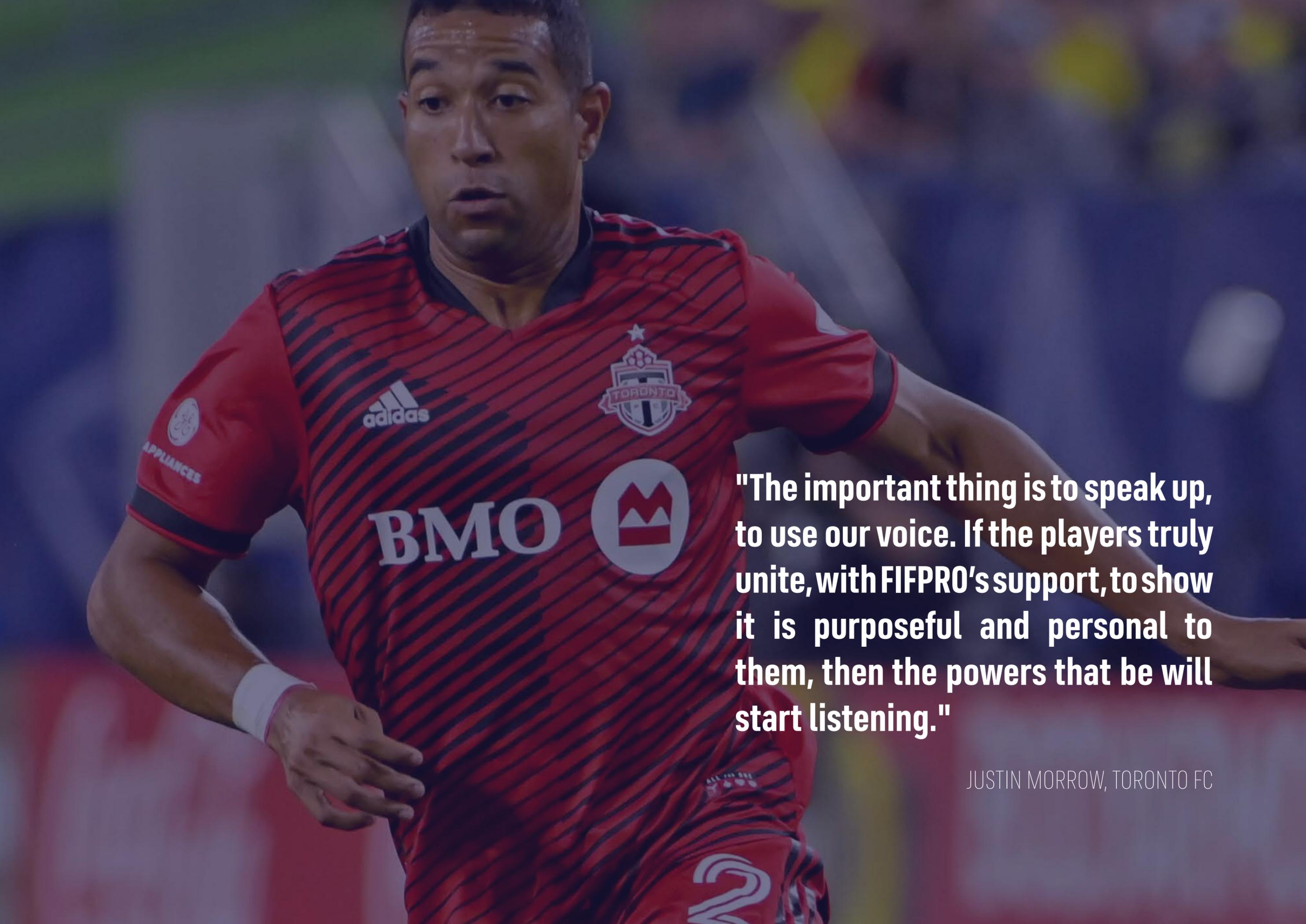




# WHAT EQUAL PLAYING FIELD?

PLAYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON DISCRIMINATION IN FOOTBALL





**"The important thing is to speak up, to use our voice. If the players truly unite, with FIFPRO's support, to show it is purposeful and personal to them, then the powers that be will start listening."**

