Article

Breaking the Silence: Perceived Barriers to Safeguarding Child and Young Athletes in Uganda and a Rights-Based Framework for Positive Change

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Abstract: Over 8 million children in Uganda are considered vulnerable to various forms of maltreatment, of which sexual violence is experienced by 26 girls daily. In the context of Ugandan sport, the types and magnitude of violence against child and young athletes is yet to be determined. The study aims to: (1) examine the barriers associated with prioritizing and implementing policies and programs to safeguard child and young athletes against harassment and abuse in Uganda as perceived by local stakeholders across Ugandan sport, and (2) offer a rights-based framework for implementing positive change in sport safeguarding in Uganda and other countries of similar cultural backgrounds. The study includes eleven (n = 11) purposively selected participants: athletes, coaches, medical practitioners, and policy makers, all born and living in Uganda. This is a qualitative inquiry that involves online in-depth interviews. The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) guides our exploratory analysis to examine context-specific barriers to better inform key recommendations for interventions. A rights-based, multi-contextual framework (TRAUMA) with multi-stakeholder engagement is proposed as a culturally tailored response for the safeguarding of child and young athletes in Uganda and other similar cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: child athlete; young athlete; maltreatment; abuse; sport; Uganda

1. Introduction

Uganda, officially known as the Republic of Uganda, is a landlocked country in east central Africa and is one of the 49 sub-Saharan countries. It is bordered by Kenya in the east, the Democratic Republic of Congo in the west, South Sudan in the north and Tanzania and Rwanda in the south and southwest, respectively. It is also known as the 'Pearl of Africa', which is an expression affiliated to Winston Churchill (Churchill 2013) who used it to describe the country's flora and fauna. There are 49 ethnic groups in Uganda. Dicklitch (1995) argues that "such diversity does not automatically translate into instability or conflict" (p. 105), but Uganda's precolonial and post-colonial history has been quite turbulent, with instances of the manipulation of ethnic, religious, and regional identities by both foreign (British) and indigenous rulers (Dicklitch 1995).

1.1. The History of Sport in Uganda

Sport has a rich and diverse history in Uganda, dating back to ancient times when indigenous games and competitions were a prominent part of the culture. However, the modern history of sports in Uganda began to take shape during the colonial era when British colonialists introduced various sports, such as cricket, rugby, and athletics. The country's first sports clubs and facilities were established during this period. Post-independence, in 1962, Uganda gained recognition on the global sports stage when John Akii-Bua won the

400 m hurdles gold medal at the 1972 Munich Olympics, marking a significant milestone in the nation's sporting history (Uganda Olympic Committee 2020). Since then, Uganda has continued to make strides in various sports, with a growing emphasis on football, athletics, boxing, and rugby (Wood 2014). This historical backdrop has contributed to the development of a vibrant sports culture in the country, which continues to evolve to this day.

In contemporary Uganda, sport continues to hold a special place in the hearts of its citizens. Football, in particular, is a national obsession, with local clubs such as Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and SC Villa enjoying widespread support. Cricket and rugby also have dedicated followings, and athletics has produced several world-class athletes, including Stephen Kiprotich, who won the marathon at the 2012 London Olympics. Moreover, there has been a concerted effort to promote sports participation among children and young people in Uganda, with numerous sports development programs and initiatives aimed at nurturing talent and fostering a healthy lifestyle.

In terms of current sports participation rates among children and young people in Uganda, there has been a noticeable increase in recent years. The government, along with various non-governmental organizations and sporting bodies, has been actively promoting sports at the grassroots level to harness and nurture young talent (Athletics World 2018). Schools across the country now include sports programmes as part of their curriculum, ensuring that children have opportunities to engage in physical activities and discover their sporting interests. Furthermore, the growth of community sports clubs, especially in urban areas, has provided young Ugandans with access to more structured and competitive sports environments. As a result, there has been a rise in the number of children and young people participating in sports, both at the recreational and competitive levels.

To provide some data on sports participation rates among children and young people in Uganda, recent surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture indicate that approximately 70% of primary and secondary school students actively participate in various sports and physical activities. This is a significant increase compared with previous decades. Additionally, data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics reveals that youth involvement in organized sports clubs and leagues has seen a steady rise, with nearly 40% of young people aged 15 to 24 engaging in such activities. These statistics reflect a growing enthusiasm for sports among Uganda's youth, highlighting the potential for further development and success on both national and international sporting stages (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture 2017; UNICEF 2018).

