



“NO ONE WANTS TO TALK ABOUT IT”

Voices of impacted people on the participation of athletes
convicted of sexual offenses at mega sporting events

An exploratory study by:



**Athletes
Network**
FOR SAFER SPORTS

**THOMAS
MORE**

UNIVERSITY
OF APPLIED
SCIENCES



**"NO ONE WANTS
TO TALK ABOUT IT"**

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Published on 7th October 2025
Original language: English
Printed in the Netherlands

Sport & Rights Alliance

The Sport & Rights Alliance was established as a foundation (Stichting Sport & Rights Alliance) in 2015 and has its registered office in Amsterdam. The foundation is registered in the Netherlands Chamber of Commerce (Kamer van Koophandel Amsterdam - KvK) under the number 95392424 with the Dutch tax identification number RSIN 8671.12.992.

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Network**
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About the Sport & Rights Alliance

The SRA's mission is to promote the rights and well-being of those most affected by human rights risks associated with the delivery of sport. Our partners include Amnesty International, The Army of Survivors, Football Supporters Europe, Human Rights Watch, ILGA World (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), the International Trade Union Confederation, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Transparency International, and World Players Association, UNI Global Union. As a global coalition of leading NGOs and trade unions, the Sport & Rights Alliance works together to ensure sports bodies, governments and other relevant stakeholders give rise to a world of sport that protects, respects, and fulfills international standards for human rights, labor rights, child rights and wellbeing as well as safeguarding, and anti-corruption.

About the Athletes Network for Safer Sports

The Athletes Network for Safer Sports is an international network of organizations and people connected by their lived experience of abuse in sport. A core program of the Sport & Rights Alliance, the Network brings together athletes, allies, survivors, victims and whistleblowers with a mission to create and strengthen safe spaces for people affected by abuse in sport – promoting healing, amplifying each other's voices, and advocating for systemic change. The Network is guided by an Advisory Council composed of athletes and allies impacted by abuse in sport, who are responsible for providing the Network with overall programmatic guidance and strategic support.

About Thomas More University of Applied Sciences



Thomas More University of Applied Sciences is a Belgian university recognized for its strong involvement in international networks and projects aligned with its diverse degree programmes and research domains. Through its research line “Safeguarding Sport & Society”, Thomas More conducts quantitative and qualitative research on violence against children and vulnerable groups, from the perspectives of victims, perpetrators, bystanders and organizations. As a practice-oriented institution, Thomas More develops and evaluates educational tools and intervention programmes to prevent harassment and abuse in local amateur and elite sports clubs and higher education settings. Areas of focus include the prevalence and nature of abuse, bystander behaviour and behaviour change, specialized training for coaches and (para-) medical personnel to detect and respond to abuse, and the implementation and effectiveness of safeguarding policies at local, national, and international level.

Situating the authors



Given our extensive involvement throughout the research process, we believe it is important to provide readers with insight into who we are and the perspectives we bring. This includes reflecting on how our personal and professional backgrounds shaped our approach to data collection, analysis, and the writing of this report.

Renata Falcão

(she/her)

Main Researcher



As a researcher with a background in law, criminology, and restorative justice, my academic and professional journey has been grounded in issues of harm and survivors' experiences. While much of my previous work has focused on rehabilitation and restorative practices, this project expanded my perspectives. In co-developing the interview framework and conducting the conversations with survivors, I found myself in a deeply emotional and, at times, confronting space. While sharing the same gender as the participants (which were all women) may have helped the development of a space that fosters open dialogue, I was conscious that my positionality – particularly my professional background as a lawyer – could be perceived as aligned with systems that have historically failed survivors. Aware of this potential mistrust, I approached each conversation with openness and a trauma-informed mindset.

I was also mindful that my identity and experiences could shape both the way questions were asked during interviews and how responses were interpreted during analysis. I noticed sometimes I would draw attention to institutional accountability and procedural aspects of participant's stories, which risked overshadowing the emotional depth and lived realities they shared.

Working closely with Joanna, someone with lived experience, helped ground the research in a survivor-centered ethos. Having her by my side was a reminder of the ethical responsibility we carried in amplifying these voices with care, making me more intentional in how I engaged with participants. Her presence and insight challenged me to question assumptions I may not have otherwise seen, and she also provided a sense of emotional safety not only for the participants, but for me as a researcher navigating sensitive conversations.

As a Brazilian, conducting interviews primarily in English with participants who were mostly native English speakers also presented its own challenges. Participants shared profoundly sensitive experiences, that would have been difficult to process even in my own language. Navigating these interactions required attentiveness and deep listening. Still, coding emotional responses felt unsettling, as I realized that the depth and vulnerability shared by participants could not be easily categorized or analyzed. This discomfort challenged my training and assumptions, but it also became a space for personal and professional growth.

Joanna Maranhão

(she/her)

Co-author



Working closely with Renata on this project has been a profound learning experience for me. With more than two decades of experience as a professional swimmer and also carrying the lived experience of abuse in the context of sport, I approached this project through both lenses. For many years now I've been working closely with survivors of abuse – or “colleagues by experience” as I usually call them – therefore I recognize my position influences our priority to amplify the voices of impacted athletes. I feel constantly compelled to continue to explore possibilities to better connect research and advocacy, and this has been the driving force of this specific research project. The process of co-leading this research with Renata and having the guidance from the Thomas More team have added value to our work, and I hope it serves as inspiration for future collaboration between advocacy groups and academics.

One of the most complex aspects personally was managing body language during interviews – especially when participants shared views that deeply resonated with my own experience. In these moments, I navigated the delicate balance between my role as a young researcher and a survivor, offering emotional support to participants while practicing a trauma-informed approach. Additionally, having the support of a trained psychologist available not just for the participants but for both Renata and me was extremely helpful to allow us to keep focused on the research goal and manage our emotions throughout the process.

I feel nothing but gratitude to everyone involved in this project – firstly to the participants who dedicated their valuable time to discuss this issue, to Renata and her kind way of leading this work, to the SRA Secretariat and the research team at Thomas More. Navigating this work can often be extremely overwhelming to everyone involved, so strengthening a community of care and creating spaces where we can respectfully discuss these issues is fundamental to the future of safe sport.

Jon Brain

(he/him)

Co-author



My role in this project was shaped by the tension between advocacy and research. With a research background, I am trained to approach topics in their complexity and to weigh multiple perspectives. This orientation, while valuable for academic rigor, sometimes sat uneasily alongside the urgency and clarity that advocacy requires. Navigating these different approaches became a central part of my experience. My contributions centered on supporting Renata and Joanna set-up the data collection and analysis and provide feedback on the current report.

As a man without lived experience of abuse, I was mindful of the different position I occupied in comparison to colleagues whose perspectives were shaped by advocacy and lived experience. This made me particularly attentive to listening and learning from them, and it reminded me to approach the work with humility. The awareness of my position often made it hard for me to grapple with how to raise nuanced perspectives on the topic, such as the potential role of sport in supporting reintegration after a conviction, without wanting to offend or harm my colleagues. Additionally, this made offering more critical, research-oriented perspectives on the research content difficult, since I knew these contributions might be received differently than those of my colleagues. At times, I worried that my input might inadvertently undermine the advocacy work, which led to moments of unease and self-doubt. I sought to approach this tension with openness and humility, recognizing discomfort as an opportunity for reflexivity and growth.

Working within a team that combined lived experience, advocacy expertise, and research was truly a profound learning opportunity which I am forever grateful for. Renata and Joanna also created a space where it felt safe to discuss tensions openly, and their willingness to listen and learn made those conversations extremely rich and constructive. As a researcher, I also tried to support them in reflecting on how their own positionality shaped the work, so that reflexivity became a shared practice. This exchange of perspectives was both challenging and transformative, and it reshaped how I understand collaboration in this field. Looking forward, this experience has strengthened my commitment to collaborations that bridge research and advocacy. The strength of this project lay not in erasing differences but in allowing them to generate dialogue and deepen understanding.

Advocacy keeps research connected to lived realities and urgency, while research provides the reflexivity and rigor that can strengthen advocacy. Holding both together was not always comfortable, but it was one of the most meaningful aspects of my involvement, and it is a balance I aim to carry into future work.

Acknowledgements



This report was developed as a follow-up to the statement¹ released in 2024, led by three survivor-led organizations: the Athletes Network for Safer Sports, Kyniska Advocacy,² and The Army of Survivors.³

We are deeply grateful for the allyship shown throughout this initiative and to each participant of this research who shared their views and insights about this issue.

Content Warning

This report discusses sexual violence within the context of sports, including sensitive real and hypothetical incidents of abuse perpetrated by athletes and associated individuals. It may be distressing for some readers, particularly those who have suffered similar abuses.

Local Support

If you or someone you know has been affected by athlete abuse and are seeking support, please use these resources at these links to find the nearest local resource available:

sportandrightsalliance.org/athletes-network/resources/ or
<https://www.bravemovement.org/get-helpathletes-network/resources/>

Definitions and types of abuse

For the purpose of this report, the following definitions of types of maltreatment in sports have been adopted⁵:

Interpersonal violence

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.

Neglect

The failure of parents or care givers to meet a child's physical and emotional needs or failure to protect a child from exposure to danger. This definition equally applied to coaches and athlete entourage

Physical violence

Physical violence is an act attempting to cause, or resulting in, pain and/or physical injury. Physical violence includes beating, burning, kicking, punching, biting, maiming or killing, or the use of objects or weapons.

Psychological violence

Psychological violence (abuse) involves the regular and deliberate use of a range of words and non-physical actions used with the purpose to manipulate, hurt, weaken or frighten a person mentally and emotionally; and/or distort, confuse or influence a person's thoughts and actions within their everyday lives, changing their sense of self and harming their wellbeing. In sport, it could also take the form of non-physical actions that could cause physical or psychological harm to the athlete. Psychological violence could occur online and offline in different forms.

