

THE CONCEPT OF GENDER AND HOMOPHOBIA IN SPORTS

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine professional male athletes' views on the concepts of gender and homophobia in sports. The research employs a phenomenological design within qualitative research methods. The sample consists of sixteen male athletes, and data were collected using a semi-structured interview form. The findings indicate that when athletes engage in sports traditionally categorized as male or female, they are perceived as unusual by society, subjected to ridicule, and, in particular, women are often humiliated. Furthermore, regarding attitudes toward homosexual athletes, a few participants indicated that they might not be fully tolerant, believed that such situations should not be normalized, yet acknowledged that respect must be shown. Overall, the athletes' attitudes toward homosexual athletes were found to be positive, showing respect as long as no immoral behavior is encountered. These findings suggest that, in terms of personal values, athletes generally demonstrate a respectful and positive approach toward homosexual athletes and gender roles in sports. However, some participants' reservations about normalization reveal that societal norms and heteronormative perspectives continue to influence their attitudes.

Keywords: Homophobia in sport, Sports, Gender, Gender in Sport.

Sporda Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Homofobi Kavramı

Öz

Bu araştırmanın amacı, profesyonel erkek sporcuların sporda toplumsal cinsiyet ve homofobi kavramına ilişkin görüşlerini incelemektir. Araştırma nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden fenomenoloji desenindedir. Araştırmanın örneklemini 16 erkek sporcu oluşturmaktadır. Veri toplama sürecinde yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada; toplumda kadın ve erkek sporu olarak kalıplaşmış spor branşlarıyla ilgilenilmesi durumunda, toplum tarafından sporcuların ilginç karşılandığı, dalga konusu olduğu ve özellikle kadınların bu süreçte aşağılandığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. İlaveten sporcuların eşcinsel sporculara yönelik tutumları incelendiğinde ise bazı sporcuların bu süreçte çok fazla hoşgörülü olamayacaklarını, bu durumun normalleştirilmemesi gerektiğini ancak saygı duymak zorunda oldukları belirlenmiştir. Sonuç olarak sporcuların eşcinsel sporculara yönelik tutumlarının olumlu olduğu, ahlak dışı bir davranışla karşılaşmadıkları müddetçe saygı duydukları tespit edilmiştir. Nitekim bu bulgular, sporcuların kişisel değerleri açısından eşcinsel sporculara ve toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine genel olarak olumlu ve saygılı yaklaşıtlarını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, bazı sporcuların normalleştirme konusunda çekinceleri, toplumsal normlar ve heteronormatif bakış açılarının tutumları üzerinde etkili olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sporda homofobi, Spor, Toplumsal cinsiyet, Sporda toplumsal cinsiyet.

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1. Introduction

Sport is defined as a cultural activity in which individuals compare their movement skills with others through rules they have set or adopted and according to socially accepted ethical values. Sport is also referred to as an activity that requires physical skill, has an organizational structure, and contains a competitive element within the framework of rules (Hemmingsen, 2023). Moreover, the field of sport, as a reflection of broader social structures, demonstrates gender-based inequalities, entrenched roles, and discriminatory attitudes.

The literature identifies various theoretical frameworks that seek to explain how individuals internalize male and female roles and how these roles are socially constructed. For example, the Biological Determinism perspective argues that societal differences are fundamentally rooted in biological factors (Wilson, 1975). Psychoanalytic Theory posits that individual identities are shaped through the psychosexual development process experienced during childhood (Freud, 1962). Socialization Theory emphasizes that gender is a learned process acquired through interaction with social agents (Oakley, 1972), while Social Role Theory asserts that gender roles are not biologically predetermined but are shaped by the division of labor and societal expectations (Eagly, 1987). Queer Theory highlights that gender and sexual identities are neither fixed nor natural, but socially constructed and fluid (Butler, 1990). Hegemonic Masculinity Theory explains that the “ideal” form of masculinity in a society establishes dominance over other masculinities as well as over women (Connell, 1995). Finally, Feminist Theories provide critical perspectives on gender inequalities and examine the social, political, and economic pressures faced by women (Lorber, 1994; Tong, 2009).

