



LEADERSHE SPORT PROJECT

GENDER INEQUALITY THROUGH SPORT

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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON GENDER (IN)EQUALITY THROUGH SPORT

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Final report on the perceptions of gender equality in the sports industry

Background of the survey

Women have been historically excluded from sport, and even though there have been great improvements on the path to gender equality in sport, traditional gender roles, as well as inequality in access to participation in certain sports and especially in access to leading roles and decision-making positions in sports, still prevails. Women in sport are often deprived of opportunities for team leading, educating, and other higher positions. In 2023, the Sport Integrity Global Alliance (SIGA) conducted research on female decision-makers within the International Federations, where an exceptionally small number of only 26.9% of female leaders was found. Moreover, women make up only 10% of trainees in the Olympic Games.¹

Gender-based violence in sports and inadequate media reporting on women's sports also significantly contribute to this issue. Women in sport are often underrepresented in the media, and when they are, this coverage frequently reinforces gender stereotypes. All of this contributes not only to women's position in sports but also to the public perception of the public on women in sport and gender (in)equality in sport.

This survey aimed to showcase the public's perceptions of gender equality in the sports industry and how they differ between the four partner countries, Serbia, Denmark, Hungary, and North Macedonia. It is a product of the 18-month-long LeaderSHE project, implemented by the Handball Club Belgrade, from Serbia.

The LeaderSHE project was created to target issues of gender inequality in sport, as there was a noticeable absence of non-formal education among young athletes, especially women. Implementation of the project was funded and supported by the Erasmus+ Network and the European Union.

Through this project, workshops on leadership for women and women athletes, women trainers, and women in sport studies have been implemented in order to

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<https://siga-sport.com/press-releases/women-remain-underrepresented-in-sports-leadership-despite-some-progress-siga-survey/>



empower and develop adequate knowledge and skills required for future leaders within sport.

After the practical trainings, this survey has been implemented in order to acquire better insight into different practices and public opinions on obstacles that women face through sport.

Through this survey, data was collected from people coming from different age groups, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as different socio-economic statuses of their countries.

It was conducted by a partner organisation in each country and two partner organisations in Serbia, one from the capital of Belgrade and another from the southern city of Nish in order to examine any possible regional distinctness.

The five organisations partnering for the Leadershe project were:

1. Handball Club Belgrade (Serbia) - based in the capital of Serbia.
2. Karate club Nish (Serbia) - based in the south of Serbia, in the city of Nish.
3. Yanta Volley (N. Macedonia) - volleyball club based in North Macedonia.
4. Budapest Association for International Sport (BAIS) - a sport organisation, based in Budapest, Hungary.
5. Danish Youth Team (DYT) - a non-governmental organisation, based in Aarhus, Denmark.

Socio-economic factors vary significantly between Belgrade and Southern Serbia which can impact both the extent of gender (in)equality and the citizen's perceptions of it. The Report on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Serbia for 2019 by FemPlatz² indicates that the general poverty rate and the unemployment rate of women are highest in the region of South and East Serbia and the lowest in the Belgrade region. The two regions in Serbia have a noticeable disparity in socio-economic status, education, employment opportunities, sport opportunities, etc. Therefore, this survey aimed to examine any possible differences and provide equal representation across the country.

As the survey was conducted in two Western Balkans countries and two European Union member states, it examined public opinions and public awareness of gender inequality in sport in countries with quite different existing policies targeting this issue.

² https://www.femplatz.org/library/reports/2020-08-10_PreneraZena.pdf



Denmark is the second-rated country in the EU when it comes to gender equality, with its ranking being highest in the domain of work, according to the Gender Equality Index, research done by the European Institute for Gender Equality.³

Contrary to this, Hungary is ranked 25th, being among the EU countries with the lowest score. Serbia became the first country outside the EU to launch this research back in 2016, scoring quite low, similar to Hungary, however, showing slow but steady progress in improving gender equality each year. Even though women face similar challenges in all Western Balkan countries, North Macedonia ranked significantly higher than Serbia in this research, scoring 62 points out of a 100 in 2019 and 64.5 points in 2022, and Serbia scoring 55.8 in 2018, and 58.0 in 2021.

Among the views examined by this survey was the perception of public opinion on the association of certain sports to either women or men, the gender pay gap in sports and other aspects of economic disparity between men and women in sport, the professional and economic opportunities for male as opposed to female athletes, as well as the gender-specific obstacles they may face in their career. The final part of the survey tackled gender stereotypes in sports.

Role of LeaderSHE project

The LeaderSHE project stands as a pivotal initiative within the broader landscape of endeavours aimed at combating gender inequality in the sports industry. Recognizing the persistent challenges and disparities faced by women in sports across the partner countries of Serbia, Denmark, Hungary and North Macedonia, the LeaderSHE project developed a set of objectives and a commitment to driving a positive change.

Objectives of the LeaderSHE project:

- To empower female athletes by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to excel not only as athletes but also as future leaders within the sports industry;
- To advancing gender equality in sports by challenging gender stereotypes, correcting economic disparities, and advocating for inclusivity;
- To raise awareness among athletes, coaches, administrators, and the broader public about the importance of gender equality in sports and its far-reaching impact;

³ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2022/HU>



- To provide resources, support and opportunities for women to pursue leadership roles, coaching positions, and careers within the sports sector;
- To incorporate an extensive survey focused on gathering insights into public perceptions of gender equality in sports and provide valuable information about areas of concern, potential solutions and actions step.

