

Imagining Sport in Lithuania: Young Athletes' views on Safe Sport

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Abstract

Sports organisations have a moral and legal duty of care to deliver sport in a safe environment and to promote the welfare of athletes. This right to what has become known as ‘safe sport’ is now firmly established on the global policy agenda. Simultaneously, there is growing understanding of the need to engage with athletes, including those who are children and young people, and involve them in safe sport developments and research to ensure initiatives are effective and (child-) athlete-centred. However, to date most developments and research in this area have excluded athletes. The project presented here, in which researchers delivered a series of workshops on safe sport topics to current youth high-performance athletes in Lithuania, aimed to explore youth athletes’ views on the safe sport issues they consider most relevant to sport in their nation. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were generated through focus group interviews with 17 Lithuanian undergraduate student-athletes (average age 22) from sport-related degrees. Analysis identified doping, overtraining, emotional/psychological abuse, and corruption as the issues the young athletes consider most pertinent to their sporting lives. The project highlights the importance of working with current youth athletes to understand the issues they consider important to their experience to better enable sport policymakers and educators to develop relevant and meaningful safe sport training.

Keywords: safe sport; (child/youth) athlete ‘voice(s)’; athlete rights; athlete participation; Lithuania.

Introduction

Athletes have the right to ‘safe sport’, or “athletic environments that are respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence” (Mountjoy et al., 2016: 1). Similarly, sports organisations have a duty of care to deliver sport in a safe environment (Partington, 2021). Unfortunately, research has identified the existence of various forms of athlete maltreatment, exploitation, and otherwise potentially harmful practices across all levels of sport globally. These include sexual exploitation (Ohlert et al., 2019); psychological/emotionalⁱ abuse (Willson & Kerr, 2022); physical abuse (McPherson et al., 2017); (cyber)bullying (Kavanagh & Jones, 2016; Nery et al., 2019); gender-based violence (Fasting et al., 2015); body shaming (Willson & Kerr, 2022); and numerous other rights violations (see, David, 2005; Kohe & Purdy, 2016).

The responsibilities of sports organisations to protect athletes from harm and to promote a safe sport environment are enshrined in national and international sport and non-sport legislation and policy (e.g., International Olympic Committee, 2021; UN General Assembly, 1989; UN Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). To promote safe sport, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has adopted Consensus Statements on a range of issues, including harassment, abuse, and ‘non-accidental violence’ (Mountjoy et al., 2016), training the elite child athlete (Mountjoy et al., 2008), and the health consequences of saturated sports calendars (Soligard et al., 2016). It also launched the IOC Safe Sport Action Plan to “protect the physical and mental well-being of athletes” (IOC, 2021: 2). Sports organisations have also begun to address athlete welfare issues, although such developments remain largely confined to the Global North (see, Lang, 2021a).

Engaging Young Athletes in Safe Sport Developments

As realisation of the importance of human rights in sport advances, so the agenda in research and practice is slowly shifting away from a narrow focus on protecting (predominantly child) athletes from (mostly sexual) violence and towards a more holistic and inclusive agenda that promotes *all* athletes' human rights (Lang, 2021b). Consequently, interest in involving athletes in decision-making in sport – a key element of human rights and safe sport – is growing.

Yet while there have been significant developments in advancing safe sport, athletes themselves, especially child and youth athletes, have largely been excluded from this. We use the United Nation's definition of children as those aged 17 and under, and young people/youth as those aged between 15 and 24 (UN General Assembly, 2007). To date most safe sport developments – from policy creation to prevention initiatives – have excluded children and young people, indeed athletes of any age (Lang, 2022ab). Children and young people are still largely excluded from *all* decision-making at all levels of governance in sportⁱⁱ due to traditional assumptions that position them as vulnerable, dependent, and inferior in knowledge and competence compared with other (adult) sport stakeholders (Lang, 2010, 2022b).

Given (youth) athletes are the target of most safe sport developments, this is a notable omission. Working with current (child and youth) athletes in research on this topic is crucial to ensure that research and the policy and practice developments recommended as a result are meaningful and relevant to (child and youth) athletes and lead to more athlete-centred sporting environments. The study reported here is among the first on the topic of safe sport to have included young athletes as participants.