JUSTIN MORROW, TORONTO FC

# TRIGGER WARNING

***This Report speaks to great injustices and addresses some painful and difficult topics. Its content may be distressing to individuals who have experienced discrimination and abuse, including hate-speech and sexual violence.***

***We have sought to strike a balance between providing a necessary and accurate account of players' experiences, while avoiding unnecessary repetition of offensive content.***

***We realise the Report makes for difficult reading at times. For those who do not face discrimination, we encourage you to persevere so that you may truly understand the gravity of the situation. For those who have experienced discrimination, we hope that the many examples of strength, courage, and determination, alongside our commitment to continue to fight for change even when you may not feel able to, offer hope.***



## ABOUT

The past 18 months have been overshadowed by a global pandemic that rocked football to its core. Leagues were cancelled. Players' careers were put on hold. Games took place in empty stadia. It has presented a huge challenge to the entire industry and showed us that, in many ways, football without supporters isn't really football at all. But for some players the absence of fans also offered an unexpected reprieve: it meant no monkey noises, or homophobic or sexist chants at the game. As crowds have started to return, and online abuse has drastically escalated, players have called for change.

Such change is long overdue. **This report highlights that the relentless discriminatory abuse and treatment faced by many players is deeply distressing and damaging, and that it creates an unequal playing field.** Not enough is currently being done to combat discrimination in football. If change is to happen, it will require a greater understanding and commitment from us all. That starts by hearing from those at the very heart of the game.

This report stems from a learning and listening experience conducted by FIFPRO. We listened to our colleagues, many of whom are former players, and to our Global Player Council who continue to offer a critical insight into the current challenges faced by players.

***We listened to the players who have publicly called out discrimination, and who expressed their pain, anger and frustration that so little is being done.***

And we listened to those who founded initiatives like the Black Women's Player Collective precisely because there is a need to amplify underserved voices and communities. Those voices form the basis of this report.

Chapter 1 focuses on the experience of players. It seeks to chart and acknowledge what they go through on an often-daily basis. Chapter 2 draws attention to the impact of discriminatory abuse on the players and bears witness to their pain, suffering, courage and tenacity. Finally, Chapter 3 explores some recommendations to tackle discrimination in football. It highlights the need for greater leadership diversity, the phenomenal advocacy and activism of players who struggle to survive and beat discrimination, and the importance of meaningful and authentic allyship.

### SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF "WHAT EQUAL PLAYING FIELD?"

Creating this report has helped deepen our understanding of the needs of players, but it does not mark the endpoint of that learning exercise. Instead, FIFPRO is committed to a constant and evolving process of reflection to better understand the diverse (and sometimes divergent) experiences, opinions and needs of players from different backgrounds playing in leagues around the world. We thought long and hard about addressing various forms of discriminatory abuse in a single report, and about the different challenges and experiences in the men's and women's game. Indeed, with transgender and non-binary players now openly playing in professional leagues, FIFPRO must continue to examine its and others' thinking around how we define the parameters of the game and those who play it.

Ultimately, we decided that as a starting point the benefits of taking a holistic view and tackling many of the key concerns around discrimination in football outweighed the disadvantages. It has allowed us to highlight common themes, causes and solutions.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that experiences across leagues and levels of the game are not the same. As our work in this space continues, we will look to deepen and disaggregate our understanding of different forms of abuse across the different leagues, to fully embrace and meet our responsibility to represent and protect all professional players at all levels of the game.

### MORE THAN A REPORT

An inevitable conclusion when hearing players' experiences is that the unchecked prejudice still seen in football damages players and the game, and creates a negative ripple effect around the world. We acknowledge that, as well as communicating around the issues, FIFPRO needs to simultaneously and critically examine its own role and acknowledge the fact that there is always more that we can and must do. This report heralds our intent to also do better.

In the coming years, we will be building our activities around our live strategy, detailed on the following page.

