

From the Sidelines
to the Playing Field

LGBTQI Youth Perspectives on Inclusion
in School and Community Sport



IGLYO

The International (LGBTQI)
Youth & Student Organisation

With the support of



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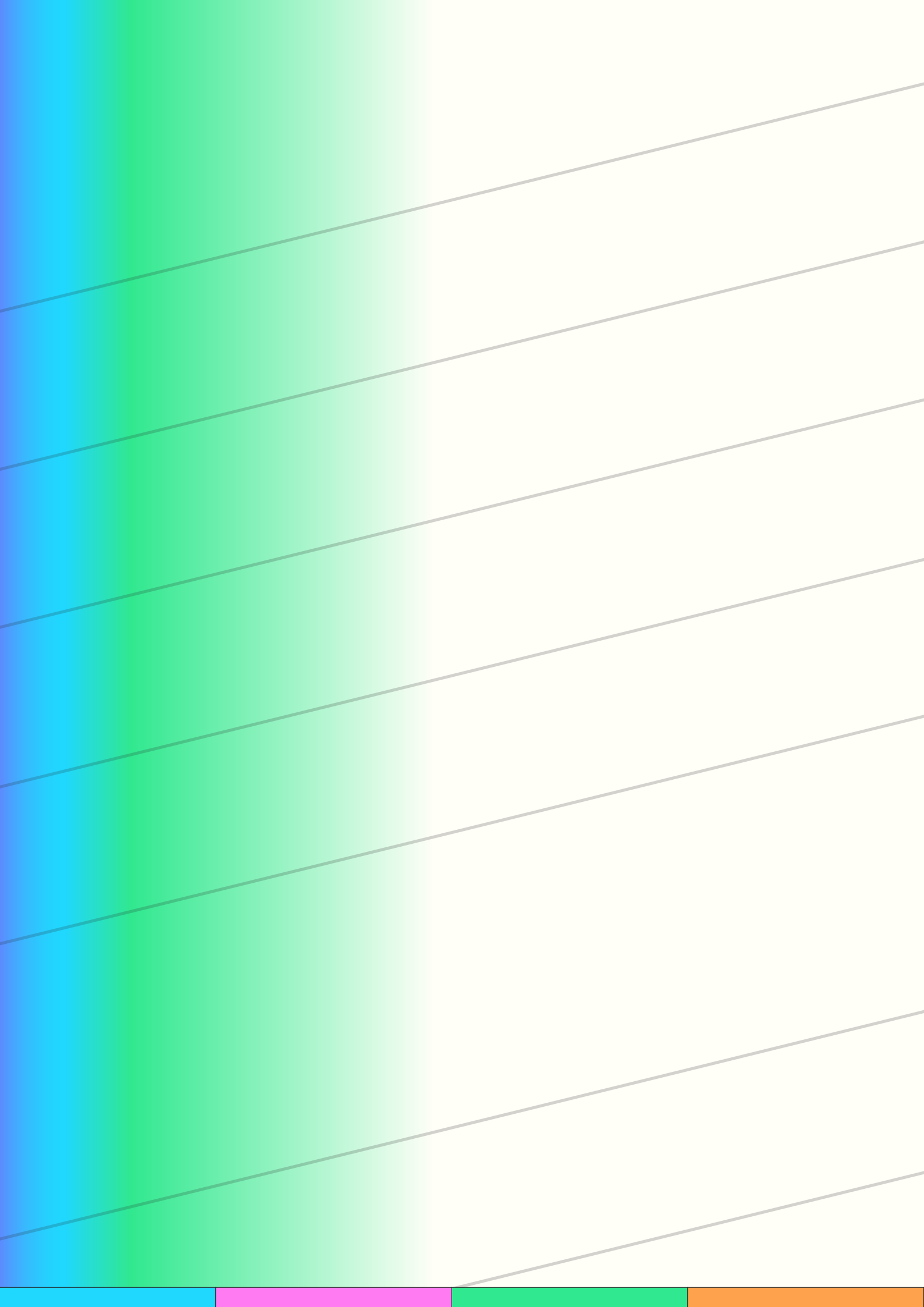


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From the Sidelines to the Playing Field:

*LGBTQI Youth
Perspectives
on Inclusion in School
and Community Sport*



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About IGLYO

IGLYO — The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organisation is the world's largest network dedicated to LGBTQI young people and their rights. We represent the voice of over 135 Member Organisations in more than 40 countries across the European region.

We advance the rights of LGBTQI young people, advocate for their equality and inclusion, empower their voices, and connect them across borders through international events, capacity-building training, thematic research, advocacy, awareness-raising campaigns, network building, regranting, and intersectional community dialogues.

IGLYO asbl is registered as a non-governmental organisation in Belgium (No. d'entreprise: 0808808665).

About the author

Simon Carpentier (he/him) specialises in gender equality, inclusion and non-discrimination, with over five years of experience conducting policy-oriented research within international organisations and EU institutions. His work examines how structural inequalities shape the experiences of diverse groups across Europe, with the aim of generating knowledge that drives meaningful action and change.

Simon found this project particularly meaningful because it was designed to centre the voices of LGBTQI youth – perspectives too often overlooked in sports policy, research and practice. What motivated him most was the opportunity to highlight these lived experiences and

translate them into evidence-based recommendations, helping to make sport more inclusive, safe and welcoming for all LGBTQI youth.

His motivation is also deeply personal. As a gay cisgender man who has long been involved in sport, Simon has experienced both the powerful sense of community it can foster and the exclusion that LGBTQI youth too often face. He now also coaches a children's football team, seeking to contribute on the ground to making sport more inclusive and welcoming for all. These experiences, while reflecting only one strand of a much broader spectrum, reinforce his commitment to ensuring that every young person can benefit equally from the positive impact of sport.



Foreword

Sport should be a playing field for everyone, and not a sideline. It's where we can explore what our bodies can do, build friendships and confidence, and develop a sense of community and belonging. For LGBTQI youth, though, sport can be a mixed experience. It can offer joy, confidence, and connection—but it can also be a place where bullying, rigid gender rules, or exclusion push them to the sidelines. Many LGBTQI young people are pushed aside from playing sports, thinking that it is something that is not meant for them.

This report grew out of the commitment to ensure that sport remains a space where the human rights of every young person—regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics—are fully respected. After publishing the study *Trans, Gender-diverse and Intersex Youth in Sports* in 2024, we saw a clear gap: while elite and professional sport often makes headlines, the everyday sports spaces that most young people encounter—school gyms, local clubs, community fields—are rarely in the spotlight. Yet these are the spaces where inclusion matters most. They're where lifelong habits are formed and where young LGBTQI people either feel welcomed or turned away.

To bring these realities forward, we commissioned this study to speak directly with LGBTQI youth across Europe and key stakeholders in this field. Their stories show both the barriers and the possibilities. Binary gender rules, unsafe changing rooms, and a lack of trained staff still keep too many young people from playing the sports they love. But we also heard about moments of care, creativity, and solidarity—coaches who listen,

teammates who stand up for each other, and clubs that make space for everyone.

The message is clear: change is possible, and it starts with action. Policies must explicitly protect LGBTQI youth. Eligibility rules need to be fair and inclusive. Schools, clubs, and federations must provide safe facilities, proper training, and real accountability. And while LGBTQI-specific spaces can be lifesaving, mainstream sport must also transform so that inclusion is the rule, not the exception. Most importantly, LGBTQI young people themselves are already leading the way. They are founding clubs, supporting their peers, and challenging outdated norms. This report shares their voices and offers concrete steps for policymakers, schools, sports organisations, and youth groups to follow their lead.

IGLYO is proud to present this report as a call to action. Together, we can make sure that every young person has the chance to play, compete, and thrive, and be celebrated for who they are.

Rú Ávila Rodríguez (they/them)

Deputy Executive Director
& Policy and Research Manager



We warmly thank the following organisations for their valuable input and collaboration during the stakeholder consultation process:

- ATLASZ SPORTEGYESÜLET (ATLASZ SPORT)
- EGLSF (EUROPEAN GAY & LESBIAN SPORT FEDERATION)
- ENGSO YOUTH (THE INDEPENDENT YOUTH BODY OF ENGSO, THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION FOR GRASSROOTS SPORT)
- FÉDÉRATION SPORTIVE LGBT+
- LEAP SPORTS SCOTLAND (LEADERSHIP, EQUALITY AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS FOR LGBTI PEOPLE IN SCOTLAND)
- OII EUROPE (ORGANISATION INTERSEX INTERNATIONAL EUROPE)
- OUT IN SLOVENIJA
- SEITENWECHSEL – SPORTVEREIN FÜR FRAULESBENTRANSINTER UND MÄDCHEN* E.V. (SEITENWECHSEL)
- TGEU (TRANSGENDER EUROPE)

Their contributions strengthened every stage of this project and helped ensure the realities of school and community sport were captured with care and precision.

Acknowledgements

IGLYO would like to express its heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to making this study on LGBTQI youth inclusion in sport possible. This project is the result of the time, effort, expertise, and solidarity of many individuals, organisations and institutions. While it is not possible to name everyone, we wish to extend special thanks to the following:

Participants

This study would not exist without the courage and generosity of the young people who shared their stories. Across Europe, LGBTQI youth took part in interviews, offering their time and their lived experiences to help us understand how sport can become a place of both belonging and inclusion. We are deeply grateful for their generosity in reflecting with us on how to create a safer and more supportive environment in sports for everyone.

Partners and sport experts

We warmly thank the European partners and experts (see box below) who advised us throughout the process, provided feedback on the research design, and helped us reach participants. Their guidance strengthened every stage of the project and ensured that the realities of school and community sport were captured with care and precision.

IGLYO Member Organisations and country contacts

Many IGLYO member organisations and local activists helped with outreach and dissemination. Their commitment to LGBTQI youth rights and their local knowledge made it possible to gather insights from diverse countries and communities. Without their dedication, this study could not have achieved such breadth or depth.

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Author of this report

We extend our deepest gratitude to Simon Carpentier, whose dedication has been central to every stage of this project. Simon not only drafted this report but also conducted the interviews, carried out the analysis, liaised with stakeholders and coordinated closely with the IGLYO team. His exceptional care, sensitivity and unwavering commitment to LGBTQI inclusion in sports shine through in both the research process and the writing. Thanks to his thoughtful approach, the voices of young people are represented with accuracy and respect, making this report a powerful tool for change.

To everyone—participants, partners, member organisations, funders, and colleagues—who helped bring this study to life: thank you. Your collective effort moves us closer to a future where sport truly belongs to every young person, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics.



Introduction

“Don’t blame yourself. Because your identity isn’t the barrier – the system is.”

Trans man, bisexual, queer, 22, Türkiye

1 → Bailey, R. (2006). Physical education and sports in schools: A review of benefits and outcomes. *Journal of School Health*, 76(8), 397-401

2 → Denison, E., Bevan, N., & Jeanes, R. (2021). Reviewing evidence of LG-BTQ+ discrimination and exclusion in sport.

3 → Clark & Kosciw (2021)

4 → The Trevor Project. (2020). *LGBTQ Youth Sports Participation: Research Brief*.

5 → Greenspan, S. B., Whitcomb, S., & Griffith, C. (2019). Promoting affirming school athletics for LGBTQ youth through professional development. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 29(1), 68-88.

6 → Doull, M., Watson, R. J., Smith, A., Homma, Y., & Saewyc, E. (2018). Are we levelling the playing field? Trends and disparities in sports participation among sexual minority youth in Canada. *Journal of Sport and Health Science*, 7(2), 218-226.

7 → Devis-Devis, J., Pereira-García, S., López-Cañada, E., Pérez-Samaniego, V. & Fuentes-Miguel, J. (2017). Looking back into trans persons’ experiences in heteronormative secondary physical education contexts. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*.

8 → Holzer, L. (2024). *Trans, Gender-Diverse and Intersex Youth in Sports*. Brussels: IGLYO.

9 → Menzel, T., Braumüller, B., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2019). *The Relevance of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Sport in Europe: Findings from the Outsport Survey*. Cologne: German Sport University Cologne.

10 → OII Europe (2024). *Intersex and Sports*.

Sport plays a vital role in young people’s development, fostering health, confidence, teamwork and belonging¹. Because it is woven into schools and community life, sport often becomes one of the first spaces where LGBTQI youth navigate recognition and identity. In these settings, sport can be a powerful source of affirmation and connection, offering opportunities to build friendships, test skills and develop a sense of community. At the same time, it can also become a site of exclusion when participation is undermined by stigma or unsafe environments. In this scenario, spaces that should nurture growth instead (re)produce homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and intersexphobia, limiting young people’s participation and well-being². Because sport so strongly influences how young people experience acceptance or exclusion, it is a vital focus for improving the lives of LGBTQI youth.

These dynamics are particularly visible in schools, where most young people first encounter organised sport. LGBTQI students are significantly less likely than their peers to participate in interscholastic or extracurricular sports, and many avoid Physical Education (PE) classes, athletic fields and locker rooms due to harassment or fear of being outed³. Verbal, physical and social bullying is widespread, while staff often fail to intervene⁴. PE teachers and

coaches frequently lack the knowledge or willingness to address LGBTQI issues, and some actively reinforce exclusionary norms⁵. These experiences leave long-term scars, such as on mental health and self-esteem, discouraging many LGBTQI youth from returning to sport later in life⁶. Exclusion is also embedded at a structural level, through the very rules that govern access to sport. From schools to community clubs, binary and heteronormative frameworks remain the default, channelling young people into categories that misrecognise or invalidate their different ways of being⁷. Eligibility rules frequently impose medicalised criteria such as legal gender recognition, hormone suppression or medical documentation – requirements that are coercive, inaccessible or inappropriate for minors⁸. Although designed for elite adult competition, these rules often extend into grassroots youth sport and even into PE classes, where schools and schools look to federations for guidance⁹. Trans and intersex youth face particular risks of exposure or disqualification under such regulations, echoing what research identifies as broader histories of pathologisation and medical scrutiny¹⁰. Beyond formal rules, cultural and social norms further reinforce exclusion. Sport operates as a disciplinary arena where

young people are taught how they should look, move and behave. Through coaching practices, peer interactions and the traditions of particular disciplines, they learn which forms of gender expression are considered legitimate. Football, basketball and rugby are framed as “masculine,” while dance and gymnastics are coded as “feminine.” In these settings, young people come under pressure to regulate their bodies, clothing, voices and behaviour to fit dominant gender norms or face ridicule, bullying and exclusion¹¹. LGBTQI young people are frequently subjected to aggressive language and microaggressions that pressure them back into conformity. Those who do not fit binary categories, including non-binary youth, young people in transition or those not yet out as trans, are left without a clear place, excluded by both peers and institutions¹².