Safeguarding

All proactive measures to both prevent and appropriately respond to concerns related to harassment and abuse in sport, as well as the promotion of holistic approaches to athlete welfare.

Safe sport

A physically and psychologically safe and supportive athletic environment where participants can thrive and experience the full benefits of sport participation.

Sexual violence (includes sexual harassment):

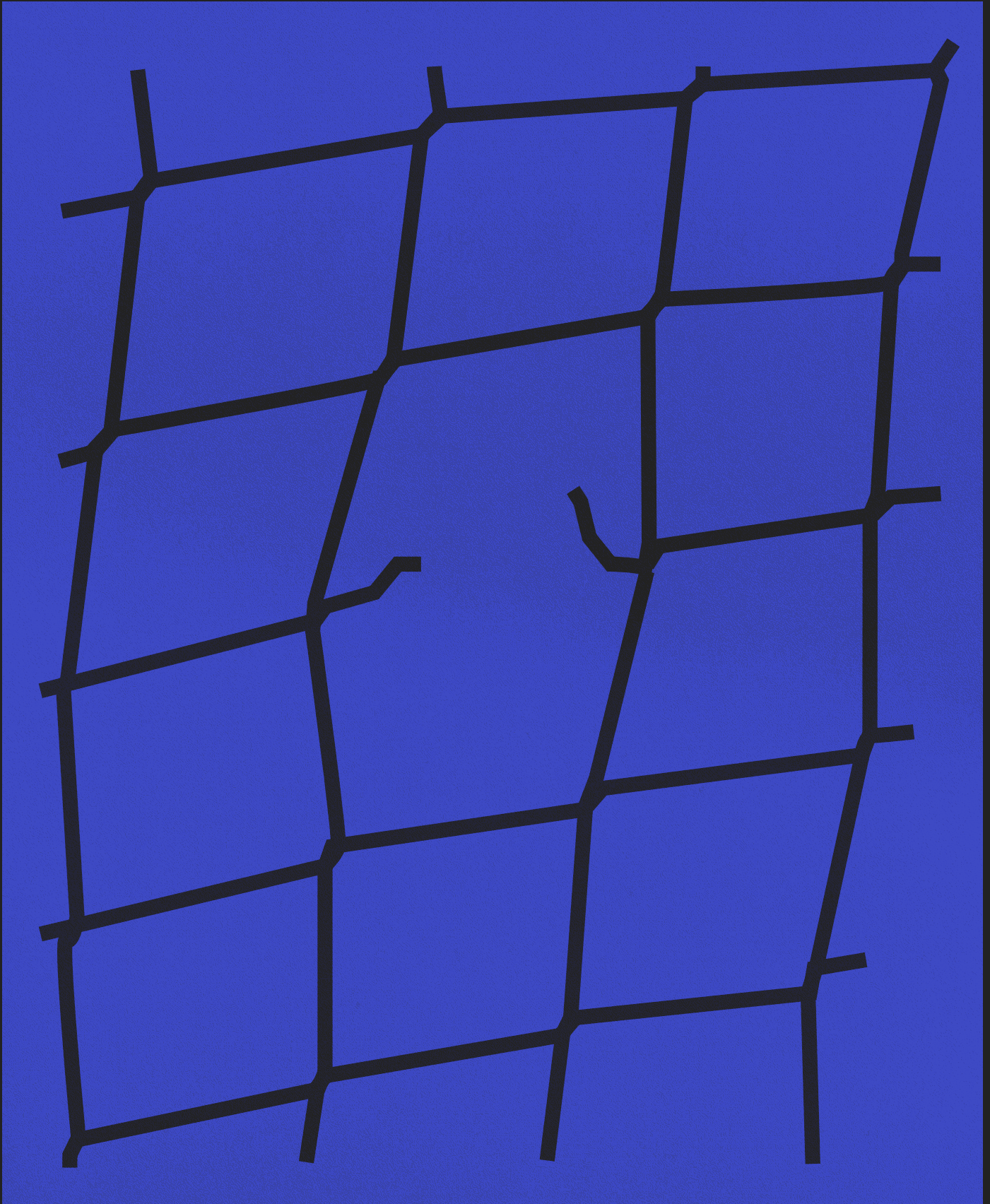
Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work. The different forms of sexual violence can occur both online and in person.

Table of Contents



Executive Summary	9
1. Introduction	11
1.1 Athletes as perpetrators	11
1.2 The ethical dilemma around athlete eligibility	15
1.3 Objectives	16
2. Methodology	17
2.1 Procedure	17
2.2 Data Collection	18
2.3 Data Analysis	19
3. Results	20
3.1 Theme 1: Institutional issues, lack of trust, and safeguarding tools	21
3.2 Theme 2: Eligibility, privilege, and conduct	24
3.3 Theme 3: Values, messaging and culture	26
3.4 Theme 4: Harm, impact, and victim-centeredness	28
3.5 Theme 5: Emotional and personal responses	29
4. Conclusion	30
4.1 Recommendations	31
4.2 Limitations	32

Executive Summary





This report highlights key findings from exploratory desk research and trauma-informed interviews with impacted people aimed at better understanding the attitudes, perspectives, perceptions and thoughts of people impacted by abuse in sports on the eligibility and accreditation criteria of athletes with prior criminal sexual convictions to participate in mega sporting events.

By centering the experiences of those directly impacted, this research project seeks to elevate their voices on a topic that has long been dominated by institutional discretion. In pursuit of these objectives, the report offers actionable recommendations on athlete eligibility and participation at mega sporting events, integrating the voices of those most impacted to support well-informed decision-making in sports governance.

When reflecting on the inclusion of athletes with prior conviction in elite sports, participants highlighted a nuanced emotional experience during discussions. Emotions ranged from anger, frustration, and sadness to empathy, ambivalence, and evoked moral reflection.

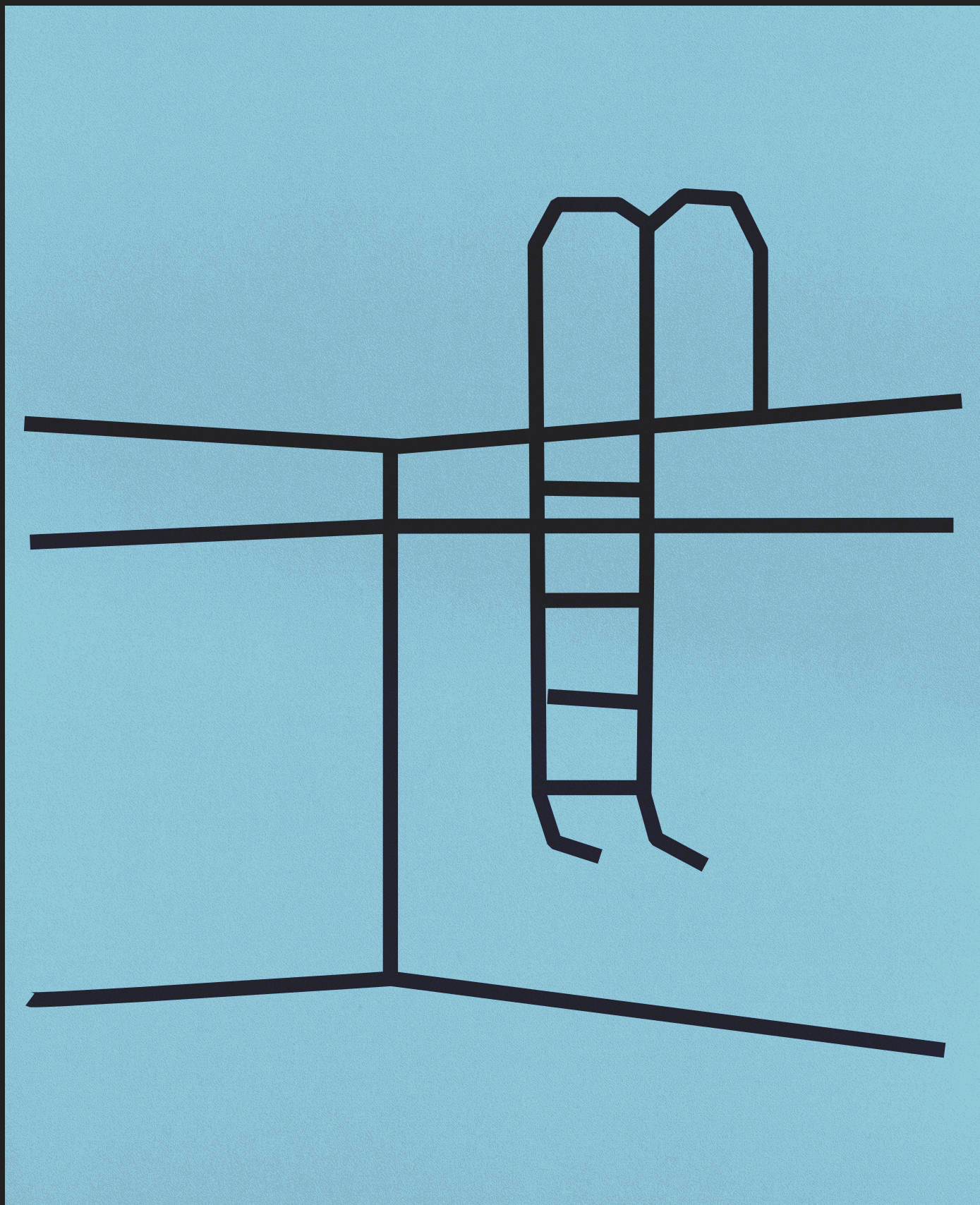
Many participants described a profound sense of betrayal and distrust toward sport governing bodies who, according to them, failed to protect or acknowledge those harmed. Compassion for those who had been impacted and concern for future safety were central to participants' reflections, as was discomfort with the idea of investing resources in reintegrating perpetrators rather than focusing on prevention, protection and remedy for those affected.