By gathering insights from a diverse group of respondents across age groups, backgrounds and countries, the survey aims to achieve several key outcomes:

- It provides an in-depth understanding of how the public perceives gender equality in the sports industry, allowing us to pinpoint areas where interventions are most needed,
- It serves as a baseline assessment of the current state of gender equality perceptions, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities ahead.

The data collected through the survey forms the basis for data-driven solutions, enabling us to tailor our efforts to address specific issues identified by respondents. Over time, the survey can be and will be used to measure progress and evaluate the impact of gender equality initiatives in sports.

Methodology and respondent's demographic

The following findings are collected from a total of 296 respondents, a third being male (33.96%) and the remaining (64.91%) being female with a small percentage of respondents (1.13%) who would rather not state their gender. The survey was conducted in a two month period, from February to March 2023.

A vast majority of the respondents were youth, with over 75% of them being younger than 35 years old. The most common age group was 18 to 24 years old (40.75%), followed by 25 to 34 years old (29.81%) and 35 to 44 years old (16.60%). Less represented were people over 45 years old (7.92%) and under 18 years old (4.91%).

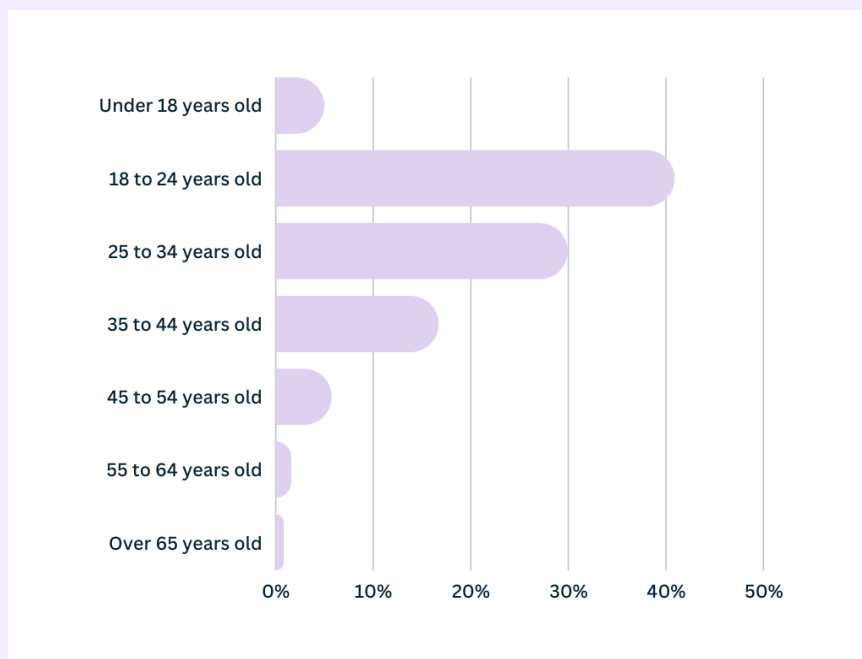


Chart 1. Age range

When it comes to the respondents' country of origin, 41.55% of answers came from Serbia, followed by 17.57% from Denmark, 44 respondents (14.86%) coming from Hungary, the same as respondents originating from other countries (14.86%), out of which a considerable number coming from Romania, and 11.15% respondents from North Macedonia.

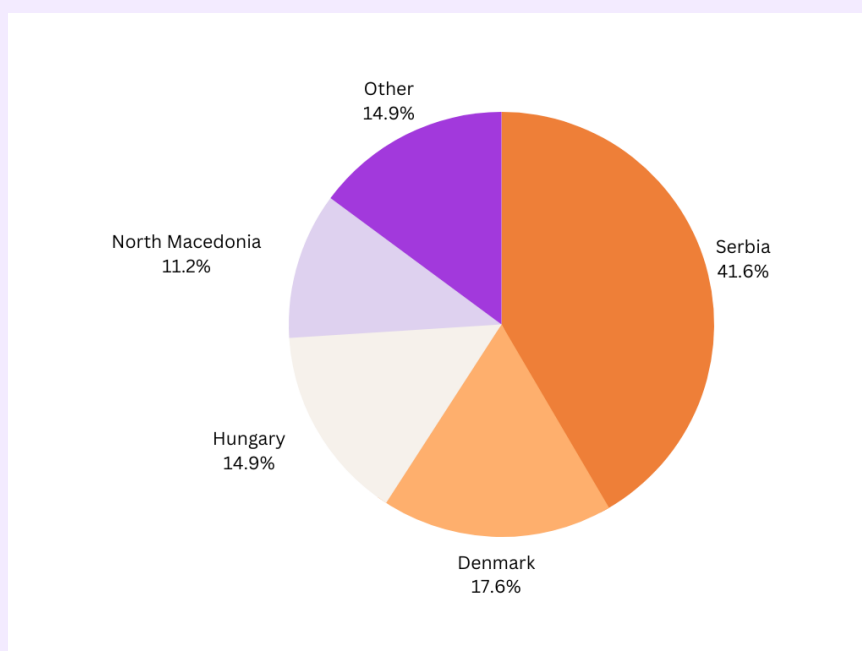


Chart 2. Country of origin



As this survey aims to showcase the attitudes and opinions of people on gender equality in sports or lack thereof, it is insightful that the professional background of respondents is quite balanced. Slightly more than half of respondents have a professional background in sports or sports-related industries or plans to work in the industry in the future (55.03%), and somewhat less than a half have not had any work experience in sports-related activities (40.27%) and are not planning to.

