COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR SPORT

Your Serene Highness, Secretary General, Ministers, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends,

On behalf of the International Paralympic Committee, it is a pleasure to be with you today to discuss safer and healthier sport for all children.

I stand before you as Vice-President of the International Paralympic Committee, but also as a girl who was born with a disability. As a girl that from an early age, I was told what I could not do. What I should not try. Who I could never be. But sport gave me the power to rewrite those expectations.

I started swimming at an early age, and at fifteen I represented Portugal at my first Paralympic Games. Sport took me to four Paralympic Games. But more important, Sport gave me strength, confidence, a sense of belonging, and the belief that my disability did not define my limits. But I also know how much of my pathway depended, at the time, on the adults and the system around me.

As Ministers responsible for sport, you understand more than most the role sport can play in shaping young lives. Sport is a powerful tool for education, inclusion, health, and personal development. Through sport, children build strength, coordination, and confidence. They learn teamwork, respect, discipline, and resilience. They experience both success and disappointment, and through those experiences develop the skills needed to navigate challenges throughout their lives.

Beyond the physical benefits, sport also plays an essential role in supporting mental health and wellbeing. Participation helps children develop self-esteem, build friendships, and gain a sense of belonging. It teaches them how to work with others, manage setbacks, and strive towards goals. At a time when many young people are facing growing social pressures, these benefits have never been more important.

For children with disabilities, the impact of sport is even more profound.

Sport fosters independence, builds social connections, challenges stereotypes, and demonstrates that disability should never define a person's potential. Whether on a playground, in a school gymnasium, or on a sports field, sport opens doors, creates opportunities, and transforms lives.

Yet despite these benefits, many children with disabilities face significant barriers to sports participation.

One in three children with disabilities still have no access to physical education. In developing countries, 90 percent of children with disabilities remain excluded from education altogether, limiting their access to learning but also to sport and physical activity.

These barriers are physical, including inaccessible facilities, unsuitable equipment and inadequate transport. They are also social, including discrimination, exclusion, and low expectations. When children are told that sport is not for them, they lose far more than the opportunity to play. They lose opportunities to develop skills, build friendships, and experience achievement.

We must change this reality.

Inclusion cannot be an optional extra; it must be embedded in sports policies, programmes, schools, clubs, and governing bodies. Governments have a crucial role in setting standards, allocating resources, and ensuring that every child has a meaningful opportunity to participate.

At the same time, increasing participation alone is not enough.

Sport reflects wider society, and its inequalities and vulnerabilities can be reproduced within sporting environments. We know that children and adults with disabilities face a significantly higher risk of interpersonal violence than the general population. Children with intellectual impairments are often particularly vulnerable. Evidence also shows that children with disabilities are not immune from abuse, harassment, bullying, neglect, or exploitation within sport itself.

Safeguarding must therefore be central to every policy and programme for children's sport.

Every child must be able to train, compete, and play in an environment that is safe, supportive, and respectful. Parents must have confidence that sports organisations have effective safeguarding policies, appropriately trained coaches, and clear procedures for responding to concerns.

For children with disabilities, safeguarding measures must be particularly thoughtful and inclusive. Protection systems must be accessible. Reporting mechanisms must be easy to understand and use. Most importantly, children with disabilities must be empowered to have a voice and be heard.

As Ministers, you can help drive this change by making inclusion and safeguarding priorities across the entire sporting system. This means investing in accessible facilities and adapted equipment, strengthening safeguarding frameworks, supporting education and training for coaches and volunteers, and ensuring that policies are implemented, monitored, and reviewed.

Governments cannot do this alone. Schools, sports organisations, families, communities, and athletes all have a role to play. Together, we must build a culture of care, accountability, and respect in which every child is valued and protected.

When inclusion and safeguarding work together, sport becomes far more than physical activity. It becomes a powerful platform for education, personal development, social connection, and lasting social change.

The children participating in sport today are our future leaders, teachers, business owners, parents, and citizens. The experiences they have in sport will shape the people they become and the societies they will build. When children are given the opportunity to play, participate, and thrive in safety, everyone wins.

Change starts with sport!

Thank you.

Leila Marques Mota