# OUR GAME PLAN

## PROTECT

**PROTECT PLAYERS FROM DISPROPORTIONATE AND/OR INAPPROPRIATE SANCTIONS FOR FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION OR SUPPORTING SOCIAL JUSTICE.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Provide direct legal advice and representation in defence of players' freedom of speech and right to peaceful protest, alongside our Member Unions.*

## SUPPORT

**ACKNOWLEDGE AND BEAR WITNESS TO THE HUGE IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AND ABUSE ON FOOTBALL PLAYERS.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Host regular opportunities for players to feed in experiences, continue to provide ongoing support to those individuals and to highlight the voice of players.*

## CHAMPION

**INITIATE AND ACTION MEANINGFUL INDEPENDENT RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF RACE, INCLUSION, COMMUNICATION AND FOOTBALL WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Financial and institutional commitment to a multi-year, independent University Chair and Research Centre to gather data, raise awareness and guide/inform meaningful actions.*

**IMPROVE EXISTING PROTOCOLS AND SYSTEMS INTENDED TO PREVENT ABUSE.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Convene an expert task force to address the three-step protocol; and provide remedy for victims and survivors of discrimination and abuse; assist and support players in their efforts to tackle online abuse through dedicated multi-sport, global research and analysis.*

**SUPPORT PLAYERS WHO WANT TO TAKE AN ACTIVE PART IN COMBATING DISCRIMINATION.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Create and convene opportunities for players to come together and raise their voices on behalf of themselves and in support of others to affect change. Continue to facilitate player activism through our Global Player Council and related groups and initiatives.*

**HIGHLIGHT, SHARE, AND AMPLIFY PLAYERS' EFFORTS TO CHALLENGE ABUSE AND SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION AND IMPROVE DIVERSITY IN POWER STRUCTURES.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Connect players to the governing bodies to directly input their experiences and ideas into decision-making processes.*

**CONTINUE TO SUPPORT NATIONAL MEMBER ORGANISATIONS TO ROBUSTLY AND CONSISTENTLY TACKLE DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE AND TO RAISE INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Deliver educational opportunities and best-practice support to national member organisations, including designing tools to protect players as they navigate both their national and international multicultural environments.*

**INCREASE REPRESENTATION AND DIVERSITY WITHIN OUR OWN ORGANISATION AND BUILD CAPACITY OF UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS.**