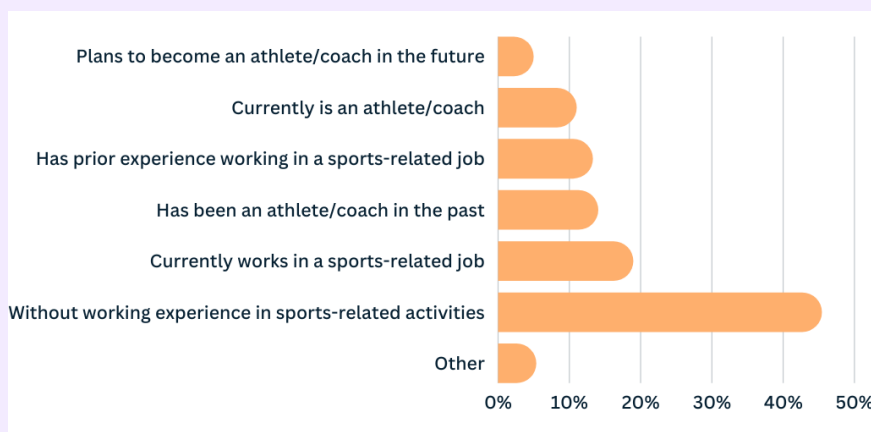


Chart 3. Professional background

Furthermore, when it comes to participation in sports or physical activity, a third of respondents (33.2%) are mostly inactive, saying they rarely or never participate in physical activity, and a vast majority (66.8%) are active.

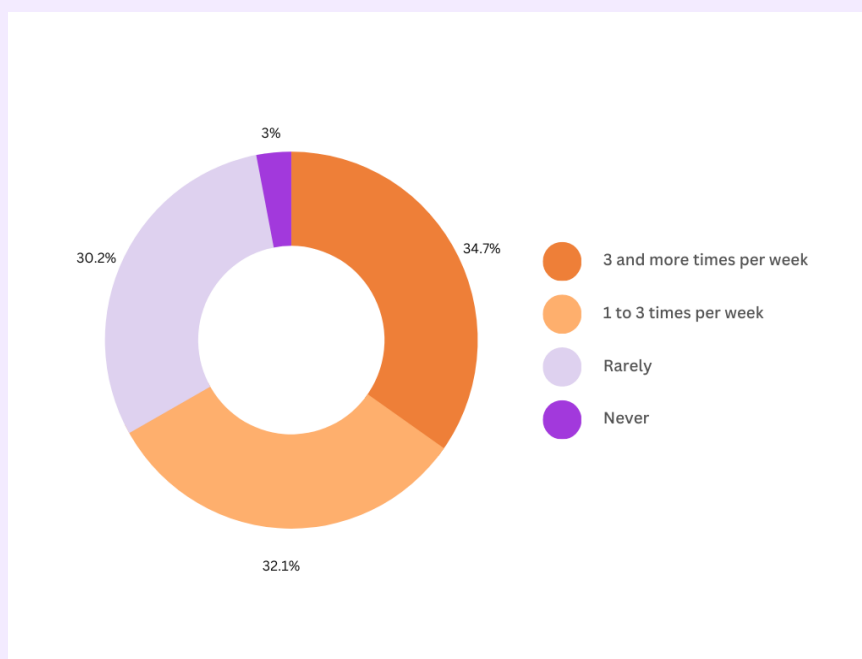


Chart 4. Physical activity



Analysis of the perceptions of gender equality in the sports industry

This analysis can be divided into four main topic categories, addressing the respondent's perception of mainstream views in their societies regarding the association of certain sports to either men or women, the gender-based economic disparities in sport, and the disbalance in power of men and women in the sport industry and the final category examining gender stereotypes among respondents.

1. Perception of public opinion on the association of certain sports to a certain gender

The respondent's beliefs on whether certain sports are primarily associated with men were divided, with somewhat more than half (56.23%) saying this is not true, but many (43.77%) disagreeing. When asked which sports are associated with men, respondents mostly listed football and different martial arts, such as wrestling and boxing, but also water polo, basketball, hockey, tennis, and many others. A few respondents mentioned almost all sports seem to be primarily associated with men, except for dance and other artistic sports, such as synchronised swimming or figure skating.

Respondents were also asked to name sports that they believe are inclusive for everyone, as assumed by the general population, regardless of gender. They listed many different sports, however, among the most common were tennis, volleyball, and handball, followed by swimming, running, and athletics. Interestingly, many respondents mentioned sports such as basketball and football, conflicting with their previous answers. Distinct differences among respondents from different countries were not noticeable when exploring associations of certain sports to different genders.