Trans, including non-binary, and intersex youth face particularly acute challenges in sport. Trans girls and women are often excluded from girls’ and women’s teams on unfounded claims about fairness or safety, while trans boys and men may be barred from boys’ and men’s teams under paternalistic notions that they are too vulnerable to cope with the physical demands or risks of play¹³. Non-binary youth are routinely left without a category in which to participate¹⁴. Intersex youth, meanwhile, confront both the risk of exposure in changing rooms and restrictive eligibility rules, which research identifies as echoing broader violations of bodily autonomy¹⁵. For all, the psychological toll is severe: exclusion from sport is consistently linked to heightened anxiety, depression and diminished self-esteem¹⁶. These barriers are further compounded by intersecting factors such as race, disability, socioeconomic background and migration status¹⁷.

Against this backdrop, IGLYO recognises sport as a critical area where intervention is needed. In 2024, it published a report on Trans, Gender-diverse and Intersex

Youth in Sports¹⁸, highlighting urgent gaps in policies and practices. The report also made clear that more was needed: the voices of young people themselves were still missing from the picture. To address this, IGLYO launched a qualitative study to document LGBTQI young people’s lived experiences in school and community-based sports. By placing their perspectives at the centre through 27 in-depth interviews, complemented by nine stakeholder consultations, the study aims not only to deepen understanding of the situation, but also to ensure that their realities shape future policy and advocacy.

The report is organised into three chapters. The first chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted for the study, combining interviews with LGBTQI youth with consultations with key stakeholders. The second chapter presents the main findings, structured around three themes: access and participation, safety and exclusion, and affirmation and visibility. Each chapter integrates examples of promising practices that can inform action at European, national and local levels. The third and final chapter sets out concrete recommendations for policymakers, sport institutions, educational actors and youth organisations.

11 → Greenspan, S. B., Griffith, C., Hayes, C. R., & Murtagh, E. F. (2019). LGBTQ+ and ally youths’ school athletics perspectives: a mixed-method analysis. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 16(4), 361-379.

12 → Phipps, C. (2019). Thinking beyond the binary: Barriers to trans* participation in university sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 54(2), 151-165.

13 → Holzer (2024).

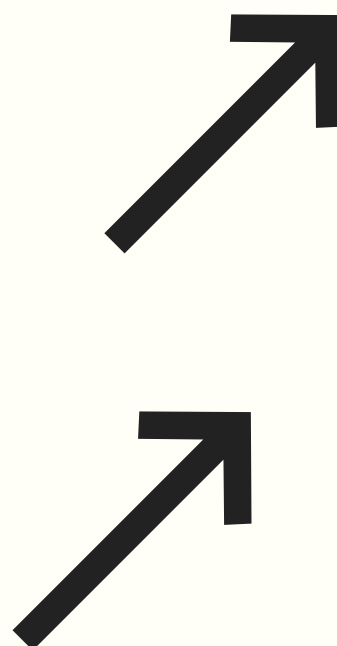
14 → Phipps (2019).

15 → Oll Europe (2024).

16 → Rovira-Font, M., & Vilanova-Soler, A. (2022). LGBTQIA+, mental health and the sporting context: A systematic review. *Apunts Educación Física y Deportes*, 147, 1-16.

17 → Rovira-Font, M., & Vilanova-Soler, A. (2022). LGBTQIA+, mental health and the sporting context: A systematic review.

18 → Holzer (2024).





Methodology

This study combined in-depth interviews with LGBTQI youth, stakeholder consultations and desk research. Youth voices formed the core of the analysis, while stakeholder perspectives and existing evidence added institutional and policy context.

How were the interviews and consultations designed?

For youth interviews, an in-depth qualitative approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of young LGBTQI people in sports. The interview guide, informed by the desk research and literature review, focused on access and participation, safety and exclusion, and affirmation and visibility. It also invited participants to share examples of good practice and reflections on what inclusive sport looks like. Questions were open-ended to allow participants to narrate experiences in their own words.

For stakeholder consultations, a semi-structured interview format was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to explore context-specific practices, challenges and opportunities. The interview guide emphasised the policy and institutional context, situating young people's lived experiences alongside organisational challenges, examples of good practice and recommendations for improving inclusion in sport.

Who was eligible to participate?

Youth participants were aged 18-30, self-identified as LGBTQI, resided in a Council of Europe Member State, and had current or recent (within three years) sport experience in either school-based settings

(e.g. PE, after-school teams, university clubs) or community-based settings (e.g. youth clubs, local sport groups).

Stakeholders were engaged in work related to LGBTQI rights, youth inclusion, and/or inclusive sports at the local, national and regional levels. They were based in, or had work focused on, the Council of Europe region or at least one Council of Europe Member State. Priority was given to stakeholders with direct experience in school- or community-based sport settings.

Table 1. Age, country and self-reported identities based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and variations in sex characteristics

Age (years)	Countries represented	Self-reported identities*
20 (1)	Austria	Lesbian (4)
21 (1)	Belgium	Gay (6)
22 (1)	Croatia	Bisexual (8)
23 (1)	Czechia	Cis women (4)
24 (3)	Denmark (2)	Cis men (4)
25 (1)	France (3)	Trans women (4)
26 (3)	Germany	Trans men (4)
27 (4)	Hungary	Non-binary/genderfluid/
28 (2)	Italy (2)	genderqueer (8)
29 (5)	Malta (3)	Intersex (3)
30 (4)	Spain (2)	* Many participants combined several terms to reflect their identities (e.g. 'bisexual, queer, non-binary'), which means the totals exceed the 27 individuals interviewed.
	Netherlands	
	Türkiye (2)	
	United Kingdom (5)	
	Ukraine	

Who participated?

Between June and July 2025, 27 LGBTQI young people participated in interviews. Participants were selected to ensure representation of young people identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer or intersex. They took part in both team sports (e.g., basketball, football, roller derby, squash) and individual ones (e.g., cycling, swimming, tennis, skating, yoga). The study did not systematically collect data on other axes of marginalisation. Instead, participants were invited to share these aspects of their experiences if and when they wished. Some did reflect on how disability or migration shaped their participation in sport, and these insights are integrated where relevant in the findings.

During the same period, nine stakeholder consultations were held, representing a mix of European federations and networks (e.g. LGBTQI sport, trans and intersex organisations), national advocacy organisations and federations, and grassroots sport initiatives. Their contributions were anonymised to encourage open discussion.

How were participants recruited, and interviews conducted?

For youth interviews, an open call was launched via IGLYO's channels and circulated through member organisations and over 40 national and European LGBTQI groups, helping reach a wide and diverse spectrum of young people. Interested individuals submitted an online form to confirm eligibility.

Stakeholders were primarily recruited through direct outreach using a preliminary list of relevant organisations. IGLYO supported recruitment by sharing contacts and facilitating introductions, particularly with Member Organisations. Where relevant, pan-European organisations referred to national partners, and a snowball sampling approach was also used, with consulted stakeholders recommending others who met the eligibility criteria.

Interviews and consultations were conducted online in English or French with informed consent. Youth interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, and stakeholder consultations 30-45 minutes. All discussions were recorded and transcribed, with transcripts returned for participant review and revision.



What is the scope of this study?

This study provides rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of LGBTQI youth in school- and community-based sport, and several contextual factors should be considered when interpreting the findings.

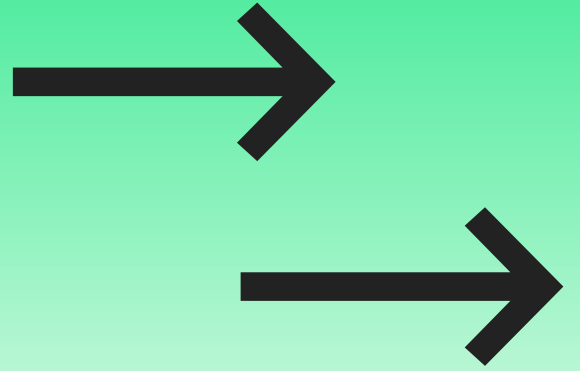
The interviews reflect a diversity of identities, countries and sporting experiences, though they were not designed to be statistically representative of all LGBTQI youth. Recruitment through LGBTQI networks meant that most participants had some connection to queer organisations and were at least partially open about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or variations in sex characteristics. Certain groups – including young people with disabilities, racialised youth and migrant youth – were less present. In addition, interviews were conducted only in English and French, limiting participation to those comfortable in these languages.

The stakeholder consultations added valuable perspectives from European and national LGBTQI sport organisations, grassroots clubs and advocacy networks, providing rich insights into both structural challenges and community-driven solutions. Perspectives from mainstream sport federations and schools were less represented in the sample.

Finally, the study focused specifically on school- and community-based sport, an area where information is scarce. While elite and professional sport has received considerable public and academic attention, the everyday sporting experiences of most young people take place in schools, local clubs and community settings. Understanding these spaces is therefore essential to improve inclusion where the majority of LGBTQI youth actually participate. Although there may be connections with elite or professional sport, the findings should not be extrapolated beyond school- and community-based environments.

Considering these factors, the results are best understood as qualitative evidence of recurring barriers and opportunities, rather than prevalence data. At the same time, by placing LGBTQI youth voices at the centre, the study provides vital and often overlooked perspectives that can meaningfully inform advocacy, policy and practice.





Key findings

Key findings

Access & participation

Key takeaways

→ Sport and equality policies often rely on broad promises of “inclusion for all” without explicitly naming LGBTQI youth, leaving them invisible in governance and action plans – especially trans and intersex youth.

→ Eligibility rules and administrative procedures, from hormone requirements to ID checks, systematically exclude trans and intersex youth, forcing many to rely on exceptions, endure misgendering or face outright bans.

→ Persistent gender norms in schools, clubs and families shape who is seen as belonging in which sport. Many LGBTQI youth feel compelled to conform or self-censor, while those who are visibly gender non-conforming face the harshest barriers.

→ Rural and small-town LGBTQI youth face limited clubs, long travel times and few inclusive options. Provision is concentrated in capitals, and inclusion often depends on individuals creating spaces themselves.

→ High costs for equipment, travel and fees prevent many LGBTQI youth – especially trans, migrant and working-class young people – from participating. Chronic underfunding also leaves queer-led clubs struggling to provide sustainable opportunities.

→ LGBTQI organisations and clubs face structural shortages, poor-quality or exclusionary venues, and unstable arrangements. Even when facilities are secured, they rarely guarantee the safety and dignity young queer people need to participate.



19 → United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

20 → United Nations. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966).

21 → United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Policy Position in Relation to the Protection of Human Rights in Sport without Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sex Characteristics*. Geneva: UN Special Procedures, 31 October 2023.

22 → International Olympic Committee. *IOC Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations*. Lausanne: IOC, 2021.

23 → 'No presumption of advantage' rejects assumptions that trans and intersex athletes have inherent unfair benefits. 'Bodily autonomy' affirms that no athlete should be forced to undergo medical procedures as a condition for participation. 'Stakeholder-led policy design' stresses the importance of consulting affected athletes when developing inclusion policies.

24 → Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity*, 31 March 2010.

25 → Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)9 on the revised Code of Sports Ethics*, 16 June 2010.

26 → Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2021)5 on the European Sports Charter*, 13 October 2021.

27 → European Commission. *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2020) 698 final. Brussels, 12 November 2020.

28 → Council of the European Union. *Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the European Union Work Plan for Sport* (1 July 2024–31 December 2027), C/2024/3527, 3 June 2024. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 218, 19 June 2024, 1–12.

Integrating targeted provisions for LGBTQI youth across sport, equality and youth policies is key to creating inclusive pathways

Sport is recognised under international human rights law, including Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹⁹ and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights²⁰, as part of the right to take part in cultural life. Guidance from the UN Special Procedures (2023) confirms that this right must be guaranteed free from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics²¹. The statement further warns that categorical bans or the creation of separate sport categories for trans and intersex athletes are *prima facie* violations of fundamental rights, including non-discrimination, privacy and bodily autonomy. In contrast, the International Olympic Committee's 2021 Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination²² was highlighted as a positive step, particularly for its principles of no presumption of advantage, bodily autonomy and stakeholder-led policy design²³.

At the European level, the Council of Europe progressively strengthens its normative framework on sport and equality. The Recommendation on

measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (CM/Rec(2010)5)²⁴ calls for equal access to sport and action against abuse, while the Revised Code of Sports Ethics (2010)²⁵ and the European Sports Charter (2021)²⁶ establish commitments to equality and the protection of vulnerable groups, including children and youth. Yet LGBTQI youth are not explicitly mentioned, leaving their inclusion dependent on broad interpretations and risking invisibility in practice. At the EU level, LGBTQI inclusion in sport remains largely absent from strategic frameworks. The EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy (2020–2025)²⁷ makes no substantive reference to sport, while the current EU Work Plan for Sport (2024–2027)²⁸ is silent on LGBTQI issues altogether.

Stakeholders confirmed this neglect, stressing that very little work is being done specifically on LGBTQI youth in sport at the European level. They noted that policy frameworks often rely on generic promises of "inclusion for all," which in practice render LGBTQI youth invisible as a distinct group. As one (international organisation) put it, "*Such frameworks are quite scarce... When inclusion is assumed rather than stated outright, it often doesn't materialise in practice.*" Another stakeholder (international organisation) highlighted that the lack of

youth voices in decision-making further reinforces this invisibility: “If young people are heard in decision-making, then they can influence things. And they can make it more inclusive.” Without meaningful youth participation in governance and strategy, their perspectives are systematically overlooked.

These gaps are most visible in Equality Action Plans, which several stakeholders described as superficial. References to trans people are sometimes included, but often watered down and rarely translated into substantive change. For intersex youth, the gap is even more stark. One stakeholder (international organisation) observed that intersex issues are “simply not a topic” in most countries, with only a handful taking meaningful steps, while the majority score zero on ILGA-Europe’s Rainbow Map for intersex rights.²⁹

Beyond content gaps, stakeholders also warned of a structural paradox: exclusion itself prevents progress. “If we keep excluding trans people from sport, then how are we ever going to collect the data we need to understand what inclusion looks like?” one (international organisation) asked. Exclusion denies visibility and data, and too often the lack of evidence is treated as evidence of absence, reinforcing inaction. Stakeholders argue that policy processes need a mindset shift toward proactively including LGBTQI youth, especially trans and intersex youth, rather than waiting for data that exclusion itself makes impossible to generate.



35 → Ministry for Gender Equality, Diversity and Equal Opportunities (France). Plan national pour l'égalité, contre la haine et les discriminations anti-LGBT+ 2023-2026. Paris, 2023. Available at: <https://www.egalite-femmes-hommes.gouv.fr/plan-national-pour-egalite-contre-la-haine-et-les-discriminations-anti-lgbt-2023-2026>

36 → Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry of Employment. Action Plan for Equal Rights and Opportunities for LGBTQI People 2020-2023. Stockholm, 2020. Available at: <https://www.government.se/contentassets/a613979cb5e94ba2a236147a2bc979c1/action-plan-for-equal-rights-and-opportunities-for-lgbtqi-people.pdf>

37 → Swedish Sports Confederation (RF). Strategi 2025. Stockholm: RF, 2015. Available at: <https://www.rf.se/rf-arbete-med-strategi-2025>

38 → NOC*NSF (Dutch Olympic Committee & Sports Federation). Guidance on Gender and Sex Diverse Individuals. Arnhem: NOC*NSF, 2021. Available at: <https://nocnsf.nl/media/4876/guidance-on-gender-and-sex-diverse-individuals.pdf>

“If we keep excluding trans people from sport, then how are we ever going to collect the data we need to understand what inclusion looks like?”