Overall, participants consistently underscored the need for clear, enforceable, and transparent eligibility standards that prioritize the safety and integrity of the sporting community over the reputational or competitive interests of institutions. While there was some debate over the merits of standardized versus case-by-case approaches, there was broad agreement that current systems lack both clarity and consistency.

Results also revealed a strong belief among participants that eligibility to compete at mega sporting events is a privilege that should be earned and maintained through ethical conduct, not merely athletic performance. While some held firm that convictions for sexual violence should result in permanent disqualification from high-level sport, others supported conditional models of reintegration provided these were grounded in accountability, transparency, and meaningful reform. With regard to their

feelings, participants emphasized that the presence or public celebration of known offenders can retraumatize victims, create unsafe environments, and silence others within teams and communities. This rationale evolved around the tendency of institutions to prioritize talent and commercial interests over ethical standards. They called for shared standards of accountability that transcend national boundaries, reinforcing the idea that ethical conduct is integral to legitimate participation at the highest levels of competition.

Based on the findings, the report outlines both applied and research recommendations. These include the need for sport governing bodies to adopt broader consultation processes that incorporate the voices of impacted people; establishing a multidisciplinary, international and multicultural working group to evaluate eligibility frameworks; the review and strengthening of the current eligibility criteria to prioritize safeguarding; and transparent communication with the public. In addition, a key recommendation for future researchers is to also expand the scope on types of offences, types of sport and events beyond sexual violence to explore how other forms of misconduct are handled in eligibility decisions. The methodology of this report also emphasizes the importance of embedding mental health support for both participants and researchers, and calls for further investigation into how survivors' voices can be structurally integrated into sport governance.



1.1 Athletes as perpetrators



Discussions about safeguarding in sports have traditionally focused on instances where athletes are victims, however, emerging data reveals that, within sports settings, athletes are also frequently reported as perpetrators of interpersonal violence.⁴

Interpersonal violence is defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person, that either results in or has a highlikelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” in the recent 2024 International Olympic Committee (IOC) Consensus Statement on Interpersonal Violence and Safeguarding.⁵ This encompasses varying types of violence including of sexual nature, which has been reported in the literature as a frequent issue between peer athletes.⁶

This reality raises complex questions about different layers of power dynamics, peer relationships, and the deeply ingrained cultural norms that shape the competitive sports

ecosystem. Reflecting on the complexity of these issues, the new IOC Consensus Statement has advanced this discourse by adopting the concept of “safeguarding”, which transcends the traditional notion of “safe sport”. The term is defined as “all proactive measures to both prevent and appropriately respond to concerns related to harassment and abuse in sport, as well as the promotion of holistic approaches to athlete welfare.”⁷

While this safeguarding definition focuses on harassment and abuse within sports, such harmful behaviours can be found not only in sports but also within broader society. Well-documented in the media, high-profile cases involving elite athletes accused and/or convicted of sexual violence reveal how societal perceptions of these athletes, aligned with institutional self-defense, can have a major influence on the outcomes of such cases.

In 2017, Brazilian soccer player Robinho was sentenced to prison for participating in the rape of a woman in Milan, Italy⁸ – an incident that occurred in 2013, when he was playing for Associazione Calcio Milan (AC Milan). Despite his conviction being upheld by Italy’s highest court in 2022, Robinho evaded imprisonment by remaining in Brazil, where laws prohibit the extradition of its citizens.⁹ Robinho’s sentence was only transferred to be served in his home country in 2024 when the Brazilian Superior Court of Justice convened to discuss the case. This case not only illustrates the global challenges of holding high-profile athletes accountable but also exposes how legal, geographic and cultural barriers can allow offenders to avoid facing the consequences of their actions since his eligibility to compete has never been revoked.¹⁰

Similarly, in October 2022, the National Football League (NFL) player Brandon McManus from the Jacksonville Jaguars was accused of sexually assaulting a woman during a flight from London to the United States.¹¹ The Jaguars said they were aware of the complaint and acknowledged “the significance of the claims”, yet decided to “reserve further

(1) Introduction

1.1 Athletes as perpetrators

comment at this time.” In July of that same year, a Premier League footballer, unnamed due to legal restrictions, was arrested in North London over accusations of rape and sexual assault made by multiple women.¹² Despite the serious allegations, the footballer reportedly continued to play for his club while the investigation was ongoing.

Additionally, in 2022, another high-profile controversy emerged, when the Glasgow Clan ice hockey team in Scotland announced the signing of Finnish player Lasse Uusivirta. Uusivirta had been accused of rape in Alabama in 2013 and subsequently fled to Finland, avoiding indictment.¹³ The decision to sign him sparked immediate outrage among hockey fans¹⁴ and a statement from the Rape Crisis Scotland organization.¹⁵ In response to the public backlash, the Glasgow Clan swiftly reversed the signing just three hours after its official announcement, also suspending the club’s chief executive, Gareth Chalmers, and head coach, Malcolm Cameron, who were held responsible for proceeding with the deal despite knowledge of Uusivirta’s past.¹⁶

Another Brazilian footballer, Olympic champion and former Barcelona player, Dani Alves, was found guilty of raping a woman in a nightclub in Spain in December 2022.¹⁷ Initially denying the accusations and altering his testimony five times, he was sentenced in February 2024.¹⁸ However, the Spanish court later overturned the sentence, citing “insufficient evidence.”¹⁹ While the case remains ongoing, it is important to highlight that, under current football regulations, Alves was always eligible to play.

More recently, Thomas Partey, a former Arsenal midfielder, was charged by the Crown Prosecution Service of England and Wales with multiple counts of rape and one count of sexual assault²⁰. Despite the severity of the accusations, the team continued to stand by the player, consistently keeping him in the lineup and featuring his image in social media posts.²¹ Arsenal also approved the inclusion of Partey in the Premier League’s official trading cards set,²² highlighting how clubs and leagues

may continue to publicly endorse accused players even amid ongoing legal proceedings.

Moreover, another recent example emerged during the 2024 Summer Olympics Games in Paris, involving the Dutch volleyball player Steven Van de Velde. While many of the aforementioned cases involved sportspersons who ultimately managed to avoid legal accountability, Van de Velde’s case stands out as one in which the athlete in fact served time in prison. He was convicted and imprisoned by a British court in 2016 for raping a 12-year-old child.²³ After being imprisoned for a year, he served the rest of his sentence under judicial supervision with mandatory treatment and rules of contact. He was nevertheless allowed to represent the Netherlands at the beach volleyball tournament. His participation was supported and endorsed by the Dutch National Volleyball Association (NEVOBO) and the Dutch Olympic Committee (NOC*NSF), who declared that “he met all the qualification requirements for the Olympic Games and was therefore part of the team.”²⁴

Nonetheless, Van de Velde’s participation ignited intense backlash from both within and outside the sports community, prompting statements from the Athletes Network for Safer Sports,²⁵ Safe Sport International,²⁶ and the Brave Movement.²⁷ These statements criticized the lack of clear guidelines for determining whether individuals with prior criminal or disciplinary records should be allowed to compete in such prestigious events. Their concerns highlight an ongoing debate within international sports governance: Should past convictions impact an athlete’s eligibility at mega sporting events, and, if so, under what criteria?

These incidents challenge the principle of sports autonomy and highlight the role sport governing bodies can play when addressing incidents of sexual violence. They also highlight concerns regarding the perceived impunity of certain athletes, which may be reinforced by their public status and the symbolic capital associated with their position as role models. This lack of accountability illustrates a deeper

(1) Introduction

1.1 Athletes as perpetrators

imbalance - how different societal sectors handle individuals with criminal records. While sporting organizations continue to grapple with these questions, other professional fields enforce far more rigid ethical consequences. In most industries, individuals convicted of sexual crimes face permanent disqualification or significant barriers. Publicly known cases within professions such as medicine,²⁸ education²⁹ and law enforcement³⁰ showcase how individuals with sexual criminal convictions – or, in some cases, allegations of sexual misconduct – face strict restrictions in the exercise of their activities. Sports, however, seem to operate under a lower standard, particularly towards athletes.

While many sports organisations conduct background checks on authority personnel,³¹ this kind of scrutiny is rarely applied to athletes. A recent study on the current practices of background checks on student-athletes found that, among 20 institutions of higher education in the United States with background check policies in place, only two had these checks applied to student-athletes.³² This finding highlights how athletes can be perceived as less accountable than other personnel within the sporting structure.

While background checks are neither infallible nor the only tool to prevent further abuse in sports, their absence raises several concerns around the lack of rigid criteria for eligibility to participate at mega sporting events. This gap may promote the perception that athletic achievements should take precedence over ethical considerations, allowing athletes to maintain prestigious positions with limited examination of the broader implications of their participation in mega sporting events.

1.2 The ethical dilemma around athlete eligibility



The participation of athletes convicted of sexual offences at mega sporting events – such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, FIFA World Cup, and UEFA Championships – presents a complex dilemma between legal rights and ethical considerations. Legally, individuals who have served their sentences have the right to be reintegrated into society. In fact, countries that prioritize rehabilitation and social reintegration of convicted people, such as Norway³³ tend to report lower rates of reconviction.³⁴ Moreover, studies suggest that engagement with sports during detention³⁵ and post-detention³⁶ can foster positive outcomes, playing a key role in reintegration.

Nevertheless, competing at mega sporting events can represent more than a mere return to society, with some contending that such participation constitutes a privilege rather than a right.³⁷ being therefore subject to conditions (including, for instance, complying with the World Anti-Doping Code).

