

*IMPROVING
PLAYER ASSOCIATIONS'
SUPPORT FOR*

WOMEN ATHLETES



Introduction

This Guide is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ project "Supporting Women Athletes from Europe" (SWAFE), led by EU Athletes and aiming to improve the support that is available to elite and professional women athletes. Since the project started in January 2017, three new women's Player Associations have joined EU Athletes.

The guide is addressed primarily to existing player associations that might or might not currently have women members. It is also designed to be of help to any athletes thinking about forming a players association to support women athletes, though we would also draw attention to an earlier document "The Players Guide to Social Dialogue: How to set up an effective players association" which is available from EU Athletes' website in a number of languages:
www.euathletes.org/esscd/

Background

«Too many elite women athletes in Europe typically suffer from poor working conditions...»

Whilst women's sport is typically not as commercially popular as the men's game in many cases, it is a growing marketplace. Importantly, elite women players act as the "shop window" for their sport and have an important part in attracting children to play sports. Women and girls' low participation at the grassroots level, compared to boys and men, is an issue in many sports. Too many elite women athletes in Europe typically suffer from poor working conditions, low pay and disrespectful treatment. We believe that this lack of consideration for elite women athletes will have a detrimental effect on female participation at all levels.

It is also interesting, and important, to recognise that some women athletes may not feel as if they have a right to be treated

as paid workers. Too many clubs will claim that they cannot afford to even pay national minimum wages and that people are "lucky" to be playing their sport at a high level.

Our research based on Spanish futsal and Greek volleyball found:

- Most women athletes are part-time, either combining their sport with work or studies
- Many do not have a written employment contract
- The vast majority earn less than €10,000 a year
- More than a quarter had suffered gender-based harassment as an athlete

It is likely that these results will be similar in many other sports and countries.

Benefits to player associations

Player associations exist to support players and improve their working conditions.

It is clear that established associations would be well placed to assist women athletes with battles that were probably won for the men's game many years ago. Supporting women athletes is a chance to get back to basics and to remind your sport and your members what player associations stand for.

The legal situation in each country will probably differ but it is likely that, on the basis of anti-discrimination, restricting access to an existing player association to male players only may be of questionable legality. At the very least, it is an issue of fairness and public relations.

There are definite benefits in expanding the membership of traditionally male associations to include women athletes. These include:

- A larger number of members
- The chance to appeal to a new commercial market
- The ability to negotiate with the federation about the women's national team
- Expanding your influence and remit within the sport

Besides that, the most important reason is likely to be that the elite women athletes in your sport need assistance and deserve the protection of a player association. This is the reason that player associations exist and it can be invigorating to make a real difference to women athletes' work situations.



Who should take the initiative?

It is important to consider who should take the lead in improving the support available for women athletes.

Should a traditionally male player association look to actively unionise women athletes or should it wait for the women players to approach the union? It's probably a mixture of both. We suggest that the existing player associations should reach out to the women's game and see how they respond.

Our view is that there needs to be an active participation, a strong desire for improved working conditions and representation from

the women's game if the new arrangements are going to work.

Be aware that there is nothing wrong with just starting with the women's national team, who may often be the only female athletes with working contracts. One of the first jobs may well be to raise women's expectations of what they should demand as professional athletes.

It is also possible to do quite a bit of work before taking any decision on whether to set up a separate women's players association or welcome them within an existing men's association.

Team visits



No player association has ever succeeded without spending considerable time meeting and talking to its players. There is no way round this, face-to-face meetings are the only way to get going. Even established player associations should meet every team at least once a year.

There is merit in identifying a key player at each club who seems most interested and could be your initial contact point. This person could become your club representative and may wish to stand for election to the Executive Committee in due course.

You need to decide who is the best person or people to do your initial team visits. It is probably preferable to have both a former / current women athlete and a representative either from the men's player association or from a women's association in a different sport.

Start at the top

The women's national team is a good place to start. These people are at the best in their sport and have an important relationship with the national federation. They are likely to be the most popular and well-known players with a degree of market power.