29 → ILGA-Europe. Rainbow Map and Index: Intersex Bodily Integrity. Available at: <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/categories/inter-sex-bodily-integrity/>

Box 1. Promising practice: National policies for LGBTQI inclusion in sport

In France, the National Olympic and Sports Committee (CNOSF), together with the Ministry of Equality and the Ministry of Sports, has launched measures under the **National Plan for Equality and the Fight Against Anti-LGBT+ Hatred and Discrimination (2023-2026)**³⁵. These include an expert committee on trans identities, training modules for grassroots educators, guidance for federations and embedding anti-discrimination commitments in sports governance.

In Sweden, government dialogue with the Swedish Sports Confederation since 2018 has been embedded in the country’s broader **Action Plan for Equal Rights and Opportunities for LGBTQI People (2020-2023)**³⁶ and in the Confederation’s long-term Strategy 2025³⁷. These strategies have driven initiatives such as leadership training on norms and privilege, revised youth sports guidelines and regulatory changes allowing associations to use gender identity rather than legal gender for board equality requirements.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Olympic Committee & Sports Federation (NOC*NSF) published the **Guidance on Gender and Sex Diverse Individuals (2021)**³⁸. The document includes checklists on inclusive language, registration forms, facilities and governance, alongside recommendations for supporting gender-diverse athletes in both recreational and competitive contexts. By offering concrete measures, the guidance helps clubs translate equality commitments into everyday practice across the country.

30 → In this report, descriptors in brackets reflect the terms participants chose to describe themselves.

31 → United Kingdom Supreme Court, *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* [2025] UKSC 16. Full judgment available at: <https://supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2024-0042>

32 → The Football Association of England (2025), "Policy on the Participation of Transgender and Non-Binary People in Football." Available at: <https://www.thefa.com/football-rules-governance/policies/transgender-and-non-binary-participation-policy>



Reforming rules and processes that exclude trans and intersex youth is essential to guarantee equal participation in sport

For many young people, the main barriers are not acts of hostility but the rules that govern access. One stakeholder (international organisation) noted that while debates often fixate on elite competitions, these rules often “*spill over into grassroots settings, limiting access for young queer people.*”

One participant (trans woman, 24, UK)³⁰ described how a close friend, one of the few trans women playing league football, was suddenly banned despite complying with the eligibility requirements. Under the English Football Association’s March 2025 transgender inclusion policy, trans women could play in the women’s game if they demonstrated a blood serum testosterone concentration below 5.0 nmol/L for at least 12 months prior to competition, and continued to maintain that level thereafter. However, following the United Kingdom Supreme Court’s decision in *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* (2025)³¹, which ruled that “sex” in the Equality Act 2010 refers to biological sex, the Association revised its policy in June 2025. Under the current rules, trans women are ineligible to play in any women’s football competition it governs, from professional games to grassroots and amateur leagues³².

The Football Association justified this decision on the grounds of “safety” and “fairness,” claiming that trans women retained physical advantages even after hormone treatment and that these posed risks in competitive play. This reasoning draws on assumptions about inherent biological differences between male and female bodies, with opponents of trans inclusion arguing that such differences create an unfair advantage. Several stakeholders challenged this rationale. One (international organisation) dismissed appeals to “fair competition,” noting that “there’s always someone who’s faster, stronger or comes from a country with more resources.” Others highlighted

that such claims lack evidence: while federations often insist “more scientific evidence is needed” before trans women can participate, existing reviews show no solid basis to conclude that they maintain a performance advantage³³. In practice, such discourse operates less as a safeguard and more as a form of structural exclusion, limiting the participation and visibility of trans and gender-diverse people in sport, especially when their presence challenges normative assumptions about gender and athletic performance.

Administrative requirements further curtail everyday participation. In Türkiye, public gyms are divided into two groups according to the gender marker on ID cards. One participant (trans man, bisexual, queer, 22, Türkiye) described how his access shifted once his documents no longer aligned with his gender identity: *“I started before medical transition.*

Back then, it was okay for me to enter public gyms, but now it’s not because my appearance and voice no longer match my documents. You have to enter based on that, so I can’t go there anymore.”

Another interviewee (non-binary, trans masc, bisexual, queer, 23, Belgium) recounted facing similar barriers: *“You have to sign with your legal name... it’s just bureaucracy that isn’t very trans-inclusive.”* These stories illustrate how procedures presented as routine, such as checking ID cards or filling out forms, can function as gatekeeping devices, turning documents into instruments of exclusion rather than guarantees of rights. For trans and non-binary youth, this often means being compelled to use a legal name that misgenders them, a daily source of stress, anxiety and dysphoria.

Barriers are even more pronounced in competitive settings, where the absence of clear, inclusive rules mean young LGBTQI people often rely on exceptions rather than rights. One participant (trans man, 27, Malta) explained that he was only able to compete because judges agreed to make an exception: *“Because it’s local and not professional, they could bend the rules. But if it were international,*

33 → E-Alliance Research Hub for Gender+ Equity in Sport. Transgender Women Athletes and Elite Sport: A Scientific Review (2022). Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport. Available at: <https://cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/2024-01/transgender-women-athletes-and-elitesport-a-scientific-review-en.pdf>

39 → Australian Football League. Gender Diversity Policy – AFLW and AFL. Melbourne: AFL, 2018. Available at: <https://resources.afl.com.au/afl/document/2019/12/04/0901c87f-571b-4eb9-b7b5-42d55015a1c5/Gender-Diversity-Policy.pdf>

Box 2. Promising practice: Revising rules for trans and non-binary inclusion in sport

In Australia, the national **women’s league of Australian Rules Football (AFLW)** has adopted a **Gender Diversity Policy**³⁹ that regulates eligibility for trans and non-binary players. To play at the elite level, applicants must demonstrate that their testosterone levels have remained below 5.0nmol/L for 24 months, and also provide performance data such as sprint times, endurance runs, strength tests and match statistics. Applications are assessed by a multi-disciplinary sub-committee covering high performance, inclusion, legal and medical expertise, with a right of review if an application is refused. The policy also includes privacy safeguards: applicants are not required to provide a birth certificate, and medical information must be kept confidential. While the policy applies only to elite competitions (AFLW and AFL), it explicitly states that “the relative priority of competition success and social inclusion may differ between community and elite football, noting the latter has the greatest potential rewards, including remuneration, for participants.” On this basis, the AFL acknowledges the importance of developing separate guidance for community football, where social inclusion should take precedence. It also notes the need for future guidance on the participation of intersex players. Although still highly medicalised and demanding, the AFLW policy demonstrates elements of promising practice. In contrast to blanket bans, it offers a structured, transparent process with safeguards, explicitly recognises that community football requires a stronger emphasis on inclusion and signals the importance of privacy protections. These features illustrate how governing bodies can begin to move beyond one-dimensional thresholds towards more inclusive frameworks, even if further reform is needed to ensure genuine equality.

I wouldn't have been allowed to compete with men because my documents still say female... My coach talked to the judges, who agreed to let me compete in the male category even though my documents are still not officially changed." His account underscores how access often depends on the goodwill of individuals rather than consistent, rights-based protections, leaving young trans people vulnerable to arbitrary exclusion.

For intersex youth, exclusion is compounded by deeper erasure. One interviewee (intersex, fluid, trans, queer, 30, France) recalled being allowed to train but barred from competition:

"They didn't know where to place me... On my ID card, it says F, so I had to be in the girls' team, but I wasn't feminine enough to be accepted with the girls, and I wasn't considered a guy either. I was kind of nowhere."

Their experience shows how regulatory frameworks grant only conditional participation, reinforcing the message that intersex bodies have no legitimate place in sport. The same participant remembered being exempt from PE altogether in elementary school because *"at that time, I hadn't yet heard the word 'intersex'. It wasn't known."*

Another (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) pointed to the long-term impact of early medicalisation, describing it as *"forced feminisation."* Such interventions shaped their sense of self long before entering sport, illustrating how medical and educational practices laid the groundwork for the exclusions later reproduced in sport. Taken together, these narratives expose how overlapping exclusions across medicine, education and sport systematically block intersex youth from equal recognition and participation.

Tackling persistent gender norms and stereotypes is vital to enabling LGBTQI youth to choose and enjoy sport fully

Across the interviews, young LGBTQI people described sport as a key arena where gender norms and stereotypes

dictate who is seen as legitimate, who belongs and on what terms. These norms shape which bodies are deemed *"fit"* for certain activities, which identities are tolerated and how young athletes are judged – often long before questions of skill or motivation arise.

Gender norms start to be policed in schools. One participant (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) recalled being called a *"tomboy"* and told by teachers: *"Boys, you can play football, girls, you can rest."* Across contexts, participants noted that PE is still divided by gender, forcing young people into *"boys"* or *"girls"* classes that offer little space for trans, non-binary or intersex students. Sports uniforms similarly entrench this separation: for instance, in the UK, students were required to wear heavily gendered clothing, such as skirts for girls and shorts for boys. Such arrangements become significant barriers, pushing young people into categories that misrecognise their identities.

Because decisions on PE organisation and uniforms are often left to individual schools, approaches vary widely, leaving inclusion dependent on the discretion of school leadership rather than on consistent protections. This underlines the need for clear policies to prevent gender-segregated PE and gendered uniforms from continuing to act as obstacles to equal participation.

The same gendered dynamics evident in schools continue in wider sporting spaces. One interviewee (male adjacent, queer, gay, 23, Croatia) observed how football and basketball created *"a macho environment where topics related to LGBTQI issues aren't really welcomed."*

This example illustrates how gender norms are enforced through the culture of particular disciplines, making many sporting spaces unwelcoming for LGBTQI youth. Clothing and equipment further reinforce these binary expectations through what young people are expected or required to wear. One participant (gender fluid, non-binary, queer, 27, Germany) described feeling discomfort in yoga and pilates classes: *"It was mostly cisgender women wearing tight leggings*

and sports bras, and I realised I did not fully feel comfortable... Maybe nobody had a problem with it, but I asked myself whether I fit in." Another (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 30, France) reflected on fencing gear: *"Men have cups and women have chest protectors. I didn't have a cup, but I would have needed one, except I never would have dared to ask for it. And I think it wouldn't have fit anyway."* These stories show how attire and material design can also become sources of exclusion, whether through the discomfort of not fitting in with gendered clothing or through gear designed around binary assumptions that fail to recognise diverse bodies.

Gendered expectations also extend into the home, where parental decisions reinforce the same gendered boundaries around sport. One interviewee (gender fluid, non-binary, queer, 27, Germany) described joining the only girls' basketball team available: *"I started playing and was really happy... I would cry if I could not attend training. My mom wasn't happy about it – that I quit swimming and went to play a masculine sport. She never came to see a game for the four years I played."* This illustrates how parental ideas of what counts as a "gender-appropriate" sport can directly undermine young queer people's choices.

Many young queer people internalise these expectations, adapting their choices in an effort to conform. One participant (cis man, bisexual, 26, Spain) described becoming a football referee even though he disliked the sport, as a way to demonstrate his masculinity and assert that he was "a boy." Another (queer, 29, Austria) remembered using snowboarding to convince himself he was not gay: *"I thought: gay people don't snowboard, so I can't be gay."* Both examples reveal how some LGBTQI youth engage in sports less for enjoyment than as strategies of conformity and self-protection, reinforcing cycles of self-surveillance and self-censorship.

Building on this, some interviewees highlighted how conformity in gender

expression could provide contingent protection. One participant (cis woman, lesbian, queer, 29, Malta) reflected: *"I'm cisgender and feminine presenting, so I've had the privilege of being able to blend in if I choose."* Another (cis woman, bisexual, 28, Denmark) similarly explained that being able to "pass" meant she rarely faced barriers. An interviewee (trans woman, 24, UK) described being consistently recognised as a woman as a form of privilege not shared by many other trans women. By contrast, one participant (male adjacent, queer, gay, 23, Croatia) noted that queer women who presented more masculinely faced greater problems. Together, these accounts show how passing shields some from discrimination and exclusion, while exposing others to closer scrutiny.

Privilege in sport is also shaped by race, class and disability. One interviewee (trans woman, 24, UK) observed that her whiteness and middle-class background insulated her, while migrants and asylum seekers faced far greater obstacles. Another (non-binary femme, queer, 20, Wales) explained that being Asian and living with a disability, in the context of rigid gender norms, made visibility itself feel exclusionary: *"Even if you take my queerness out, I'm Asian and visibly disabled. So I stood out."* These examples demonstrate that gender norms impact LGBTQI youth unevenly: conformity or privilege can offer protection, but racialisation, class, disability or visible gender non-conformity often compound exposure to scrutiny, hostility and exclusion.

Closing the gap between urban and rural contexts is key to ensuring LGBTQI youth everywhere can participate in sport

For many LGBTQI young people, geography itself determines access to sport. In rural areas, the challenge is not only finding an inclusive team but any sports club at all. One participant (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) captured this divide: *"I lived in the countryside for five*



years. There, honestly, there weren't many sports clubs at all... Now I've moved to the city. And here, yes, there are." Their words underline how moving to an urban centre can suddenly open doors that remain shut in smaller communities.

Long distances and lack of transport further exacerbate these barriers. An interviewee (genderqueer, gay, 25, Netherlands) explained: *"With athletics, I didn't really have much choice. The next club is about 30 minutes away. Transportation can be a big barrier, especially in rural areas."* Another (trans

man, gay, queer, 29, UK) added: *"This pitch is one of the two closest to me, and I still have to travel an hour by bus to get there."* Even when young LGBTQI people are motivated, the time and cost of long journeys make regular participation unsustainable.

The gap between rural and urban contexts becomes most visible when it comes to LGBTQI-inclusive spaces. An intersex bisexual man (30, France) described the reality of living "in the middle of nowhere": *"If you want to do certain sports, you have to drive an hour to a big city. (...) There's one LGBT association in my area that does something once a year. But apart from that, there's really nothing."* A bisexual woman (28, Italy) echoed: *"In a big city you might find something... [but] in small towns or the countryside, you have no choice."* In rural areas, the general scarcity of sport is worsened by the limited availability of queer initiatives, leaving LGBTQI youth with few opportunities to access the social and community benefits that sport can provide.