Including athletes in research, strategy development, and decision-making is central to democratising sport and realising safe sporting environments. As well as

highlighting the value that an organisation places on (child) athletes, involving (child) athletes can break down power imbalances between (adult) coaches and leaders and (child) athletes; support the early identification of potential concerns, including safeguarding concerns, and develop trust, which can encourage disclosures; and create innovative and more athlete-centred sporting spaces that better meet athletes' needs and encourage long-term healthy sport engagement (Lang, 2022a). This is vital given studies repeatedly indicate a high prevalence of maltreatment in sport (Pankowiak et al., 2022; Vertommen et al., 2016) and that formal routes for disclosing allegations in sport are either rare or not recognised by athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2020; Parent, 2011). As such, engaging athletes in meaningful ways in safe sport developments has significant benefits.

There is also a legal imperative to involve children: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) mandates that children's views be incorporated into decisions on matters that affect them (Lundy, 2007). The project discussed here involved young people as defined by the UN (i.e.: individuals aged 15-24; see, UN General Assembly, 2007). The UN notes that the participation of *all* young people, not only children, in matters that affect them is key to youth well-being and empowerment and to sustainable development (see, UN Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2018):

The capacity for progress of our societies is based, among other elements, on their capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of youth in the building and designing of the future. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilise support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account.

(UN General Assembly, 1996, Article 104)

Consequently, the UN has made effective participation of youth one of its 10 priorities (UN Secretary General, 1996) and advocates the incorporation of contributions from young people into all aspects of life. This project focused on young people and their contributions to safe sport in recognition of this.

Athlete Understandings of ‘Safe Sport’

Given the relativeness novelty of the term ‘safe sport’, it is perhaps unsurprising there is significant “conceptual confusion” around the term (Gurgis et al., 2022a: 2). Of the few studies that have included athletes, Mountjoy et al. (2020) found that most athletes at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games interpreted safe sport as relating to athletes’ physical safety (i.e.: using safe equipment, training injury free) and fair play (i.e.: following the rules). Fewer than 10 percent linked safe sport to a sporting environment that is free from harassment and abuse. This focus on *physical* safety in athletes’ interpretations of safe sport is unsurprising given ‘safe’ is defined as “free from harm or risk ... secure from threat of danger, harm, or loss” (Merriam Webster, 2022). This is not without consequence: while preventing harm and minimising physical risk are important elements of safe sport, athlete participation, sometimes referred to as ‘voice’, is central to the development of safe sporting spaces (Lang, 2022b). A focus on *safe* sport, with its connotations of risk- and harm-prevention, reinforces dominant understandings of (child) athletes as vulnerable and dependent and obfuscates their agentic capacities (Lang, 2022a).

Meanwhile, a small study of seven athletes in Canada that explored the perceptions of ‘equity-deserving athletes’ⁱⁱⁱ on safe sport found this group also considered the term ‘safe sport’ ambiguous but included in its definition the advancement of positive values, such as fairness and inclusion as well as protection from abuse (Gurgis et al.,

2022b). Meanwhile, among other sport stakeholders, understandings of safe sport were fluid, context-specific, and broad (Gurgis et al., 2022a) – participants variously understood the term to include addressing gender and racial inequity; preventing harm caused by training in unsafe conditions; avoiding engagement in unethical practices, such as doping; and creating a positive sporting environment where athletes can develop life skills, such as confidence and leadership.

A concern that arises from this limited work is that the right for athletes to be included in sport governance, or to have a ‘voice’ on and influence developments, did not form part of athletes’ or other stakeholders’ understandings of safe sport. As such, athletes and other sport stakeholders do not appear to recognise athlete participation *as part of* safe sport. This suggests there is a need to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of athlete participation to ensuring safe sport.

It is also clear from existing research that we know little about the safe sport issues that athletes consider important or relevant to their sporting lives. No studies have yet asked athletes this. This is particularly relevant in Lithuania, the setting for the study discussed below, where discussions of safe sport are rare, the development of a safe sport environment is new to the policy agenda, and no research has explored safe sport from the perspectives of (youth) athletes. Understanding what issues are most relevant to the lives of (youth) athletes in a variety of sports across unique national contexts will enable sport policymakers and educators to tailor safe sport training so that it is of relevance to athletes and coaches. Therefore, the project discussed here aimed to explore young Lithuanian athletes’ views on the safe sport issues they consider most relevant to sport in their nation.