Heteronormativity, popularized by Michael Warner in 1991, is defined as the understanding that heterosexuality is the assumed and natural sexual orientation in society. This perspective is based on the assumption that biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity are aligned and fixed. In this context, non-heterosexual identities are marginalized or overlooked (Warner, 1991; *Heteronormativity*, n.d.). For example, when examined in the context of sports, heteronormative norms have historically associated athleticism with masculinity, marginalized LGBT+ athletes, and restricted their visibility and participation (Anderson, 2005; Warner, 1991; *Heteronormativity*, n.d.).

Just as in the world, it is also observed in Turkey that individuals with different sexual orientations face prejudice, and during this process, negative situations such as pressure, segregation, and exclusion occur. The phenomenon of individuals exhibiting discriminatory attitudes toward homosexuals and approaching them with prejudice is referred to as homophobia. According to the literature, Herek (1984) defines homophobia as a set of negative attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors toward homosexual individuals. Worthen (2013) states that homophobia is not only an individual prejudice but also a normative system of pressure that is learned and reinforced at the societal level. This concept is also defined as hatred, discrimination, or discomfort toward homosexuality (Barker, 1999, s. 220). During this process, individuals with different sexual orientations are reported to face problems in areas such as education, health, and work (Akkuş, 2017). In the sports field, issues related to the gendering of athletes are also observed. A review of the literature shows that both women and men face obstacles and pressures in sports that do not align with societal gender norms (Kavasoğlu & Yaşar, 2016), and research findings indicate that sports are only associated with masculinity, with women being marginalized in this area (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Lenskyj, 2003). However, to achieve success in sports, it is essential that sports are not categorized as women's or men's sports. In other words, no distinction should be made in sports; sports such as football, handball, and basketball should not be exclusively associated with men, and sports such as volleyball or tennis should not be linked only to female athletes. In this context, sports activities should be conducted with an inclusive approach, without discrimination, and without limiting individuals' freedom (Uğurlu, 2018).

It would not be wrong to state that the sport culture exists in all countries worldwide. This culture varies from society to society and is shaped by what each society brings. While some societies place great importance on sports, others do not prioritize it to the same extent. Indeed, growing up in societies that value and emphasize sport increases the likelihood of engaging in competitive sports, helps individuals feel valuable, and makes them more accepted in society (Doğan, 2016, s. 248). The classification of sports, or in other words, the segregation, brings various obstacles for individuals who are not suitable for certain sports according to gender (Kavaşoğlu & Yaşar, 2017). On the other hand, while it is beneficial to present the homophobic attitudes in relation to sports and work on solving these negative situations, it will also allow for determining attitudes toward homosexual athletes, the adjectives used to describe them, and the level of homophobia in society (Saraç, 2008).

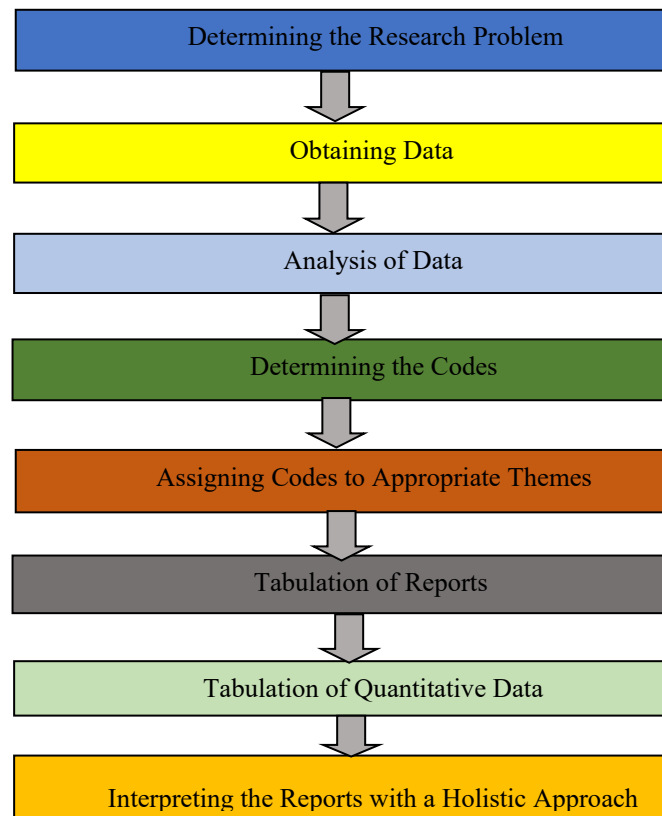
People's location, culture, and values affect the development of sports. Sometimes, this situation negatively affects the progress of sports. Furthermore, in addition to the problems that individuals with different sexual orientations face in society, they also encounter various challenges and pressures in the sports field. It is necessary that sports are not categorized based solely on gender, and success in sports should not be linked to gender. In other words, this process should be evaluated based on individuals' abilities, determination, and performance. Indeed, eliminating gender discrimination and homophobic attitudes in sports can create a more equitable environment. This would allow athletes to showcase their potential more effectively. As a result, this approach would provide an area where individuals can freely express themselves and focus on success without being separated into male or female sports. This would contribute to the physical and psychological development of athletes in a healthier way, which can ultimately enhance overall success in sports. Therefore, in light of all this information, the study aims to examine the views of male professional athletes regarding the concept of gender in sports and homophobia.