Stakeholders reinforced these concerns, noting how strongly provision is centralised. Most LGBTQI clubs are concentrated in major urban hubs and, in some countries, overwhelmingly in the capital. One stakeholder (national organisation) observed that single-sport clubs (focusing on just one discipline) are heavily clustered in the capital, while in the provinces LGBTQI provision is much thinner, sometimes limited to a single omnisport club (bringing together several

activities under one organisation) to serve an entire region. A similar picture emerged elsewhere, where another stakeholder (national organisation) noted that *“almost all activities are in the capital,”* leaving those outside it with limited opportunities, often reduced to informal activities such as hiking.

In rare cases, young people created opportunities where none existed. One participant (non-binary femme, queer, 20, Wales) explained: *“This is quite a rural area. There’s barely anything. The only reason there is a queer climbing group here is because my friend and I started it.”* While such efforts demonstrate resilience, they also highlight the uneven burden placed on LGBTQI youth. Without systemic provision, inclusion often depends on young queer people who are willing and able to carve out safe spaces for themselves and their peers.

Addressing financial inequalities is also critical to guarantee equal opportunities for all LGBTQI youth to participate in sport

Financial inequalities emerge as another significant obstacle to sport participation, cutting across both grassroots and elite levels. Costs for equipment, training, travel and membership fees often make sport inaccessible, particularly for those already facing economic precarity linked to gender identity, migration status, or family background.

At the grassroots level, expenses vary dramatically between sports. One participant (cis woman, lesbian, queer, 29, Malta) contrasted roller derby with rugby: *“With roller derby, you have to buy your own equipment – skates, protective gear and add-ons – pay around €30 a month to rent the training court per person, and cover travel costs abroad, since there is only one team in Malta. Altogether, it adds up to between €300-€600 a year, all out of*

pocket. Rugby is much cheaper. We used to pay about €100 a year to train.” Another (queer, 29, Austria) highlighted that even reaching the national team did not remove these burdens: *“My parents paid most of my costs. Even when selected for the [squash] national team, we had to pay for our own kit.”* These accounts underline how costs can push LGBTQI youth toward cheaper options or force them to give up altogether, regardless of talent or motivation.

For trans and queer youth in particular, money often decides whether participation is possible at all. One interviewee (transfemme, queer, 21, Italy) recalled: *“We didn’t have much money, so I couldn’t afford to try other sports or pay for something else... In my city, there weren’t any places that were both queer-friendly and affordable. And when something is free, it’s always football. And it’s only guys.”* When she tried an aerial dance class in a private club, the fees quickly became prohibitive: *“I’m poor, I’m a migrant, and I’m trans. I couldn’t keep doing sports.”*

Similarly, another (trans woman, 24, UK) explained that even queer-specific spaces can become exclusionary when replicating mainstream costs: *“The financial barrier is huge... a drop-in queer yoga class is 8 euros. In Edinburgh, a general class can cost close to 20. It’s just expensive. That’s why more subsidised queer sports programmes are so important.”* She stressed that for asylum seekers or trans people in transition, these costs make participation virtually impossible.

Stakeholders confirmed that financial precarity constrains individuals and undermines the organisations working to support them. Many LGBTQI sports associations operate with precarious budgets. As one stakeholder (national organisation) explained, *“a fairly precarious financial balance, like in many associations... We could not hire two or three more people, even if that’s the*



Box 3. Promising practice: Breaking down financial barriers in sport

Participants highlighted several initiatives that help lower costs and make sport more accessible for LGBTQI youth.

Free or subsidised activities, such as charity-supported weightlifting sessions, non-profit yoga groups, reduce financial barriers for young people with limited access to sport. **Targeted support schemes**, like university grants for trans students in the UK, were also seen as models that could be adapted to sporting costs. Community-led efforts also play a role, from **solidarity funds** covering entry fees to policies of free access for trans people of colour. These approaches show how subsidies, financial aid, and collective solidarity can make participation more equitable and sustainable.

intention." Others noted bluntly that *"the biggest one is money,"* as funding is hard to access both locally and at the European level. Resources that do exist often flow to professional or mainstream clubs, leaving grassroots or queer-led initiatives underfunded.

Even larger umbrella organisations report facing structural precarity. One stakeholder (international organisation) shared that funding was overwhelmingly project-based: *"You apply, you get funding for a year, you run three workshops, and then it's over."* Erasmus+ grants are important but demand novelty each cycle: *"After that? You reapply and they say, 'We've already funded this topic. What's new?'"* Cuts under right-wing governments can also destabilise provision overnight. One organisation (sports club) also described how queer youth centres suddenly lost all funding before partial restoration, leaving ongoing uncertainty. Occasional private sponsorships or corporate grants (e.g. Nike community funding) provide temporary relief but come with their own risks, since priorities can shift without warning: *"It's also connected to a U.S. company, and we can't predict what their priorities will be."*

This constant instability makes it difficult for organisations to plan long-term, invest in inclusive infrastructure or expand their activities. Instead of focusing fully on building welcoming and sustainable sports environments, many LGBTQI organisations and clubs are forced to concentrate on short-term survival. As a result, opportunities for young queer people remain limited, and the support they receive is often fragmented or uncertain.

Securing access to sports facilities is vital to ensure safe and consistent opportunities for LGBTQI youth participation

For many LGBTQI organisations, finding a place to train or compete is a constant challenge. Even when financial or geographic barriers can be overcome, access to facilities often determines whether young people can participate. Stakeholders pointed that these barriers are frequently structural, linked to high demand and limited supply, but can also reflect discriminatory or exclusionary dynamics.

One organisation (sports club) noted that *“we do have many swimming pools, but almost all of them... are fully booked by the national team and other professional clubs.”* The few available slots were often at impractical times, excluding those who study or work. While most obstacles were logistical rather than discriminatory, since venues rarely knew they were renting to an LGBTQI club unless the legal name appeared in contracts, there have been exceptions. In one case, a swimming pool cancelled a club’s booking after discovering it was an LGBTQI club. The organisation pursued legal action and won, creating what members viewed as an important precedent for equal access.

Elsewhere, the issue was the quality and inclusivity of available facilities. One stakeholder (national organisation) noted that LGBTQI groups had to rent older public buildings, *“often built decades ago.”* While participants adapted to these settings, the facilities themselves were far from inclusive, lacking gender-neutral changing rooms or toilets. In other contexts, grassroots collectives were sometimes pushed into even more precarious arrangements, such as training in squats or other legally and structurally unsafe buildings. This creates instability, with groups facing the constant risk of expulsion and the pressure of repeatedly

relocating, placing an added burden on self-organised, volunteer-based initiatives. These conditions show that access is not only about securing a space, but also about whether that space enables safety and dignity³⁴.

Some long-established organisations have managed to negotiate more stable arrangements. For example, one sports club reported strong partnerships with local schools and municipalities: *“We don’t have our own facilities. We always request time slots from the local municipality for everything we offer. And they give us permission for that. Usually, there’s not really a problem with it. We’re pretty established and the things we do are quite regular, so they know it’s coming.”* However, organisers stressed that guaranteed access is not enough on its own. As they explained, *“When applying [for facilities], it’s important for us to create a safer space. And that means not having other clubs there at the same time doing, for example, boys’ sports.”* In practice, negotiating exclusive or parallel use of facilities is often essential for safety, a need not always fully recognised by local partners.

34 → Accessing facilities is particularly challenging for trans, intersex and non-binary participants. These dynamics are explored further in the ‘Safety & exclusion’ chapter.



Key findings

Safety & exclusion

Key takeaways

- Changing rooms are among the most unsafe and exclusionary spaces in sport, forcing many trans and intersex youth to avoid them, rely on fragile exceptions or abandon participation altogether.
- Beyond changing rooms, gyms, pitches, public parks and schools often feel unsafe, as scrutiny, local cultures and institutional resistance prompt LGBTQI youth to self-censor or withdraw from sport.
- Exclusion is reinforced across every level – from teachers and coaches to parents, peers and even opponents – where silence, microaggressions and direct hostility reveal how accountability is too often absent.
- Reporting systems are frequently mistrusted, unavailable or mishandled, leaving LGBTQI youth silent as a survival strategy and allowing discrimination to go unchallenged.
- Even LGBTQI-specific clubs, though intended as safe spaces, can reproduce exclusion through microaggressions, tokenisation or unaddressed hierarchies, leaving some young people, especially trans youth, doubly marginalised.
- Growing anti-gender movements and political hostility create a climate of fear that makes sport unsafe before participation even begins, putting trans youth at particular risk and forcing some queer initiatives to retreat from visibility.
- Exclusion harms LGBTQI youth well-being by triggering anxiety, withdrawal, and loss of friendships and belonging, and in some cases even causing physical distress.

Making changing rooms safe and inclusive is essential to ensure that LGBTQI youth, especially trans and intersex youth, can participate in sports without fear of harassment or exclusion

Changing rooms exemplify how binary structures in sport enforce exclusion, making them some of the most stressful and humiliating spaces for LGBTQI youth. For trans and intersex youth in particular, what should be a simple act of getting changed is often described as a source of fear and vulnerability.

Several trans participants described experiences of hostility and suspicion. One interviewee (trans man, bisexual, queer, 22, Türkiye) recalled being treated as if he were a predator: *"In the locker room, they treated me like a predator, as if I was there to watch or harass them, not just to change like everyone else."* Another (trans man, 29, Türkiye) described swimming at university: *"The changing room was full of women, and I felt like I wasn't supposed to be there... Even now, I'm afraid of other men, because if the marks on my body reveal I'm trans, I'm afraid they might fight me."* These testimonies show how changing rooms turn into spaces of suspicion and fear, denying trans youth safety and belonging.

Others cope by avoiding changing rooms altogether. One participant (trans woman, homoromantic, bisexual, 27, UK) admitted she avoided them completely: *"Normally, I show up already dressed in my kit to avoid having to change there. Even when it is just my teammates, I still feel nervous."* Another (trans woman, 24, UK) described never using gym facilities: *"In the past, I would never have gone into the changing room if I went to a generalised gym... I just came to already wearing my gym clothes. Now I do use these changing rooms, but I usually find a private spot rather than changing in the middle of the room."* These strategies allow them to keep playing sports, but at the cost of lost social connections and a lingering sense of vulnerability.

Some trans youth try to negotiate acceptance, but this acceptance is often fragile. One participant (trans man, 27, Malta) described approaching gym staff to explain his transition: *"At the beginning I was using the female one, but after starting hormones I felt it wasn't fair anymore... The first times people had seen me going into the female changing room, and then suddenly they saw me in the male one – that caused some odd reactions."* His experience illustrates how recognition can hinge on the perceptions of others, rather than being secured through inclusive policy.

Stakeholders confirmed that even LGBTQI clubs struggle under rigid facility rules. One organisation (sports club) recalled a trans woman swimmer being told by the head coach to *“either use the male locker room and dress as male, or do not come.”* With no gender-neutral facilities available, the club was forced into a compromise where the swimmer could not continue: *“That’s the mission statement of the club – that we try to provide a safe space to do sports for LGBTQ people. And in this case, we just couldn’t do it... I count it as a huge loss, because we failed in that scenario.”* This demonstrates how a lack of inclusive infrastructure can undermine even the best-intentioned organisations.

For intersex participants, the binary set-up of changing rooms is described as uniquely traumatic, forcing them to place themselves in categories where they do not belong. One participant (intersex man, bisexual, 30, France) explained: *“For intersex people, it can be super traumatic... When you see a ‘girl’ door, a ‘boy’ door, and a ‘disabled’ door, you don’t recognise yourself.”* Another (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) reflected: *“Even now that I know who I am, that I am proud, that I accept myself, there’s still something about locker rooms that I can’t handle. I can’t find my place either with the men... or women.”* Such testimonies highlight how binary facilities erase intersex identities, forcing young people to navigate spaces that consistently misrecognise them and undermine their sense of belonging.

These struggles in sport are reinforced by early exclusions with lasting consequences. One participant (intersex, fluid, trans, queer, 30, France) recalled being exempted from PE and never learning how to swim, only to be prevented from trying again later in life by lifeguards who told them: *“No, you can’t go there, because there are children.”* These experiences reveal how stigma accumulates over time, beginning with denial of access in childhood and continuing into adulthood, ultimately depriving intersex youth not only of belonging but also of basic skills and opportunities.

Other queer young people also describe changing rooms as spaces of discomfort. For some, this led directly to self-censorship. One participant (queer, 29, Austria) said he avoided coming out partly because of the locker room setup: *“One big room, six to eight showers, everyone naked. I feared it might become awkward if I came out.”* Another (male adjacent, queer, gay, 23, Croatia) explained: *“When you’re in a changing room or taking a shower, you’re basically in your most vulnerable position. I just don’t want to do that to myself just yet.”* These examples underline how changing rooms can silence queer youth by forcing them to manage visibility and safety.

Cis participants, by contrast, only occasionally reported exclusion, and far less frequently. One interviewee (cis woman, bisexual, 28, Denmark) recalled a lesbian teammate forced to change in a broom closet, while another (cis man, gay, 24, Hungary) described avoiding overcrowded locker rooms. For most cis youth, however, the alignment of identity, documents and appearance allows them to pass through changing rooms largely unnoticed. This contrast shows how safety in changing rooms is unevenly distributed, leaving trans, intersex and queer youth vulnerable while cis peers move through with less scrutiny.

Creating welcoming sports spaces beyond changing rooms is critical to reducing the self-censorship and avoidance that weigh on LGBTQI youth in sport

For many LGBTQI youth, unsafety extends far beyond the changing room, shaping how they experience gyms, pitches, swimming pools and even public parks. What should be ordinary sites of play or exercise often become spaces navigated with caution, where risks are weighed up before deciding whether, where and how to participate.

Public spaces are rarely neutral settings for sport. One participant (male adjacent, queer, 23, Croatia) described avoiding the most convenient running paths in a local park because they passed near a football stadium: *“The part of the park that’s the most well-paved is right across*

40 → +PLUSS Project. *Champions of Inclusion: A Game Plan to Boost Your Sport Club* (EGLSF, 2025). Available at: https://www.eglsf.info/download/projects/pluss-project/D4.1_Guidelines_FINAL.pdf

41 → LEAP Sports Scotland. *Manifesto for Inclusive Physical Education* (Glasgow, LEAP Sports Scotland), 28 August 2025. Available at: <https://leapsports.org/files/4107-Manifesto-Leaflet.pdf>

Box 4. Promising practice: Tools to build more inclusive sport spaces

Out in Slovenia introduced a **rulebook** that all participants must sign before joining activities. The document clearly states that discrimination will not be tolerated and ensures that everyone respects the same guidelines. If someone behaves inappropriately, the rulebook provides a reference point for taking action, giving the club a basic but effective framework. The organisation also highlighted the PLUSS project, which produced a similar resource entitled **'Champions of Inclusion: A Game Plan to Boost Your Sport Club'**.⁴⁰

This guide is designed to help sports clubs create environments where LGBTQI people feel welcome and supported. It combines practical recommendations with real-life examples and ready-to-use tools, covering areas such as governance, anti-discrimination policies, inclusive language, and the visibility of LGBTQI identities in sport.