1.2. Abuse and Maltreatment in Uganda

Violence and abuse in Uganda remain significant challenges, affecting various segments of the population. Domestic violence, particularly against women and children, is prevalent, with alarming rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, (UNICEF 2020). According to the first ever national survey on violence against children in Uganda, 3 in 4 young adults experienced some form of violence during childhood. one in three young adults experienced at least two forms of violence of either a sexual, physical or emotional nature during their childhood. Half of all 18-to-24-year-old Ugandans believe it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife (UNICEF 2018). Additionally, the country grapples with political violence, human rights violations, and armed conflict in certain regions, leading to the displacement of communities and a cycle of violence (Human Rights Watch 2020). Efforts to address these issues have been made through legislative measures and civil society organizations' advocacy, yet the fight against violence and abuse in Uganda continues to be an ongoing struggle (Amnesty International 2020). Child labour, child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM) also remain pervasive issues. The United Nations and various NGOs are actively engaged in efforts to combat these problems and promote human rights in Uganda, but sustained commitment and comprehensive strategies are needed to bring about lasting change.

Annually, at least 35 per cent of Ugandan girls and 16 percent of Ugandan boys between 13 and 17 years of age experience sexual violence (UVACS 2018). Moreover, more than 8 million Ugandan children are considered vulnerable to various forms of maltreatment, of which sexual violence is experienced by 26 girls daily (UNICEF 2019). This may result in physical injury, mental distress, self-harm, contemplation of suicide and sexually transmitted infections (UVACS 2018). Research suggests that, among other causal factors for the rampant child abuse and children's rights violations prevalent in Uganda, the low overall prioritization of child protection and children's rights and the cultural differences regarding child protection play important roles (Renzaho et al. 2018).

1.3. Sport, Abuse and Maltreatment in Uganda

The discourse around sport is one within which children's rights may be defied. Among other variables, the sport ethic of emotional, mental, and physical toughness for winning at all costs leaves participants vulnerable to abuse (Brackenridge 2002). Different terms (e.g., abuse, interpersonal violence, exploitation) are used to describe harms children may experience in sociocultural settings such as sport (Blakemore et al. 2017; Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017; Stirling 2009). The all-encompassing term "maltreatment" is often used to describe a range of harmful behaviours and acts towards children (Fortier et al. 2020; Gattis and Moore 2022). Emerging evidence over the past three decades demonstrates that children who play sports are subjected to various forms of maltreatment across different countries and competitive levels (Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017). There is evidence of sexual abuse (Bjørnseth and Szabo 2018; Fasting et al. 2004), emotional abuse (Gervis et al. 2016; Rhind et al. 2015a), physical abuse (Alexander et al. 2011; Vertommen et al. 2016), neglect (McPherson et al. 2017; Rhind et al. 2015b), and bullying (Evans et al. 2016).

Despite the inherent subjectivity of the topic, which highlights the need for diverse study populations and locations, most of the extant literature on maltreatment in sport as emerged from Europe and North America. A 2021 study found that Ghanaian, Indian, and Brazilian athletes navigate multi-layered and highly contextual interpersonal and systemic forms of maltreatment that can be qualitatively different from that experienced by athletes from the Global North (Rutland et al. 2022). These and other data emphasize the importance of sampling geo-culturally diverse sport stakeholders—especially from under resourced settings such as sub-Saharan Africa (Mkumbuzi et al. 2021)—and integrating first-person perspectives into sport safeguarding policies, programmes and interventions tailored to local contexts.

In Uganda, much of the sport-related research on sport for development themes (i.e., employment, empowerment, gender equity, and personal development through sport), and on the degree and magnitude of maltreatment against athletes is unknown (Hayhurst 2013; Hayhurst et al. 2014). While the Uganda Olympic Committee has instituted several federation-specific policies, codes of conduct, rules, and regulations to prevent athlete maltreatment (Amoding 2021; USF 2018), many cases of abuse still go unreported and safeguarding processes remain largely incomplete (Raising Voices 2017). The International Safeguards for Children and Sport are a set of actions that youth-serving sport organizations can implement to ensure participants' safety. This framework provides a mechanism for safeguarding strategies to be developed in various local contexts (Mountjoy et al. 2015), but knowledge is limited regarding the best way to translate this framework for Global South sports settings (Brackenridge et al. 2012; Rhind et al. 2017).

Some studies (Rutland et al. 2022) suggest that athletes who live in countries with fewer resources may have different priorities and experiences related to maltreatment. However, this is impossible to confirm, given the scarcity of accessible empirical data. To our knowledge, since the mid-2000s, only two peer-reviewed empirical studies on maltreatment in sport have originated from Africa (Zambia, Kenya). Thus, the prevalence and consequences of interpersonal violence on youth athletes in African sport contexts is not well known. In Zambia, Solstad and Strandbu (2019) found that (i) unequal power relations in sport (often gendered, where girls were seen as more vulnerable and exposed to

'devastating' risks such as unsolicited sex and unplanned pregnancies, though this is also non-gendered, i.e., hierarchical cultures of silence), (ii) coaching ideals (misguided ways of motivating athletes), and (iii) athletic ideals (being tough and more resilient as a point of pride) in their sport culture, were the primary threats and risks related to maltreatment. These threats and risks in sport were also situated within the wider local context. Authors conclude that "safeguarding in sport continues to exist in the tension between protecting athletes from harm on the one hand and subscribing to a culture that promotes the ideals 'faster, higher, stronger' on the other" and that there is a "need to discuss critically how glorification of toughness and resilience might contribute to normalize harmful practices in sport".