2. Method

2.1. Research Model

The views of professional athletes were found in the study about the concept of gender and homophobia in sports. The study was conducted within the scope of qualitative research. Qualitative research is an approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and social realities, and at revealing the meanings and perspectives they hold within their social and cultural contexts, conducted using non-numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The study has phenomenology model, which is one of the qualitative research method designs. Phenomenological study is described as a research design which aims to reveal individuals' perceptions, experiences and their own perspectives (Saban & Ersoy, 2016, s. 55). The participants' statements reflect only their own perceptions and views. The aim of the study was to provide a transparent account of existing perceptions regarding gender and homophobia. Figure 1 contains information regarding the determination of the research problem and the process of interpreting the results.

Figure 1*Determining the Research Problem and Interpreting the Results*

Unfortunately, the issue of gender stereotyping is still prevalent in the world of sports. There are noticeable differences in how female and male athletes are perceived, the expectations placed on them, and how they are portrayed in the media. Today, sports that require strength and risk are labeled as “men’s sports,” while more graceful and flexible sports are seen as “women’s sports.” When the situation is reversed, this often leads to female athletes being described as “masculine” if they are strong, tough, or competitive, while male athletes are labeled “feminine” if they display grace or more emotional traits. These kinds of stereotypes limit both athletes’ career advancement and their modes of self-expression. This situation also leads female athletes to feel pressured to pay extra attention to their appearance.

In light of this information, as shown in Figure 1, the research problem was initially identified. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with professional male athletes. Qualitative research methods were chosen for this study to gain a deeper understanding of the issue. In other words, qualitative methods were preferred to overcome the limitations of quantitative approaches and to provide more detailed answers to questions of why and how.

2.2. Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of professional male athletes living in the city of Samsun, while the sample consists of 16 male athletes. In the study, the sample group was determined with criterion sample method, which is a type of purposeful sampling method. The criterion sampling method involves the use of a set of pre-determined or researcher-defined criteria (Grix, 2010). In the study, sample criterion was determined as the athletes’ being engaged in sports professionally and the sample group consisting of only male athletes. These criteria were determined to allow an in-depth examination

of how the themes of gender and homophobia manifest among male athletes. Selecting professional athletes enables the observation of how gender norms and homophobic attitudes in sports are shaped through their professional experiences. Limiting the sample to male athletes allows the study to analyze the visibility of homophobia and heteronormative norms specifically within the context of male athletes, while also indicating that the findings cannot be generalized and are specific to this group.

2.3. Data Collection

In the study, the interviews were carried out with a 10-question interview form prepared by researcher to examine professional male athletes' views on the concept of gender and homophobia in sports. Data collection process was carried out via internet (e-mail), which is one of the qualitative research data collection methods. In order to prevent data from piling up, analyses were made after the interviews and continuous communication was established via e-mail until data saturation.