In Scotland, **LEAP Sports** co-created the **Manifesto for Inclusive Physical Education**⁴¹ together with secondary school pupils in Glasgow. This manifesto sets out six commitments for inclusive physical education, covering areas such as language and behaviour, reducing gender segregation and creating welcoming environments. The process was collaborative, ensuring that young people shaped the outcomes. The manifesto also comes with an action plan, and LEAP is now working directly with schools to put these commitments into practice. This complements broader LGBT-inclusive education reforms in Scotland by specifically addressing the often-overlooked area of sport and physical activity.

from the stadium... inhabited by fans of Dinamo Zagreb. They're pretty right-wing. Sometimes we avoid the less-paved paths because we don't want to run into someone accidentally and then be unable to run away." Another (trans man, gay, queer, 29, UK) similarly explained how public pitches felt unsafe when strangers lingered nearby watching: *"It's a public space, so people sometimes come and stand next to the pitch and watch, which can feel uncomfortable."*

These experiences reveal that sport in public spaces is shaped by geography, culture and the presence of others, turning ordinary exercise into a negotiation of risk.

Gyms, too, often generate unsafety for LGBTQI youth, as constant scrutiny and the anticipation of hostility shape how participation unfolds. One interviewee (trans man, 27, Malta) described weightlifting in the gym under watchful eyes: *"The staring happens a lot... When you do certain exercises, some parts of you are a bit more exposed. Even if you pass well, people can tell, and they start chatting. It gets in your head. You think, 'They noticed,' or 'Are they talking about me?'"* For him, participation meant managing other people's gaze while battling his own fear: *"Somewhere else would be even worse... I didn't want to let people dictate what I do."* While he persisted despite these pressures, others responded differently, avoiding such spaces altogether. One participant (trans woman, lesbian, 30, UK) explained: *"I just live under paranoia... It's why I don't really go to a regular gym much. I've not been to public baths more than once since I transitioned."* Together, these testimonies show how gyms frequently function less as places of fitness than as spaces of vigilance, forcing queer youth either to endure exposure or withdraw from participation.

In conflict settings, existing insecurities in sport become even harder to navigate. One interviewee (cis woman, lesbian, 28, Ukraine) explained that air-raid alarms and missile strikes force public venues, including sports clubs, to close and send

people to shelters, repeatedly interrupting sessions and making it hard to keep a routine. While this reality affects all Ukrainians, it places an even heavier burden on LGBTQI youth, who already struggle to feel safe in parks, gyms and other sporting spaces. War exacerbates these insecurities, turning an already fragile negotiation of safety into an even greater barrier to consistent participation. Schools also emerge as environments where exclusion is especially entrenched. Stakeholders across countries described PE as a major source of exclusion, where institutional resistance to LGBTQI issues was strongest. They noted how national-level hostility around trans inclusion filters down into classrooms and playgrounds, reinforcing anxiety and creating unsafe environments for trans youth in particular. Attitudes such as “yes, but not in schools” continue to block change, leaving education settings among the least responsive to inclusion. Even where training and resources exist, uptake remains inconsistent and reliant on the goodwill of individual teachers, making safe and inclusive sport unpredictable and uneven rather than secured as a right.

Ensuring accountability at every level of sport is vital to prevent and stop discrimination against LGBTQI youth

Exclusion in sport rarely occurs in isolation. It is shaped both by those responsible for safeguarding participation, including teachers, coaches and parents, and by the peer cultures that develop around them. When accountability is absent, discrimination flourishes, leaving LGBTQI youth unprotected.

Teachers, often the first adults to introduce young people to organised sport, play a decisive role in shaping whether sport feels safe or hostile. One participant (cis man, gay, 24, Hungary) linked his discomfort in sport to early experiences in PE: “Those set the tone for me that sports environments weren’t safe.” Graded tasks like ball-throwing became humiliating rituals, where he “always got the lowest

mark,” gradually eroding his motivation until he “wanted to escape those classes.” His story reveals how PE tests can shame those who don’t fit the athletic norm, leaving lasting scars on belonging in sport.

Classmates often pick up and amplify exclusionary signals from teachers and the wider school environment. One interviewee (cis man, gay, 26, Spain) recalled high school being marked by “a general atmosphere where some kids would make fun of others, exclude them from groups, or not let them choose the sports they wanted to do.” Another (cis man, gay, 24, Hungary) similarly noted that classmates “didn’t help either,” explaining that gender-segregated PE left him surrounded by boys who were “not really my people.” These accounts underscore how peer cultures reinforce institutional barriers, making school sport a space where exclusion is normalised and sustained.

For others, exclusion in school sports is reinforced by intersecting forms of prejudice. One participant (transfemme, queer, 21, Italy) recalled being openly mocked by male classmates: “They were very rude. They would always comment on me and my other queer friends.” She added that the hostility was not only misogynistic and transphobic but also racist, with classmates using slurs to provoke her. Similarly, an interviewee (trans man, gay, queer, 29, UK) described being singled out as the only racialised player: “I definitely felt othered sometimes... I’d get ignorant comments from other kids.” These testimonies highlight how intersecting prejudices intensify exclusion in school sport, leaving some students especially targeted.

Peers continue to play a central role in exclusion beyond school, often echoing the dynamics first experienced in childhood. One participant (cis woman, lesbian, 28, Ukraine) described how teammates turned against her after discovering her same-sex relationship online: “At the next training, there was silence and whispering... Someone said, ‘It’s not a gay club, we do sports here,’ and everyone laughed.” The trainer, who witnessed the remarks, chose to ignore

“At the next training, there was silence and whispering... Someone said ‘It’s not a gay club, we do sports here,’ and everyone laughed.”



42 → Seitenwechsel. Available at: <https://www.seitenwechsel-berlin.de>

43 → FLINTA is a German acronym for Frauen, Lesben, Inter, Nicht-binär, Trans und Agender (women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender people). MINTA is a related term used for Männer, Inter, Nicht-binär, Trans und Agender (men, intersex, non-binary, trans, and agender people). Both terms are used in German-speaking contexts to emphasise inclusivity and visibility beyond binary gender categories.

Box 5. Promising practice: Fostering accountability for inclusion in children's sport

At the inclusive sports camps run by **Seitenwechsel**⁴² in Berlin, awareness and accountability are embedded from the outset. Invitations to the camps explicitly welcome gender-diverse children and explain what that means, setting expectations for all participants. During the camps, children take part in workshops on gender diversity designed to help them understand and support their peers. Parents are also involved, both in discussions and by joining the closing activities, ensuring that inclusion extends beyond the camp itself. Trainers also play a crucial role: they are briefed in advance on inclusive language and concepts such as FLINTA/ MINTA⁴³, and many are themselves trans, intersex or non-binary. Their visible presence provides role models for young people and opens space for questions and learning. By preparing trainers, engaging parents and fostering peer awareness, Seitenwechsel shows how accountability for inclusion can be shared across all those involved in children's sport.

them. She was told there was no space when she later tried to re-enrol in another class at the same studio. Eventually, she abandoned the group. Her experience shows how peer hostility, unchecked by a coach's silence, reveals a failure of accountability at multiple levels, leaving her with no viable path to remain in sport. Exclusion is not limited to one's own team, with opponents also acting as a source of hostility. One interviewee (trans woman, 27, UK) recalled: *"There were a few instances of transphobic comments from other teams, but those individuals were removed."* A participant (cis man, gay, 26, Spain) similarly noted that *"in competitive environments, people felt they could say whatever they wanted."* Such experiences demonstrate how transphobia and homophobia are embedded in competitive sport, where the intensity of play is too often treated as justification for hostility. Even when clubs intervene, responses tend to be reactive rather than preventive, leaving youth vulnerable to discrimination at the very moment they should be competing on equal terms.

Coaches are also frequent sources of exclusion. One participant (cis man, bisexual, 26, Spain) recalled that, while he did not face physical violence, he was ignored, sidelined from games, and treated as if he did not belong. By contrasting his experience with physical violence, he downplayed its seriousness, yet the silence and benching still stripped away his playing time and sense of support. Another (non-binary femme, queer, 20, Wales) reflected on a coach's comment about their wheelchair use: *"The comment my coach made was 'Why wouldn't you just get a chair and sit down between climbs?' which is a fair comment, because, effectively, it'd be doing the same thing."* They acknowledged *"He's a very good coach,"* but pointed to the blind spot: *"He's not a wheelchair user, so he doesn't understand the preference I have to move around that way rather than just sit."* Although both incidents were described as minor or excusable, they nonetheless underline how even small actions or comments from coaches

can shape whether LGBTQI youth feel recognised and supported in sport.

Even when exclusion does not originate with coaches, parental pressure often pushes them into compromises that deepen marginalisation. One participant (cis woman, bisexual, 28, Denmark) recalled how parents polarised around a lesbian teammate: some defended her, while others demanded restrictions. In response, the coach created a separate changing space and scheduled showers differently. While this arrangement seemed accommodating, it in fact singles her out, reinforcing her isolation in ways that are humiliating, degrading, and profoundly othering. Here, parental influence redirects responsibility away from challenging prejudice and toward containing it, at the expense of the young LGBTQI person.

For some, the impact of seemingly small incidents only becomes clear in hindsight. One interviewee (gender queer, gay, 25, Netherlands) put it this way: *“The thing with microaggressions is that they’re small. I only really started noticing them when I began doing more research on queer youth and got involved in activist spaces.”* His reflection shows how remarks or behaviours may not register as harmful at the time, but with greater awareness, they become recognisable as part of a wider pattern. What once seems trivial is later recognised as exclusion, showing how microaggressions quietly erode confidence and belonging over time.

Building trust and safe reporting systems is key to guaranteeing accountability and protecting LGBTQI young people in sport

Exclusion flourishes when young people cannot trust the systems meant to protect them. Accountability is not only about how coaches or teachers intervene in the moment but also about whether institutions provide safe, reliable ways to report discrimination. In practice, many LGBTQI youth feel unable to speak up, and when they do, their concerns are often dismissed or mishandled.

This mistrust is evident in how rarely discrimination was formally reported. One participant (male adjacent, queer, gay, 23, Croatia), who works for the largest LGBTQI organisation in the country, explained: *“We haven’t had any reports of people getting kicked out of gyms or being attacked while practising sports outside. But a lot of people don’t report hate crimes or hate speech. They’re ashamed... They don’t want to let it out. (...) There’s a lot of mistrust towards the authorities, be it the police or any other institutions. That’s a problem.”* As such, the absence of reports should not be read as evidence of safety, but as a sign of underreporting driven by stigma and mistrust of institutions.

Even when young people do speak up, institutional responses often fall short. One interviewee (cis man, gay, 26, Spain) explained that *“reporting or complaining didn’t always work. Teachers didn’t always take it seriously. (...) People felt they could say whatever they wanted.”* Another (male adjacent, queer, gay, 23, Croatia) noted that supportive staff often lacked the tools to act: *“Professors and teachers, even if they want to help, they don’t have the language or the skills to help.”* Without training, resources or clear procedures, institutions leave young queer people exposed. In turn, this creates a climate of impunity where discriminatory behaviour goes unchallenged and exclusion in sport is reinforced.

Faced with this lack of support, silence often becomes a coping strategy and a survival mechanism. One participant (cis man, bisexual, 26, Spain) said he found it difficult to talk about his problems, whether at school or at home, and never felt able to have open conversations with his parents about his queer identity and experiences. Similarly, another (trans man, bisexual, queer, 22, Türkiye) explained: *“No, I could not speak up, and I always felt like they also saw me as the weirdo.”* Together, these narratives underscore that speaking up is often perceived as unsafe, whether because of the absence of trusted adults or fear of ridicule. Without reliable systems in place, the burden of silence falls on individuals, reinforcing isolation and signalling that their safety is treated as a secondary concern.

Preventing exclusion and tokenisation within LGBTQI-inclusive sports spaces is vital to avoid double marginalisation

Even LGBTQI-inclusive sports groups, founded as safe alternatives to mainstream clubs, are not immune to reproducing exclusion. For many LGBTQI youth, discrimination within these communities feel especially painful because it comes from spaces expected to provide safety, producing a sense of double marginalisation.

Among the most common forms of this internal exclusion are microaggressions that chip away at feelings of safety and belonging. An interviewee (trans

woman, 24, UK) explained that “low-level transphobic microaggressions in generalised queer sports spaces” stopped her from joining a queer football group she had been excited about. She recalled: “Some of the people from the team have done things to me or to friends, and that made me feel like I didn’t want to be involved anymore.” Whether subtle or explicit, these experiences create an atmosphere of risk rather than safety, deterring her from spaces that are supposed to be inclusive.

Participation in queer spaces also comes with the burden of tokenisation. Being the only trans woman often means feeling visible but unsupported. As one participant (trans woman, 24, UK) put it: “It’s very difficult to bring up issues that affect you.” Representation without solidarity left her caught between visibility and vulnerability, singled out as proof of inclusion but without real space to voice her needs. The silence around her heterosexuality further illustrated how tokenisation worked: she was visible as ‘the trans woman,’ yet other aspects of who she was could not be voiced. “I’m a heterosexual trans woman... But in these spaces, it feels very difficult to mention it,” she explained, noting that negative perceptions of straight men shaped how she was seen. She added: “But it’s the way that trans women are seen... I wouldn’t say it’s just transphobia; it is also misogyny.” Her testimony shows how belonging in queer spaces is conditional, shaped both by her position as a trans woman and by her heterosexuality, which clashes with community norms defined in opposition to straightness.

Stakeholders also highlighted how internal power dynamics can marginalise certain groups. One (national organisation) observed that “if there are too many cis gay men in the group, FLINTA people will slowly stop coming. Often it becomes more sexualised, and that can make them feel uncomfortable.” This perspective underlines that queer sport spaces are not immune from reproducing hierarchies of visibility and dominance, where the presence and behaviour of cis gay men →

44 → Fédération Sportive LGBT+, *Acceptess-T and Outrans. Charte Sport et Trans* (2021). Available at: <https://www.outrans.fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Sport-TransCharte2021-V5.pdf>

45 → Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). *WFTDA Gender Statement Clarification Update*, 6 February 2025. Available at: <https://resources.wftda.org/wftda-gender-statement-clarification-update/>

Box 6. Promising practice: Putting trans inclusion in sport intro practice

In France, the **Fédération Sportive LGBT+** partnered with **Acceptess-T** and **Outrans** to draft the ‘**Charte Sport and Trans**,⁴⁴ a ten-point guide on welcoming trans people and promoting inclusive practices for all members. The charter addresses issues such as inclusive language, access to facilities, respect for self-determined gender identity and the creation of safer spaces where trans participants feel recognised. Freely available online, it can be signed by any sports club, not only LGBT+ clubs, provided they meet a few basic requirements to ensure proper implementation. By signing, clubs commit to adopting these practices, while the federation supports them with training and resources, and highlights local initiatives across its network.

