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PROGRESS

PROMOTING GENDER RIGHTS, EQUALITY SKILLS IN SPORT

GUIDE TO KEY CONCEPTS: GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORT



HOW TO USE THIS GLOSSARY

This glossary brings together all the key concepts presented in the PROGRESS project's training modules and toolkit. Nothing has been removed: every original definition has been rephrased in simpler language and paired with a concrete example from the world of sport (practice and coaching).

Rather than a plain alphabetical list, these concepts are grouped into 6 broad families, organised as a logical journey: starting with the basic notions (sex, gender, identity), then understanding how inequality is built (norms, stereotypes), learning to name it (discrimination), observing its concrete effects within sporting structures, then discovering the tools for taking action, and finally how to create safe environments.

For each concept, you will find:

- a simplified definition, in plain, accessible language;
- an "In sport" box with a concrete example from practice or coaching;
- "See also" cross-references to related concepts, to show how these ideas connect.



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UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS: SEX, GENDER AND IDENTITIES

Before talking about inequality, we need to agree on the basic vocabulary: what sex, gender, identity and orientation actually mean. These concepts are often confused with one another - here's how to tell them apart.

BIOLOGICAL SEX

The physical and biological characteristics - body, hormones, chromosomes - used to classify a person as male, female, or intersex at birth.

IN SPORT

This is why most federations have separate "men's" and "women's" categories, and why sex testing in elite sport is so controversial.

See also: Gender, Gender identity

GENDER

The roles, behaviours and expectations that a society attaches to being a man or a woman. It isn't biological: it's learned, and it changes across time and culture.

IN SPORT

The idea that "football is for boys, gymnastics is for girls" is about gender, not biology - these are cultural associations, not natural ones.

See also: Gender norms, Gender roles, Gender stereotypes

GENDER IDENTITY

How a person feels and experiences their own gender, on the inside - which may or may not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

IN SPORT

A coach who respects gender identity asks the athlete how they want to be addressed, rather than relying only on the team roster.

See also: Gender expression, Transphobia, LGBTQIA+

GENDER EXPRESSION

How a person shows their gender to the outside world: clothing, hairstyle, voice, posture, attitude.

IN SPORT

A girl with a "boyish" playing style, or a boy who shows his emotions openly, are simply expressing who they are - it says nothing about their sexual orientation.

See also: Gender identity, Gender stereotypes

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A person's romantic and/or sexual attraction to others: to the same sex/gender, the opposite sex/gender, both, or more than one.

IN SPORT

Changing rooms and team trips need to be safe spaces regardless of athletes' sexual orientation.

See also: Homophobia, LGBTQIA+, Safe space

SOGIESC

An umbrella term combining Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics - used to talk about these dimensions together, especially in safeguarding policies.

IN SPORT

More and more safeguarding policies in sport use SOGIESC to make sure no athlete is excluded or discriminated against, whatever their orientation or identity.

See also: LGBTQIA+, Safeguarding

LGBTQIA+

An umbrella acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Asexual people, with the "+" covering other identities not explicitly listed.

IN SPORT

An LGBTQIA+-inclusive club makes sure changing rooms, team communication and competition rules don't exclude anyone within this community.

See also: Sexual orientation, Gender identity, Homophobia, Transphobia



HOW INEQUALITY IS BUILT: NORMS, ROLES, STEREOTYPES

Inequality doesn't come out of nowhere: it relies on norms and stereotypes that we learn very early, often without realising it. This group of concepts explains that mechanism.

GENDER NORMS

The unwritten rules about how men and women are “supposed to” behave - learned so early that they often feel “natural”, even though they’re entirely social.

IN SPORT

“Boys don’t cry after a loss, girls shouldn’t be too aggressive on the pitch” — that’s gender norms at work.

See also: Gender, Gender roles, Hidden curriculum

GENDER ROLES

The tasks and responsibilities a culture assigns to men and women - for example, who is “supposed to” coach and who is “supposed to” run the snack bar.

IN SPORT

In many clubs, men coach the senior teams while women are steered towards youth teams or admin roles - a question of assigned role, not skill.

See also: Gendered division of labour, Glass ceiling

GENDER STEREOTYPES

Fixed, oversimplified ideas about what men and women are like - for example, “men are competitive”, “women are gentle”.

IN SPORT

“Women’s football is less exciting to watch” is a stereotype, not a fact - and it shapes media coverage, sponsorship and pay.