Context and Method

Lithuania, both historically and politically, is on the semi-periphery of Western and Eastern contexts with fundamentally distinct philosophical and ideological influences (Blagojević-Hjerson, 2014). The small nation has a strong sporting history with notable regional and international sporting successes across the 20th century as both as independent nation and member of the Soviet sport system. The nation's independence in 1991, and entrance into the European Union (2004) and Eurozone (2015), has subsequently shaped the nation's contemporary sport profile, performance, and growth. With a population of 2,800,900 people, there are more than 1,200 sports clubs in the country and over 77,000 people of all ages regularly participate in sport (ESSA-Sport, 2019). However, Lithuania does not yet have sport welfare enshrined within national sport policy or sport-sector specific safeguarding mechanisms. Furthermore, little is known about maltreatment in sport in Lithuania. A study of peer-on-peer bullying and harassment among sport participants in the country found almost one-third of team sport athletes reported experiencing this form of maltreatment (Vveinhardt & Fominienė, 2022). Meanwhile, recent work on gender-based violence in sport, which included sexual, psychological/emotional, and physical abuse of children and young people, noted that violence in sport is rarely discussed publicly in Lithuania (Mergaert et al., 2016). This has resulted in a 'code of silence' on violence against athletes in the country. This is concerning given a recent retrospective study of the prevalence of violence against children in sport in six European nations found that three-quarters of respondents reported at least one experience of physical, psychological, or sexual violence, or neglect in sport before they reached age 18 (Hartill et al., 2021). Whereas the Lithuanian system may share similarities with other European nations and post-Communist peers, Lithuania provides a unique context to explore deeply entrenched values, ideas and *a priori*

assumptions that underpin how (young) people are acculturated to think, feel, and be in sport, and that may contribute to the nation's sporting identity.

Methods

No research in Lithuania or elsewhere has yet explored youth athletes' views about the safe sport topics they consider most relevant to their sporting lives. Consequently, and informed by the interpretivist paradigm, this study intended to understand the safe sport topics that young Lithuanian athletes consider most pertinent to them. Towards this end, Merriam's (1993) qualitative case study approach was used to enquire about the young peoples' knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of safe sport. This methodology enabled an analysis of a bounded phenomenon that was particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 1998). For example, the approach was particularistic as it was located within the temporal and spatial parameters of the sport system in Lithuania. Furthermore, the analysis was descriptive in that the issues raised in the project emerged from the experiences, thoughts, knowledge, and understandings of the participants about their national sport sector. Finally, this case was heuristic in its contribution to work on athlete welfare and 'safe sport;' advancing understandings of safe sport and the welfare issues that young people (in Lithuania) view as relevant.

After receiving ethical approval from the authors' institution and consent from the partner institution to host the project, 17 Lithuanian undergraduate student-athletes (average age: 22) from sport-related degrees volunteered to participate in one week of interactive workshops covering a range of topics relevant to safe sport. Participants, 10 women and seven men, were involved in various sports at performance level (football, basketball, handball, rowing, kayaking, judo, boxing, volleyball), with some currently or previously competing for (age-grade) national teams.

The full-day workshops took place over five consecutive days at the end of the academic year to prevent disrupting the host university's taught sessions. They covered a range of safe sport issues: violence and maltreatment, early specialisation, eating disorders, sexism, ableism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, use of performance-enhancing substances, match-fixing, and transitions within and out of sport. These topics were selected as they are recognised by the IOC as threats to the integrity of sport and because they were not discussed in-depth in the student-athletes' degree programmes. The workshops were designed and delivered by both authors who have taught and conducted research in this area for two decades. The workshops included time for open whole-group and small-group discussion and directed tasks, with time set aside for the student-athletes to design and prepare a poster on a safe sport topic of their choosing that they later disseminated as part of an awareness-raising campaign in their sports clubs. The posters and findings relating to the youth athletes' experiences of leading their own safe sport campaigns are presented elsewhere (Purdy & Lang, in review). This paper presents data relating to the student-athletes' perceptions of the safe sport issues they consider most relevant to their sporting lives in Lithuania. This is in recognition that current youth athletes' lived experiences of sport in their country, gained through direct involvement rather than through representations constructed by others, can provide sport stakeholders with valuable insights into safe sport that might otherwise be missed.