(1) Introduction

1.2 The ethical dilemma around athlete eligibility

This argument lies in the substantial prestige and public visibility afforded to elite athletes, positioning them not only as competitors but as role models. A recent study with over ten thousand participants across seven European countries indicates that most people strongly agree (with a mean over 5.0 in a seven-point rating scale) that elite athletes contribute to collective identity, connection and pride³⁸ thereby reinforcing their roles as public figures.

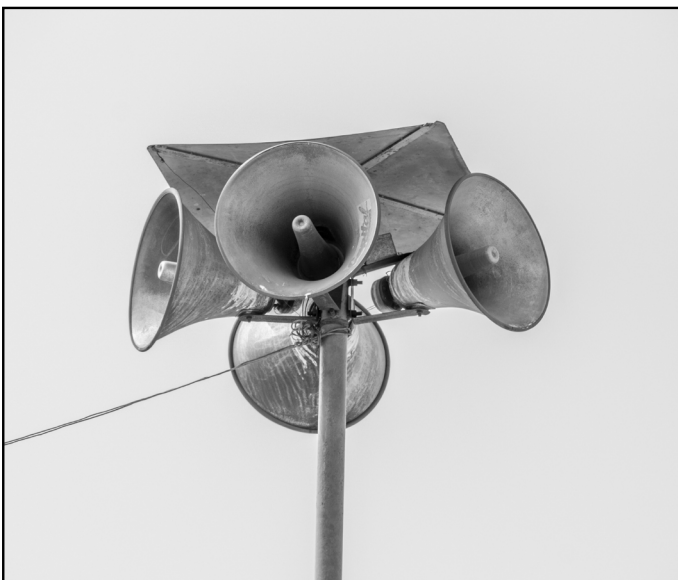
Although elite athletes are often perceived, solely through their participation in sport, as inherently good role models³⁹ it has been argued that moral virtues are not necessarily a product of sport itself, but rather a personal quality that may exist independently of the sporting environment.⁴⁰ This raises important ethical and societal questions regarding the extent to which athletes' participation should be scrutinized, particularly in cases involving serious misconduct.

These questions become even more pressing when considering athletes who have been convicted of sexual violence. Their elevated status extends beyond community reintegration, carrying broader ethical and societal implications. The debate, therefore,

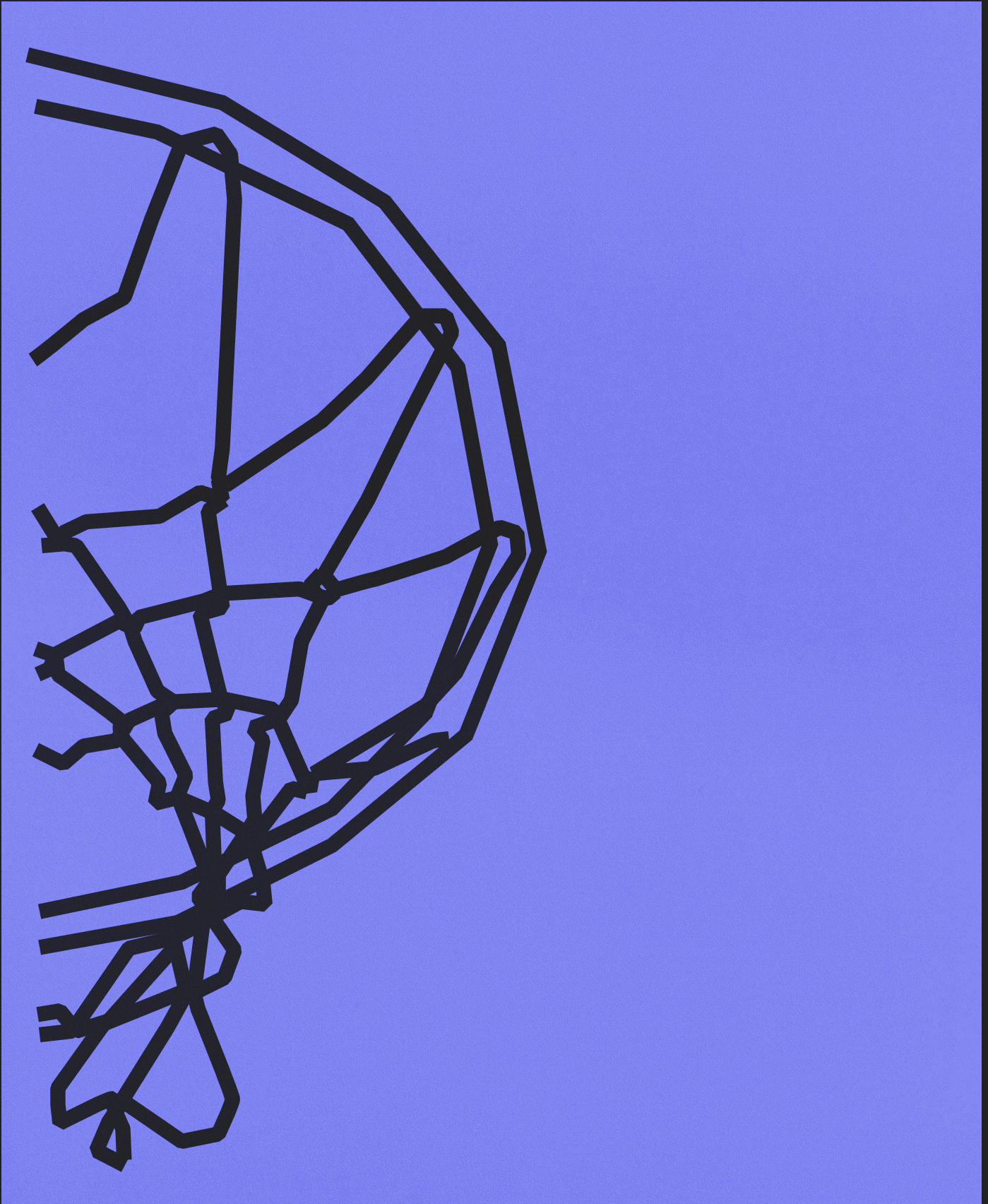
is not exclusively centered around legal permissibility, but about the wider ethical impact of granting athletes with sexual convictions access to platforms that amplify their influence and visibility. The failure of sport governing bodies to provide transparent criteria outlining how convicted athletes are assessed for participating at mega sporting events calls into question the legitimacy of their decision-making and undermines the credibility of sports governance. This can contribute to a culture in which harm caused by these athletes is overlooked in favor of their athletic achievements.

Given the wide experiences of impacted people, their perspectives offer unique and often overlooked insights into how institutions operate and the consequences of their decisions. Those directly affected can identify gaps, blind spots, and unintended consequences that institutional actors may miss. By centering the experiences of those directly impacted, this project seeks to elevate their voices in a conversation that has long been dominated by institutional discretion. This shift not only challenges traditional top-down decision-making but also encourages more inclusive policy development.

1.3 Objectives



This project aims to explore the attitudes, perspectives, perceptions and thoughts of people impacted by abuse in sports on the eligibility and accreditation criteria of athletes with prior criminal sexual convictions to participate in mega sporting events. By examining their perspectives, the project seeks to contribute to a safer, more accountable sports culture where the voices of impacted people are centered.



2.1 Procedure

This project employed a qualitative research design that explored the attitudes, perspectives, and perceptions of impacted people regarding the participation in mega sporting events of athletes convicted of sexual crimes. The methodological framework consisted of a desk research study (comprising a structured review of existing literature and media coverage) as well as trauma-informed semi-structured interviews in collaboration with a licensed psychologist throughout the project.

The procedures planned for the collection and treatment of research data were approved by the KU Leuven Ethics Committee (SMEC G-2025 01 2235). In the evaluation process, risks and necessary precautions were considered in order to avoid discomfort and/or avoid causing further harm to the interviewees. In this sense, a document containing overall information about the project and the interview structure was presented to each participant beforehand.

The participants were given control over the conversation and offered the possibility to interrupt and/or end the session at any time. Additionally, information about supporting services, which is available on the SRA website, was presented.⁴¹ Further, the contact of a trained psychologist for emergency care or any other purposes was made available. While the psychologist was not present during the interviews, their support was available per participants' request.

The psychologist's involvement was intended to extend care and emotional support not only to the interviewed participants but also to the research team. This approach is grounded in a Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care (TVIC) framework, aiming to prevent emotional distress or retraumatization triggers among all participants. Given that both participants and researchers can be affected by the act of sharing or listening to sensitive narratives, adopting a holistic approach that prioritizes the safety and well-being of everyone involved is essential.⁴²

<< Pre-Interview

Before the interviews, a mock interview was held with the two interviewers and the psychologist. In it, the psychologist role played an impacted athlete, in order to rehearse the interview flow, practice active listening, notice emotional cues and respond empathetically. This led to safety considerations such as offering pauses during interviews, scheduling debriefs afterwards and ensuring participants knew how to access support if distress emerged. A minimum one-day gap between interviews was implemented to allow interviewers time for emotional and cognitive processing.

>> Post-Interview

After each block of 3-5 interviews, researchers met with the psychologist to debrief. The presence of an external mental health professional as a point of contact for psychological/emotional support strengthened strategies to welcome the researchers' experience - processing their emotional/mental responses, stimulating a healthy balance between their professional role and personal life. Recognising the sensitivity of the topics discussed and how research on interpersonal violence in sport can be emotionally taxing, we followed recommended strategies towards researcher self-care.⁴³ These included not only regular debriefings after interviews, but also individual self-reflection through journals, and the incorporation of mindfulness practices to promote researcher's well-being.