See also: Sexist language, Sexism

GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

The unequal distribution of tasks between men and women, based on gender norms rather than actual skills.

IN SPORT

Men dominate head-coaching and federation leadership roles, while women are over-represented in volunteering or support functions.

See also: Horizontal segregation, Vertical segregation, Glass ceiling

HIDDEN CURRICULUM

The messages we absorb without anyone teaching them directly - through habits, jokes, and “the way things are done” in an organisation.

IN SPORT

If every poster in a club shows male athletes and male coaches, young girls absorb the message that leadership “isn’t for them” - without a single word being said.

See also: Gender norms, Homosocial reproduction

HETERONORMATIVITY

Treating heterosexuality as the default, “normal” option, which makes other orientations seem like an exception, or even a problem.

IN SPORT

Assuming every athlete has an opposite-sex partner when asking about “your boyfriend/girlfriend” is a small example of heteronormativity.

See also: Homophobia, Sexual orientation

HOMOSOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The tendency of people in power to recruit and promote others who resemble them - same background, same profile, same networks.

IN SPORT

A male-dominated federation board that keeps appointing men “like them” to leadership roles is practising homosocial reproduction - sometimes without even realising it.

See also: Glass ceiling, Vertical segregation



NAMING INEQUALITY: DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Once the mechanisms are understood, we need to be able to name precisely what counts as discrimination - and how it builds up or overlaps with other forms of exclusion

DISCRIMINATION (DIRECT AND INDIRECT)

Treating someone differently and unfairly because of who they are. Direct: visible and intentional. Indirect: a rule that looks neutral but disadvantages one group in practice.

IN SPORT

Direct: banning women from standing for election to a club's board. Indirect: scheduling all training sessions in the evening, when in practice it's mostly women who handle childcare at that time.

See also: Sexism, Cumulative disadvantage

SEXISM

Any act, word, image or behaviour based on the idea that one sex is inferior to the other.

IN SPORT

A comment like "you throw like a girl", used as an insult, is sexist - it treats femininity as something shameful.

See also: Sexist language, Discrimination

SEXIST LANGUAGE

Words or expressions that reinforce stereotypes, exclude people because of their gender, or treat one gender as the default and the other as secondary.

IN SPORT

Always saying "the athletes and their wives", or covering a women's match by focusing on the players' looks rather than their performance.

See also: Sexism, Inclusive communication

PREJUDICE

A judgement formed about someone in advance, without real evidence or experience - often based on a stereotype.

IN SPORT

Assuming a female referee will be "less authoritative" before she's even blown the whistle is a prejudice.

See also: Gender stereotypes, Sexism

HOMOPHOBIA

Fear, rejection or hostility towards people who are, or are perceived to be, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

IN SPORT

Changing-room jokes that use "gay" as an insult create a climate where LGB athletes don't feel safe being themselves - that's homophobia in action, even without physical violence

See also: Heteronormativity, Safe space

TRANSPHOBIA

Fear, rejection or hostility towards transgender, non-binary or gender-diverse people.

IN SPORT

Stopping a trans athlete from using the changing room that matches their gender identity, or constantly questioning their "right" to compete, are forms of transphobia.

See also: Gender identity, Safeguarding

CUMULATIVE DISADVANTAGE

Small, repeated disadvantages that build up over a career or a life, eventually producing a large gap - even though no single moment looks dramatic on its own.

IN SPORT

A girl gets slightly less playing time as a junior, slightly less coaching attention as a teenager, and slightly less visibility to scouts as an adult — none of it looks like "discrimination" on its own, but together it blocks her path to elite level.

See also: Glass ceiling, Vertical segregation

INTERSECTIONALITY

The idea that people can face several forms of disadvantage at the same time (gender + ethnicity + disability, for example), and that these combine rather than simply add up.

IN SPORT

A young disabled woman from an ethnic minority may face barriers to access that are different from - and greater than - those faced by a non-disabled woman, or a disabled man.

See also: Discrimination, Cumulative disadvantage





INEQUALITY IN PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURES

Beyond individual behaviour, inequality takes very concrete forms in the way sporting careers and institutions are organised.

GLASS CEILING

An invisible barrier that stops women (and other under-represented groups) from reaching the top of an organisation, even though nothing officially forbids it.