Aligned with the authors' positioning and interest in understanding the safe sport issues that young people themselves (in Lithuania) considered pertinent to their current sporting lives, and consistent with the methodology (i.e., Merriam's case study (1998)), at the end of the workshops, focus-group interviews with the first author were undertaken with all of the participants. A total of three focus groups were undertaken, each featuring up to eight students. All were audio recorded and lasted around 45 minutes. These

interviews formally explored the relevance and resonance of safe sport issues to the young athletes' sporting lives in Lithuania. Three months later, nine of the student-athletes participated in a follow-up virtual focus group interview. This interview, which was audio recorded and lasted an hour, explored the young people's reflections on their understandings of safe sport since attending the workshops.

It is important to recognise that this paper is written by scholars from Western backgrounds and prevailing research perspectives have tended toward Westernised accounts of safe sport. As such, it was important that the project focused on safe sport issues identified by young people as most relevant to their current experiences in sport instead of what others (i.e.: Western adults/researchers) think are important. Indeed, this is necessary to help tailor safe sport training, especially in contexts such as Lithuania where safe sport is new to the policy and practice agenda. Furthermore, for such a participant-centred project, we were mindful not to impose Western logic, presumptions and a theoretical (over)reading, rather, the exploratory approach was essential. While the authors were not from Lithuania, conception and delivery of this project was informed and enriched by long-term professional and personal engagements within and an understanding of the region and a familiarity with the structure of sport education in higher education (Purdy et al., 2017; Purdy et al., 2018; Purdy et al., 2019). Finally, the authors were not fluent in Lithuanian, so workshops and focus group interviews were conducted in English. English is spoken by around 30 percent of the population, including by around 80 percent of people under 30, having replaced Russian as the second language taught in most schools after Lithuania gained independence from the USSR in 1990 (Statistics Lithuania, 2022). Furthermore, as part of their university degree, students were required to study English. As such, the student-athletes were, to varying degrees, comfortable and competent speaking in English, although online translation tools were

used occasionally to clarify technical terms. The data generated were transcribed and anonymised before analysis. The extracts below use the words exactly as they were spoken by the young people. As some of the student-athletes participated at elite level and may have been the only athlete in their cohort to do so in their sport, the names of sports have been removed to ensure comments cannot be attributed to individuals.

An inductive thematic analysis was undertaken that involved systematic and rigorous interrogation of the interview transcripts. Initially, transcripts were read and meaningful words, phrases, and common features (Tesch, 1990) relating to young Lithuanian athletes' views on the safe sport issues they consider most relevant to sport in their nation. Examples included: doping, overtraining, homophobia, corruption, racism, emotional/psychological abuse, the role of the coach in promoting safe sport, sport federation reactions and barriers to safe sport. These 'meaning units' were organised into wider categories that reflected whether they related to micro or macro level issues. Also of interest were issues that were deemed to not be relevant in sport in Lithuania. These data will be discussed next.

Findings and Discussion

The student-athletes identified a range of safe sport issues that they considered relevant to sport in Lithuania at micro and macro level. At the at the macro level, they were most concerned about corruption within national sport federations and the lack of reporting mechanisms for safe sport concerns. Meanwhile, at the micro level, the student-athletes identified a range of specific maltreatment concerns.

Micro-level Concerns: Doping, Overtraining, and Psychological/Emotional Abuse

At a micro-level, the student-athletes raised doping, overtraining, and psychological/emotional abuse as relatively common and often misunderstood problems in Lithuanian sport. In some instances, the student-athletes had encountered these issues in their sport personally, while in others they had either heard about or witnessed them affecting peer athletes. For example, the issue of doping was raised by several student-athletes. The perception was that federations did little to inform athletes or coaches about doping or regularly test athletes:

There could be some starting point for everybody from federations about general information. [The] problem is that the federation don't ask in their league about doing [tests] or don't even test the players, so they are not obligated to spread ... awareness.

...there was a coach a case, a cycling coach that was involved in doping, where he gave cyclists drugs.

I sometimes feel that it must be more information about doping in Lithuania and that the federation should promote something about it, players don't know where to look about some medication and that they could be banned from sport when we play European cup. Like they know something but not much.

Meanwhile, overtraining was raised as a significant issue by numerous student-athletes. The young athletes complained that many coaches did not differentiate between training loads for adults and children and young people, putting young athletes at risk of overtraining syndrome and injury:

Honestly, I would probably change the way that the coaches – not just the coaches, but the whole training system – affects young athletes. I would change it so it wouldn't be the same for, say, under 17 athletes and the ones that are older – 23 or something. Because ... there are situations like this, where a young athlete is seen as a big prospect. He's, let's say, 16 years old, and he's taken into an adult club already. He plays with adults, he does everything the same: the same training ... he puts in the same amount of work ... so the training becomes too hard for the still child or teenager since his body is still growing. He needs to have specific [age-appropriate] amounts of work.