If you can get the national team to support becoming part of a player association then they will act as powerful ambassadors within their colleagues. The national team are role models for younger players and can be influential, especially when they go back to their clubs after international duty.

Social media

Many elite women athletes will be using social media to build their brand and the profile of their sport. Social media, if it is done well, can be a powerful tool in bringing women athletes together and can help to drive forward an association.

During your team visits make sure you get as many contact details as possible for future members and find out their preferred contact method.



The Asociacion de Jugadoras de Futbol Sala Femenino (AJFSF) for women futsal players finds social media to be very useful to attract members. It uses social media to spread important messages to their futsal players in a cost effective and efficient manner. At the start of the season they launch their campaigns with video and infographics and posters about the advantages and importance of becoming members. It has found that following players means they follow the association back and creates a powerful link with the members.

Trough Social media AJFSF created a worldwide campaign called #WOWenPlayFutsalFIFA. More than 10 countries joined in by using the hashtag plus a picture of women playing futsal to demand that FIFA gave greater recognition and support to women's Futsal.

The French Basketball Player Association (SNB) used social media to raise awareness amongst women players about worker rights. They have combined the national sport collective agreement (CCNS) and the women's professional league regulations, to create tweets that explain athletes working rights in a way that is easily accessible and understood. The tweets cover a range of issues including minimum wage, Image Rights and the right to a second medical opinion. Tweets are also available in English to help foreign players.

The reason behind this strategy is to improve player's knowledge so they become more aware of their working environment and rights and more willing to engage with the SNB to fight for improvements.



The Women's Gaelic Players Association (WGPA) does regular surveys of its members. It has found that its players struggled to have access to such basic services as showers or training facilities. Research on the experiences of individuals and teams has helped identify priority areas for WGPA. Areas identified included travel expenses, equipment provisions, food after training, player input into national decision making, training commitments and medical support.

Research

Whilst you cannot beat meeting people to get an idea of the issues, the next step is to get hard evidence to back up your arguments. One of the best ways of doing this is through research. Using the Internet and social media means that research can be done quite easily and quickly.

We cannot overstate the relevance of good research for raising an issue for public debate and embarrassing the federation into action. It is also a way of finding out what is most important to your members and reminding them that the new player association is interested in their views while working on their behalf.

Surveys have moved the argument for change with stakeholders such as the media, the associations, government and media beyond anecdotal evidence to facts and

figures. Surveys are a simple, useful tool for engaging and building affinity with members.

Whilst you will be best placed to design your own research questionnaire, we have included a suggested model in the annex of this document. It is important to consider the benefits of keeping questionnaires short and perhaps trying them out on some supportive players first.

Be aware that online resources such as Google Forms make it much easier to carry out quick research, but that response rates can be quite low. It can sometimes be better to do paper questionnaires during team visits, depending upon how well your athletes respond to different communication channels.



Federations & public sector support

Most federations will receive significant government funding and will be required to operate policies to promote gender equality and promote women's grass roots sport. This can give elite women athletes an important role with their federations. These requirements can be a powerful lever to encourage federations to improve the treatment of women's athletes. If there is a sympathetic Minister or MP who champions women's sport within the Government, the impact can be even more powerful.

You should consider whether additional funding for players could be achieved by agreeing to promote their sport through a

fixed number of community projects and/or school visits. Such an approach would be in partnership with the federation, which obviously has its benefits in developing improved relationships.

The WGPA helped to secure €1m funding from the Irish government for all top level female Gaelic teams. Each team receives a team bursary to invest in sports science supports, raise standards across the game and recognise the cultural contribution women players make to Irish society. The equality argument was a major driver as male Gaelic players were already receiving individual government grants.





Equal pay for equal work

It is important to be aware that the equal pay rule applies to sport. It is generally illegal to discriminate against people because of their gender, though the specifics may vary according to different case law and the interpretation of the courts.

It may be necessary to take legal advice on how equality laws apply to sport. Alternatively, there may be a women sports group in your country that could be an excellent source of help, advice and support. It is also probably worthwhile studying the federation's equality statement and holding it to account according what it has committed to do.