2. Perception of public opinion on the economic disparity between women and men in sports

This survey also explored the beliefs of respondents on whether there is a gender pay gap in sports-related professions and if there is, how present it is. The gender pay gap refers to the difference between the earnings of men and women. The data



provided by Eurostat on the gender pay gap indicate that “Working women in the EU earn on average 12.7% less per hour than men.”⁴

Generally, over half of respondents (52.45%) stated that the gender pay gap is highly present in sports, almost a fourth that it is not so present (23.02%), and only a small percentage that it is not present at all (7.17%). It is also important to note that a substantial number of respondents (17.36%) did not have an opinion on this. The gender pay gap in sports was mostly recognised among respondents from Hungary, where almost 60% stated they believe that the gender pay gap is highly present in sport-related professions. This finding is intriguing when compared to Eurostat's data that suggests Hungary is among the EU countries with the highest pay gap, being 17.3%.

In Denmark, as the main factor that contributes to the gender pay gap in sports, respondents recognised fewer sponsorship opportunities for female athletes. In Hungary and Serbia, the main contributors are societal biases and discrimination, and in North Macedonia, it is the lack of investments in women's sports. Nevertheless, overall, respondents recognise these three factors together with a lower revenue generated by women's sports, as almost equally important factors that contribute to the pay gap in sports.

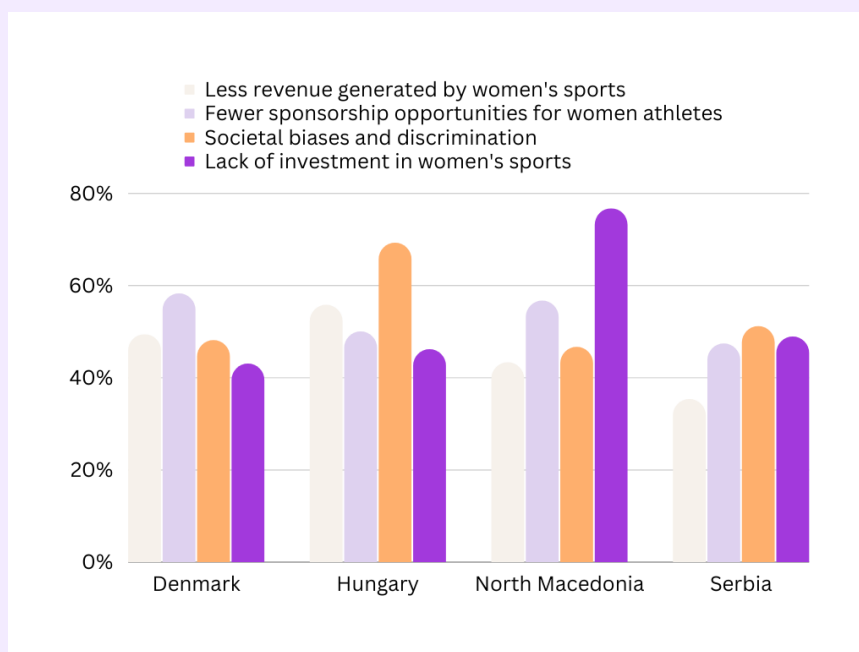


Chart 5. Perception of factors contributing to the gender pay gap⁵

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics

⁵ Percentages shown on this graph refer to the percent of respondents who believe a certain factor contributes to the gender pay gap. This was a multiple choice question and respondents chose all factors they believe are contributing to the gender pay gap.



A vast majority of respondents believe that the gender of an athlete affects the sponsorships they receive with only 6.79% disagreeing with this. Around half of the respondents (51.7%) believe that sponsorships differ very much or completely based on the gender of an athlete and 41.5% differ somewhat or slightly. In the answers to this question, there were evident differences in country-specific data, showing that in North Macedonia over two-thirds of respondents think that sponsorships differ very much or completely when they are appointed to male or female athletes, and in Denmark, only 41.77% agree with this. Here it is important to note Denmark's aforementioned ranking on the Gender Equality Index, taking the second-highest place in the EU.

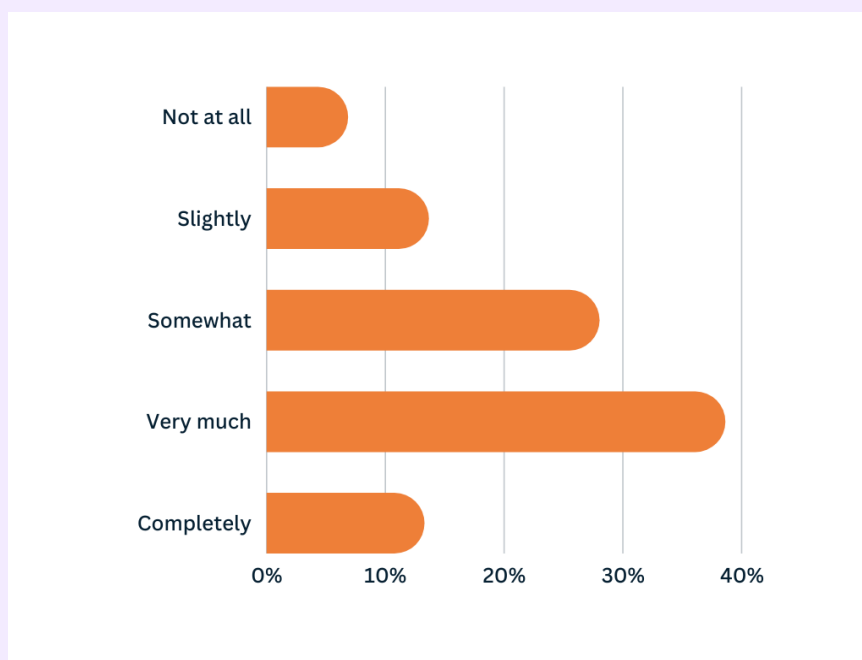


Chart 6. Perception of the extent to which the received sponsorships differ based on the gender of an athlete