At the grassroots level, a roller derby player in Malta explained how their league avoids symbolic inclusion through clear rules and enforcement. Their **handbook**, grounded in the **Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) gender policy**⁴⁵, sets out non-discrimination rules and makes explicit: “Trans women are women. Intersex women are women. As a women’s roller derby league, HIR also welcomes gender-expansive skaters, regardless of their pronouns, who feel most comfortable playing women’s roller derby.” This example shows how grassroots clubs can counter tokenisation by putting commitments into writing and linking inclusion to accountability in practice.

may inadvertently push women, non-binary and trans participants to the margins.

Others emphasise that symbolic inclusion is not enough. One interviewee (trans woman, lesbian, 30, UK) criticised the tendency of some groups to claim inclusivity while leaving trans people unnamed and unprotected: *"Some people say they're inclusive, but their idea of inclusiveness is really narrow and shortsighted. (...) There has to be an explicit mention, like: 'We don't tolerate transphobia,' just as much as homophobia, biphobia and other forms of discrimination."* Her point shows the limits of broad labels and surface-level commitments. Even clubs that call themselves trans-inclusive may fall short of creating a genuinely welcoming environment – for instance, when pronouns are not shared, language stays binary (e.g. girls/boys), or team structures reinforce gender divisions. Unless transphobia is explicitly named and addressed in practice, "inclusive" spaces risk centering cisgender lesbian, gay and bisexual participants while leaving trans youth exposed.

While these challenges are most often raised by trans participants, others also note that LGBTQI sport spaces can fall short of their inclusive ideals. One participant (queer, 29, Austria) described how joining a running group left him feeling peripheral: *"It didn't feel super inclusive. It was a big group, everyone knew each other, it was hard to be the new person. People had cliques. The stereotype about elitism in queer groups... I kind of experienced that."* Reflecting further, he added: *"They probably thought they were inclusive. Maybe I just didn't meet the right people."* His account reveals a different dynamic: exclusion does not always arise from overt prejudice but from subtle hierarchies that leave newcomers feeling unseen.

Challenging the backlash against LGBTQI rights is key to preventing

greater safety risks for LGBTQI youth in sport, particularly trans youth

The growing backlash across the Council of Europe region has a chilling effect on sport, with trans and intersex young people bearing the brunt. Hostile political and media climates not only legitimise exclusion but also deepen feelings of fear and mistrust, making sport unsafe before LGBTQI youth even enter the field. One participant (trans man, 29, Türkiye) described how political attacks permeate everyday life: *"In the last 5-6 years, there has been a stronger and more open attack on trans people... In short, the situation is getting worse day by day... I can't feel safe. I am very afraid. And I believe this changes a lot of things, including sport."* His narrative demonstrates that political hostility is not abstract but manifests in daily insecurity, extending into sport and deepening exclusion.

Similar dynamics unfold in other contexts where hostility materialises directly on the ground. One interviewee (trans woman, homoromantic, bisexual, 27, UK) described how an anti-trans protest group targeted her football team: *"There was an anti-trans protest group that showed up at our training location. They shared photos of us online and made comments about us on Twitter... seeing those photos reposted on hate groups, saying horrible things about us, was really tough."* Yet she also emphasised the solidarity that followed: *"The league took action. They banned the protest group from protesting on the property, and all the teams in the league put out a joint statement in support of trans players. That made a huge difference. So while it was discouraging from the outside, everyone involved in the league itself made trans players feel extremely included and welcome."* Her experience illustrates how decisive institutional action can transform hostility into solidarity, restoring a sense of safety and belonging.

Stakeholders stressed that these incidents form part of a wider pattern across

The issue of trans people's inclusion is the battleground right now. Even where acceptance of gay and lesbian people has moved forward, trans people are being actively excluded,"

Europe. "The issue of trans people's inclusion is the battleground right now. Even where acceptance of gay and lesbian people has moved forward, trans people are being actively excluded," one (international organisation) explained. They also observed that while anti-gender movements actively block progress, progressive political parties frequently remain silent or dilute their positions, creating a sense of abandonment that reinforces exclusion. Across contexts, political signals amplify these dynamics. In Germany, the Chancellor's dismissal of Pride flags in Parliament was cited as undermining trust, while in France, heated debates on trans inclusion are described as "hot button issues," leaving federations hesitant to adopt inclusive policies. In other countries, grassroots clubs report retreating from visibility to survive. One (sports club) explained: "Since the climate is like this and we read it in the news and everything, we try to just remain below the radar, not get too much visibility, not get exposed in any way." While this approach helps avoid direct conflict, it narrows participation, discourages younger members, and threatens the long-term visibility and sustainability of inclusive sport.

Safeguarding mental health and well-being is critical to countering the exclusion of LGBTQI youth from sport

Exclusion in sport does more than deny young queer people the chance to play. It directly affects their mental and physical well-being, reshaping their confidence, sense of safety and long-term relationship with physical activity. Experiences of rejection, ridicule or hostility do not stay confined to the pitch or the gym; they follow young people into everyday life, leaving long-term impacts on participation, inclusion and overall well-being.

For some, discrimination leads directly to withdrawal from sport, often as an act of

self-preservation. One participant (cis man, bisexual, 26, Spain) recalled how the stress of feeling insecure or out of place pushed him to walk away rather than remain in an unwelcoming environment. Leaving helped him avoid further harm but also meant losing spaces of physical activity, social connection and personal growth. Another interviewee (cis woman, lesbian, 28, Ukraine) likewise left group training after hostile experiences and turned to yoga, which she found a better fit "both mentally and physically." She explained that returning to her former sport would be triggering, reinforcing her decision to stay away: "Now, I'm more careful, because it can happen again." These experiences illustrate how withdrawal, while protective in the short term, often results in lasting disengagement from sport and diminished access to its physical, mental and social benefits.

Stakeholders confirmed that exclusion can sever participation as well as social ties. One explained that for (international organisation), being banned from sport can feel like losing an entire friendship network: "It's like when a family moves and a child loses all their friends at school. Except in this case, it's not because you've moved, it's because of who you are." This perspective highlights that sport is not only a space for exercise but also for belonging, and that exclusion can isolate LGBTQI youth from their peers at a critical stage of social development.

For others, exclusion deepens existing struggles with mental health. One participant (trans woman, homoromantic, bisexual, 27, UK) described the distress of seeing anti-gender protestors repost her team's photos online: "I already don't especially love doing photos because sometimes it triggers my dysphoria. So seeing these photos being reposted... was really tough." This experience illustrates how online harassment compounds pre-existing dysphoria, intensifying the mental health pressures she already faces. It also shows that exclusion is not confined to in-person sporting spaces but extends into

digital arenas, where its impact on young people's well-being can be even more severe.

In some cases, the strain becomes so intense that it manifests physically. One interviewee (cis woman, bisexual, 27, Czechia) recalled how, after being excluded from playing and clashing with her coach and the team captains, she felt overwhelmed. The stress grew so extreme that it produced sudden physical symptoms: *"I had to walk about 200 meters to the bus station from my dorm. Just 200 meters. And I had to stop like two or three times. I physically couldn't handle how much my body just... couldn't move. I remember my veins and my fingers were swollen. So much. It was the weirdest thing I've ever experienced."* The distress of exclusion, compounded by direct conflict with team leaders, can spill over into the body, producing visible symptoms and underscoring the magnitude of the toll on young LGBTQI people's health.

46 → French National Union of Families and Friends of People with Mental Illness (UNAFAM). *Psycyclette 2025 – en route pour la 11e édition*, 14 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.unafam.org/sinformer/actualites/psycyclette-2025-en-route-pour-la-11eme-edition>

Box 7. Promising practice: Cycling to enhance mental health

One participant (Intersex, fluid, trans, queer, 30, France) highlighted 'Psycyclette'⁴⁶ as an inspiring example of how cycling can be used to promote mental health. Organised annually by the French National Union of Families and Friends of People with Mental Illness (UNAFAM), the event brings together people living with psychological difficulties, their families, and volunteers for a multi-day solidarity cycling tour across France. The aim is not competition but collective movement: riding side by side, participants share experiences, build trust, and support one another along the route. Each stop along the journey also serves as an opportunity to raise awareness in local communities, sparking dialogue about mental health. At its heart, Psycyclette uses cycling to improve mental well-being, rebuild confidence and reduce isolation. While not specific to LGBTQI youth, it was mentioned during interviews as a powerful model of how sport can directly safeguard mental health, and it suggests possible inspiration for initiatives tailored to LGBTQI communities.



Key findings

Visibility & affirmation

Key takeaways

→ Visibility of LGBTQI peers, coaches and athletes encourages participation, but its potential is limited because representation remains scarce, stereotyped or fragile.

→ LGBTQI youth must be able to decide if, when and how to share their identities in sport. Disclosure can be risky but also support self-discovery – and should never be forced by institutional rules.

→ Participation in sport strengthens LGBTQI youth's well-being by supporting mental health, building body confidence, fostering care and autonomy and enabling empowerment and reflection.

→ Affirming experiences in sport emerge through joyful play, recognition and reclaiming space, but remain fragile when belonging depends on performance or external conditions.

→ Queer-specific clubs offer lifelines of safety, confidence and community, often serving as gateways into wider sport – but lasting inclusion also requires change within mainstream environments.

→ LGBTQI youth are already acting as agents of change, resisting exclusion, supporting peers, creating new initiatives, and influencing mainstream sport and policy.



"Having references and role models in schools. Not necessarily famous people, even older students who can share their experiences and confidence."

Increasing the visibility of role models is vital to encouraging LGBTQI youth participation in sport

For many LGBTQI youth, the most powerful role models are not celebrities but peers they encounter in everyday life. One participant (cis man, gay, 26, Spain) explained: *"Having references and role models in schools. Not necessarily famous people, even older students who can share their experiences and confidence."* Another (intersex, fluid, trans, queer, 30, France) described how watching someone rollerblading at a local skatepark made them want to try it too. These stories highlight the importance of visibility in everyday environments. Close and relatable role models can powerfully open safe pathways into sport by showing that support and belonging are possible in the spaces where young people train, play and learn.

Coaches and mentors, leading by example, can also embody powerful representation. A young coach (genderqueer, gay, 25, Netherlands) explained: *"The biggest thing I do is representation. By being myself, I show them they can be fully themselves too. I wear jewellery, sometimes paint my nails, and I'm openly gay and genderqueer."* Such everyday visibility can shift cultural norms: when leaders and mentors express their identities openly, they show that LGBTQI identities are not only compatible with sport but integral to it. Yet the responsibility for visibility often falls on individuals who may not be safe or comfortable taking it on, especially when it entails personal risk.

Beyond grassroots environments, LGBTQI identities at professional and leadership levels remain largely absent, negatively portrayed or unevenly represented across the community. One interviewee (cis woman, bisexual, 28, Denmark) explained: *"There's not enough representation. And when we do have representation, it's normally either negative or, even if it's positive, it gets attacked by the media."* Another (trans woman, 24, UK) noted that when searching for trans women in sport, *"all you get is horrible media,"* in stark contrast to the occasional celebratory coverage afforded to gay men or lesbians. This lack of positive and

balanced representation at higher levels risks discouraging queer youth from aspiring to elite sport or leadership roles, while also limiting the presence of LGBTQI voices in governance – voices essential to advancing inclusive rules and policies.

Beyond these systemic patterns, queer young people also point to cases where visibility appears unpredictable and difficult to explain. In Türkiye, one participant (cis woman, bisexual, 27) reflected that the situation is “hard to understand,” describing the contrasting experiences of two women’s volleyball players. Melissa Vargas, a Cuban-born player, was widely celebrated for her talent – so much so that people in conservative areas handed out sweets in her name – and, as the participant noted, “everybody knows she is gay.” By contrast, another Turkish player who was openly gay faced constant public scrutiny and ultimately moved to Italy in search of greater freedom. These examples underscore the fragility of visibility: even within the same sport and identity group, it can shield some athletes while exposing others, depending on shifting social attitudes and contextual factors that remain difficult to predict.

Ensuring LGBTQI youth can choose if and how to come out in sport is essential to enable self-discovery and acceptance

Sport often plays a central role in how young LGBTQI people navigate their identities. For some, it is a space where disclosure feels risky and must be carefully managed. For others, it is where confidence and self-acceptance are nurtured. These contrasting experiences illustrate how sport can both restrict and empower, depending on the environment.

For a number of participants, sport is a space where LGBTQI identity must be concealed or disclosure carefully managed. One participant (cis woman, lesbian, 28, Ukraine) described her first experience of being outed: “*This was my first experience like that.*” Since then, she has chosen to remain cautious, relying on neutral expressions such as saying

47 → European Gay and Lesbian Sport Federation (EGLSF). EuroGames Lyon 2025. Lyon, 23-26 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.eglsf.info/category/euro-games/>

Box 8. Promising practice: Building networks to strengthen visibility of intersex and trans athletes

OII Europe is currently working with TGEU to develop a **network for intersex and trans athletes**. The initiative grew out of a bootcamp in Strasbourg, where athletes, including Caster Semenya, highlighted the urgent need for mutual support and exchange, which OII Europe described as “a cry for help from the athletes.” The network is being established initially across Africa and Europe, with the ambition to expand globally. Its aim is to connect intersex and trans athletes through chat groups, mailing lists, and in-person meetings, enabling them to share experiences from countries such as South Africa, Belgium, Germany, the United States, and beyond. While its primary purpose is solidarity and advocacy, the network also fosters greater visibility of intersex and trans athletes, challenging isolation and offering young people more diverse and connected role models.

At the European level, the **EuroGames**⁴⁷ provide one of the most visible platforms for LGBTQI athletes. Organised by the **European Gay and Lesbian Sport Federation (EGLSF)**, the latest edition (EuroGames Lyon 2025, held from 23 to 26 July) brought together around 5,000 athletes competing in 30 sports, alongside a rich cultural programme and community events. By combining competition with visibility, the EuroGames promote mixed-gender participation, have distinct categories for non-binary participants and allow athletes to self-identify their competition category. For LGBTQI youth, the event offers a powerful cross-border platform of visibility and solidarity, demonstrating that inclusion and belonging in sport are not only possible but actively celebrated.

she had “a partner.” Others adopt a more pragmatic stance, neither hiding nor emphasising their LGBTQI identity. One interviewee (trans woman, homoromantic, bisexual, 27, UK) explained: *“I don’t go out of my way to tell people. It’s just a fact about me. If it comes up, I won’t hide it, but I don’t bring it up unless it’s necessary.”* Similarly, another (intersex man, bisexual, 30, France) said: *“I talk to my friends about being intersex, but I don’t talk about it to anyone else. After all, it’s a club, it’s quite simple.”* These examples illustrate how strategies of concealment or backgrounding identity enable continued participation while limiting exposure to unwanted scrutiny or risk.