It is interesting to consider whether pay should be related to the actual work that the athletes do or the financial and commercial income that the different men's and women's games bring in. The reality is that it is probably a mixture of both in most cases.

Equal pay first: In October 2017, a historic announcement was made by the Norwegian football association that Norway's male and female players will receive the same amount of pay for representing the country. It was reported that the amount of money paid to the women's team will almost double from 3.1m krone to 6m krone. This included a 550,000 krone subsidy from the male football players.

Different models

When the time is right to formalise the support available to women athletes there are a number of different options to choose from within the player association family. Choosing which approach works best should take into account the possible relationship with already existing player associations. The best model may also depend upon the specific circumstances of the sport in your country and how the federation is organised with regards to women's sport and the elite game.

The three main models are:

- A combined men's and women's players association
- A separate but related (sister) women's players association, often sharing the same back room support and office space.
- A stand-alone women's players association.

All of these different models have positives and negatives. EU Athletes takes the view that the first two options are probably best with a standalone association being the last resort. This is due to the difficulty in setting up new associations from scratch.



women's players association

Combined

Sister

Stand-alone





Combined associations

Håndbold Spiller Foreningen (HSF) was founded in 1997 and is the Danish Handball Players' Association, an independent association that represents and safeguards the interests of female and male handball players in Denmark and Danish players abroad. HSF has about 600 members equally distributed between women and men. It provides personal counselling, fights for collective improvements and promotes Danish elite handball by developing the conditions for handball players over time. HSF has negotiated national team agreements for the female and male national team since 1998.

Pros: Easy to set up. Existing infrastructure is in place with skilled staff and funding.

Cons. There can be a danger of tokenism and that women's issues get lost within the larger men's game. Also women may be less motivated to engage and volunteer for the association

This is probably the easiest route to take to help unionise women's sport. Existing male associations may need to change their constitution to permit women athletes to join but this should be relatively simple process at the next General Assembly.

Please be aware that you will need to ensure that the existing male members are supportive of expanding the membership to include women athletes. There is a real risk of tokenism so it is important that the help is real and that the male players, especially the high-profile ones, are prepared to stand up for the women players.

The benefits that can be achieved by a truly combed approach was demonstrated by the Australian Cricketers Association in their 2017 negotiations with Cricket Australia. This resulted in significant improvements for men and women cricketers. The ACA said that the gender equality pay model and other equalisations resulted in the biggest pay rise in the history of women's sport in Australia.

A degree of cross-subsidy from the male game may be required initially to include women within a male association and it is important to be honest about this and allocate sufficient resources for the new women members. Most associations will probably have a degree of cross-subsidy between the best players and those lower down the leagues so there is a precedent for such an approach.



Issues to consider:

• **Staff** – it is important to consider the gender balance of an existing male association. Whilst there is no reason that men cannot support women athletes, it is probably important that associations have a mix of staff genders that is reflective of its membership or at least commits to work towards such a goal.

• **Board** – The management board of an association will typically consist of current players. It is important that women are represented on this board once women are members of the association. In the short term this may require appointing specific people to the board (if allowed under your constitution). In the longer term it may be necessary to have positions on the board that are specifically ring-fenced for women to elect. However this will depend upon the percentage of women members. For example, if women make up 50% of the membership then there may be no need to guarantee board positions for women, but if women currently only make-up 5% of the membership, then there is a benefit in ensuring at least one women athlete representative on a board of 10 people. At the same time, it is important to raise awareness and educate members and staff about the importance of aiming at gender balance in decision-making bodies.

• **Player representatives** – many player associations' models will be based around

player representatives based at each club. The same model should work for women's sport but you may need to consider providing training for your club representatives.

• **Equal access to services** – it is very important that a mixed player association offers the same level of service to men and women members including legal representation, dual career support, and hardship grants. This is essential for the credibility of the association to represent women and may be required by national laws.

Whilst there are many benefits to having a combined player association, it can be the case that athletes feel that their voice sometimes gets drowned out by the men's game.

Given the different size of membership and also sometimes the wealth within the men's and women's games this is always likely to be an issue. One of the ways around this is to perhaps have a dedicated resource or lead officer and board member for the women's game within the player association. There may also be benefit in approaching some high-profile male athletes to act as champions for women's rights within the game.