Almost all respondents believe that women's sports teams receive less funding compared to men's sports teams, with only 4.15% stating this is not at all true. A substantial percentage of 61.89% believe women's teams receive less funding is very much or completely true and a third (33.96%) believe this is somewhat or slightly true. Responses from Denmark here also stand out with only 46.84% stating this is very much or completely true, whereas in other partner countries, this varies from 65 to almost 70% of respondents.

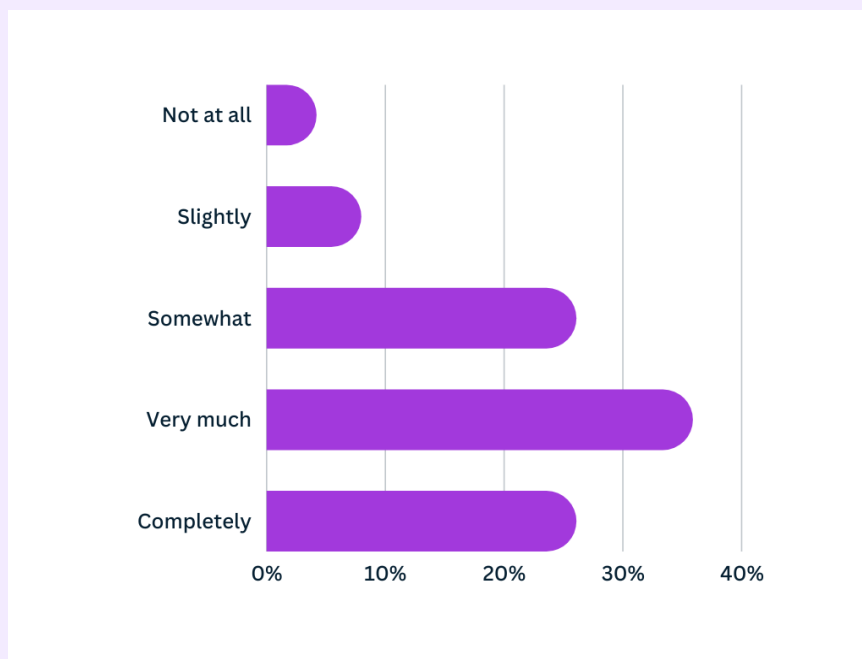


Chart 7. *Perception of the extent to which women's sport teams receive less funding compared to men's teams*

3. Perception of public opinion on the disbalance in power between women and men in sports

When asked about the availability of opportunities for women to hold leadership or coaching roles at the top level of sports organisations in comparison to that for men, 75.85% of all respondents agreed that there should be more institutional and programmatic support for local sports clubs in developing and promoting women's roles in sports. This varies significantly between Serbia and Hungary where around 78% of respondents agree and Denmark and North Macedonia where slightly less, around 68% of respondents, share this opinion. Nevertheless, 21.89% of all partner countries believe that there are enough opportunities for women leaders in sports and that holding these positions only depends on someone's personality and work performance.

As three main obstacles keeping women from becoming leaders in sports management, most respondents recognise the underrepresentation of women in the specific sport discipline, traditional family roles such as raising children, and the lack of recognition from the current leadership in a specific sport. Many also see the lack of aspiration to become leaders and economic obstacles as reasons that block women from taking higher positions in sports management. Here, the opinions of respondents do not vary regarding their country of origin, as well as when it comes to the three main reasons for continuous gender inequality in sports. The strict beliefs



society has about the differences between male and female athletes, the underrepresentation of female athletes in the media, and the disinterest of the public in women's sports are recognised as the main reasons for gender inequality in sports and sports-related industries.

4. Gender stereotypes in sport

Most respondents (70.19%) would have no preference regarding the gender of their or their child's coach. Still, 16.23% say they would prefer a female coach, and 13.58% a male coach.