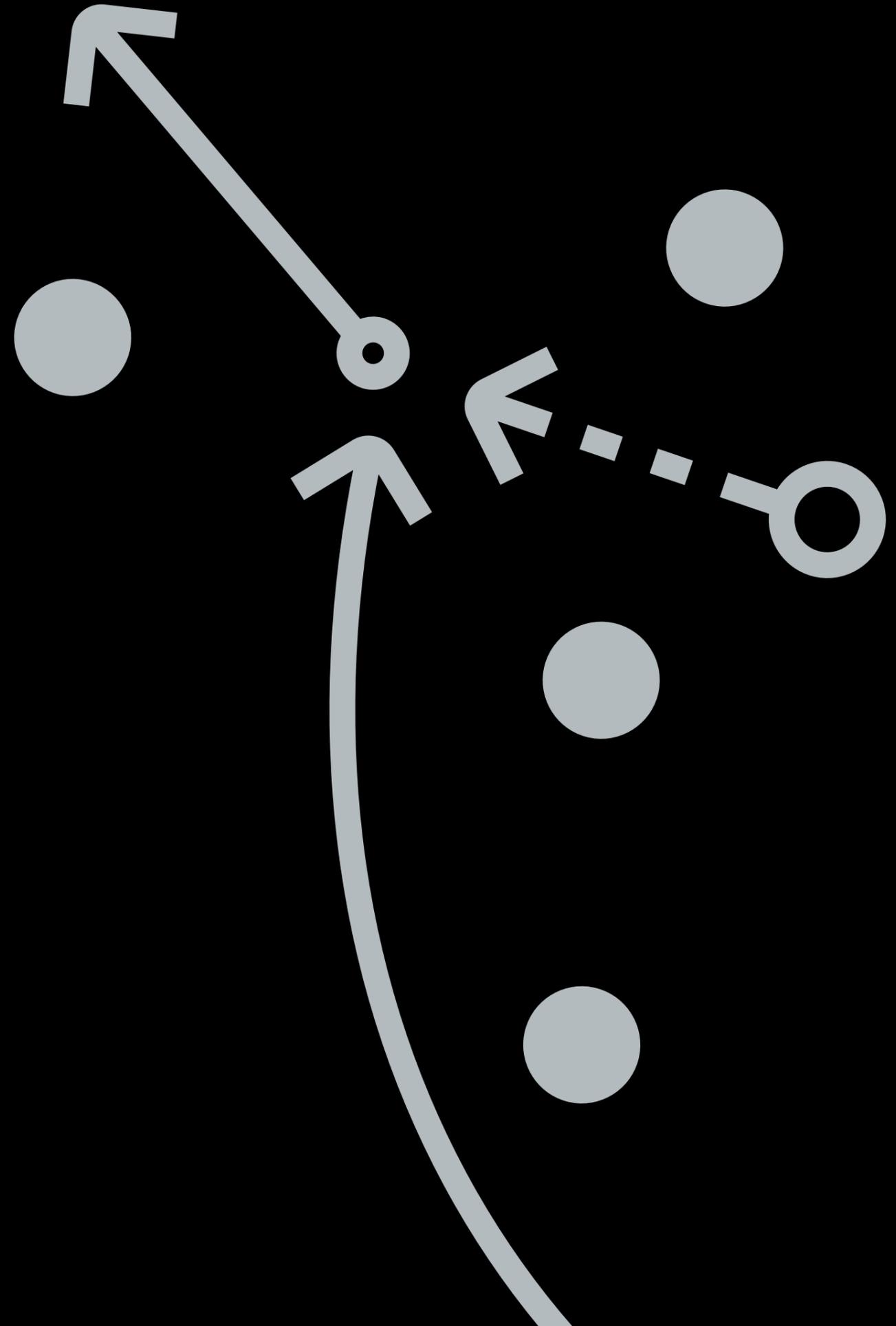
### FIFPRO ACTION

*Deliver the Ready to Board programme for women, and curate appropriate leadership initiatives for other underrepresented groups, focussing first on Black players and players of colour.*

**PUSH FOR MORE DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN THE PLAYER UNION NETWORK AND WIDER FOOTBALL INDUSTRY.**

### FIFPRO ACTION

*Work with our Member Unions to design strategies for diversity, equality, and inclusion. Make the necessary statutory changes both internally and within the player union network to increase diversity at Board level.*





# WHAT EQUAL PLAYING FIELD? *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

As the global representative for professional football players, FIFPRO seeks to safeguard the wellbeing and professional interests of footballers across the men's and women's game, across countries and continents and across leagues. These interests are threatened by discrimination: many players face horrific racism, sexism and homophobia – among other forms of discrimination - on the pitch, in the locker room and online. This breaches the fundamental rights of players as workers and as people.

Yet day after day, players are expected to endure this discriminatory abuse and perform under pressure. There is little recognition of the devastating impact it has on them on and off the pitch. Those who face discrimination do not have the same opportunities to perform at the very top of their game as those who don't face discrimination. In short, discrimination creates a fundamentally unequal playing field for Black players and players of colour, for many women players and for LGBTQIA+ players. In a field where true competition, free from unfair advantage, is of paramount importance, the fact that some players face greater hurdles and more challenging playing conditions than others is profoundly wrong.



## DISCRIMINATORY ABUSE IS RIFE AND ITS HUMAN IMPACT DEVASTATING, BUT THIS IS RARELY ACKNOWLEDGED

- Anecdotal evidence shows that discrimination, and in particular racial abuse, is on the rise. However, there is no global tracking or reporting mechanism. This means the full scale of the problem remains unknown. The footballing industry seems particularly poor at tracking and tackling intersectional discrimination.
- Experiential evidence shows that, for those players who face discrimination, it can become constant and inescapable, with abuse both in stadia and online.
- The industry has failed to acknowledge the extent of discrimination, in part because it fails to truly understand what constitutes racist, sexist and homophobic behaviour and attitudes.
- The industry has also failed to fully grasp the impact of discrimination on players' mental health, longevity, and ability to perform.
- The growth in women's football has created greater risks of abuse of power. Simultaneously, it remains underfunded and inadequately governed, with women playing in often abysmal conditions. These factors all constitute a threat to the safety, success and wellbeing of players.