We would suggest that both the players and player association needs to be aware of the potential for women athletes to feel lost within a men's association and we would encourage regular monitoring of the situation either through questionnaires or audits.



Sister associations

A sister association is a separate women's association that works closely with its male counterpart.

Pros: A new focussed association just for women athletes. It will typically involve more female athletes in its running and may be closer to their issues. The ability to work closely with the men's associations and even share office space is a great way to save money and gain from their expertise.

Cons. Resources can be an issue and need to develop a brand. The number of potential members may be too small to be viable

A number of associations have chosen this route. They felt that a separate, though closely related, association would provide the best of both worlds. There was a concern that joining within a male dominated association could mean that the women's issues were not given sufficient resources or profile. It may also be the case that the men's association wants to stay focussed on its own core function whilst also supporting its fellow athletes.

Typically, a sister association will be formally constituted and set up with its own finances, board and staff. It will need its own logo, brand, social media channels and website. However, some associations have one website dedicated to both male and female

The Spanish Women's Futsal Association (AJFSF) started by being included in the men's association because of the need for a lawyer to help women players with contract issues. However after a year, the female players decided to set up a separate association. This was because they felt that the men's association perhaps struggled to effectively fight

for both mens and womens priorities at the same time. So although they set up a new association (AJFSF) they continued to work closely with the men's association. The two associations share office space, have the same agreements with sponsors, use the same website, have similar logos and work on joint projects together.



association which is also something to consider, as it can help to save costs and give more visibility to newly established women's union. Sister associations will often share an office with the more established men's association as a way of reducing overheads (like IT and payroll as well as rent) and benefiting from a close working relationship. Ideally the men's and women's player association will have an observer status on each other's executive boards and work closely on issues of joint interest.

Such an approach works very well for a number of associations. It allows an exclusive focus on the issues most relevant to the women members. It also means that the women members need to take more ownership of their association and be more actively involved if it is going to succeed. This

is a good thing but it can be hard to engage athlete.

It is important to consider the size of the potential membership of any sister association. If a new organisation is going to be sustainable it needs to have a solid playing base in the game. We would suggest that at least 100 members would be the minimum that is needed for a sustainable association. If you do not think this is possible then it may be better to have a combined male and female association.

The cost of setting up a sister association, in terms of finance and more significantly staff time, will be considerable and you will need the active support and engagement of women athlete volunteers to drive the association forward.



Stand-alone associations

Pros: In charge of own destiny, not reliant on others. There can sometimes be no other choice in some sports and countries.

Cons: Setting up a new association is undoubtedly hard work with little resources in the initial stages. It can be overly dependent upon volunteers and its founders to drive the associations forward. The number of potential members may be too small to be viable.

There is no getting around the fact that it is hard work to set up a standalone players association. But then nothing worthwhile was ever easy and there will always be advice and support available through the EU Athletes network.

We would also strongly encourage you to read our earlier publication "The Players Guide to Social Dialogue, How to Set up an Effective Player Association", which contains a wealth of information and expert advice.

We would suggest that a stand-alone association should only be chosen when there are no other options. When this is the

case, you might like to try to involve a bigger (non-sporting) trade union to see if they can support you.

Finally, it is essential is that the views of the elite women players are sought as to which model of association they prefer. The plusses and minuses of each model should be set out for them.

EU Athletes would also strongly encourage anyone thinking of setting up a new association to speak to colleagues in other sports and countries. There is a wealth of experience within the membership of EU Athletes that is very happy to help.



Some thoughts on gender of staff and management boards



Whilst it might be tempting to employ only women in a women's player association we would suggest that such an approach be reconsidered as it may be illegal. It is important to make sure that you have the best people for specific jobs regardless of their gender. The player associations have always found that players generally respond best to ex-players but this is not written in stone. There are some very good Player Development Managers and Chief Executives who have never played the sport they work in professionally.