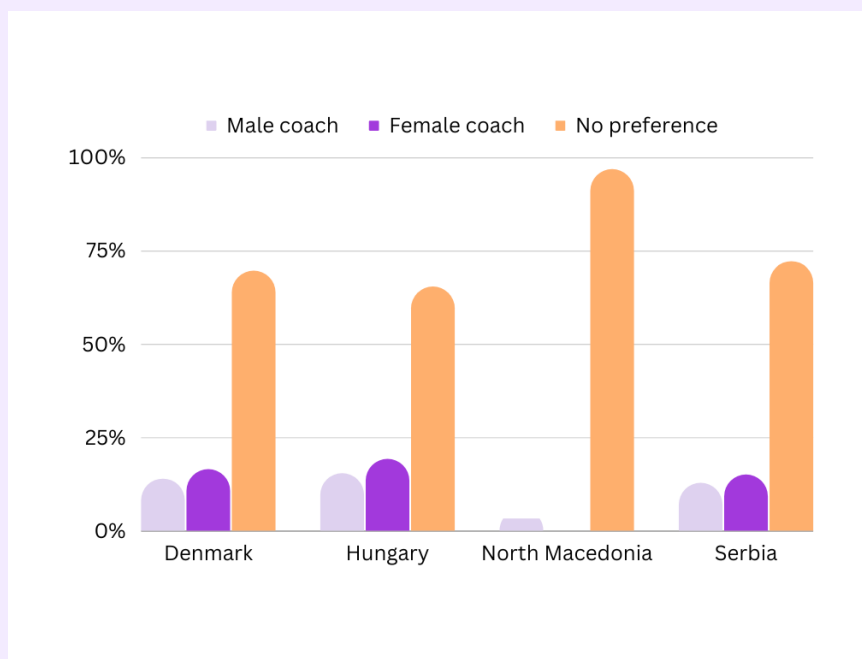


Chart 8. *Preference for the gender of the coach*

When asked about their attitudes towards a woman refereeing a men's sports game, a vast majority, 54.72 percent would support it, 37.74% stay neutral and only 7.55% would oppose this. Answers to this question were quite different depending on the country of origin.

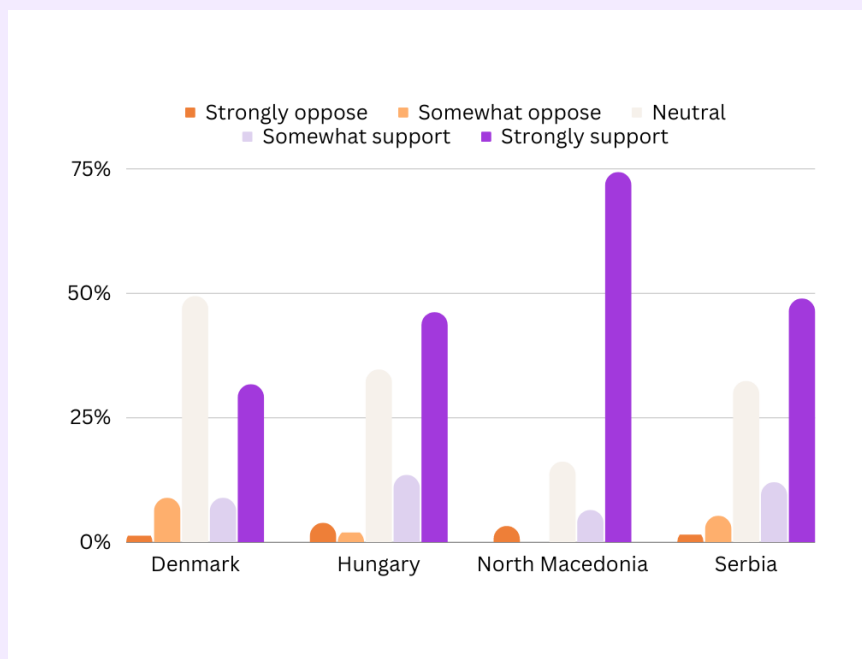
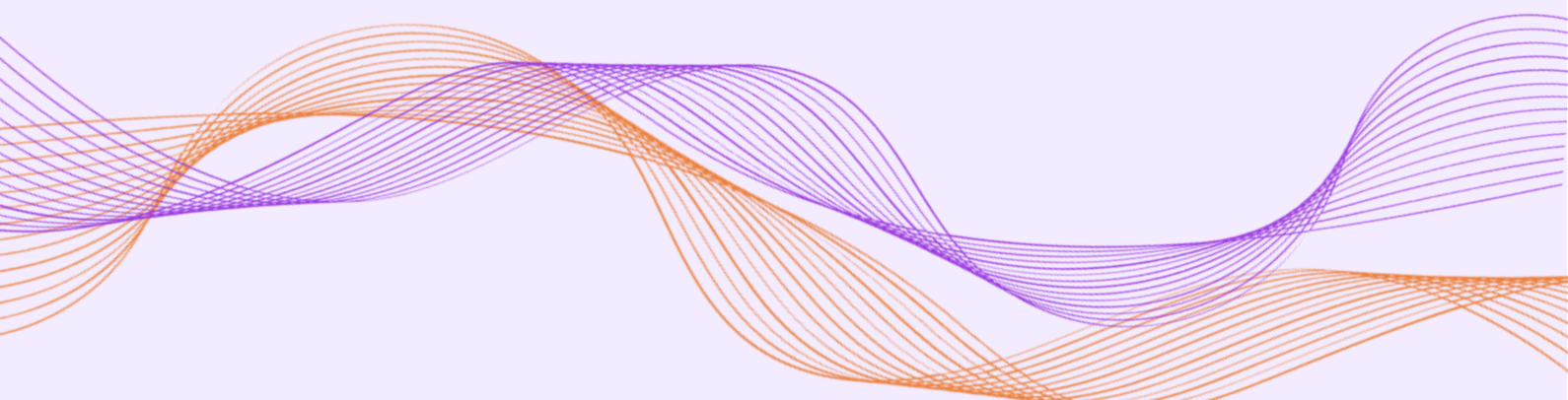


Chart 9. *The extent of support towards a woman refereeing a men's game*

As per the teams they follow, 41.13% of respondents said they follow men's and women's sports teams equally, 29.81% said they follow male sports more frequently and 5.28% stated they follow women's sports more frequently, with a large number (23.77%) not following any sports teams. As reasons for their preference towards women's or men's sports, most respondents state it is simply more interesting to them personally and that men's sports are more accessible, as men's sports games are more likely to gain more media coverage and are often streamed on popular TV channels most people have access to.