2.2 Data Collection



Phase 1

Desk Research

The first phase of the study aimed to answer the question on how and if sport governing bodies define and operationalize eligibility criteria in relation to athletes with criminal convictions for sexual offenses. To address this, a desk-based analysis was conducted to review existing eligibility criteria and criminal background check procedures across mega sporting events - including the FIFA Women's and Men's World Cups, UEFA Women's and Men's European Championships, and the Olympic Games. This involved reviewing relevant literature such as reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic articles, legal decisions and media reports to contextualize the current accreditation process, identify existing gaps in policy and establish a ground understanding of the current systems in place.

Phase 2

Interviews

The second phase involved semi-structured interviews guided by a trauma-informed approach to gather qualitative data from participants. The recruitment process of participants was done through the SRA's website and social media channels (Twitter/X, Instagram and LinkedIn). The adoption of semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of each participant's perceptions through the description of two or three vignettes (brief hypothetical scenarios), followed by questions. The vignettes were developed based on a combination of insights from previous research and known public cases shared by the media. One or two vignettes (depending on the flow of the conversation) were chosen at random from a set of four, with a third vignette used as a control tool that was standardized and presented to all participants. Each participant's virtual interview lasted around 60 minutes and was conducted by the research facilitator and Athletes Network coordinator via a secure online platform.

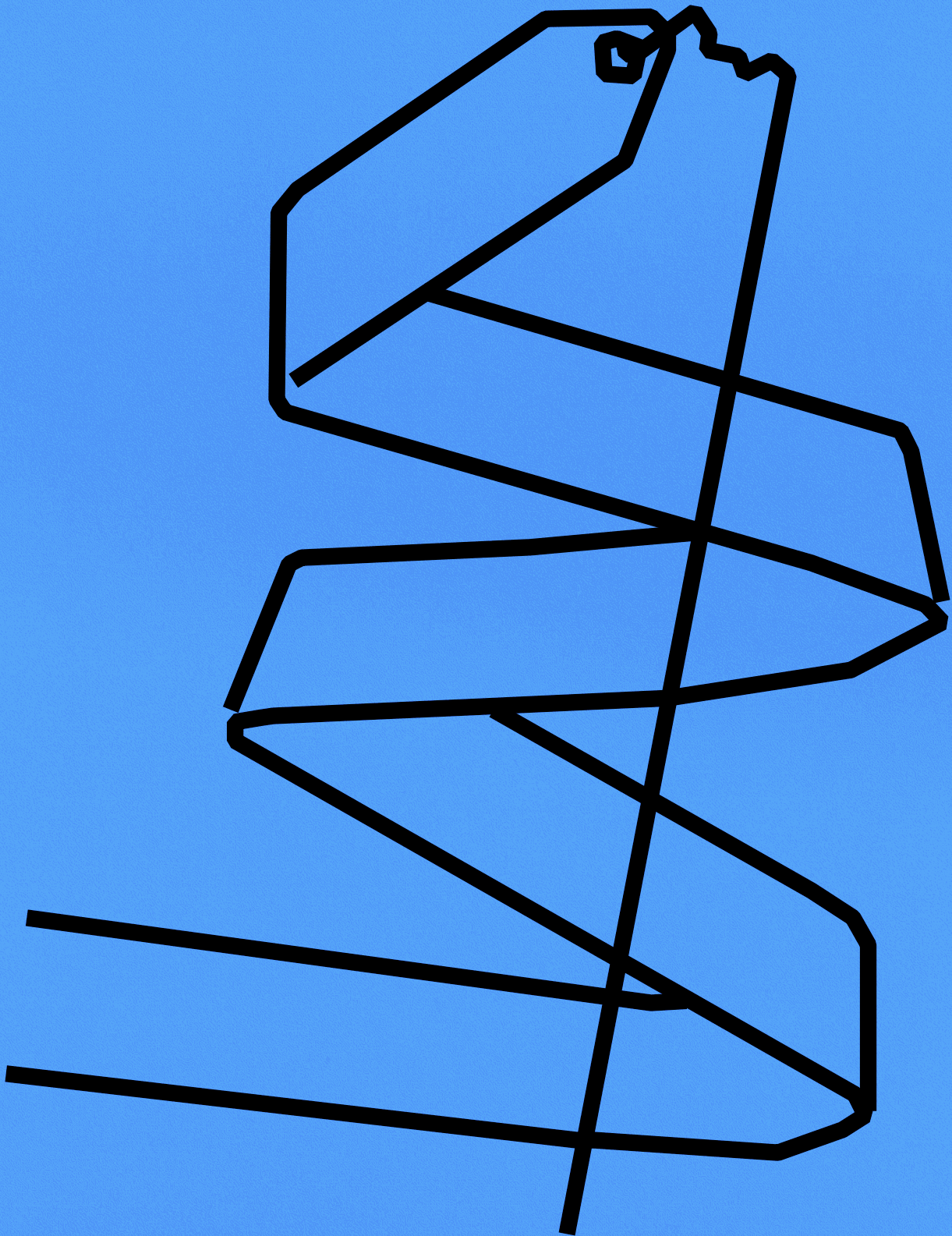
2.3 Data Analysis

A total of 10 interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify common themes and patterns across the data (i.e., concerns and recommendations) following the methodological guidance of Braun and Clarke.⁴⁴ Data was pseudonymized to ensure confidentiality and was processed securely using password-protected storage platforms.

The analytic process followed the six-phase approach of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke,⁴⁵ beginning with familiarization, during which the researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts to familiarize with the data. This was followed by initial coding, where meaningful segments of text were identified across the dataset. Codes were generated inductively, capturing both semantic and latent content related to experiences of harm, institutional responses, emotional processing, and ethical concerns. To organize and track the data, two working documents were developed: one that compiles all codes, and another that maps the codes which appeared in each of the ten interviews. A total of 155 initial codes were generated.

In the next phase, related codes were grouped based on conceptual similarity in order to generate preliminary themes and subthemes. This was an iterative and reflexive process, involving continuous comparison across transcripts, re-reading of the data, and critical engagement with the research questions. Initially, six preliminary themes were developed. One of these was titled “In Vivo Quotes”, comprising literal quotations from participants. This theme was later dissolved, with its codes redistributed across the remaining five themes based on their substantive meaning. The final five themes, which will be explored throughout Section 3, were not merely descriptive summaries but were constructed and designed to illuminate patterns of meaning, shared tensions, and contradictions within participant accounts.

Throughout the analysis, attention was given to the researchers’ own positionalities and how these may have influenced interpretive decisions. Reflexive diaries were kept and internal discussions were used to interrogate assumptions, manage potential biases, and reflect on emotional reactions to the material. This iterative dialogue between data, codes, and thematic development was central to ensuring analytic depth, coherence, and rigour in the findings.



Findings from the desk research indicate that there is no consistent global approach to the participation of athletes with prior criminal sexual offenses.

In some jurisdictions, integrity policies include provisions that may trigger referrals to law enforcement, but these are usually assessed on a case-by-case basis rather than applied to all.⁴⁶ Certain sport-specific governing bodies have adopted stricter measures, classifying it as a “permanent disqualification” or “red light” in the case of a felony involving the sex crime of rape.⁴⁷

Overall, policies vary widely by who is covered (athletes, coaches, people with contact with minors and others). In many systems, background checks can render adults in certain roles ineligible, but only a limited number of frameworks explicitly extend these exclusions to athlete membership or competition entry.

The following sub-sections present the five key themes developed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis of interviews with impacted individuals. These themes reflect a range of perspectives and emotional experiences related to the eligibility and accreditation of individuals with criminal sexual convictions in sport. While each theme is distinct, they are interconnected - offering insight into the complex ethical, institutional, and emotional terrain navigated by those impacted by interpersonal violence in sporting contexts.

3.1 Theme 1:

Institutional issues, lack of trust, and safeguarding tools

“I think real change would have to come from the major organizations that currently hold the most power in sports. The way the system is structured, their involvement is essential.”

This theme captures participants’ perceptions of how sport governing bodies respond, or fail to respond, in cases involving the participation of athletes with criminal sexual convictions. Across interviews, participants expressed an expectation that sports institutions would have safety measures and policies in place. They also highlighted a prevailing sense of institutional inaction, silence, or complicity as factors that increase harm. Some described a lack of clear safeguarding policies, absence of transparent eligibility standards, and inconsistent responses from clubs and/or federations as a concern. A participant mentioned that the sport governing bodies should “start by acknowledging that this is a problem” and “it’s as serious as making sure that there is proper grass.” They continued by stating that these governing bodies must own their responsibility and not merely take performative steps ☹

“It comes down to the sport federations and their responsibility, the governing bodies, if you will, whether it’s the International Federation or the National Federation, and then agencies like the IOC and the IPC [International Paralympic Committee] that have multi-sport jurisdiction. If it doesn’t start there, or if they seem to be apathetic to the cause, or worse yet, if it’s performative, if their steps toward safety for athletes and spectators seems more performative, I think that does more damage. And that’s the biggest problem I feel right now in global sport, is that nobody’s taking responsibility for the safety of the people involved.”

(3) Results

3.1 Theme 1: Institutional issues, lack of trust, and safeguarding tools

➤ Institutional distrust and standardized procedure

Several participants expressed their lack of trust in sport governing bodies, noting that decisions are often influenced by financial interests and institutional reputation. One participant mentioned that decisions receive more “push back” in cases of higher status player *“I’d say it depends on the player’s status. I think the higher the status, the more push back you’re going to get, the more protective coddling there is around this individual and that it becomes more politicized.”*

In the same line, participant mentioned that *“If you’re a high-revenue generating international federation and somebody who’s important to your federation, from a sponsor standpoint or an athlete standpoint or a coach, you’re gonna probably see a delay in the reaction, even today with all the attention put on it.”*

Together, these reflections point to a broader concern that institutional decisions may be guided less by ethical standards than by the perceived value of the individuals involved.