## MORE CAN AND MUST BE DONE BY GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

- Despite a large number of high-profile discriminatory incidents, targeting in particular young Black players, not enough is being done by governing bodies.
- Slogans and educational campaigns alone will not create change. In fact, superficial or performative action conceals the absence of any concrete change, especially when frameworks for combating abuse are inadequate or inadequately implemented.
- Players have repeatedly expressed their frustration about a lack of action to combat abuse on social media in particular. Recent announcements from Twitter and Instagram suggest some progress is being made, but we are yet to learn whether these changes are actually making social media safe for players and their followers.
- There needs to be better cooperation between governments, private companies and football governing bodies to combat online abuse.



## PLAYERS TRYING TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM DISCRIMINATION FACE CRITICISM, IGNORANCE AND PROFESSIONAL DISADVANTAGE

- Players who wish to act against discrimination face a range of unenviable choices and unfair criticisms:
  - Those who raise concerns in their teams, clubs, leagues and federations report frequent trivialisation of their experiences, as well as professional repercussions for whistleblowing.
  - Reporting discriminatory abuse, and in particular sexual abuse, therefore often places players at significant personal and professional risk.
  - Victim blaming, particularly in cases of racial and sexual abuse, remains rife.
- There is a lack of immediate care and support for players who face discriminatory abuse. We as player unions and representatives can also improve in this regard.
- In the absence of better regulation, players facing abuse online are effectively being asked to either endure abuse and risk their mental health or leave social media. The former creates an unsafe work environment, while the latter will likely negatively impact their commercial opportunities. Many players are obliged to have an online presence with stipulations regarding a scheduled amount of sponsor content, and could be in breach of those obligations if they chose to remove themselves from an unsafe online environment.



## GREATER DIVERSITY IN FOOTBALL'S LEADERSHIP IS A PREREQUISITE FOR CHANGE

- Power in football still rests very squarely with a tiny minority of individuals who do not reflect the diversity of the game's talent.
- At best, this powerbase fails to fully appreciate the extent and impact of discrimination because it lacks lived experience. At worst it forms part of the problem and strongly resists change.
- There is some evidence that gender diversity is improving in football. But Black people and people of colour, and in particular Black women and women of colour, are especially underrepresented.
- In some instances, a person is hired to be representative of simply any minority group, without the prerequisite expertise and without access to adequate resources. Such tokenistic and underfunded hires fail to address issues of diversity, equity, equality, and inclusion imbalances at the root. They can lead to cosmetic activities that only serve to mask continuous inequalities, rather than more meaningful systemic change.



## PLAYERS ARE LEADING THE MARCH FOR CHANGE

- Many players have eloquently and courageously spoken out against discrimination. Their activism benefits not only those in football but has inspired and brought hope to people around the world.
- Such activism however comes at a cost: those who have raised their voice or taken a knee face criticism from the public and risk sanctions from governing bodies. They must be protected and supported.
- Players report how the constant struggle against discrimination, even when educating well-intentioned colleagues and supporters, is exhausting. The responsibility for creating long overdue change cannot and should not be laid solely at the feet of those affected by discrimination.
- Discriminatory behaviour and its effects may not always be immediately obvious or apparent to those who are not experiencing it. Those not affected by discrimination must therefore educate themselves. There is an important role to play for committed and meaningful allies.



### SPRINGBOARDS FOR CHANGE

The following eight central themes arose in conversations with players and experts:

**1** Change starts with unequivocal, consistent and courageous leadership. If we are to eradicate discrimination, football's leadership needs to speak out and step up. Performative campaigns and corporate value statements are not enough.

**2** Such action requires mainstreaming of anti-discrimination principles through all governance and guidance. It also requires resource and investment. This must be accompanied by governance conditions and careful monitoring to prevent improper exploitation of power dynamics.

**3** Greater diversity across the entire power structure must be an immediate priority.

**4** A zero-tolerance approach is needed to protect players. This applies not only to the initial discriminatory incident, but also to any subsequent victim-blaming or interference with players' rights to freedom of expression. We need clearer and better enforced boundaries for behaviour to change.

**5** Athlete voice must be embraced and encouraged, not punished. Footballers have the right to freedom of expression like any other individual. They have the right to speak out and protest, including online and on the pitch. Player activism has been a source of phenomenally positive social change and is something to be celebrated and built upon.

**6** More broadly, players should feature centrally in the process of building and implementing structures and systems that bring about greater protections and positive change. The challenges faced by football can be tackled through co-creation with players and player representatives.