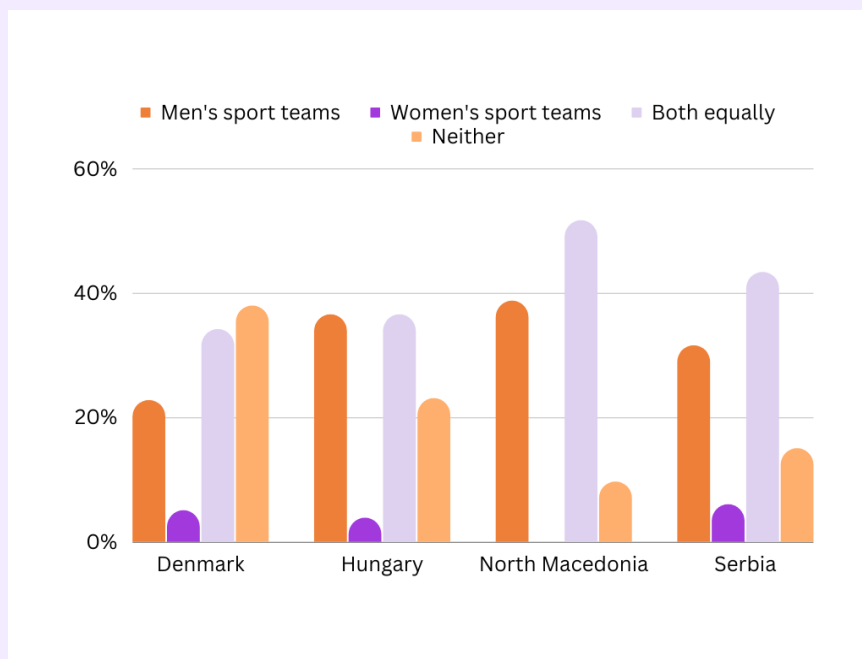


Chart 10. *Most frequently followed sports teams*

Almost half of the respondents (46.42%) believe that women athletes somewhat face obstacles when transitioning from their sports career to opening their own sports club. Over a third believe this is very much or completely true, 10.57% think they face slight obstacles, and 7.55% believe they do not face any obstacles at all.

Additional findings: regional diversity in Serbia

As mentioned in the introduction, this survey was conducted by two partner organisations in Serbia, one in Nish, the largest city in the south, and one in Belgrade, the capital, in order to showcase any differences in public opinion as there is a noticeable disparity in socio-economic status, education, employment and other key factors between these two regions.

Some of the significant differences were found in the perception of a gender pay gap in sports-related professions, where more respondents from Belgrade recognised this as an existing problem in comparison to Nish, where 14.29% believe the gender pay gap does not exist and 42.86% that this is highly present. In Belgrade, 67.14% of respondents recognised this as a highly present issue whereas only 2.86% answered it is not present at all.

Interestingly, when asked about the factors contributing to the pay gap between male and female athletes, respondents from Belgrade mostly recognised the lack of



investment in women's sports, and in Nish, it was the societal biases and discrimination they recognised as the main contributor to this issue.

Even though most respondents from Nish said they believe that sponsorships athletes receive differ based on their gender, most (36.51%) thought this is only somewhat true, and most respondents from Belgrade (51.43%) believe this to be very much true. When it comes to their opinion on women's sport teams receiving less funding compared to men's sport teams, the situation is similar. Respondents from Belgrade believed this statement to a greater extent with 48.57% saying they completely believe this, whereas in Nish only 15.87% believed this completely. The same difference in extent showed in the results when examining the belief that women athletes face obstacles when transitioning from their sports career to opening their own sports club.

A vast majority of respondents agreed that there is a lack of institutional and programmatic support for local sports clubs in developing and promoting women's roles in sports in Serbia, however, there was a slight difference here as well. Almost a third of respondents from Nish (31.75%) believe that there are enough opportunities for women leaders in sport and that them reaching these only depends on their personal competences and personalities.

When it comes to coaching, 78.57% of respondents had no preference when it comes to the gender of their own or their child's coach. In Nish, this number was slightly lower (65.08%), however when asked what gender they would prefer, the same number of people answered men and women.

These findings may indicate a slight difference in public opinion and awareness of gender equality in general, and specifically when it comes to sport, in Belgrade, and in Nish. However, respondents mostly showed a difference in the extent of their opinion on certain existing issues rather than a complete difference of opinion.





Conclusion

This analysis showed that many believe certain sports are mostly associated with only men or only women, according to existing beliefs of what is considered “masculine” or “feminine” in the four examined countries. This can indicate the existing prejudice and gender stereotypes in society towards what is “acceptable” for a woman or a man. Such stereotypes can create obstacles, especially for young girls and boys when choosing a sport they like or wish to be involved in.