Whilst there is often a benefit in bringing in non-executive directors from outside the sport, such as lawyers and accountants, to help run a board, we are strongly of the opinion that current or recently retired players should make up the majority of the management board of player associations. It is essential that player associations ensure that they are representative of the players.

Ideally you want to create a staff team with complementary skill sets who will be able to add value to the work of the executive board. Whilst the gender balance of the team is important it should not be the sole consideration.

Key targets

Regardless of what type of association you are, it is important to set short, medium and long-term targets for what you want to achieve for your women members. These targets need to be closely related to what your new members want and should be based upon the answers to your initial questionnaire and follow up discussions.

The following list is a suggestion for some of the targets you should be looking to achieve on behalf of your members.

It is generally good practice to have one or two key priorities' that have been agreed with the players beforehand for both the short-term and also longer term goals. These are likely to be issues that arose out of your earlier research or team visits.

A Funding

Without adequate funding any player association will be limited in what it can achieve. It makes sense to set financial goals for any new association which can include sufficient funds to employ a dedicated member of staff. Funding typically comes from member subscriptions, commercial income, government grants, donations and the federation. It may also be worthwhile approaching the men's player association for support-in-kind and commercial contacts.

Associations need to manage their players' expectations about what can be achieved in the short term. Experience has shown that it is important not to over-promise and then under-deliver. New associations need to learn to walk before they can run.

B Basic worker rights.

Most European countries will have guaranteed minimum employment rights for all workers.

These can include National Minimum Wages, social security, injury at work pay, maternity rights.

One of the first targets of any association should be to ensure that women professional athletes are treated at least as well as any other worker and given the same rights and protections. These can normally be enforced through court cases but sometimes the threat of a court case can be sufficient to bring about changes.

Also, do not under-estimate the power of the media to shame clubs and federations into treating athletes as workers. It can be an interesting exercise to compare the rights and salaries of players to those who work in the stadium.

C Salaries and bonuses for the national team

Player Associations can have a positive impact on negotiations of the pay and conditions of national teams – provided that the team is unified behind the players association. This can be a tricky area to negotiate but almost every established player association will have experience in this area so do not be afraid to ask for help.

D Changes in the federation / structure of the game

Depending upon what your new members say, it may be that the new player association wants to target changes in the organisation of its sport. This is an important role for any player association.

E Access to proper facilities

Again, depending upon the answers to the questionnaire, access to hot showers and decent changing facilities can be an important target for player associations. Moving on it could be that

access to the same support facilities as male players – such as strength and conditioning coaches and nutritional support – could be a target.

F Growing and increasing the profile of women's sport

It can be a good target to aim to work with clubs and federations to grow the commercial appeal of your sport – and to hopefully enter into a revenue sharing model. Women's sport can be commercially attractive (and is sometimes included within sponsorship contracts for the men's game) and it is right that women players are paid for any commercial use of their image rights.

G Collective Bargaining Agreement

The aim of almost every player association is to negotiate a Collective Bargaining Agreement with the federation or league which covers all the important areas of players' working lives. This is an excellent long-term goal but it may take a while to get there.

H Equality with the men's game

Again, this may be another excellent long-term goal and if you look at the Norwegian women's football team's recent victory on equal pay for the national teams, it is certainly a possibility.

More generally with any negotiation it can be good to aim high and in so doing move the federation or leagues closer to your position, even if you don't get everything that you call for.

I Anti-harassment campaign

Depending upon the situation in your sport it may be that your new members would welcome a campaign that promotes their rights to dignity at work and to a working environment free from

sexual harassment and bullying. It is possible that there may be funding available for such a campaign from the public or trade union sector.

J Player Development Programmes

Given the lower finances available in most women's sports it may be helpful to focus on dual career development opportunities for your athletes. Providing or negotiating education scholarships, leadership training, mentoring opportunities for players can be a positive goal.

Finally, a number of women's associations have mentioned the issue of the need to increase women players sense of entitlement and respect. This is a tricky area as you need to be very careful not to be seen as talking down to people but it may be essential to address at some point.

All athletes need to recognise that they have a financial value and that whilst they consider themselves lucky to be playing high level sport they also need to recognise that it is an economic activity that has value. As players, they are entitled to a share of that economic value and everyone in the game needs to recognise this.