I think some of them [coaches] are overtraining too much and put pressure [on] children. When they're in young age, they pressure too much.

A lot of the times it's sort of, when you overtrain your young athletes, at first the results seem to be pretty good and everyone's like, "OK, we're doing great, let's continue this sort of approach. ... It's working" and then a year goes by and you see that they're starting to just fall off, have injuries after injuries after injuries.

Some student-athletes argued that coaches did not recognise overtraining syndrome as a problem among athletes of any age and sometimes even encouraged athletes to train against the advice of medical professionals:

My [teammate]... was overtrained. And the doctor said that you need to rest, but our coaches go on, 'It's OK. It's OK to go on' ... Our coach had said... 'it's OK, [take some] vitamins... take a rest, maybe two days of rest and then go on again.'

Training regimes need to account for skeletal and muscle maturity levels and the athlete's specific developmental and health requirements. Forced overtraining that leads to (risk

of) injury and being forced or encouraged to train while injured or without sufficient rest constitute forms of physical abuse in sports contexts (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Yet these are among the least well recognised forms of abusive behaviour in sport, despite their commonness; more than one-third of respondents in one Australian study reported experiencing overtraining or being made to train through an injury (McPherson et al., 2017). Such behaviours are often normalised in sports cultures that valorise ‘sacrifice’ and physical and mental toughness as essential attributes for medal success (McPherson et al., 2017). This results in organisational and individual tolerance for these behaviours and an unwillingness among athletes to disclose injuries or fatigue for fear of being seen as ‘weak’, ‘uncommitted’, or at risk of being dropped from the team. Furthermore, a sports system that rewards coaches and federations, financially and reputationally, for producing winning athletes is likely to encourage a culture that tolerates physically abusive behaviours and silences athletes.

Another key safe sport issue considered most relevant to the student-athletes was psychological/emotional abuse. Many of the student-athletes reported experiencing psychologically/emotionally abusive behaviours from their coaches and argued this form of abuse was common in sport in Lithuania, even at youth levels:

... when you're a young age and the coaches ... they don't understand psychology, and a lot of players that I know have a lot of problems because of the coach, because of the things they said.

... many [sport] coaches I know, they are old, and they are all old fashioned so they raise their voice very often. I can even say that it is the way of teaching for them and then they don't know anything else that could work.

There was a player and she was very good but she didn't have much balance ... she was really strong, really good physical[ly] ... our coach took her out because she [dropped the ball] ... and she [the coach] was bullying her. She was bullying her. She was shouting at her, "you are rubbish, we don't need you". ... I knew her and knew it made her upset. ... [that's] normal.

Part of the problem, they suggested, was that coaches failed to recognise the negative impact of psychological/emotional abuse on athletes:

I think the really important thing is that not a lot of coaches understand emotional abuse, because a lot of them think, "oh, it's just your head, fix everything with your head", but that doesn't work that way. I think that's the main problem.

That many of the athletes in this study had either experienced or witnessed psychological/emotional abuse is unsurprising; repeated studies have found this form of abuse is by far the most prevalent in sport (Hartill et al., 2021; Vertommen et al., 2016). Yet it often goes unreported (Hartill & Lang, 2018) because psychological/emotional abusive behaviours are frequently normalised in sport. Such behaviours are insidious but often trivialised as 'banter' and inconsequential and/or legitimised as a necessary tactic to develop mentally tough athletes (Jacobs et al., 2017; Solstad & Stranbu, 2019). This may explain why the student-athletes believed coaches did not take this abuse seriously.

For the student-athletes, the commonplaceness in their sporting lives of these behaviours had the effect of making behaviours that constitute abuse seem normal. However, attending the safe sport workshops led some of the student-athletes to question their treatment in sport for the first time, sparking acknowledgement that they had internalised psychologically/emotionally abusive behaviours as acceptable and leading them to re-think their own coaching behaviours and those of the coaches who train them:

Before this programme, I didn't understand how serious it is, and at some points, I was like, hmm, maybe I was abused that way? ... Maybe that kid was abused that way? And because I am coaching myself little kids, I now understand that I shouldn't be as strict to them sometimes as I am, so this was a big impact on me especially, and I think when I come back to [my city], I will try my best maybe to educate my coaches so that we as a team can do better.