In Kenya, Rintaugu et al. (2014) found that, of 339 university female athletes, 64.4% had experienced sexual harassment, the most common forms of which were sexually offensive looks, comments, and unwanted comments on attractiveness in public. The majority of perpetuators were spectators, with sexual harassment occurring mostly on the playing fields. Physical complaints after these episodes included headache, fatigue and insomnia, and the majority of athletes sampled did not know whether their universities had any policy specific to maltreatment in sport.

Our study fills this gap and breaks the culture of silence in Uganda (Maractho 2022) by asking diverse sport stakeholders to talk. Our study has two objectives: (i) to examine the barriers associated with developing and implementing policies and programs to safeguard child and young athletes against maltreatment in Uganda as perceived by local sport, and (ii) to offer a rights-based framework for implementing a positive change in Ugandan sport, drawing from the barriers that are identified. Our findings provide a basis for relevant stakeholders to develop and implement strategies to help ensure athletes experience Ugandan sport as a positive context for healthy personal and performance development.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Conceptual Framework

The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al. 2009), a comprehensive framework combining constructs from existing theories that facilitate translation of research findings into practice, primarily within the health care sector (Damschroder et al. 2009), guided the design of data collection tools and analysis. The CFIR has been widely utilized in the medical field, for studies on hypertension (Gyamfi et al. 2020), health care intervention efficacy (Keith et al. 2017), patient care (Breimaier et al. 2015), healthy food (Taher et al. 2022), and the implementation of a sports injury prevention program (Richmond et al. 2020). To our knowledge, the CFIR has been used to examine neither barriers nor facilitators to the development and implementation of sport safeguarding policies in Uganda or elsewhere.

The 5 CFIR domains—intervention characteristics, individual characteristics, inner setting, outer setting, and process—and 37 operationally defined constructs (Damschroder et al. 2009), are instructive in examining multi-layered contextual factors that influence implementation (Damschroder and Lowery 2013). We shall note that the 'intervention' construct of the CIFR does not necessarily or always correspond to an intervention that has already been implemented. Rather it can also question the need for an intervention or change, while helping to unpack any barriers and facilitators for its materialisation. Our aim was not to investigate a specific sport safeguarding intervention but to examine general barriers to an effective sports safeguarding policy implementation by asking CFIR-driven questions.

2.2. Methods

A qualitative inquiry was carried out between March and April 2021. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven (n = 11) adult participants aged 24 to 50 years old, of which eight (n = 8) were females and three (n = 3) were males. There were: two (n = 2) coaches; four (n = 4) athletes (three from swimming and one from athletics);

two (n = 2) sports administrators from the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports; and three (n = 3) medical professionals.

Qualitative researchers often confront dilemmas regarding the determination of what constitutes a robust sample size (Young and Casey 2018; Crouch and McKenzie 2006; Boddy 2016; Vasileiou et al. 2018). The challenge is to find a sample that will produce thorough and meaningful findings. Young and Casey (2018) argue that a small sample size should not be seen as a limitation, in and of itself, when evaluating the rigor and findings of qualitative research. This conclusion was arrived at after an analysis of the data they had collected for three distinct qualitative studies. They found that significant coverage of codes ranged from a minimum sample size of 6–9 interviews, partial theme representation required minimum sample sizes of 4–6 interviews, and substantial theme completion necessitated sample sizes of 7–10 interviews across the projects. These findings agree with previous research (Francis et al. 2010; Guest et al. 2006, 2016; Hennink et al. 2016). For instance, Francis et al. (2010) examined interview data from two different studies, and found that the majority of themes (92%) emerged in the first 6 interviews. Hennink et al. (2016) found that code saturation ("hearing it all") began at 6–9 interviews, and additional nuance ("understanding it all") appeared as additional transcripts were included. Young and Casey (2018) thus argue that "rigorously collected qualitative data from small samples can substantially represent the full dimensionality of people's experiences, with larger sample sizes adding important but perhaps increasingly minute pieces of meaning" (p. 12). These findings provide strong evidence and reassurance that researchers, under certain conditions, can achieve robust results with small sample sizes. In our study 'who' and 'how many' participants were based on what we wanted to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, and what will have credibility (Patton 1990). Specifically,

- Participants were selected based on their personal experience or knowledge of the topic under study.
- Small numbers were studied intensively. The interviewer (first author), born and raised in Uganda, met several times with the interviewees maintaining a connection to gain trust and confidence during the entire process (Taylor 2005; Crouch and McKenzie 2006). The conversations were in-depth and relatively free flowing (though still focused), as is often the case in enquiries of subjective feelings and reactions, commonly in relation to "sensitive" topics (Renzetti and Lee 1993).
- Selection was conceptually driven by the CIFR, especially with regards to the multi-stakeholder dimension (Curtis et al. 2000). Purposefully, we had representation of different stakeholders and not only athletes. Multi-stakeholder participant selection was congruent with our conceptual framework to better understand multi-layered contextual factors (e.g., intervention characteristics, outer and inner settings, characteristics of individuals) that hinder or facilitate the implementation of effective sport safeguarding policies in Uganda (process domain).
- Swimming and athletics were purposefully selected because they are relatively early specialization sports. As athletes are immersed in these sports at early ages, their exposure to different abuse situations may be increased (Lang and Hartill 2014). Additionally, the national federations of these sports have safeguarding codes and regulations in place; thus, how they are being used and perceived by key stakeholders is of interest.

