first place, which is usually not the case as seen in the figures presented above.

Historically, the sport sector has been dominated by "beliefs about sex binary and male hegemony". Moreover, the fact that usually sport systems are based on sex segregation generally means that people who do not fit into or reject fitting into sex categories are hindered from participating in sports, particularly organised sports[13].

The Resolution "A/HRC/RES/40/5" on the "elimination of discrimination against women and girls in sport, adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council, further recognises the multiple and intersecting forms of stigma and discrimination in sport suffered by women and girls, which are "subject to discriminatory laws and practices based on their race and gender", including the "eligibility regulations for female classification" adopted and published by some international and national sport federations[14].

This sex binary and male hegemony within sports reproduces a rather restrictive understanding of the different gender identities in sports, which in turn leads to the adoption of policies, measures and attitudes that exclude LGBTQI+ Youth from sport. Moreover, the scientific foundation upon which these practices[15] rely on are still contested amongst academia and, as highlighted in the above-mentioned UN report, "may not be compatible with international human rights norms and standards, including the rights of women with differences of sex development" and, more broadly of LGBTQI+ Youth.

[11] Agnes Elling, Kiki Collot d'Escury: "Between stigmatization and empowerment: Meanings of physical activity and sport in the lives of transgender people" (2017).
[12] Richard Peter Bailey, HOORAY Project, "What works? Evidence-based guidance regarding physical activity and mental health in adolescents" (2023).
[13] Birgit Braumüller, Tobias Menzel and Ilse Hartmann-Tews, 'Gender Identities in Organized Sports – Athletes' Experiences and Organizational Strategies of Inclusion' (2020). ILGA-Europe et all: "LBTI women in sport: violence, discrimination, and lived experiences" (2021).
[14] UN Human Rights Council, Resolution A/HRC/RES/40/5 on the "Elimination of Discrimination against Women and Girls in Sport" (21 March 2019).
[15] Some practices include the testosterone rules which use testosterone as criteria to determine whether women with variations in sex characteristics are eligible to compete.

The absence of LGBTQI+ persons in sports governance and decision-making bodies often results in policies and practices that do not adequately address the needs and concerns of LGBTQI+ Youth.

When considering all the above, this leads us to believe, in the absence of concrete data and research, that sport governance bodies that adopt this kind of social exclusion practices usually lack LGBTQI+ Youth representation to properly advocate for the needs and rights of such a minority group.

This, in turn, will also limit the access to inclusive programmes, making it difficult for LGBTQI+ Youth to participate fully and comfortably in sport activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the several and multidimensional benefits of sport participation, LGBTQI+ Youth still face significant barriers limiting their rightful participation and representation in sport. These include, among others, discrimination, exclusion, abuse, bullying, stigma, lack of inclusive policies, infrastructures and a welcoming environment, and absence of representation in decision-making positions. Addressing these barriers is crucial to fostering an inclusive environment where all youth feel safe and valued.

Thus, the inclusion of diverse groups, including LGBTQI+ Youth, in sport governing bodies is essential. Diverse sport governing structures and representation in decision-making bodies ensures that governance reflects the whole community, promotes equality, and enhances decision-making processes.

Considering all the above, we highly encourage sport federations, organisations, clubs and other sport stakeholders and institutions to consider the following recommendations:

1. **Ensure effective and meaningful youth participation and representation in decision-making**

Youth represent the biggest segment of our population engaged in sports. Being one of sports key stakeholders, young people should be represented at the decision-making tables. A viable possibility for this is to establish and develop youth representation bodies within sports organisations governance structures. These need to necessarily include LGBTQI+ members and hold at least one seat at the main decision-making body of the organisation. The youth body and youth position should have an effective and meaningful role in shaping policies, programmes, and practices.

2. **Policy Development**

Develop and implement policies, frameworks and guidelines that explicitly protect and promote the rights of LGBTQI+ Youth in sport. Such policies, frameworks and guidelines

should necessarily be developed, implemented and evaluated together with LGBTQI+ Youth, in a co-created and co-managed approach.

3. Education and Training

Provide education and training opportunities on LGBTQI+ inclusion for sports staff, coaches, administrators, and athletes[16]. Education and training foster information and understanding, helping create a more supportive and welcoming environment for LGBTQI+ Youth.

4. Ensure Safe Spaces and Inclusive Infrastructures

Whilst lack of resources remains the greatest limitation to infrastructure development within grassroots sport organisations, these should be empowered with the necessary means to develop and maintain sports facilities that are safe and inclusive for LGBTQI+ Youth. This includes ensuring accessible facilities, providing gender-neutral changing rooms and bathrooms, and a dedicated room for some time alone and access to psychological staff.

5. Develop Partnerships with LGBTQI+ Organisations and Stakeholders

Sport organisations usually don't have the necessary in-house knowledge and expertise to fully understand and act upon all the needs and challenges faced by LGBTQI+ Youth in sports. As such, there's a need to cooperate with LGBTQI+ organisations to develop and promote inclusive sport programmes and policies.

[16] The term athletes refers to athletes that compete in non-professional amateur level.





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