For others, sport plays a decisive role in affirming their queer identity, supporting self-discovery and fostering belonging. One participant (cis man, gay, 26, Denmark) reflected: *“Sports have been a big part of building my confidence and discovering who I am.”* Another (cis woman, lesbian, queer, 29, Malta) described rugby as a turning point: *“When I first joined rugby, it made a big difference for me. I met other queer people, and it really helped me discover and understand myself better at the time.”* Similarly, another (transfemme, queer, 21, Italy) recalled how coming out reshaped her friendships and participation: *“After coming out, I started connecting more with the girls in my class. I strengthened my relationships with them and started playing volleyball with them. I felt more comfortable.”* Together, these narratives demonstrate how sport can nurture identity formation by strengthening self-acceptance and building networks of queer belonging.

In some cases, sport goes even further, becoming a space for embodied experimentation where identities can be tested in practice. One interviewee (gender fluid, queer, non-binary, 27, Germany) explained: *“In my football team, I am totally open about my sexuality... I shared with some of my teammates that I have some questions about my gender identity.”* They described football

as a place to experiment with “body hair, clothing and the use of shared facilities.” Another (non-binary, trans masc, bisexual, queer, 23, Belgium) reflected on how skiing shaped their self-recognition: *“I started realising, ‘Oh... when that guy called me ‘he’, it felt particularly good. What’s that feeling?’ I think it shaped me in being confident and being queer.”*

These stories show that for many young LGBTQI people, sport becomes a space to experiment, to see themselves differently and to build confidence through embodied participation.

Sports can also be the catalyst for pivotal disclosure at home. One participant (gender fluid, non-binary, queer, 27, Germany), describing their first attempt to join a local football team, recalled: *“I came back home and said to my mom, ‘Look what I found, and I really want to go to a training.’ It was the first-ever women’s football team in my hometown that I was excited about joining. But my mom said no... We had a big fight and discussion for a month, which ended up eventually with me crying and coming out to my mom, and telling her that she was not allowing me to be myself.”* In this case, football became more than a sporting choice. It was the moment that connected personal exploration with family disclosure, turning participation into an act of self-assertion and identity affirmation beyond the team itself.

Several participants reflected on how their relationship with sport shifted over time, from a space of concealment in youth to one of queer liberation in adulthood. One interviewee (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) recalled once feeling compelled to “conform” to femininity, with sport reinforcing the pressure to hide. Today, however, they describe sport and their body as “a source of liberation.” Another (queer, 29, Austria) described a similar trajectory: while playing squash, his sexuality was an “open secret” confined to close friends, but he is now “completely unapologetic.” These accounts highlight how the role of sport in identity formation is dynamic, capable of moving from

restriction and conformity to liberation and affirmation over time.

Stakeholders emphasised that the challenges around disclosure in sport are also shaped by institutional practices. They stressed that participation in sport should never depend on disclosing one's LGBTQI identity. As one stakeholder (international organisation) asked pointedly: *"Do you have to go and tell everyone, 'This is XY, she's intersex?' Is that a forced coming out?"* The same stakeholder cautioned against proposals to create LGBTQI-only categories in sports competitions, warning that this would amount to a public outing rather than genuine inclusion: *"Just imagine you have the 100-metre freestyle with eight swimmers. And then the next event is another 100-metre freestyle with just one swimmer, labelled 'LGBTQI'... everyone's pointing their fingers at you. It just doesn't work."* Both examples show how institutional practices can amount to forced outing. True affirmation, stakeholders stressed, means recognising that sport is for everyone and ensuring all young queer people can participate without being singled out.

Harnessing sport's role in care and confidence is key to LGBTQI youth well-being

Earlier sections highlighted how exclusion harms LGBTQI young people's well-being, fostering anxiety, isolation and withdrawal. Yet participants also made clear that when inclusive participation is possible, sport can be profoundly beneficial. Beyond supporting identity exploration, it also contributes to mental health, confidence, physical care and broader forms of empowerment and reflection.

Many described sport as crucial for their mental health because it creates space to release pressure and restore balance. One participant (intersex, fluid, trans, queer, 30, France) explained: *"For me, sport is super important for mental health. It allows you to release energy. And when the weather's nice, feel the wind, the elements."* Another (non-binary, fluid, bisexual, queer, 22,

Italy) shared how skating helped regulate their emotions: *"Sometimes, I feel like I need to calm down and I go skating."*

Others highlighted how regular physical activity provides stability and release. One interviewee (cis woman, bisexual, 28, Denmark) described gymnastics as her way to "decompress," while another (trans woman, homoromantic, bisexual, 27, UK) noted the stark difference between being active and inactive: *"I feel a lot better when I'm active compared to when I can't play any sports."* Together, these reflections reveal the role of sport in supporting well-being, offering LGBTQI youth dependable ways to manage stress in daily life.

Sport's benefits also lie in building physical capability and confidence. One participant (cis man, gay, 26, Spain) explained:

"Sport didn't help me with the process of self-recognition of my orientation. But it did help me in other ways, mainly with feeling comfortable in my body, building confidence." Another (genderqueer, gay, 25, Netherlands) added: *"It didn't necessarily help me with my specific queer identities, but it definitely helped me become more confident in myself physically."* For LGBTQI youth who often

face pressures that undermine comfort in their own bodies, these experiences of strength and capability offer an alternative route to affirmation grounded in physical self-assurance.

For some, sport becomes a way of bodily care in the context of medicalisation and transition. One interviewee (trans woman, 24, UK) explained that starting hormones made her more conscious of long-term health: *"I developed a sense of needing to take care of the long-term health of my body because hormones can have long-term health effects."* Another (intersex man, bisexual, 30, France) linked sea kayaking to regaining control after years of imposed hormone therapy: *"I had it for a long time, imposed by doctors... Stopping created weight gain... and so, I want to compensate for that with sport."* In both cases, sport serves as a means to reclaim care and bodily autonomy, transforming it from a site of medical control into one of self-determination and agency.

"I was so happy. Even though I didn't bind my chest, they saw me as their kids' big brother."

For others, the physical confidence gained through sport becomes a foundation for empowerment. One participant (non-binary, 30, Malta) described how roller derby helped them live with dysphoria and strengthen their sense of self: *"Getting stronger and skating and getting better at the skills made me feel better in my body... It even gave me the courage to eventually get top surgery."* In this way, sport nurtures agency and self-determination, transforming bodily confidence into the courage to make deeply personal choices about one's body and identity.

One interviewee (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) offered a different perspective, describing sport as a catalyst for reflection and healing. They called walking *"a true reappropriation of my body, of public space."* Retracing routes once travelled by car became a way to rediscover nature, slow down and reflect on broader conditions: *"It allowed me to reflect on free time, productive time, work, capitalism, social relations, how we talk to each other, under what conditions, how much time we have for that."* Their experience highlights how well-being through sport extends beyond physical strength, fostering balance, connection and liberation.

Affirming spaces of joy and community are vital for LGBTQI youth to thrive in sport

The findings outlined earlier showed how exclusion harms LGBTQI youth, but participants also recalled moments when sport felt safe, joyful and validating. Affirmation takes different forms, from embodied experiences and recognition by others to the joy of play and the solidarity of community. At the same time, young queer people also stressed how fragile such moments can be when dependent on external conditions.

For some, affirmation is rooted in the embodied experience of sport itself. One participant (non-binary, trans mas, bisexual, queer, 23, Belgium) recalled how skiing created moments of gender validation: *"Because you're all bundled*

up, and people don't really see you. And especially freestyle skiing. It's not seen as a very feminine practice... But I felt very validated. And that was something that tipped me off, like: 'Oh, am I a cis woman? Hell no.'" The physical practice of skiing – its clothing, movements and cultural coding – aligned with their sense of self in a way that felt profoundly affirming.

For others, affirmation comes through recognition by those around them. One interviewee (trans man, bisexual, queer, 22, Türkiye) described training in a park without binding his chest, initially a source of fear. Yet the parents nearby recognised him warmly as *"their kids' big brother."* He remembered the moment with joy: *"I was so happy. Even though I didn't bind my chest, they saw me as their kids' big brother."* What might have been experienced as exposure instead became a moment of validation, underscoring how much affirmation depends on how others respond to bodies in motion.

For many participants, affirmation stems from the joy of play itself. Several described enjoying sport most in informal, non-competitive settings, where performance was not judged against strict standards. One participant (cis man, bisexual, 26, Spain) reflected that in sports like tennis or swimming, he could simply practise and enjoy himself without others judging whether he was *"good enough."* Another (cis man, gay, 26, Spain) said beach volleyball was most enjoyable *"not in a competitive way."* These reflections emphasise the value of low-pressure environments where sport is experienced as pleasure and connection, rather than as a test of worth or belonging.

Stakeholders reinforced this point. One (national organisation) described how their activities foster community and affirmation through fun, non-competitive play: *"We're all terrible in some sports, but it's not that serious. We're really just there to have fun."* They explained that their annual queer camp functions not only as a recreational space but also as a regional solidarity hub for youth from Eastern Europe, where rights are weaker. Another

(sports club) shared a similar philosophy: *"Our approach to sport is: it should be fun. It should only be fun. And nothing that we do is connected to performance. We don't count the goals."* Together, these accounts underscore how recreational, non-competitive spaces affirm LGBTQI youth by centering joy, solidarity and belonging over performance.

In some cases, affirmation emerges from reclaiming spaces once marked by exclusion or from starting later than expected. One interviewee (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) described joining a casual football group organised through friends: *"They invited me, and at that moment I really felt something. I felt good, I felt safe. It was a real moment of togetherness... There was something almost liberating. I really felt aligned."* Being able to play football after years of exclusion at school was not only enjoyable but profoundly affirming. Another participant (trans man, gay, queer, 29, UK) echoed this sense of recovery: *"It's really affirming to finally do something I've wanted to do for so long, and realise it's not too late to start."* These narratives highlight how returning to or re-entering sport can transform past exclusion into agency and belonging.

Yet these moments of affirmation are not always stable. Some participants pointed to how recognition could feel conditional, especially when it depended on performance. One interviewee (non-binary, fluid, bisexual, queer, 22, Italy) reflected that *"the way in which people in that environment treated me was too reliant on how good I was at playing and how nice I was to my teammates, even if they weren't nice to me."* Another (queer, 29, Austria) expressed similar frustration from their experience: *"If you're good at something, people like you more. That's been true across every sport I've played."* These stories expose the fragility of affirmation in sport, showing how belonging can become transactional, granted in exchange for skill or compliance rather than genuine acceptance.

Supporting queer-specific clubs is critical to building confidence, community and lasting engagement for LGBTQI youth, but inclusive initiatives must also extend beyond them

As discussed earlier, LGBTQI-specific sport environments are not automatically inclusive, with some young queer people, particularly trans youth, recalling experiences of exclusion within them. Yet many participants also described such spaces as lifelines, where participation was not conditional on hiding identity but where being LGBTQI was simply part of the community. As one interviewee (trans woman, homoromantic, bisexual, 27, UK) explained: *"As much as I enjoy football, the main reason I'm part of the team is the community aspect. It's great not having to constantly think, 'I'm trans, will I fit in?' Everyone there is trans. Everyone's in the same boat. We're just there to connect and have fun."* In this case, the removal of doubt or scrutiny allows sport to be enjoyed freely, without fear of judgment.

For others, queer inclusive groups foster confidence by breaking down stereotypes and making sport less intimidating. One participant (cis man, gay, 26, Denmark) recalled joining a cheerleading team at university: *"That experience really gave me confidence and showed me I didn't have to care about stereotypes."* Similarly, another interviewee (trans man, 27, Malta) described how playing on a mixed-gender football team created comfort: *"Because there were different people, you always fit in somewhere. That's what really made me feel comfortable about joining."* These experiences reveal how inclusive teams can transform diversity into a shared norm and make space for genuine self-expression.

Several participants also emphasised how queer-specific clubs build networks of belonging that extend far beyond sport. One participant (cis man, gay, 26, Denmark) described joining the international Frontrunners running network: *"It was completely different, much easier to meet people, very welcoming,*

"It's really affirming to finally do something I've wanted to do for so long, and realise it's not too late to start."



and I made friends I'm still close to today... One thing I love when I travel is checking if a city has a Front Runners branch. I'll message them and go for a run. It's a nice way to discover a new city and meet queer people." Others shared similar experiences of spillover community. One interviewee (non-binary, 30, Malta) described meeting some of their closest friends and future housemates through roller derby, while another (intersex, fluid, queer, 30, France) noted that cycling groups enabled them to "meet new people every day... with the same passion." These accounts show that queer clubs do more than provide safe spaces to play. They also cultivate enduring networks of solidarity, friendship and mutual support.

Stakeholders echoed these perspectives, stressing how clubs intentionally nurture community beyond sport itself. One (sports club) explained that members join primarily "*because of the community – that it's friendly, it's inclusive... They can just be themselves. And then we do sports, which is good, of course.*" Regular social events such as pub quizzes or karaoke further extend this sense of belonging. Another (sports club) highlighted how much of their work involves building solidarity: "*Through sport, a lot of things come up... It's a lot about trying to build some kind of community, some team feeling – that they're in it together.*" Camps, they added, play a particularly important role in belonging, as older youth often take younger ones "under their wings."

LGBTQI sports groups can also serve as gateways to broader participation. One interviewee (trans woman, 24, UK) explained that joining a trans-only weightlifting club gave her the confidence to access mainstream gyms and classes: "*It gave me the confidence to then go as a trans woman to regular gyms... I've also had the confidence to bring along a couple of people who were a bit shy.*" Another (trans woman, lesbian, 30, UK) described attending a trans-only swimming session but noted that even arriving an hour before the official inclusion slot was unproblematic:



"I actually arrived an hour before the official inclusion hour, and that was totally fine. I didn't get any bother or grief. It was good, I enjoyed swimming a lot." These accounts illustrate how targeted initiatives can build the skills, confidence and peer support that empower LGBTQI youth to participate in less predictable sporting environments. In this way, inclusive groups function as stepping stones toward wider engagement.