When the content of the questions is examined;

- ✓ *What do you think is the general perception in society of female athletes involved in sports typically labeled as "male sports"? Please explain.*
- ✓ *Do you think that female athletes involved in sports typically labelled as "male sports" feel a greater need to pay attention to their appearance? (For example, wearing makeup or jewellery during training and competition.)*
- ✓ *Do you find female athletes involved in sports typically labelled as "male sports" to be unappealing?*
- ✓ *What are your views on athletes who are homosexual? Does this make you feel any antipathy toward them?*
- ✓ *Are there people with different sexual orientations involved in sports around you? What is your opinion on this matter?*
- ✓ *Do you think that society treats athletes with different sexual orientations with sufficient tolerance? Or should there be more tolerance? Please explain.*
- ✓ *In your opinion, what kind of attitude should society adopt toward homosexual athletes? Please explain.*
- ✓ *To what extent do you think an athlete's sexual orientation affects their career?*
- ✓ *What are your views on homophobia and sports? Do you think gender matters in sports? Do you have any recommendations on this topic? Please explain* questions were asked within the scope of.

2.4. Data Analyses

In the study, the data obtained with semi-structured interview forms were transferred to Nvivo program. The reason for choosing the semi-structured interview form is due to the flexibility it allows during the research process and the ability to ask new questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The data transferred to Nvivo program were analyzed with content analysis method. Code and theme lists were created as a result of the analyzed data. The resulting code list was assigned to suitable themes. As a result of the analysis, code and theme list was reported through Nvivo program. The agreement rate in the code list was calculated as 84% by four experts from the field with the formula "consensus/consensus + disagreement x 100". Generally, 70% is considered sufficient in this calculation (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

2.5. Research Ethics

The study was conducted on a voluntary basis. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process. In this study, all the rules specified under the Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive have been followed.

3. Results

Table 1

Demographic information of male athletes

	Age	Gender	Branch	Educational status	Income level	Sport Orientation	Sport Age
P1	21	Male	Swimming	AU	Moderate	Health	7
P2	20	Male	Swimming	AU	High	Doctor	9
P3	33	Male	Basketball	Graduate	Low	Own choice	21
P4	23	Male	Volleyball	AU	Very low	Own choice	7
P5	30	Male	Basketball	Graduate	Moderate	Coach	20
P6	29	Male	Football	AU	Moderate	Own choice	20
P7	30	Male	Wrestling	Graduate	Low	Coach	22
P8	24	Male	Football	AU	Moderate	Own choice	12
P9	22	Male	Swimming	AU	Low	Coach	7
P10	32	Male	Wrestling	Graduate	Moderate	Coach	16
P11	29	Male	Wrestling	Graduate	Moderate	Own choice	9
P12	29	Male	Handball	AU	Moderate	Own choice	11
P13	27	Male	Football	AU	Moderate	Own choice	13
P14	20	Male	Swimming	AU	Low	Own choice	7
P15	25	Male	Handball	AU	Moderate	Own choice	13
P16	23	Male	Swimming	AU	Moderate	Own choice	11

Table 1 presents the personal information of professional male athletes. It was found that the ages of athletes engaged in team and individual sports range between 20 and 33, and that the majority of them have a moderate income level. Additionally, it was found that most of the athletes who are currently attending university have been involved in sports for a period ranging from 7 to 22 years.

Table 2

Perceptions of the public for the sport branches athletes are engaged in

Name	Node Type	Name	Coded Words	Coded Text
Perceptions of the public	Node	Male athletes	26	Women are humiliated
				It is considered as interesting in the society
				There are stereotyped thoughts
				They are ridiculed
				Sport is classified in itself

There is discrimination
Reports\\Male athletes

Table 2 includes the views of professional athletes regarding the sport branch they are engaged in. The athletes stated that in case of being engaged in sport types stereotyped as specific to the opposite gender in the society, this situation was considered as interesting by the society, they were ridiculed, discriminations were made and especially women were humiliated. Indeed, this perspective can be interpreted as a reflection of gender stereotypes within the field of sports.