Participants' inclusion criteria and demographic characteristics are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively, below.

Table 1. The participants' eligibility criteria.

Inclusion Criteria
- Coaches from national swimming and athletics codes   - Willing and able to give consent   - A minimum of three years' experience
- Able-bodied female athletes from national swimming and athletics codes   - Aged 18 years and above   - Willing and able to give consent
- Policy makers from the Ministry of Education and sports   - A minimum of three year's experience and above in sports administration   - Willing and able to give consent
- Medical practitioners in sports   - Willing and able to give consent

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the study participants.

Stakeholders	Age	Gender
Athletics athlete	27	Female
Swimmer 1	24	Female
Swimmer 2	25	Female
Swimmer 3	26	Female
Swimming coach	37	Male
Athletics coach	28	Female
Medical professional 1	50	Female
Medical professional 2	32	Female
Medical professional 3	29	Male
Sports administrator 1	37	Male
Sports administrator 2	32	Female

2.3. Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed and then analysed using inductive analysis based on the CFIR framework. Inductive analysis involves detailed readings of raw data to extract concepts, themes, or a model (Thomas 2006). This approach offers a practical way of producing reliable and valid findings through the condensing of raw textual data into concise meaningful information. Our key research questions were drawn from the five CIFR constructs: (1) intervention characteristics, (2) outer setting, (3) inner setting, (4) characteristics of individuals, and (5) process. Subsequently, the qualitative measurement tool that we used, i.e., our semi-structured interview questions, also developed inductively from each of these CIFR constructs. Table 3 illustrates the inductive reasoning running through the CIFR constructs, the research questions, and the interview questions. Subsequently, a codebook was developed and reviewed for meaningful data extraction (Neuendorf 2017). Themes and subthemes were generated in order to describe different data patterns and category constructions about the barriers associated with the implementation of policies and regulations for safeguarding athletes in Ugandan sports. A coding scheme through initial review of transcripts was developed where several sections of text that addressed our analytic concepts of interest were assigned descriptive codes. Then, operational definitions

for those codes were developed and sub-divided into meaningful topics and subtopics, before being analysed for detailed interpretation.

Table 3. Application of the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research. CIFR planning questions and constructs for implementing change in sport safeguarding (adapted from King et al. 2020; McCullogh et al. 2022).

CFIR Domain	Key Constructs	Application of Constructs (Key Research Questions)	Interview Questions	Results: Identified Barriers and Key Overarching Themes
Intervention characteristics	Relative advantage, adaptability, complexity, cost	What are the stakeholders' perceptions about the current situation in the safeguarding of athletes in sport in Uganda? How feasible would it be to implement effective regulations for safeguarding athletes in sports? What (broad and/or specific) barriers and facilitators do the stakeholders identify?	What is your understanding of safeguarding and well-being? How would you relate this understanding to the sport context in Uganda? If you were to implement a change, an intervention, what would you do differently to ensure that athletes are protected from abuse in Ugandan sport? Can you think of any factors that would hinder or facilitate this?	High complexity for implementation due to cultural/structural barriers (key overarching theme: culture and norms). Lack of funding and resources (key overarching theme: political processes, lack of funding, and resources).
Outer setting	External policies and incentives	What do the stakeholders perceive to be the external (outside sport) policy-level factors affecting the adoption of regulations safeguarding athletes in sports?	Uganda has status and regulations against the violation of children's rights. Do you think these are effective? Are you aware of any violations of children's rights in Uganda? If yes, why do you think such violations exist?	Culture of silence in Uganda: unreported abuse. (key overarching theme: culture and norms) No peer pressure from organisations that have implemented local, contextualised policies (key overarching theme: political processes, lack of funding, and resources).
Inner setting	Structural features, culture, change readiness	What factors do the stakeholders identify inside the setting of sport that affect their use of regulations for safeguarding athletes in sports?	Can you point to, or give examples of, situations that might be regarded as a form of abuse or violence towards the athletes? Could they have been prevented? If yes, how? If not, why not? What do you think are the most prominent types of abuse and violence in your sport? (if any) (question to athletes, coaches) What do you think are the most prominent types of abuse and violence in sport? (if any) (question to sports administrators, medical professionals)	Structural/cultural specificities that restrict/disrupt awareness and recognition of the existing problem; male dominance, hegemonic masculinity (key overarching theme: culture and norms). Implementation climate characterised from relatively low tension for change, and low relative priority; limited readiness for implementation (e.g., limited resources) (key overarching theme: political processes, lack of funding, and resources).
Individual (athletes/coaches)	Knowledge/beliefs, self-efficacy, personal attributes	Do athletes have education, social support/reporting mechanisms in case of abuse?	Do you know any channels that are used to report violence and abuse in Uganda? Are you aware of any such channels for reporting violence and abuse specifically in sport in Uganda? If yes, are these channels available and accessible to everyone? Is there any education (e.g., schools, sports clubs, community hubs) provided to members of the society (e.g., parents, children, and athletes) to educate them about issues to do with violence and abuse especially in rural areas? If yes, do you know what kind of teaching methods are used?	Limited to no knowledge on abuse which leads to tolerance of abusive practices and normalisation of abuse (key overarching theme: culture and norms). Weak reporting mechanisms; lack of education and training (key overarching theme: political processes, lack of funding, and resources).