However, some stakeholders cautioned that while these alternative spaces are empowering, they may not automatically drive change within mainstream sport. One representative from an international organisation observed: *"We're seeing young people organising sport in alternative ways, placing LGBTQI identities at the heart of these initiatives. That's a really positive and promising trend."* At the same time, they noted that such parallel spaces, though vital, do not necessarily lead to systemic transformation: *"I think that lots of the new and emerging sports, and the different ways that people are organising, will inevitably be a threat to – and will drive change within – sport as an entity overall. Whether that leads to or improves the inclusion of LGBTQI young people? I remain somewhat ambivalent about that. I'm not sure."*

Acknowledging and empowering LGBTQI youth as agents of change is essential to transforming sport

As highlighted in the first chapter, LGBTQI youth are often absent from official decision-making, leadership, and governance in sport. Yet their lack of formal representation does not mean they lack influence. Across contexts, participants described resisting exclusion, supporting peers, creating new initiatives and even shaping mainstream structures. At the most personal level, LGBTQI youth resist scrutiny by redefining how they are seen. One interviewee (trans man, 27, Malta) explained turning stares at the gym into a source of empowerment: *"Oh, you want to stare? I'll give you something to stare at."* By wearing tank

48 → Atlasz Sport. Available at:

<https://www.atlaszsport.hu>

49 → Out in Slovenia. Available at:

<https://www.outinslovenija.com>

Box 9. Promising practice: Creating safe and social spaces through queer sports clubs

Hungary's **Atlasz Sport**⁴⁸ is the country's only LGBTQ+ multi-sport club and has been running for more than 20 years in Budapest. Entirely community-driven, the club organises activities ranging from volleyball, table tennis, swimming and running, while also providing a platform and community support for hiking groups and same-sex dance classes. Beyond sport, Atlasz also hosts community events such as pub tours, karaoke nights, and beach outings, making it as much a social hub as a sports club. Annual highlights like Sports Day and the sports camps provide open, low-barrier entry points where newcomers can try activities and meet others in a safe environment. For many members, the appeal lies not only in sport but in the chance to be themselves without fear of judgment, fostering confidence, belonging and community that extends well beyond the pitch or pool.

In Slovenia, **Out in Slovenia**⁴⁹ provides spaces where LGBTQIA+ people can participate in a wide range of sports and recreational activities, from hiking and social events to self-defence, dance, badminton and more. Its mission is to foster physical well-being, social connection and a sense of belonging. Last year, it co-organised 'Queer Sport Camp' as part of the EU-funded project Inclusive and Safe Sports Camp in Eastern Europe, together with partners in Slovakia, Poland, Croatia and Romania. The camp combined recreational sport with community-building and cross-border solidarity, offering a rare regional space for queer athletes to connect.

In Berlin, **Seitenwechsel** has long created inclusive pathways for young people. Its Mädchen* Sport project, running for over two decades, welcomes children aged 6-14 with a name marked by an asterisk to signal that it is not only cis girls who are included. Activities range from football and swimming to dance, with one project based in refugee accommodation centres to reach children who might otherwise be excluded. Almost all activities are free, lowering barriers to participation. For older youth, Seitenwechsel also runs MINTA* Sport, a newer initiative for queer young people aged 14-18, which organises activities such as climbing, canoeing and surfing in collaboration with local queer youth centres.

“What if I identify as non-binary? Where do I go?”

tops to accentuate his muscular arms, he reclaimed control over how his body was perceived. What could have been disempowering became a strategy of visibility and pride, illustrating how LGBTQI youth assert agency within sporting spaces.

Others extend this agency into acts of peer solidarity. One participant (trans woman, 24, UK) recalled helping another trans woman return to the gym by accompanying her to a class: *“Having someone on the inside who’s the same as you makes a big difference.”* Many echoed this sentiment, describing how going with a friend or partner made joining or staying in sport easier. One interviewee (intersex man, bisexual, 30, France) explained: *“It was a friend of mine who told me: ‘You can come.’ She was already there. If I had been alone, I would have hesitated.”* Similarly, another (cis man, gay, 24, Hungary) noted that going to the gym with his boyfriend *“makes a big difference. It keeps me motivated, so I haven’t given up.”* Together, these accounts show how peer solidarity reduces isolation, eases entry into sport, and supports sustained participation over time.

For many, agency also means creating new initiatives. One participant (intersex, non-binary, lesbian, 29, France) described the simple but powerful act of starting a casual football group to provide a safe and affirming space to play. Others developed more formal structures: one (gender fluid, queer, non-binary, 27, Germany) launched a FLINTA committee within their football club, while another (non-binary femme, queer, 20, Wales) helped establish a queer climbing club. These examples show that LGBTQI youth are not waiting for mainstream sport to change, but are actively building infrastructures where belonging and safety are assured.

Some also work within mainstream sport to shift culture from the inside. A coach (genderqueer, gay, 25, Netherlands) explained how they avoid gendered divisions when assigning children to groups and challenge colleagues’ habitual language: *“What if I identify as non-binary?”*

Where do I go?” Such interventions illustrate how LGBTQI youth can influence everyday practices, gradually nudging institutions toward inclusion.

Others carry their activism into research, representation and policy. One participant (cis woman, bisexual, 28, Denmark) used her role in a sports organisation to promote queer inclusion through podcasts, policy submissions and EU-level strategies. Another (gender fluid, queer, non-binary, 27, Germany) connected academic research on sport and gender with institutional engagement, serving as a student representative on their university’s sports committee. These stories demonstrate how young queer people’s actions in sport can influence wider conversations and decisions about inclusion.





Conclusions

Sport can offer LGBTQI youth health, confidence, and a sense of belonging, yet persistent barriers and inequalities continue to limit this potential. This study identifies recurring challenges alongside opportunities for change, summarised below:

Conclusions

Access & participation

→ **Inclusive policies need clarity.** Broad commitments to “inclusion for all” are not enough. When LGBTQI youth, particularly trans and intersex young people, are not explicitly mentioned in sport and equality strategies, their needs remain overlooked and actions lack accountability.

→ **Participation rules require reform.** Current eligibility and registration systems often work against inclusion. Procedures such as medical or legal gender checks continue to sideline trans and intersex youth, forcing many to seek exceptions or navigate exclusionary structures.

→ **Social expectations influence participation.** Deeply rooted gender norms in families, schools and clubs continue to dictate which sports feel “appropriate.” Many LGBTQI youth adapt or hide parts of themselves to fit in, while those who defy expectations face heightened scrutiny and exclusion.

→ **Location limits opportunity.** Access to inclusive sport is uneven across regions. While large cities often host LGBTQI-friendly initiatives, young people in smaller towns or rural areas are left with few options and must often travel far or create their own spaces to participate.

→ **Financial barriers persist.** Costs for membership, travel, and equipment prevent many LGBTQI youth from joining or staying in sport. Those with fewer resources, including trans, migrant and working-class young people, are disproportionately affected. Underfunded queer-led clubs also struggle to keep opportunities accessible.

→ **Spaces must feel safe.** A lack of stable, welcoming and gender-inclusive facilities remains a major obstacle. LGBTQI organisations face venue cancellations, limited availability or unsafe environments, making it difficult to guarantee the comfort and dignity essential for participation.



Conclusions

Safety & exclusion

→ **Changing rooms must be safe.** For many LGBTQI youth, especially trans and intersex young people, changing rooms remain the most intimidating and exclusionary environments in sport. Providing gender-neutral, private and affirming facilities is essential to participation without fear or humiliation.

→ **Safety is a wider issue.** Beyond changing rooms, gyms, pitches, swimming pools, and schools often feel unsafe due to local cultures, peer scrutiny or institutional neglect. When these spaces are not actively inclusive, LGBTQI youth withdraw or conceal parts of themselves to cope.

→ **Accountability must be shared.** Teachers, coaches, parents and teammates all influence how safe young queer people feel in sport. When discrimination is ignored, through silence, microaggressions or overt hostility, exclusion becomes normalised and unchallenged..

→ **Reporting systems need credibility.** Many young LGBTQI people do not report incidents because systems

are inaccessible, mistrusted or poorly handled. Ensuring confidential, transparent and responsive mechanisms is crucial for building trust and tackling discrimination.

→ **Queer spaces must be truly inclusive.** Even LGBTQI-focused teams and organisations can reproduce exclusion when trans and intersex youth are overlooked, tokenised or left unprotected. Inclusion requires ongoing reflection, dialogue and accountability within queer spaces themselves.

→ **Hostile climates heighten risk.** Anti-gender movements and political backlash have created a climate where visibility can feel unsafe. This rising hostility particularly endangers trans youth and pressures community initiatives to retreat from public life.

→ **Well-being depends on safety.** Exclusion and fear of discrimination have tangible effects on mental health, leading to anxiety, isolation and loss of connection. Protecting psychological safety must be recognised as a central part of inclusion in sport.



Conclusions

Visibility & affirmation

→ Representation makes a difference.

Seeing LGBTQI athletes, coaches and peers visibly engaged in sport helps young queer people imagine their own place within it. Yet representation remains limited, often fragile or stereotyped, highlighting the need for diverse and sustained visibility.

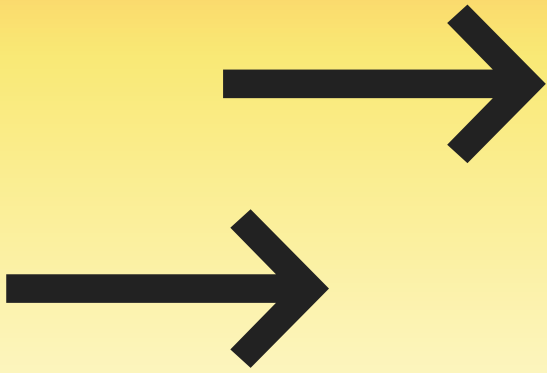
→ **Coming out must be a choice.** LGBTQI youth should have full control over if, when, and how they share their identities in sport. Coming out can foster self-understanding and connection but must never be imposed through institutional policies or expectations

→ **Participation nurtures confidence and well-being.** Taking part in sport supports mental health, body confidence and self-esteem. For many LGBTQI youth, these experiences build resilience, independence and a sense of care for themselves and others.

→ **Affirmation grows through joy and belonging.** Moments of recognition, playful expression and shared enjoyment make sport an affirming space. However, this sense of belonging remains fragile when it depends on performance or conditional acceptance.

→ **Dedicated queer spaces remain vital.** LGBTQI-specific teams and clubs continue to serve as crucial sources of safety, confidence and community. Yet sustainable inclusion also requires mainstream sports environments to become more welcoming and affirming.

→ **Young queer people drive change.** LGBTQI youth are already leading transformation, challenging norms, supporting one another, launching new initiatives, and shaping sport and policy from within. Enabling their leadership is key to lasting inclusion.



Recommendations

Creating inclusive, safe, and affirming pathways for LGBTQ! youth in sport requires coordinated action at every level, from policymakers who set the frameworks, to institutions that implement them, to schools and youth organisations that shape everyday experiences. Only through cross-sectoral collaboration between these actors can systemic barriers be dismantled and meaningful change achieved. The following recommendations, drawn from the study's key findings, outline concrete steps each actor can take to turn commitments into practice.

Recommendations

Policymakers

→ **Integrate LGBTQI youth inclusion explicitly into national and EU sport, equality and youth strategies**, with measurable targets (e.g. share of federations with inclusive policies, % of schools with inclusive PE guidelines).

→ **Guarantee protection for trans and intersex youth by reforming eligibility and administrative rules** in line with IOC (2021) and Council of Europe standards on fairness and non-discrimination.

→ **Distinguish grassroots and elite contexts when designing sport rules**, so that community and youth sport are not restricted by elite-level policies.

→ **Engage LGBTQI youth directly in policymaking** through partnerships with civil society organisations or advisory mechanisms, ensuring their experiences inform governance.

→ **Mandate inclusive design** for new and renovated sport facilities and infrastructures, prioritising safe, gender-neutral and accessible changing areas in guidance to schools, clubs, and municipalities.

→ **Provide stable, long-term funding for grassroots and LGBTQI-led sport initiatives**, beyond short-term cycles (e.g. through CERV or Erasmus+).

→ **Strengthen data collection and monitoring on LGBTQI youth participation and experiences in sport**, ensuring intersectional disaggregation by gender identity, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, socio-economic background, migrant status and disability.



Recommendations

Sports institutions

(federations, clubs, facilities)

→ **Mainstream LGBTQI youth inclusion across federation governance, safeguarding and competition rules**, moving from voluntary charters to binding requirements that ensure accountability.

→ **Adopt fair and transparent eligibility rules for trans and intersex youth** based on self-identification and rights-based principles.

→ **Enforce anti-discrimination policies** with clear reporting systems, sanctions and follow-up procedures.

→ **Create structured participation channels for LGBTQI youth**, such as advisory boards, youth councils or collaboration with inclusive grassroots organisations.

→ **Guarantee access to safe and inclusive facilities**, including gender-inclusive changing spaces and flexible arrangements for privacy and comfort.

→ **Reduce financial barriers** through sliding-scale fees, equipment-sharing or solidarity funds.

→ **Provide mandatory training on LGBTQI inclusion for coaches, referees and staff** within licensing and continuing education frameworks.

→ **Integrate mental health support** by connecting clubs to counselling services and training staff to identify and respond to distress.

→ **Expand provisions of FLINTA- and trans-specific activities** alongside inclusive mainstream teams to ensure safe and affirming participation options.

→ **Increase outreach beyond capital and urban hubs**, ensuring queer people in rural areas have access to inclusive sports opportunities.

→ **Promote positive visibility** by featuring LGBTQI athletes and allies in communications and public campaigns.



Recommendations

Educational institutions

(schools, PE teachers, universities)

→ **Integrate LGBTQI youth inclusion throughout PE curricula and school sport guidelines**, from language use to team organisation and non-gendered activities.

→ **Adopt inclusive participation policies** that allow freedom of uniform choice, flexible grouping and open access for trans, non-binary and intersex youth.

→ **Require inclusive infrastructure** (e.g. gender-neutral changing rooms and toilets) in all new or renovated school facilities.

→ **Ensure accountability** through safe, confidential reporting mechanisms for discrimination or harassment.

→ **Provide mandatory teacher training on SOGIESC diversity and inclusive pedagogy** to prevent exclusion.

→ **Incorporate anti-bullying and anti-discrimination modules in PE**, explicitly addressing homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, intersexphobia, racism and ableism.

→ **Run awareness-raising workshops and campaigns with students on diversity and inclusion in sport** (e.g. peer-led initiatives or campaigns during Pride Month).



Recommendations

Youth organisations

→ **Build organisational capacity on LGBTQI youth inclusion in sport** by training staff and volunteers, sharing good practices and using existing toolkits and resources.

→ **Create and sustain LGBTQI-inclusive sport groups**, especially in rural and underserved areas, to offer safe entry points where mainstream provision is lacking.

→ **Support informal and peer-led initiatives**, from local meetups to online groups, as valid and accessible forms of participation.

→ **Develop peer-led support and buddy systems** to help young queer people join teams or return to sport with confidence.

→ **Equip LGBTQI youth as advocates** by offering training in leadership, communication and policy engagement.

→ **Lower financial barriers** through solidarity funds, travel bursaries and equipment-sharing schemes.

→ **Build cross-border youth networks** to connect young LGBTQI youth, amplify role models and share inclusive sport practices.



From the Sidelines to the Playing Field: LGBTQI Youth Perspectives on Inclusion in School and Community Sport

IGLYO — The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organisation is the world's largest network dedicated to LGBTQI young people and their rights. We represent the voice of over 135 Member Organisations in more than 40 countries across the European region. We advance the rights of LGBTQI young people, advocate for their equality and inclusion, empower their voices, and connect them across borders through international events, capacity-building training, thematic research, advocacy, awareness-raising campaigns, network building, regranting, and intersectional community dialogues.

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