[In future], I would like to be the face of some kind of good message, spread the awareness, to do some campaign work and bring the athletes together for good cause.

The first participant's lack of recognition of behaviours in sport that constitute maltreatment is unsurprising as many abusive practices and behaviours are structurally and culturally embedded in sport, rationalised as not only leading to improved performance but *necessary* for this (Lang, 2021c). Furthermore, coaches, athletes, and other stakeholders may be desensitised to and so not recognise these behaviours as problematic (Jacobs et al., 2017). This was highlighted by another participant: "We can't change something like abuse because we don't see it as an abuse". Similarly, another commented:

Basically, in our sport, we don't have so much abuse or we just don't see it as abuse, because we're like – we should think like, 'we are a man, like we are adults, we must take this as a man, you know, be strong, don't think about it, do everything we can'".

These comments also echo long-standing criticisms of sport as a site for the (re)production of orthodox and dominant forms of masculinity (Anderson, 2005) – a locus characterised by hyper-competitiveness (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), aggressive physical

expression (Kreager, 2007), misogyny (Schacht, 1996), and homophobic attitudes (Krane, 1996).

Macro-level Concerns: Corruption

At the macro level, the student-athletes considered corruption to be a significant problem within sport federations in Lithuania. Specifically, several young athletes referred to peers who had received preferential treatment, including being selected for national teams and being refused access to discuss welfare concerns with federation staff, based on whether they were known personally to senior federation members:

I had a coach ... he is head of the under-21 players national team. [They] are not good as ours some of the players, so he said this name, that name, [but] the higher-ups from the federation said, 'we don't know him'. The coach said he was fighting for our teammates [to get a place on the national team] ... [on the] national team usually you see players who don't play in the league, and [yet] they get invited to the national team! And they play badly. But usually some of the players have a lot of money, and that's why they get to play in the national team.

I think in [sport] or [sport] there are some problems in federations. For example, if the federation president does not like me, he will say, "oh, I don't care about her. ... Oh, go away. I won't do anything."

Others were concerned that the financial and reputational rewards federations and coaches receive when athletes in their sport have high-level success raised the potential for fraud and corruption, with one noting that, "maybe the money goes not where it should go". This caused mistrust of national sport federations and coaches among the student-athletes and led to the belief that those working for federations did not care about athletes:

So I think first, when we don't know what's the organisation, who are the people working there, there is no trust, but if they prove you that it's a trust thing – they respect you, they show you – I think it will build the community.

... they have never shown that they care. They *should* show that they care.

The student-athletes believed many of the abuses perpetrated by coaches were the result of the funding system for coaches. Many nations rely on volunteer coaches, however in Lithuania, the majority of coaches are paid, with bonuses awarded for results. This was viewed as promoting poor practice and hindering the fostering and maintenance of a safe sport ethos. Student-athletes stated:

I think it's a big issue in Lithuania, that you have sports schools. Sports schools depend on the coach's salary. So, the salary is from the results, not how many kids you have, not how many hours you train. ... If you don't have results, there is less salary.

... especially for children, because when we have games or competitions, after those competitions, our coaches get money for us, for our results.

Consequently, for athletes in such this system: "It all stands up to better results, better pay, and they don't care about you". This criticism extended to the sports federations who were also perceived to be focused on finances, often at the expense of the health and well-being of athletes. For example:

All [the federations] think [about] is money. They don't care about the well-being of athletes. I think they're: "OK, so he will win that and that, and then we will get money," but they don't care how much they have to go through to get that result. So that's really sad that it's happening in our country.

Performance management funding is common in sport globally. However, the pay-for-performance model, whereby federations and coaches are financially rewarded for the achievements of ‘their’ athletes, risks encouraging a win-at-all-costs culture that prioritises athlete success over welfare, putting athletes at risk of harm, positioning them as disposable, and concealing maltreatment (see, Whyte, 2022). For the young athletes here, the money-for-medals system in Lithuania encouraged maltreatment and favouritism and disincentivised coaches and federations from prioritising athlete welfare. Other countries with similar funding systems are currently grappling with how to tackle this (see, Grey-Thompson, 2017; Johannsen, 2021). What is clear is that the young athletes here perceived the current funding system in Lithuania as open to misuse and not working in their best interests. For athletes to develop a trusting professional relationship with a coach and have confidence in their sporting system, it is essential that their physical and mental well-being take precedence and that athletes recognise that sports stakeholders take this seriously. Rewarding coaches and federations for athletic success while marginalising athlete welfare and ignoring athletes’ concerns is unlikely to promote safe, fair, and transparent sporting cultures.