IN SPORT

Women make up most volunteers in many federations, but are rarely found on executive boards or as national team head coaches — that's the glass ceiling.

See also: Vertical segregation, Homosocial reproduction

HORIZONTAL SEGREGATION

The concentration of men and women in different fields or roles, side by side rather than in a hierarchy - for example, "contact" sports versus "aesthetic" sports.

IN SPORT

Men dominating football/rugby coaching while women dominate gymnastics/dance coaching reflects horizontal segregation, not ability.

See also: Gendered division of labour

VERTICAL SEGREGATION

The unequal representation of women and men across levels of a hierarchy: present at the base, increasingly absent the higher you go.

IN SPORT

Many women coach at youth or grassroots level, but very few reach national team or Olympic head-coach positions.

See also: Glass ceiling, Cumulative disadvantage



WORKING TOWARDS EQUALITY: TOOLS AND GOALS

Once inequality has been identified, how do we act on it? This group of concepts presents the tools and goals institutions use to make progress towards equality.

GENDER EQUALITY

A situation where women and men have the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities - not that they become identical, but that being born male or female no longer determines what's possible for you.

IN SPORT

Equal prize money, equal access to facilities and equal media coverage for men's and women's competitions are concrete signs of progress towards gender equality.

See also: Gender equity, Empowerment

GENDER EQUITY

A related but different term, sometimes used to mean "fairness" between genders - but institutions such as the UN prefer "equality", because "equity" has historically been used to justify treating women unequally "for their own good".

IN SPORT

Worth remembering for official documents: in a European project like this one, "equality" is the term to use, not "equity".

See also: Gender equality

GENDER GAP

Any measurable difference between women's and men's situations - most often used for pay, but it applies to any area (participation, health, leadership...).

IN SPORT

The gender pay gap in professional football, where the top women's league salaries are a fraction of the men's, is one of the most visible gender gaps in sport.

See also: Gender equality, Vertical segregation

GENDER ANALYSIS

A method for examining how a situation, policy or project affects women and men differently - looking at their different needs, access to resources and constraints.

IN SPORT

Before building a new sports centre, a gender analysis might ask: will the opening hours, transport links and safety conditions work equally well for women and men in the area?

See also: Gender mainstreaming

GENDER MAINSTREAMING

A strategy of systematically checking the impact on women and men at every stage of a policy or programme, rather than treating gender as a separate issue.

IN SPORT

A federation that practises gender mainstreaming checks the gender impact of every decision - sponsorship deals, competition calendars, facility investment - not just its "women's sport" programme.

See also: Gender analysis, Gender equality

EMPOWERMENT

The process by which a person gains power, confidence and control over their own choices and life - not given by others, but built through access to resources, skills and opportunities.

IN SPORT

A coaching certification programme open only to women, which builds confidence and provides access to leadership networks, is a tool for empowerment.

See also: Gender equality, Glass ceiling



CREATING SAFE, INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Understanding and naming inequality is one step. The final piece - essential for trainers and coaches - is knowing how to create genuinely safe and inclusive environments.

SAFE SPACE

An environment where people can take part, learn and express themselves without fear of discrimination, harassment or exclusion - built on clear rules and mutual respect.

IN SPORT

A changing room or team chat where homophobic or sexist jokes aren't tolerated, and where everyone knows how to report a problem, is a safe space.

See also: Safeguarding, Homophobia

SAFEGUARDING

The policies and practices put in place to prevent and respond to abuse, harassment, violence and discrimination - particularly towards children and vulnerable people.

IN SPORT

A club's safeguarding policy includes a code of conduct for coaches, a clear reporting procedure, and background checks for adults working with young athletes.

See also: Safe space, Transphobia, SOGIESC

INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

Communicating - in words and images - in a way that represents and respects everyone, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability or other characteristics.

IN SPORT

Using photos of women coaching boys' teams or men supporting women's leagues in a federation's newsletter, instead of only the usual stereotype-confirming images.

See also: Sexist language, Gender stereotypes

KEY RESOURCES

For the original full definitions and further reading:

- Council of Europe (2016 [2022]). Gender equality glossary. rm.coe.int
- European Institute for Gender Equality (2016). EIGE gender equality thesaurus and terminology. eige.europa.eu
- UN Women (2020). Gender Equality Glossary. wrd.unwomen.org
- UN Women (2021). Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit. unwomen.org





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