Quick wins

Quick wins can be very important for a new association as a way of getting supporters on board. We would suggest that the working conditions, whether its pay or win bonuses, are a good place to start.

Once an association has its first win for women members it will become easier to get more women members to join.



The Hellenic Professional Volleyball Players Association (HPVPA) was reconstituted in 2009 and initially only male athletes were included. This was because the law recognised only men as professional athletes. Wanting to change the status quo in 2012, the association voted to include women athletes with the aim of them being recognised as workers in Greek sports law. It took almost four years of campaigning before the volleyball federation recognized the right of HPVPA to represent female athletes in social dialogue.

Conclusions

Women's sport is a growing economic activity with increasing levels of elite athletes earning an income from their sport. However, far too many elite women athletes suffer from poor working conditions.

There is an important role for the player associations to play in helping to support women athletes' rights and their voice within their sport. EU Athletes is firmly of the opinion that all of its member player associations should actively consider how they support women athletes.

The benefits of including women athletes within the European player union movement will be multiple – for the players, for the associations and ultimately for the sport itself.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the research and in order to improve the situation of elite female athletes and the gender equality in sport in general, we make the following important recommendations to decision makers at national and European level:

- >> Include equal treatment of professional sportsmen and women as a priority while working on gender equality in sport**
- >> Undertake research on deficiencies related to worker status and labour rights of elite women athletes**
- >> Recognize and promote the added value of Player Associations in advancing gender equality in sport at EU and national level**
- >> Include athletes and their properly mandated representatives in policy initiatives related to gender equality and women's sport at EU and national level**

Questionnaire for Women Players

1) Sport you play

.....

2) Nationality

.....

3) Country you currently play in

.....

4) What best describes your current work status?

- Full time athlete
- Part time athlete studying
- Part time athlete doing other paid work
- Part time athlete not doing other paid work (Include part time athlete studying and paid work...)

5) Do you get paid for playing sport?

.....

If yes please tick scale (euros per year, including all expenses and benefits such as accommodation, car allowance, study grant etc.)

Just expenses

- 0-5,000 5-,000-10,000
- 10,000 – 20,000 20,000-30,000
- 30,000-40,000 40,000-50,000
- 50,000+

6) Do you have an agent?

.....

7) Do you get paid by your club for other duties? For example coaching?

.....

8) Do you have a written employment contract

.....

If yes, labour law contract or a different contract (private/civil law)?

.....

9) Do you have employment rights like other workers, eg sick pay, maternity pay, social security

.....

10) Does your employer provide private health insurance?

.....

11) Are you free to choose which club to work for? (freedom of movement)

- Yes No I don't know

12) I feel valued as an elite athlete

- Strongly disagree disagree neither agree nor disagree agree agree strongly

13) My sport is my number one priority at the moment

- Strongly disagree disagree neither agree nor disagree agree agree strongly

14) How many hours a week do you work as an athlete (playing, training with the team and individually, recovering, photo and video sessions ? etc)

.....

15) Do you have access to the following support services free of charge (Must be more clear if we mean support from the club or generally including Players Association)

- Strength and conditioning advice
 - Nutrition advice
 - Physiotherapy
 - Dual career advice
 - Legal protection
- If yes – who is providing these services? (club, federation, player association or other)
-

16) Are you a member of your player association (union)?

.....

17) The player associations treats women members as well as male members

- Strongly disagree disagree neither agree nor disagree agree agree strongly

18) Have you ever suffered from gender-based harassment*, sexual harassment* or any other form of gender-based violence as an athlete?

.....

*Gender-based harassment means unwelcome conduct related to a person's gender and has the effect or purpose of offending another person's dignity.

*Sexual harassment refers to behaviour of a sexualized nature which is unwanted, exploitative, degrading, coerced, forced and/or violent.

19) Would it be helpful for us to do some more detailed research into gender-based harassment, sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence against women athletes?

.....

20) What is your biggest frustration with women's sport?

.....

21) What should be the top priority for the player associations to campaign for changes in women's sport?

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 **EU Athletes**



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