Table 3. *Cont.*

CFIR Domain	Key Constructs	Application of Constructs (Key Research Questions)	Interview Questions	Results: Identified Barriers and Key Overarching Themes
Process	Formal/informal (opinion) leaders	Who do the stakeholders identify as formal and informal leaders who will shape the implementation and adoption of these policies for safeguarding athletes in sports?	Who do you think has the power to implement change in safeguarding in sport in Uganda? (Individual and/or entity) Is there anything else you would like to mention or highlight that might shed more light on the topic of safeguarding athletes in Uganda?	There is government will and international organisations willing to help but structural/cultural specificities restrict, prevent, or disrupt awareness and recognition of the existing problem for any planning, engaging, executing, or reflecting (key overarching theme: culture and norms). Weak enforcement of laws; no unified, multi-stakeholder policies among leading decision-making entities (key overarching theme: political processes, lack of funding, and resources).

Two key overarching themes of significant and interlaced barriers to change emerged: (i) culture and norms, and (ii) political processes, funding and resources. These map across all five CIFR domains: (1) intervention characteristics (adaptability, complexity, cost), (2) outer setting (external policies and incentives), (3) inner setting (structural features, culture, change readiness), (4) characteristics of individuals (knowledge/beliefs, self-efficacy, personal attributes), and (5) process (formal, informal (opinion) leaders). Table 3 below shows how the identified barriers are mapped onto each domain (and their constructs).

The trustworthiness of the process was enhanced by giving participants the opportunity to comment on the accuracy of their transcriptions and offer their interpretation of emergent themes (Holloway and Brown 2014). Researchers sought contextual sensitivity and contextual intelligence in this analysis (Holloway and Brown 2014) through regular meetings to reflect on expectations and experiences. In this way, biases could be identified and overcome (Rhind et al. 2017).

3. Results: Barriers to Implementing Sport Safeguarding in Uganda

3.1. Key Overarching Theme 1: Culture and Norms

Several participants point out that the degree to which international policies or initiatives can be adapted, tailored, refined, or reinvented to meet local needs is limited. Contributing factors to the high complexity associated with the implementation of safeguarding policies are Uganda's deeply rooted cultural norms. A medical professional (female, 32 years old) explains how social hierarchy and power dynamics come into play, "I think I would attribute it to the way people have been brought up and grown up and they are told that it is okay for an older man to touch you or you are not supposed to object an elder's decision" and she goes on to relate this to the deeper cultural norms of Uganda "It is something that I think is deep rooted and has deep culturally based aspects in our country". A swimmer (female, 24 years old) reiterates this and expresses her concern about Uganda's 'culture of silence' that makes people apprehensive to talk about sensitive matters such as underage pregnancies or abuse.

Personally, I feel like as a country, we pretend like certain things like underage female pregnancies, kids getting raped, abused, and assaulted are not happening because they are uncomfortable to speak about. And it is like no one speaks about them. Anything related to sex is like an uncomfortable conversation to have and people choose to ignore it and pretend it is not happening. And in the age, we are in right now you can't pretend certain things aren't happening because people are getting affected.

Cultural barriers are also experienced in the context of sport. Both female swimmers who took part in our study agree that Ugandan sport is underpinned by male-dominated structures and norms. They perceive this as a barrier to the implementation of effective safeguarding policies "as coaches in most sports are males and even the people that make the important decisions like the Ugandan federation of swimmers are mostly male" (swimmer, female, 24 years old). A medical professional (female, 32 years old) considers the male-dominated nature of sport in Uganda to be a key factor that prevents (female in particular) athletes reporting abuse "so if you are a woman in sports and then unfortunately, you are abused, you are stuck, you have really no one to talk to". As she says.

They (i.e., female athletes) probably do not find a right platform to address these issues and, generally speaking, sports in Uganda have been male-dominated, majority of the athletes and administrators are males.

It is important to see the barrier of 'culture and norms' not in isolation but in association and interaction with political decisions, priorities, and processes. This relates to broader, complex, and intertwined barriers which are examined next.