No consensus was found with regard to the use of a standardized or case-by-case decision process in terms of eligibility of those convicted. Some participants mentioned the need for a standardised procedure - mentioning that *“to me, it’s standardized across the board. If you’ve been accused of interpersonal violence, you forfeit your privilege of participating in our events.”*

Similarly, another participant argued *“we can’t have a system that makes a decision based on a case-by-case basis”,* pointing to the risks of discretion and unequal treatment. They reinforced this view by highlighting the inconsistency between existing technical standards and behavioral standards, saying *“At the end of the day, we have the ‘FIFA standard’ for seats, for toilet, for VIP areas, right? So we should have a ‘FIFA standard’ for expected behaviour as well.”*

These perspectives reflect a desire for clear and enforceable eligibility frameworks that prevent decisions from being swayed by status or institutional interest.

In contrast, others expressed the potential benefits of a case-by-case analysis on eligibility, while also acknowledging the challenging practicalities of such an approach. Participants emphasized the importance of considering the specific context of each case, with one participant highlighting the need to include many voices when making such decisions ➤

“It’s a really complex question that in my opinion would have to be more of a case-by-case basis, but just making sure that not only victims’ voices are heard but also other people that are gonna, you know, be competing with or against or training with these people as well.”

(3) Results

3.1 Theme 1: Institutional issues, lack of trust, and safeguarding tools

Similarly, a participant affirmed that *“I don’t think it’s a black and white thing. I wouldn’t just say that definitely they should never compete. I think that... I hate saying this as a lawyer, but it’s a case-by-case basis.”* This view was accompanied by a recognition of the emotional tension surrounding the issue ☺

“I think just being antagonistic and saying it’s off, it’s off completely. I’m not sure if that helps in the long run. I understand it though. I completely understand it. So it is a difficult issue.”

These reflections highlight the complexity of determining the eligibility of convicted athletes. They show that while the perspectives of those affected can meaningfully contribute to the process, there is no unified viewpoint.

One potential solution, as expressed by one participant, would be to create a hybrid model. One that combines a standardized procedure with the flexibility to adapt to individual cases ☺

“My personal opinion would be to have overall standard procedure with emphasis on a case by case within the procedure. So general policy that allows for flexibility.”

In addition, participants called for the introduction of formal and enforceable safeguarding mechanisms. These mechanisms, they suggested, should include clear eligibility rules, required criminal background checks and public acknowledgements regarding the participation of a convicted athlete and the measures taken to ensure safety. One participant emphasized the importance of having a framework to limit excessive discretion *“having like a framework and set of guidelines I think would be helpful because I guess the fear is if you have too much discretion, option of saying, well, if it’s a violent offense, but it happened, you know, three years ago, it starts to get hard unless you have a really good matrix.”*

☺ Criminal background checks at mega sporting events

Criminal background checks were widely supported as a fundamental part of the vetting process. *“I do think that criminal background checks or background checks in general need to be part of the vetting process to be involved in sport,”* stated one participant, while another added, *“I think if you’re joining an organization, you should be background checked. I think sports could learn something from, like the business world in that.”* These remarks stress the perceived gap between sport and other professional domains in implementing basic safeguarding standards.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that background checks are not flawless. One participant pointed to the existence of *“lots of loopholes in our background checking”*, while another noted issues of inconsistency,

explaining that *“There are some problems with that process because it’s not very consistent. For instance, if you have the wrong spelling of your name.”* Another participant raised concerns about the potential for racial bias in how background checks are interpreted, noting *“people of color have more likelihood to have things on their records, so I don’t think everybody should [be required to] have a completely clear record. But I do think there are certain crimes that, if convicted, that people should not be allowed to play.”* These comments underscore the importance of not treating background checks as a stand-alone solution, but rather as an element within a broader safeguarding strategy.

(3) Results

3.1 Theme: Institutional issues, lack of trust, and safeguarding tools

➤ Robust systems for reintegration and parallels to anti-doping

Participants also emphasized the need for well-resourced systems that ensure the return to competition of an athlete convicted of sexual violence is contingent upon the safety and well-being of the sporting community. The importance of institutional investment in these processes was particularly underscored by one participant, *“If the sports want to be able to (...) allow the best player to come back and compete, they better put their money into the system that would allow that to happen quickly in a safe way.”* This perspective highlights a broader view that reintegration cannot be approached casually, but rather requires proactive planning, financial commitment, and comprehensive safeguarding infrastructure to protect all members of the sporting environment.

In cases where convicted athletes are reintegrated, participants emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability through public communication. As one participant explained, *“I think it comes down to how you message this. I think you’d have to be extremely effective at saying that these were the core things that we undertook. We recognize the risk and we recognize the harm that occurred. We did A, B and C. Furthermore, we’re going to take measures X, Y and Z when that person is on that team.”* Together, these perspectives reflect a call for consistent and visible actions that prioritize community safety and institutional responsibility.

Moreover, differences were pointed out between the way cases of doping are handled in comparison to cases of abuse: while the first seems to receive strict enforcement of regulations, the latter seems to enjoy a higher threshold of leniency. One participant remarked that despite varying national laws, the sporting world has agreed on a set of rules regarding doping, asking, *“I don’t see how it should be any different in terms of sexual violence.”* This comparison highlights a perceived double standard, wherein ethical violations with significant social harm are met with less institutional urgency than infractions related to performance enhancement.

Building on this comparison, several participants suggested that eligibility guidelines for athletes with sexual violence convictions could be modeled, at least in part, on the current anti-doping framework. Participants stressed the absence of any clear system for handling such cases, noting that the doping model offers a practical foundation for establishing time-bound sanctions and consistent eligibility standards – tools that are currently lacking in the context of safeguarding. In this line, one participant pointed out that *“There should be a time period where you are not allowed to compete... there should be a starting thing similar to anti-doping.”*

At the same time, participants also noted that the anti-doping system carries its own challenges and limitations ☹

“The anti-doping system is totally flawed because they didn’t consult with athletes and because they didn’t put athletes at the center of decision making.”

Nonetheless, participants saw potential in adapting elements of the framework. On the condition of appropriate inclusion of survivor- and athlete-led input, some believed the anti-doping structure could inform a more ethically robust and enforceable safeguarding model ☺

“if you take the good stuff and then you add in all the things that we know about safeguarding, and you have survivor-led and athlete-led conversations, then there’s some things you could take from it.”

3.2 Theme 2: Eligibility, privilege, and conduct

This theme focuses on participants' views on the current eligibility criteria and the underlying question of who can participate in sport at the elite level. Many participants argued that participation at such level of competition is a privilege, not a right, and should therefore come with ethical conditions. As one participant noted ☺

“Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time”

“I just feel that these prestigious events and the opportunity to represent your country, there needs to be rigor around that. It has to. It’s an honor, it’s a privilege, it’s not a right. You don’t just get to destroy somebody’s life and then have your prestige elevated because you’re physically good at something.”

☞ Conditional eligibility and second chances

While some participants felt strongly that a conviction in a case involving sexual violence should mean a disqualification from competing at the highest levels, stating, for instance, that *“I guess if you commit this kind of a crime that is of a sexual nature, you forego your right, your privilege to compete in high-level sports”* – others approached it in a more nuanced way. Some participants acknowledged the possibility of a convicted athlete taking part at mega sporting events on the condition that they fulfilled all legal obligations, such as completing their sentence. Their rationale centered on the idea that once society has deemed someone rehabilitated through due process, sport should not impose indefinite or additional penalties.

Some participants proposed a structured model for conditional eligibility, with an emphasis on educational measures and contractual clauses ☺

Such a model reflects an attempt to balance second chances with responsibility - embedding education and moral commitments into formal agreements.

“The sporting organization would both talk to their players about what is expected behavior and then provide them educational resources (...) he would be receiving education from the club (...) signing a contract that said he understood what those moral clauses were.”

➤ Accountability and Transparency

One participant highlighted the importance of a public acknowledgment, from both the athlete and the organization, suggesting that eligibility in such cases could be contingent on openly recognizing the harm caused, serving time away from sport, and demonstrating genuine remorse. This acknowledgement, they argued, would help avoid situations where things are handled “quietly”, that is, without transparency and often “behind closed doors.”

Another participant also recognised the importance of such acknowledgements, yet expressed skepticism about its authenticity ➤

This tension underscores the complexity of using remorse as a criterion for eligibility, raising questions about whether the sincerity of it could be evaluated and whether accountability can truly be enforced.

“Oh my God, I would love it if they would admit their guilt, say sorry, meaningfully offer some kind of compensation or remedy to their victims. That would be in a perfect world. I would love that kind of level of power that we could wield over the perpetrator and flip the tables and say, ‘You want to play in our game? You have to do all of these things.’ Now, forcing someone to do all those things may not, you know, work.”

3.3 (Theme 3)

Values, messaging and culture

Many participants expressed concerns about allowing convicted athletes to compete at the highest level of competition, underscoring the possible message this inclusion might send to the general public. In their opinion, athletes representing their countries at mega sporting events are viewed as role models, particularly by young people. One participant highlighted that, *“I think there are certain things that are just unforgivable, and I think that sports are a great way to kind of be role models and to influence society. Everyone kind of looks up to athletes as these great heroes, as these national representations, and I just think that sends the wrong message to young kids.”*

Participants repeatedly emphasized that sport is not only about physical performance, but also about upholding values such as respect and trust, and communicating those values through action. As one participant simply put it, *“When you are participating in sport, there’s expectation of trust.”* Central to this expectation is trust among teammates, athletes, institutions and the broader public. As another participant expressed ➤

“I think that there needs to be a clear message that behavior like that is not going to be tolerated.”

“When you’re sharing a locker room, when you’re sharing sweat and tears and all of these emotional and physical things, there has to be extra safety. It has to be more safe than like a community.”