Macro-level Concerns: The Lack of Mechanisms for Reporting Safe Sport

Another macro-level concern raised by the student-athletes was the lack of reporting routes for athletes if they had a safe sport concern:

We don’t have in Lithuania anything directly we can go to, so a lot of athlete[s] think, “maybe I should go there, maybe there, maybe they will help”. Because in Lithuania, this was not like a problem. No one thought this was a problem, but I think it’s a big, big problem that needs to be solved.

... there's nothing like that that you can, "oh, I know where to go directly".

[There's] probably no one [to report to] because there is no such a place where they can tell that they have problems.

The young athletes identified the police and the Lithuanian Olympic Committee as potential places where safe sport concerns could be reported. However, some argued for the creation of an independent body where concerns could be reported:

The most important thing would be to create this space, a community, where somebody could have their voice, with[out] their name on it.... Because right now, [they] ... are just scared to give their voice.

This recognition of a 'culture of fear' regarding reporting maltreatment is consistent with previous research that has focused on disclosures of abuse in sport. Although the work focused exclusively on sexual abuse concerns, Parent (2011) identified several obstacles that contributed towards a culture of inaction and silence that hindered disclosures. These included sport stakeholders (i.e.: administrators, coaches, athletes) minimising and trivialising the experiences of those affected, 'victim' blaming, and challenging the credibility of those who report (Parent, 2011). Furthermore, those affected by abuse in sport often feel that reporting their experiences will not accomplish anything and are concerned about retaliation or future re-victimisation (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Consequently, a culture of inaction and silence often prevails.

Less Relevant Concerns: Racism, Homophobia and Transphobia

Meanwhile, the young athletes identified racism and the inclusion of transgender athletes less pertinent issues to sport in their country:

About transgender, we have one girl who became a boy. In the school the director of the school let her/him play with the boys.

If [racism or trans/homophobia are] happening, it's happening in 2 percent of [the] population. It's good to learn things that happen in the world, and we don't have all of that happening in Lithuania, but it's good to know that it is happening – not good to know, but it's *essential* to know.

The student-athletes' beliefs that racism and trans exclusion are less relevant to sport in their country may result from the lack of ethnic diversity and LGBTQ+ acceptance in Lithuania. Lithuania is more homogeneous than other Baltic countries (Statistics Lithuania, 2021). While the 2005 Law on Equal Treatment addresses discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the workplace, education, and in respect of access to goods and services, Lithuania remains the only Baltic country not to recognise same-sex relationships (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). Research also suggests that while public attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community have improved in recent years, violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals remain common (National LGBT Rights Organisation, 2019).

Meanwhile, recognition of racism is limited in Lithuania. Kleinaityte (2017) argues that racism, and particularly Afropobia^{iv}, is common in Lithuania but because most of the population is White, it is often rendered invisible and its prevalence underestimated. While still an ethnically homogenous country, over the past decade Lithuanian society has become increasingly diverse (Statistics Lithuania, 2021). As such, it is

important that sports organisations and higher education institutions that train sports coaches effectively prepare practitioners for a more diverse and inclusive sporting community. This would necessitate interrogations of social practices in sport and how they create or maintain inequalities, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability.

Conclusion

‘Safe sport’ is now firmly established on the global policy and agenda. Yet research that explores youth athletes’ views on the safe sport issues they consider most relevant to them is rare. Equally, studies on the topic of safe sport in Lithuania, where discussions of safe sport are absent and the development of a safe sport environment is new to the policy agenda, are lacking. This study aimed to fill these gaps by exploring young Lithuanian athletes’ views on the safe sport issues they consider most pertinent to sport in their country. Such understandings are important to help sport policymakers and educators understand the issues affecting youth athletes and tailor safe sport training to the variety of sports across unique national contexts at hand.