3.2. Key Overarching Theme 2: Political Processes, Funding, and Resources

The male-dominated sport context is perceived by some participants as a decisive factor in the lack of an efficient abuse reporting system. One athlete (female, 24 years) shares, "I do not believe that there is any platform that one can go to so as to make a report on abuse". Similarly, most sports federations "do not have anything on safeguarding and athlete wellbeing in their websites, and those that do, even if you click on the dropdown for safeguarding, there will not be any information there, just a blank page".

A sports administrator (male, 37 years old) expresses his concern that "abuses are rarely reported because of the fear of reprisal" and that "people that are usually abusive are still around and in charge, so many of these things may go unreported". He highlights the absence of whistle-blower policies that could "protect athletes and enable them to be able to speak out, communicate effectively without them getting into trouble". An athlete (female, 27 years old) echoes this by describing when Moses Kipsiro, one of the county's best long-distance runners, received death threats after he publicly reported the sexual abuse of three young female athletes in 2014. As she emphasises, "there is no protection for athletes that decide to come out and speak on behalf of their fellow athletes who might be getting abused right under the noses of the federations". Additionally, she expresses her frustration that, following the death threats, "Kipsiro ended up pulling out of the cross-country world championships". A medical professional (female, 32 years old) also refers to the same case of abuse in athletics.

I think you heard about the athletics coach from eastern Uganda who abused three underaged runners. Apparently, he also violated two more girls around that region but those were not athletes. He was reported to have committed these offenses between 2013 and 2014 I think, he was taken to court, but they never really apprehended him for the three runners, or even when he sent threats to Kipsiro, they still did nothing. Some top athletes threatened to boycott major games until the Uganda athletics federation stepped in, but it seemed like they were not really bothered about what was happening.

Several participants attribute these observations to the low prioritization of sport by the Ugandan government. A swimmer (female, 25 years old) expresses her disappointment that "some policies may be there, but they are not that enforced. They are broken. Someone may break rules and say yeah, rules are meant to be broken". A sports administrator (male, 37 years old) explicitly says "Government has not prioritized sports and financing has not been at a level that a priority sector would enjoy whose ripple effect falls on the athlete as well". He expresses his frustration that.

We do not have a specific policy at the country level that is athlete specific or that talks directly regarding issues that protect athletes and the welfare of sports in terms of how exactly athletes should be heading, how they should develop, how they should grow, nurtured, there is nothing as far as policy is concerned.

Such policy gaps in athlete wellbeing, paired with deeply rooted sociocultural hierarchies, result in the normalization of abuse. A swimmer (female, 24 years old) strongly believes that many athletes are violated sexually because "they were actually never told what violating or what consent is". She thinks that this makes them "feel like it's normal" and then eventually "they end up not wanting to go for training because they feel like uncomfortable around their coach, team members". Another swimmer (female, 25 years old) expresses an almost identical view that "athletes that used to be very good at their sport now just all of a sudden not showing up anymore and you never know what happened to them". She thinks that this often happens due to unreported abuse, "a lot of the athletes here in Uganda do not even know and would not be able to recognize abuse, microaggressions or violation" and that they mistakenly think that "abuse is only about rape or something like that... problem is people they do not know the different types of abuse so they cannot recognize them".

Several participants point out that safeguarding education for athletes and onlookers is missing. A swimmer (female, 26 years old) says that "there is not really much education or even how to handle the situation if you happen to be in that situation". While a medical professional (male, 29 years old) emphasises the low priority that education has in the federations' agendas, "most of the federations do not even have education seminars for our athletes and the athlete support staff, it is not a topic that is considered very important".

Another medical professional (female, 50 years old) thinks that the lack of education on issues of abuse goes beyond sport and starts from the years of formal schooling education.

When in high school they were teaching us about the Canadian prairies, and the Swiss Alps. These are things that I can say were a waste of time because you will never use them anywhere anyway...so why not teach us about abuse and all that it entails instead, topics that are a reality in our society and to equip children with these tools. This to me is more useful.

The same observation is made from a swimmer (female, 24 years old) who thinks that schools teach many subjects but very few schools "actually teach what consent is". This results in the normalization of abuse later in life when people "get harassed at their jobs by their bosses and staff and they are like oooh(sic) my boss jokes around, but like I know he is joking but that's still someone violating you".

The identified barriers to effective sport safeguarding in Uganda intersect. For instance, unreported abuse is described by participants as multi-contextual, and having to do with both culture and norms, and political processes, funding and resources (e.g., Ugandan culture of silence, male-dominated context of sport, low prioritization of sport, lack of funding, lack of whistle-blowing policies, lack of education, or normalization of abuse). For this reason, the solution should also be multi-contextual, and in the form of a framework that considers the local needs, cultural specificities and political processes in Uganda.