Maintaining this “expectation of trust” demands a collective commitment to shared values.

(3) Results

3.3 Theme 3: Values, messaging and culture

While sport governing bodies usually play a key role in establishing and enforcing top-down measures, to some participants it would be equally important that athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders commit to upholding and embodying these standards in practice.

➤ **Athletic performance and ethical principles**

Many participants described a conflict between the stated values of sport (such as fair play, respect, inclusion)⁴⁸ and the reality of allowing convicted individuals to return to mega sporting events. Some questioned what it means when an athlete with a criminal sexual conviction is granted national representation, wondering what message is sent not only to the general public but also to younger generations.

“So, it’s kind of that little kids look up to you and do we really want to promote little kids looking up to people who are, convicted rapists or convicted, whatever they’ve been convicted of? And again, I think it really goes back to setting a good role model. I really do believe sport athletes are, you know, a role model for society. Every society has athletes that they look up to.”

In a similar vein, another participant pointed out that when it comes to sport, there is an expectation of fair play and other norms involved in these settings ➤

In addition to that, participants reported a clear tension between performance and ethics in elite sport. Some participants noted that decisions at mega sporting events often prioritize the first over the latter, with a participant saying that *“They’re [sport governing bodies] going to make decisions based on how good the athlete is (...).”* This feeling reflects a broader perception that athletic excellence can overshadow serious ethical breaches, allowing institutions to justify inaction or leniency in the benefit of competitive success or commercial gain.

Participants warned that this dynamic could not only compromise the integrity of elite competition but also endanger the safety and moral fabric of the sporting community. This concern prompted reflections on the distinct ethical responsibilities that come with sporting visibility, with participants asserting that eligibility decisions should reflect broader societal values and not solely rely on the notion of having ‘served their time’. *“While some people who are convicted might have served their time, certain things are unforgivable, and I think sport is a great way to serve as a role model and influence society.”*

“Beyond what the law is in the country that the tournament is being played in, or the country that he’s from, or the country where the crime took place, there’s a code of conduct for the sport itself. When we talk about sport, one of the things as a child that I think just kind of naturally is imprinted on you is this idea of fair play and sportsmanship.”

➤ Cultural relativism: Misuse of cultural context to excuse sexual misconduct

This theme also captures cultural differences that could impact notions of misconduct and accountability. Participants contended that coming from a certain culture should not be an excuse for inappropriate behavior ➤

Participants reflected on the global nature of elite sport and the ethical responsibilities that come with it. Competing at this level, they suggested, demands an awareness of cultural diversity and a commitment to a conduct that reflects shared values of respect and accountability.

As one participant explained, *“If you choose to put yourself in the international space, where there are different cultures, different religions, different belief structures, different behaviors, then there’s a part of you that has to acknowledge, okay, I cannot behave the way that I behave every day at home.”* This highlights a shared expectation that athletes participating at mega sporting events should adapt to the ethical and cultural standards of the global sporting community, recognizing that their actions resonate beyond national boundaries and carry symbolic weight.

“Some people use culture as a way to escape accountability for their crimes, especially when it comes to sexual misconduct or sexual assault or even just sexual harassment or anything like that. I think that’s the problem.”

3.4 Theme 4: Harm, impact, and victim-centeredness

This theme centers on the long-term impacts of harm as described by people with lived experience, particularly when perpetrators are allowed to return to elite sport. Participants discussed the enduring psychological and emotional consequences of abuse and emphasised the need for policies that meaningfully reflect the voices and experiences of those directly impacted.

“Ultimately, we need to advocate for a legislation or a policy to be put in place that encompasses the majority. For me, [this] would be taking the majority of the voices of affected individuals into consideration when creating the policy.”

(3) Results

3.4 Theme 4: Harm, impact, and victim-centeredness

A relevant aspect of this theme relates to participants' perspectives on impacted people's engagement in policy work. Regarding eligibility criteria and decision-making which surrounds it; participants agreed that there should be space for their voices to be heard, both when creating these policies and frameworks as well as in the process of enforcing them. As one participant emphasized ☺

"I think if there was an opportunity to give those people [survivors] a way to control the environment in a way that they feel is dignified for them, then you are giving them the power and the dignity back."

Another added ☺

These narratives revealed a strong desire for survivor voices to be meaningfully included in eligibility criteria discussions not merely as symbolic gestures, but as agents of policy and structural change. Participants also challenged procedural approaches that ignore the emotional and moral dimensions of harm, noting that performative actions can sometimes cause added damage instead of ensuring real safety.

"So if there was an opportunity for a workshop on this with the people who are aggrieved to come together and to have a trauma-informed conversation very well scaffolded about how to manage the situation. (...) I think that you're dignifying their voice, you're giving them an opportunity to have their say."

3.5 Theme 5: Emotional and personal responses

This theme captures the broad emotional range of responses expressed by participants throughout the interview process, from anger and outrage, to ambivalence, forgiveness and compassion. Many described feelings of distrust when institutions failed to acknowledge their experiences, and others spoke about the emotional cost of continuing in a sport that they felt failed to protect them.

"It's a lot beyond the disappointment, the anger, the sadness, the frustration with the situation."

One participant underscored the collective dimension of harm in the of absence of institutional response in these cases, highlighting how they would personally feel if a convicted athlete was welcome to play their sport at an international competition ☺

"Sport in a recurring fashion fails to act, fails to protect the people in their duty of care, and fails to care about infringements on human rights."

These reflections highlight how institutional decisions can resonate across the sport community, intensifying feelings of injustice and undermining trust in sport's legitimacy as a space of fairness and accountability.

"My first reaction would be anger. I'm angry not just for the victim herself, but everyone else who has experienced something similar (...). I think it's upsetting just because it sends a clear message that these crimes aren't really taken seriously."

(3) Results

3.5 Theme 5: Emotional and personal responses

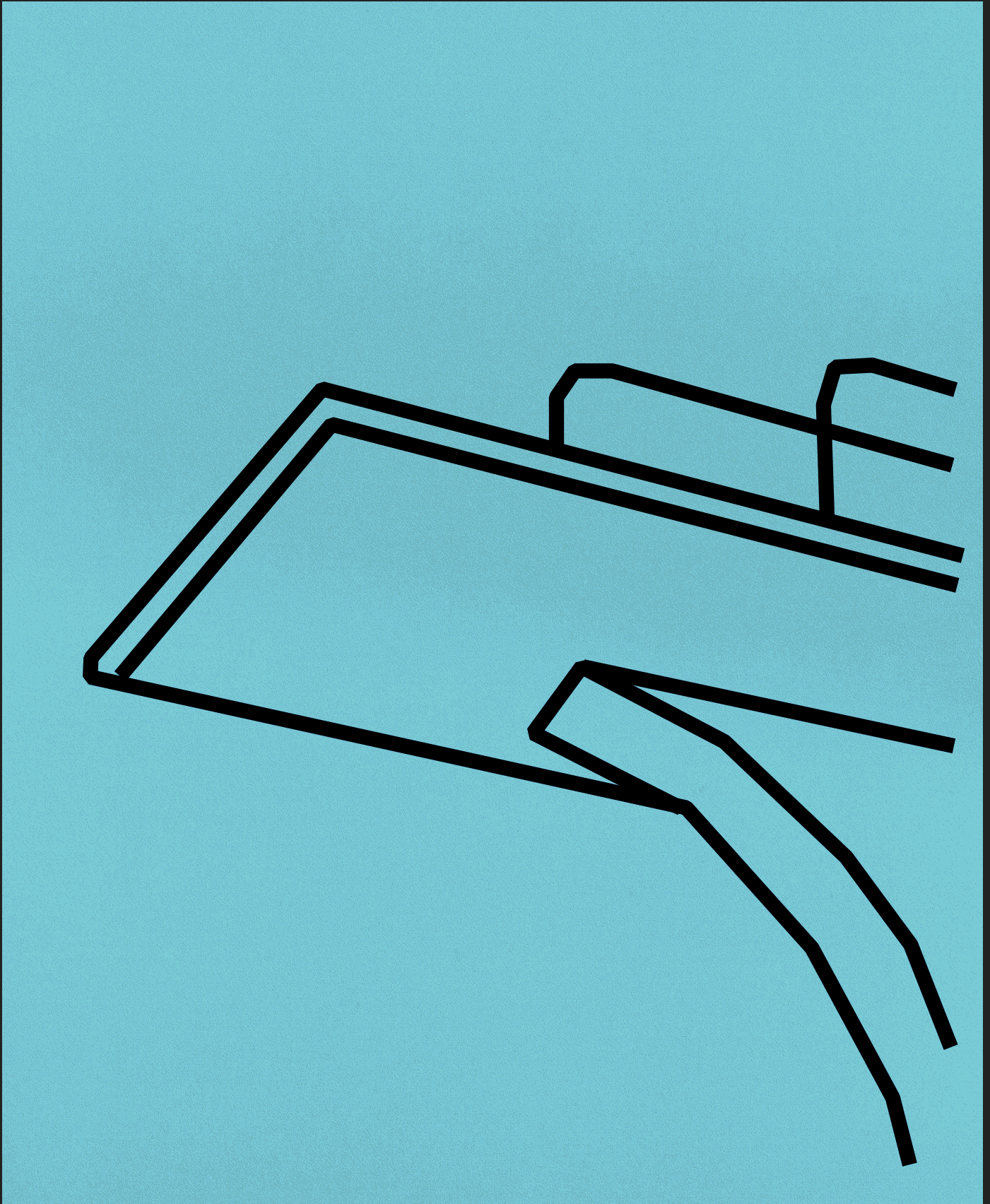
A general sense of empathy towards other victims and potential future victims was observed across interviews. Participants frequently framed their concerns not only in terms of justice for individual survivors but also in relation to the broader responsibility to prevent further harm. As one participant reflected, *“I think for me, my first reaction is always kind of compassion and worry for the victim,”* Another participant extended this concern to the wider sporting community, stating, *“I would be concerned about the athletes’ safety on the other team. And my primary concern would be around the ways to keep them safe from repeated offense.”* These responses suggest that, for many, eligibility decisions carry moral weight not only because of the harm that has happened, but because of what could happen, or rather happen again, if safeguarding is not taken seriously.