The gender pay gap seems to be recognised as an existing problem in the examined societies, which corresponds with the available data on the actual economic disparities between men and women. Most respondents acknowledged certain obstacles women in sport face, especially when trying to obtain higher managerial and decision-making positions. Women's sport teams are seen as teams that receive less funding and female athletes as having fewer opportunities in comparison to their male colleagues. The underrepresentation of women in sport, traditional family roles, and the lack of recognition from the current leadership in a specific sport were recognised as the main obstacles to this. The results also showed there should be more institutional and programmatic support for local sports clubs in developing and promoting women's roles in sports. The strict beliefs society has about the differences between male and female athletes, the underrepresentation of female athletes in the media, and the disinterest of the public in women's sports are recognised as the main reasons for gender inequality in sports and sports-related industries.

When it comes to gender stereotypes in sport, such as a preference for having a male or female coach and whether it is okay for a woman to referee a men's sports game, respondents showed very low levels of prejudice, however, they follow men's sport more than they do women's sport. As a contributing factor to this, the underrepresentation of women's sport in the media must be considered.

The region-specific research done in Serbia showed how socio-economic factors can influence the public's perception of gender (in)equality in sport. Respondents from Belgrade were keener to recognise a gender pay gap in the sport industry than respondents from Nish. Similar slight differences were found in the extent to which the respondents acknowledge gender-specific obstacles women face in sport, such as the lack of opportunities, funding, and other, however, this does not result in completely opposing views.



Recommendation for action

In the light of the extensive research conducted on the perceptions of gender equality in the sports industry across multiple countries, it is imperative to translate our findings into tangible actions that can drive meaningful change. The following section outlines a set of strategic recommendations for fostering gender equality in sports. These recommendations are designed to challenge prevailing stereotypes, rectify economic disparities, and promote inclusivity, ultimately creating an environment where individuals of all genders can thrive in the world of sports.

By implementing these actionable steps, we aspire to contribute to a future where gender equality is not merely an aspiration but a reality in the sports arena.

Raise awareness and education:

- Develop and implement educational programs and workshops aimed at challenging gender stereotypes in sports from an early age;
- Promote media literacy to encourage critical thinking about the portrayal of women in sports in the media;
- Collaborate with schools, sports organisations, and communities to integrate gender equality into sports education.

Support women in leadership:

- Establish mentorship programs to help women progress in sports leadership roles;
- Advocate for equal opportunities for women in decision-making positions within sports organisations;
- Encourage sports organisations to set targets for increasing the representation of women in leadership positions.

Address the gender pay gap:

- Conduct gender pay audits within sports organisations to identify and rectify disparities;
- Promote sponsorship opportunities for female athletes and teams to bridge the economic gap;
- Encourage equal prize money for men's and women's competitions in sports events;



Invest in women's sports:

- Allocate more funding and resources to women's sports programs and initiatives;
- Promote women's sports through media coverage, including broadcasting and reporting;
- Develop marketing strategies to enhance the visibility and commercial viability of women's sports.

Foster inclusivity:

- Encourage the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated sports and vice versa;
- Promote mixed-gender sports events and leagues where appropriate;
- Celebrate diversity and inclusivity within sports to create an environment where all individuals feel welcome.

Public Awareness Campaigns:

- Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in sports;
- Highlight successful female athletes and leaders as role models;
- Encourage fan engagement and support for women's sports.

Continued research:

- Conduct regular surveys and studies to monitor progress in gender equality in sports;
- Collect data on the participation of women and girls in sports at all levels;
- Evaluate the impact of initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality.

Regional considerations:

- Recognize regional disparities in socio-economic factors and tailor initiatives accordingly;
- Ensure that policies and programs address the specific needs of different regions within a country;



Partnerships and collaboration:

- Collaborate with governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, and sports associations to implement gender equality initiatives;
- Seek funding and support from international organisations and agencies to advance gender equality in sports.

Transparency and accountability:

- Encourage sports organisations to report on their efforts to promote gender equality and track progress;
- Hold sports organisations accountable for meeting gender equality goals and targets.

These recommendations aim to promote gender equality in the sports industry by addressing stereotypes, economic disparities, and underrepresentation. Implementing these actions will require the commitment and collaboration of various stakeholders, including sports organisations, governments, media outlets, and the general public.



Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to the many individuals and organisations whose support and contributions made this survey on gender equality in the sports industry possible.

First and foremost, we extend our appreciation to the participants who took the time to share their valuable insights and perspectives. Your willingness to engage in this survey greatly enriched our understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding gender equality in sports.

We would like to acknowledge the dedicated efforts of our partner organisations in each of the surveyed countries: Handball club Belgrade (Serbia), Karate club Nish (Serbia), Yanta Volley (North Macedonia), Budapest association for international sport (Hungary), and Danish youth team (Denmark).

Your commitment to promoting gender equality in sports and your role in conducting the survey in your respective regions have been instrumental in the success of this project.

Special thanks go to the team members and volunteers who played vital roles in data collection, analysis, and report preparation. Your professionalism and dedication to this cause have been invaluable.

We also want to recognize the Sport Integrity Global Alliance (SIGA) for its commitment to research on gender equality in the sports industry and for its support of our project.

Lastly, our gratitude extends to the Erasmus+ programme and the European Union for their funding and support, which enabled the implementation of the LeaderSHE project and this survey.

This collective effort has illuminated the path toward greater gender equality.



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