4. Discussion

Rhind and colleagues identified eight key pillars (CHILDREN) of implementing the International Safeguards for Children in Sport. The first is cultural sensitivity, and is followed by holistic, incentives, leadership, dynamic, resources, engagement, and networks (Muhanguzi 2011). Applying a strategy developed in the Global North to contexts within the Global South may have little effect if cultural nuances are not an a priori consideration (Krueger et al. 2014; Rhind et al. 2015a; Rutland et al. 2022). Our study reveals that different Ugandan stakeholders (athletes, coaches, policy makers, and clinicians) believe that the systemic cultural barriers existing in Uganda have made it difficult to implement an effective safeguarding policy in sport to date. Though Uganda has safeguarding statutes, regulations, and policies (e.g., The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1993; The Children Act 2016; United Nations Children's Fund 2019; The National Council of Sports Statutory Instrument of 2014) and evidence of political will for action (e.g., the National Survey of Uganda's Ministry of Gender), the patriarchal, male-dominated, and culturally conservative society hampers genuine implementation. Children have been raised and taught that the

actions of an older (male) person are not questionable in Ugandan society, and this has led to a culture of silence (and retaliatory violence when norms are violated), which enables different forms of abuse such as forced or pressured sex, or abusive sexual touching among children in different parts of the country (UVACS 2018). In a similar cultural context, in Tanzania, the belief that sexual intercourse between children and adults makes adult perpetrators financially wealthy contributes to the normalization of abusive practices (Bakta 2019). Gender-based violence in its many forms happens within larger contexts of historical, political, social and cultural violence, "women accept them because of social cultural norms that normalize them" and urges Ugandan society "to cultivate a culture of speaking up" (Maractho 2022).

We propose six recommendations of practice, which together comprise a rights-based, multi-contextual framework of athletes' safeguarding, with the acronym 'TRAUMA', that is relevant to the local culture of Uganda, and of other sub-Saharan countries with similar cultural norms (Figure 1):

(i)   A trauma-informed, victim-centred approach of violence prevention and control with mental health support and counselling services.
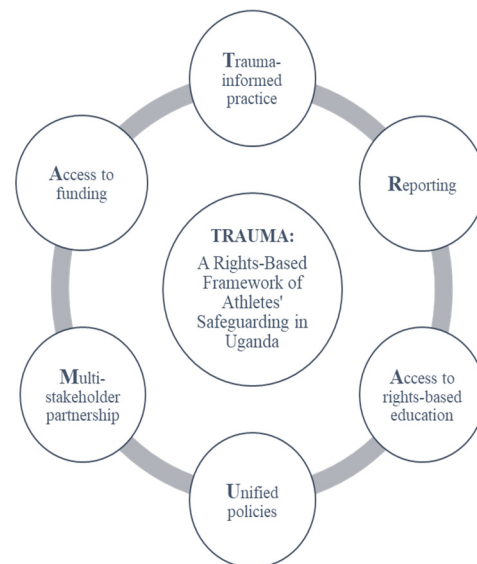

Figure 1. The TRAUMA Framework for the safeguarding of athletes in Uganda.

A study in Uganda revealed that unequal power taints gender relations and charges them with misogyny, control of sexuality, sexual abuse, and exploitation (Muhanguzi 2011). Through complex gendered relations of domination and subordination that positions boys and girls differently in Uganda, there are gender inequalities and sexual vulnerability (Foecke 2019; Muhanguzi 2011). Girls' vulnerability is characterized by confusing and traumatic experiences of double standards and silences (Foecke 2019; Mishna et al. 2019). This results in injuries sustained from violence such as mental distress, self-harm, contemplation of suicide and sexually transmitted infections (UVACS 2018). The Ugandan Ritah Namutamba, a survivor of sexual abuse from two family members and co-founder of a non-government organization (NGO), the GIRLY Network, strongly believes that what the Ugandan community truly needs is a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach (Foecke 2019). Trauma-informed practice approaches (Marotta 2022; Mountjoy et al. 2015) are identified as valuable sites of intervention to address such vulnerabilities and harms (Muhanguzi 2011).

(ii)   Reporting mechanisms that are readily available, legally bound, and human-centred, respecting the privacy and confidentiality of victims and whistle-blowers.

Whistle blowers lack legal protection and are frequently turned into witnesses when called to testify in courts of law. The concealment of the identities of the whistle blowers during court proceedings in Uganda is not guaranteed (Musinguzi 2019). Although Uganda developed the Whistleblowers Protection Act in 2010, this is only focused on corruption (IGG 2010) and does not clearly spell out the whistle blowing practices in the sport context. This, therefore, necessitates the development of whistle blowing policies that are specific to sports and that establish the reporting mechanisms and protection of whistle blowers in Uganda by benchmarking on the above protection Act.

(iii)   Access to rights-based education in schools and sports clubs that defines different types of violence and equips children (and parents) with tools for responding and reacting in given situations.