Drawing on their experiences of involvement in performance sport, the young athletes in this study identified doping, overtraining, psychological/emotional abuse, and corruption as the safe sport issues most pertinent to their sporting lives. Compared with previous research that found most athletes understand the term ‘safe sport’ to predominantly relate to physical safety (Mountjoy et al., 2020; Gurgis et al., 2022b), our findings suggest young athletes are aware of a wider range of issues that impact the integrity of sport in their country. As such, we recommend that training and awareness-raising initiatives in safe sport in Lithuania, which are now beginning to emerge, first focus on the topics identified by the athletes in this study. This will ensure initiatives are

relevant to the sporting lives of young people in the country, thereby helping increase ownership of and interest in the topic before other issues that are believed to be less widespread in sport in the country are tackled.

In addition, following the young athletes' comments about the lack of mechanisms for reporting safe sport concerns, we recommend that national sport federations in the country build links with established violence and abuse advocacy groups (i.e.: Vaiku Linija (Child Line), the Lithuanian Children's Foundation) and initiate campaigns in sports contexts to raise awareness of these. Sport funders, the Lithuanian Olympic Committee, and national sport federations in the country should also invest in the development of education and support resources for athletes in the Lithuanian language and better promote existing English-language resources, such as the IOC Safe Sport Action Plan toolkit, and Athlete365 resources (see, IOC, 2021, 2022). Given the relative newness of this topic to the sport agenda in Lithuania, research that monitors and evaluates these developments to discern their efficacy (or not) is also recommended. Finally, as coaches in Lithuania must complete a university degree to qualify as a coach, sports universities should include safe sport developments and athlete welfare issues as mandatory elements of their curricula.

While this project took place in Lithuania, it provides useful insights for the development of safe sport research and practice beyond the country. In terms of research in safe sport, this study was one of the first to recognise the contributions of children and young people to developing safe sport. Future work in Lithuania and beyond must engage with athletes, including children and young people, to ensure their voices are heard and the insights they have are incorporated into future safe sport developments. Sport stakeholders also need to be educated about the importance and benefits of athlete participation to safe sport strategies as this is too often overlooked (Lang, 2022b). Doing

so will ensure children and young people's human rights are implemented, begin to break down power imbalances between (adult) coaches and leaders and (child/youth) athletes, and help create more athlete-centred sporting spaces (Lang, 2022a).

Children and young people are marginalised populations in safe sport research (and sports research more broadly). Involving children and young people as research participants often raises particular ethical concerns as they are automatically assumed to be 'vulnerable' (Hoonaard, 2018). While we acknowledge this may be the case, we also note that vulnerability can encapsulate a wide range of people, topics, and situations. We support Iphofen's (2009, p. 109) view that, "Ethical concerns arise when routine exclusion [from research] perpetuates or exacerbates an individual's or group's lowered status in society". As such, it can be unethical *not* to include children and young people as research participants, especially when the topic of study is likely to impact their lives, as is the case with research on safe sport issues. Comprehensive ethical protocols must be in place for all research, regardless of the age of the participants and the perceived sensitivity of the topic, and we direct readers to the literature on research on 'sensitive' topics and with 'vulnerable' groups for how to ethically engage children to ensure their views are heard in safe sport research (i.e.: Lee & Renzetti, 1990; Iphofen, 2009; Powell et al., 2011; Kennan & Dolan, 2017; Hoonaard, 2018).

More research is also needed that explores other athletes' perspectives on the safe sport issues most relevant to their lives, particularly those competing at lower levels of sport, to better understand the safe sport issues that affect them and to harness their perspectives on how sport can better protect them and promote their rights.

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- ⁱ These terms are often used interchangeably, however there are distinctions, namely that emotional abuse causes impairment to the emotions and to emotional life and development, whereas psychological abuse has impacts beyond only the emotions, such as to cognitive function, memory etc. (O'Hagan, 1995).
- ⁱⁱ An exception is the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation for Sports' policy of integrating young athletes' perspectives into policymaking and practice, which began in the 1990s. It was created out of concern that young people were leaving sport due to increasing levels of adult control (see, Holmen Waldahl & Skille, 2016). The policy's focus was not safe sport specifically, however, and little is known about it as there are no publications in English.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Defined as under-represented groups comprising "Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, women, People with (dis)abilities, and LGBTQ people" (Gurgis et al., 2022a).
- ^{iv} The European Network Against Racism (2022) defines Afrophobia as racism "that refers to any act of violence and discrimination including racist speech, fuelled by historical abuses and negative stereotyping, and leading to the exclusion and dehumanisation of people of African decent".