

Dr. Kaari Mattila, Secretary-General

Finnish League for Human Rights, 30.5.2024

Your Excellencies, Deputy Secretary-General Bjorn Berge,
Minister of Youth, Sports and Physical Activity Sandra Bergqvist
Distinguished participants,

Thank you very much Council of Europe and the organisers for the invitation to address this annual EPAS Governing Board meeting to discuss human rights in Sports. Thank you for insightful speeches Deputy Secretary-General Berge and Minister Bergqvist. It is valuable that we are here together. For human rights to flourish in sports, joint work among Council of Europe, member states, sports organisations and civil society organisations is necessary.

Dear delegates, when did you last come across with news related to human rights and sports? Was it about a 16-year old girl who was sexually assaulted by her own coach. When she finally told someone, instead of protecting her and holding the coach legally accountable, she was told: “If you want to be in the next national team, you better shut up.”

Or did you hear about all those players who demanded action on racism, over and over, but this never led to any sanctions.

Distinguished participants, today I have a strong message to you. Without protection of human rights, the world of sports, so dear to us and billions of others, will not be able to fulfill its mission and values.

But I also have a more empowering message: If sports organisations integrate human rights to what they do - as outlined in the European Sports Charter and in international human rights conventions - the sports world will be able to bring about joy and well-being it strives for all of us out there.

As elsewhere in our societies, various human rights violations take place in sports in all countries. While more research is needed, data shows that sexual harassment of both child and adult athletes is rampant. Women athletes face gendered discrimination at all levels of sports structures. The psychological and physical maltreatment of children is concerningly common.

There is racism and there is discrimination of, among others, disabled persons, sexual and gender minorities and migrant athletes. Moreover, sports bodies sometimes limit the athletes' freedom of speech.

Dear participants, how do we change the situation? And what will make sports associations jump into the wagon of human rights?

To start with the most evident: it is the obligation of sports associations to oversee that human rights are respected in their activities, and to react when they are violated. This is not something voluntary. Second, through protecting human rights athletes will feel safer and respected. Which sports club would not want just that?

Finally, by ending discrimination, sports will reach diverse populations, and even the results are likely to improve: Faster! Higher! Stronger!

Now, let me tell you briefly of what we have done in Finland. As a human rights organisation we focus on advocacy, human rights education and

campaigning. We begun our work within sports about five years ago, using all those methods. First, we discussed extensively with sports people and organisations. Rewardingly, they were enthusiastic to do something together. We realised that there was a massive need for basic human rights education, and that's what we embarked ourselves on, with the support of the Ministry. So far, we've provided human rights education for more than 600 people from national and local sports organisations. The feedback has been excellent and encouraging, while many have said: "Why have I not received any such training before?"

At least half of Finland's population is active in sports as athletes, coaches, parents, and as spectators. So to boost awareness, we created the campaign "*Don't Break the Game*". It has received major public attention. So far, over 300 sports and civil society organisations joined in supporting the awarded Campaign.

The top athletes who provided their faces and voices to the campaign continue to be active with us. Many were eager to learn and do more on human rights, for which we established the platform "Team Human Rights" with 15 athletes.

Through persistent work - we start to see real changes. This brings us hope. In addition to increased knowledge, concrete results include the integration of children's rights and human rights in guiding policy documents of the Gymnastics Association and the Finnish Olympic Committee. Impact can gradually be seen in coaching guidelines. Such promising steps need to be followed through and scaled up.

To conclude; I want to highlight the importance of bringing human rights experts to the national foras of sport ethics as equal stakeholders. For

doing precisely this I salute Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture. Lasting changes, however, have to come from within the sports ecosystem. This can happen, once there is a critical mass of sports leaders who understand the groundbreaking difference human rights will make to Sports.

Distinguished participants, I've tried to outline some possible actions for you to take home, by showing what we've done in Finland with the Ministry, sports organisations and a bunch of incredible athletes, true human rights champions. Now is the momentum to make the Council of European Sports Charter a reality. Merci beaucoup. I Thank You.