Abuse frequently stems from situations of power dynamics between participants and their peers, parents, and coaches, and several other factors such as cultural beliefs which come into play to facilitate these types of situations (Tiivas 2020). For all of these reasons, abuse often remains unchallenged or unreported (Rhind et al. 2017). This is reiterated by the Ugandan stakeholders in our study, who express the certainty that many cases of maltreatment in sport are never acknowledged or reported. Lack of training arrangements puts the athletes at a risk of abuse. Literature has shown a need for training appropriate staff with skills, knowledge, and support to effectively handle safeguarding (Rhind et al. 2015b). Education is a foundation for sport safeguarding because, when people's awareness about an incident increases, the understanding and knowledge by which to overcome denial and handle the situation becomes eminent (Mountjoy et al. 2016). Parents and caretakers should also be involved in such education programs, as they can play a pivotal role in safeguarding children (Gjaka et al. 2021). Education can be a tool for addressing ignorance and normalization of the abuse through empowering athletes to know their rights, understanding the reporting mechanism, while offering an advocacy platform for empowering communities to respect human rights.

(iv)   Unified policies with firm sanctions for the perpetrators.

The Ugandan government has promoted and championed child rights through policies, legal frameworks, and the adoption of treaties (Renzaho et al. 2018). This is evidenced by the ratification of several policies and regulations aimed at protecting the rights of children. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), etc. In sport, the IOC Consensus Statement (Mountjoy et al. 2016), and the eight CHILDREN pillars for the implementation of the International Safeguards for Children in Sport (Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017) have also provided important guidelines and recommendations for effective safeguarding across different cultures and countries. However, there is still no evidence about the implementation of any of these in the Ugandan sport context. Clearer policies with firmer sanctions should be in place for an effective response to tackle maltreatment in sport.

(v)   Multi-stakeholder partnership for policy implementation.

There is a need for stronger evidence supporting the development of inter-agency standards and the harmonization of support at the national and international levels (Wessells 2009) to ensure children's safety in sport. Achieving safeguarding depends on partnerships between stakeholders from government, the private sector, civil society, academic and research institutions, and international agencies. While some partnerships already exist in Uganda, there is a need for integration and more cooperation between the different role players. Multi-stakeholder platforms are proposed as a mechanism to support and encourage partnerships, and to provide leadership on successful partnerships in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa (Haywood et al. 2019). The same holds true with regard to the achievement of sport safeguarding, especially in light of current regional strategic plans such as the Agenda 2063 of the African Union, which

emphasises the importance of strong partnerships. Agenda 2063 calls for coordination and cooperation in mutually beneficial partnerships between regions and continents to enable the realization of this African vision, in addition to articulating a Pan-African vision of integration, solidarity, and unity on a continental level (African Union 2015).

(vi)   Access to funding prioritising sport.

In the context of sport, despite cases of violence against Ugandan athletes, our study's participants expressed their concern that there is disinterest among stakeholders and low prioritization for the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and young athletes in Uganda. The findings are consistent with other studies in the African context, e.g., in Nigeria, where managers and users of sport are frustrated with the lack of funding and resources (Nwankwo and Ekechukwu 2017). Rhind and colleagues point out the lack of finances as a key barrier to a sustainable safeguarding system, which hinders the implementation of good policies at community level (Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017) as staff must be facilitated to perform those activities.

5. Study Limitations

While this research sought to understand the challenges associated with implementing policies for safeguarding athletes in sports in Uganda, it is not without limitations that should be considered during the interpretation of the research findings.

Our research documents the experiences of athletes from two sports, swimming and athletics, whose experiences might differ from those in other sports, such as rugby, soccer, cricket, among others. Future studies should explore the experiences of other athletes such as those with disabilities, those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex plus (LGBTQI+) community, grassroots athletes, high school athletes and those from other sports codes and other key stakeholders such as child protection units, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the Ministry of Education and Sports. Our research documents the experiences of female athletes whose experiences might differ from those of male athletes as well as para-athletes. There is a need to understand the experiences of male athletes from the same sports and in the same spirit, understanding the experiences of para-athletes from the same sports. As the study documents the experiences of professional sportspeople who have played at national and international levels, findings may not relate to recreational- and regional-level athletes, where sport safeguarding implementation and practice may have different requirements (McKay et al. 2021). Additionally, a purposive sampling approach was employed to recruit the respondents, which has the potential for selection bias. Lastly, as explained in Section 2, small sample size should not be seen as a limitation in and of itself. However, a larger sample would have perhaps added some increasing, minute pieces of meaning. Recruiting additional participants proved challenging due to the 'culture of silence' in Uganda and the associated fears to talk about issues that relate to maltreatment, violence, abuse, and harassment (Foecke 2019; Maractho 2022; Muhanguzi 2011; Raising Voices 2017).

6. Conclusions

A culturally tailored response is needed to safeguard child and young athletes in Uganda and in other similar backgrounds. In this way, the negative health consequences of interpersonal violence in sport can be minimized, risk and protective factors can be identified, and national programs and policies to prevent interpersonal violence against athletes can be developed.

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