While reflecting on how convicted athletes could be reintroduced to sporting facilities and competitions, one participant expressed a personal feeling of unease allocating significant resources to support the reintegration of the perpetrator – especially when a simpler alternative might be to exclude them from participation ☞

This quote above raises the question of why institutional resources – which are often limited – should be directed towards facilitating a return to sport for those with serious convictions, while survivors and other athletes continue to receive little or no support. Ultimately, it draws attention to institutional priorities and the values being privileged in decision-making. When resources favor reintegration over safeguarding, it raises the question:

“So, it’s funny because what I’m advocating for is a whole bunch of resources to allow the perpetrator to come back. Whereas you could spend no resources and just get rid of the perpetrator. So that does feel strange. Why are we giving resources to allow the perpetrator to continue?”

Whose well-being takes precedence in the current system?



Based on findings of this report, it is clear that eligibility decisions involving athletes with convictions for sexual violence are embedded within complex ethical, institutional, and emotional terrains.

The recommendations listed below reflect both the need for further research in this area as well as the need for urgency in addressing this issue through informed actions.

Given that this is a new initiative aimed at bridging the gap between research and advocacy – acknowledging that both are vital and yet operate at different paces – the collaboration between the SRA and Thomas More represented an innovative approach. In research, defining the study's goals from the outset is imperative, namely agreeing if the project aims to generate academic knowledge, influence policy or both. When these roles are clarified early on, each organization can maintain its working approach while contributing to shared objectives. For research purposes, documenting the process through

a reflexive journal can help track how personal positionality shapes data collection and interpretation.

Additionally, given the emotionally-taxing nature of research on sexual violence, this process has reaffirmed the need for mental health support to be integrated into the study design for both participants and research teams. This type of collaboration with mental health professionals can safeguard psychological well-being throughout interview protocols, debriefings, and follow-ups.

4.1 Recommendations

The reports' findings revealed a significant lack of trust in how global sport governing bodies make decisions regarding the participation of athletes convicted of sexual offenses. Though this report does not identify any single policy solution that could address the full complexity of this issue, the study has made clear that more dialogue, research and deliberation are needed to support safer environments at mega sporting events that acknowledge the needs and voices of impacted people.

Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of this subject-matter and the urgent need to review current eligibility criteria before upcoming mega sporting events, we recommend the following actions:

Establishment of a multidisciplinary working group:

Composed of people with lived experience of abuse in sports and other impacted stakeholders, forensic psychologists, civil society organizations, expert researchers, this group should be led by representatives from global sport governing bodies and tasked to review the current eligibility criteria and explore frameworks that can balance the rights of the offender to be reintegrated with the potential impact their participation would have on the broader sports community.

Broader, meaningful and transparent consultation process:

An assesment similar to this study but with a larger group of participants in order to incorporate more diverse voices should be conducted in the development of eligibility policy – including not only people with lived experience of abuse in sport but also advocates, civil society organizations and sports fans. To ensure a safe space and minimize risks of retraumatization, these consultations should follow a trauma-informed approach, as the one outlined in our methodology.

Background checks:

In line with participant feedback, criminal background checks should be established as a standardized and mandatory component of the eligibility screening process for mega sporting events. This could involve either the development of a centralized system or intercommunicating databases in order to ensure consistency and thoroughness in vetting. To ensure their effectiveness and to prevent discriminatory outcomes, they should be supported by clear guidelines for interpretation. However, background checks must be implemented as part of a broader safeguarding framework, not as a stand-alone measure.

Transparent and ongoing communication with wider sports community:

In cases where a convicted athlete is allowed to participate at a mega sporting events, global sport governing bodies should communicate this decision transparently. This should include a clear explanation of the decision-making process, as well as measures put in place to protect all – particularly those at higher risk.

4.2 Limitations

While this report reveals many significant insights from impacted people regarding the participation of athletes with criminal sexual convictions in mega sporting events, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that shaped the scope and findings of this research.

The absence of male or non-binary survivors is a significant limitation, particularly given the different ways in which gendered experiences of harm and disclosure may manifest. This homogeneity may have limited the diversity of viewpoints represented, particularly those from individuals who may not identify as survivors, or who possess different gender identities and lived experiences. While the exclusive survivor focus was intentional and aligned with the project's aims, the lack of gender diversity among participants remains a limitation in understanding the broader range of perspectives around this issue.

Additionally, the recruitment was conducted through the SRA's social media channels. This may have led to a degree of self-selection bias, in which participants most likely to engage were those already aligned with or engaged with advocacy or existing survivor groups. While the number of participants was relatively small, in relation to the size and diversity of the broader survivor community, it remains in line with Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which emphasizes depth and co-construction of meaning over statistical generalization.

Finally, while the study aimed to examine the participation of athletes with sexual offense criminal convictions, the recruitment call defined eligibility for study participants broadly, inviting anyone who had experienced abuse in sport. Even without specifying the type of abuse for the participants' pool, all participants had been impacted by sexual violence, which may have unintentionally narrowed the diversity of perspectives included in the data. Had individuals affected by other forms of abuse (such as physical or psychological violence) been part of the sample, different insights or nuances may have emerged. Moreover, by centering exclusively on criminal convictions, the study did not account for disciplinary sanctions, instances that are arguably more frequent and may represent the majority of cases.

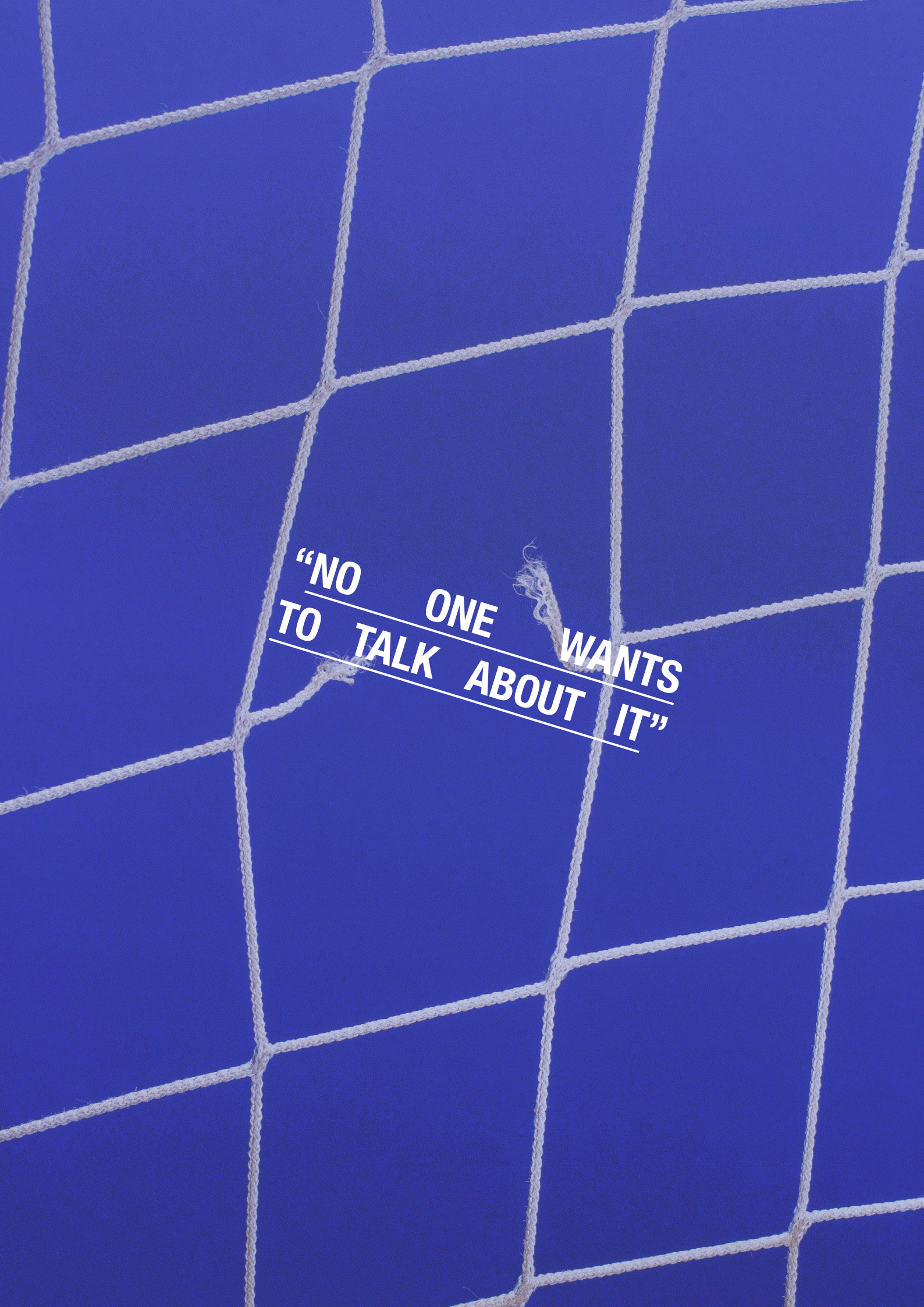
Despite these limitations, this research offers valuable contributions to the emerging discourse on eligibility, ethics, and survivor-centered governance in sport. Future studies would benefit from more diverse sampling, other study methods, cross-sectoral comparisons, and interdisciplinary collaborations to build a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

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