Table 3*Athletes' views on the concepts of sport and gender*

Name	Node Type	Name	Coded Words	Coded Text
Sport and Gender	Node	Male athletes	31	Women are physically well-built
				Women are behaviourally rude
				Women can be influenced by the sport branch
				Gender is important in terms of physical compatibility
				Sometimes women try to act like men
Reports\\Male athletes				

Table 3 includes professional athletes' views about the concepts of sport and gender. The athletes stated that the concept of gender does not have a place in sports. However, they stated that when women were engaged in sport branches which included strength, they were physically well-built, they were rude and they tried to act like men. Therefore, although athletes claim to embrace the view that gender is irrelevant, this finding indicates that societal norms continue to shape perceptions

Table 4*Athletes' views on homosexual athletes*

Name	Node Type	Name	Coded Words	Coded Text
Views on homosexual athletes	Node	Male athletes	46	I don't think that I would be tolerant
				It should be tolerated but not normalized
				Their sportive success is important
				I have an endless respect for them
				It is a matter of choice
				I don't stereotype people
				We have to respect
				Their contributions to sport matter
Reports\\ Male athletes				

Table 4 includes professional athletes' views on homosexual athletes. Most of the athletes stated their views that what matters is their sportive success and individuals' choices should be respected. A few athletes (2) stated that maybe they could not be tolerant, this situation should not be normalized, but

it should be respected. In other words, the findings indicate that most athletes emphasized the importance of sporting success for homosexual athletes and stated that individuals' choices should be respected. However, some athletes suggested that this situation should not be normalized, while still emphasizing that respect should be shown. This can be interpreted as reflecting the influence of heteronormative norms on the participants' attitudes.

Table 5

Athletes' views on the society's attitudes towards homosexual athletes

Name	Node Type	Name	Coded Words	Coded Text
Society and homosexual athletes	Node	Male athletes	35	Too many reactions
				They are discriminated
				They are pressurized
				There are athletes who end their careers
				Society is not tolerant
				Affects their career negatively
				Social and psychological pressure
				They become the target of the society
Reports\\ Male athletes				

Table 5 includes professional athletes' views on the society's attitudes towards homosexual athletes. Athletes stated their views that homosexual athletes were pressurized socially and psychologically by the society, they were discriminated, they were not tolerated and their careers were badly affected by this and some athletes even had to end their careers.

Table 6

Athletes' views on sport and homophobia

Name	Node Type	Name	Coded Words	Coded Text
Sport and Homophobia	Node	Male athletes	69	It's fine as long as there are no immoral behaviours
				They should be accepted as they are
				Their freedom should not be restricted
				Sport has nothing to do with gender
				What matters is being productive
				Success is the decisive criterion
				People should fix their own flaws
				Awareness should be raised in people
				They should not be treated as different individuals
				People should not be restricted due to their preferences
Reports\\ Male athletes				

Table 6 includes professional athletes' views on sport and homophobia. The athletes in general stated their views that it was fine as long as there were no immoral acts, that sports should not be associated with gender, people's freedom should not be restricted, awareness should be raised in the society and that the most important factor is success. Indeed, these findings indicate a discrepancy between the athletes' observations and their personal values. While the athletes adopt a tolerant approach regarding gender and homophobia in sports, they still report observing pressure and discrimination in society. This situation highlights the tension between societal norms and individual values.

4. Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

In the research, it was concluded that when athletes are involved in sports that are stereotypically associated with either women's or men's sports in society, they are seen as interesting, made the subject of mockery, and particularly women are humiliated in this process. Additionally, it was found that although athletes believe there should be no gender discrimination in sports, some think that when women engage in sports based on strength, they tend to behave in ways that are physical, rough, and like men. Furthermore, when athletes' attitudes toward homosexual athletes were examined, it was found that some athletes (5 individuals) were unable to be very tolerant in this process, believing that this situation should not be normalized, but they were aware that they should show respect. On the other hand, the majority of athletes expressed that in this process, athletic success is important and that individuals' personal preferences should be respected. Additionally, it was concluded that society is very reactive to this issue, discrimination occurs, and this pressure can bring an athlete's career to an end. Furthermore, professional athletes have stated that as long as immoral behaviors are not displayed, there is no problem, and homosexual athletes should not be treated as if they are different people, with the most important factor being athletic success. Finally, they have expressed the view that sports should not be associated with gender and that people's freedoms should not be restricted, and society should be educated on this issue.

Indeed, the results of the study reveal that gender-based classifications such as "women's sports" and "men's sports" in society create significant social pressures on athletes. The participants in the study stated that individuals engaged in sports that are considered contrary to social norms are seen as attention-grabbing, ridiculed, and especially women are subject to humiliating attitudes. Therefore, this situation shows that sports should be evaluated independently of gender roles. On the other hand, although some participants argue that there should be no gender discrimination in sports, they also think that when women engage in strength-based sports, they tend to display physical, tough, and masculine behaviors. These statements by the participants clearly reveal the gender-based stereotypes in the sports field. Another notable result of the study is the diversity of attitudes of athletes toward homosexual individuals. Some participants (5 individuals) expressed that they could not fully approach this issue with tolerance and argued that homosexuality should not be normalized, although they acknowledged the necessity of respecting individuals' preferences. On the other hand, the majority of participants emphasized that athletic success should be prioritized, and personal preferences should come second. Overall, these findings indicate that athletes develop attitudes within the framework of both societal norms and personal values. While participants' statements reveal that gender-based stereotypes and homophobic perceptions persist in sports, they also highlight the importance placed on athletic success and respect for individual choices.

For example, when reviewing the literature, it is noted that women's sports news are less frequent than men's sports news, and that gender references are present in the written and visual texts of these news (Kantar et al., 2023), certain sports such as boxing, weightlifting, and wrestling consider the disclosure of sexual orientation unacceptable (Turan et al., 2018), there is an increase in the participation

of women in sports activities and competitions (Doğan, 2016, s. 250), attitudes toward homosexual athletes have evolved over time with a more tolerant approach developing (Turan, 2018), the need for inclusivity and equality in sports (Zeigler, 2016), there is a parallel between religiosity and negative attitudes toward homosexual individuals (Whitley, 2009), attitudes toward homosexuals vary according to traditions (Nierman et al., 2007), there has been an increase in the participation of women and young girls in sports activities in Turkey, but the rate of dropping out of sports is very high (Koca, 2006), as women's educational levels increase, their participation in sports also increases (Amman, 2005), women are not seen as part of sports and are perceived as inadequate or “masculine” especially in sports that emphasize strength, speed, and competition (Lenskyj, 2003), education plays a role in increasing the acceptance of individuals with different sexual orientations (Lewis, 2003), homophobic levels are higher among men compared to women (Anderssen, 2002), sports culture is identified with masculinity, which marginalizes women in the field of sports (Dworkin & Messner, 2002), homophobic levels are higher among men compared to women (Kite & Whitley, 1996), and negative attitudes toward individuals of the opposite sex are influenced by the place of residence (Herek, 1984).

The overall findings of the study reveal that gender-based distinctions and homophobic attitudes in sports have negative effects both individually and socially. It emphasizes the need for sports to become an inclusive space without being associated with gender, where individuals' freedoms are not restricted and discrimination is absent. In this context, it is recommended that awareness-raising activities be conducted for all stakeholders, societal awareness be increased, and an equal sports culture be built.

In light of these findings, it has been determined that the athletes participating in the study have positive attitudes toward homosexual athletes and respect them as long as immoral behavior is not exhibited. It is clear that societal attitudes toward homosexual individuals are not positive in Turkey. Indeed, the same situation applies in the sports field. In this process, it is important for sports not to be associated with gender, and for the success and ability of individuals to be prioritized. This situation leads to psychological and sociological problems for individuals with different sexual orientations, and in some cases, causes them to quit sports. Therefore, individuals should not be judged based on their sexual identity or marginalized, but their dedication and attitude toward sports should be the focus. In particular, it is recommended that all stakeholders in the sports field be educated, seminars and training be provided, and more studies be conducted to contribute to the literature on this issue.

As a result, based on the findings of the study, gender equality training should be organized in all sports clubs and federations, and all athletes and coaches should participate in these trainings. National and local federations should formalize their equality policies in writing and ensure the monitoring of their implementation. Additionally, awareness-raising content (videos, news articles, etc.) should be produced in sports media, and regular research on discrimination and homophobia in sports should be conducted, with the resulting data used to inform policy development.

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