**7** Listening to lived experience is not the same as placing the onus on victims to identify, report or tackle abuse. Engaging with solution-building is exhausting and comes at a real price which must be acknowledged and mitigated. The ultimate responsibility remains with governing bodies.

**8** To ensure we are making change we need to better understand the scale of the problem. Football's governing structures should proactively track and record incidents of discrimination and create safe and confidential reporting structures that allow players to highlight concerns without risks to their career, wellbeing or safety.



## INTRODUCTION BY ANITA ASANTE

(Aston Villa, former England International)

In the late nineties and early 2000s there was a perception that racism within UK football was slowly disappearing from the terraces. Fast forward to 2021 and we are not only talking about abuse at football matches getting worse, but we now have the added problem of abuse on social media.



### PLAYERS ARE STILL GETTING ABUSED ON A DAILY BASIS

A report by Kick it Out for the 2019/20 season reported that discrimination across the professional game increased by 42% in the 19/20 season from the previous – even with it being on hold for several months because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reports of racial abuse increased by 53% and worryingly reports of abuse based on sexual orientation also significantly increased and is up by 95%.

For many players, the abuse doesn't end when they leave the pitch: the rise of social media offers direct access to players that previous generations thankfully never experienced. We have seen high profile athletes from different sports unite in the fight against racial inequality, whether it was taking the knee or participating in a social media blackout. But despite the efforts of many, it's made no significant difference as players are still getting abused on a daily basis on and off the pitch.

### HOMOPHOBIA, DESPITE RAINBOW CAMPAIGNS AND CATCHY SLOGANS, REMAINS RIFE

Unfortunately, racism isn't the only form of abuse that exists in our game. Homophobia, despite rainbow campaigns and catchy slogans, remains rife. We most frequently associate this with the men's game and indeed there's much work to do in that arena. But as the women's game grows and spreads around the world reports are coming in of homophobic language and behaviour, even from senior coaches. For example, earlier this year elite women players in Argentina filed a complaint against a senior coach for, among other things, using sexist and homophobic language, arguing that homosexuality is holding back women's football and that success depends on players being "feminine" as well as good. That same growth in the women's game has also brought an increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, most recently seeing allegations of horrific misconduct emerging in the US' National Women's Soccer League, alongside further disturbing allegations of cover ups.

Whether it's racial discrimination, gender-based violence or homophobia, discrimination is a real and present feature in many players lives. We can no longer ignore the negative impact this is having on the game we all love and especially on the players we cheer and celebrate week in and week out. It's time to admit that football has a problem.

### IT IS TIME TO MOVE BEYOND PERFORMATIVE ACTION

As a Black woman in football, I am acutely aware of my minority position within the game. Let's be frank, it's visibly obvious; on the pitch, among backroom staff and in boardrooms. When I see reports of racist incidents or homophobic comments at football matches, or sexist slurs against players online I'm never surprised because we as ethnic minorities, as women, and as gay players are faced with these microaggressions and subtle and overt forms of discrimination every day. But I still feel wounded and disregarded when I see so little being done. The game can and should do better.

Many of us within football are ready for drastic change. Change that can be enforced and led by football's governing bodies. It is time to move beyond performative action, to recognise the damage that this abuse is causing and take concrete and courageous steps towards change. The first thing football should do is take the problem seriously and adopt a zero-tolerance approach. The current three-step procedure and a dedicated anti-discrimination monitoring system does not go far enough: the three-step procedure underestimates, or perhaps underappreciates, the detrimental impact of such offences on players. The measures focus more on giving offenders multiple chances than on protecting players' wellbeing and dignity. Similarly, now that a solid social media presence is now such an integral part of a player's brand and job, the players' calls for improved regulation of social media must be heard by executives in Silicon Valley.

### A LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE UPPER ECHELONS

One reason behind football's failure to truly understand the damage caused by discriminatory abuse is the lack of diversity in its upper ranks. The second thing that therefore needs to happen is that we need a more diverse range of perspectives and opinions in senior footballing positions. Football is a self-governing institution. To restore players' trust, clubs, leagues and federations must demonstrate that they can and will take racism, sexism and other forms of abuse seriously. To do this, they need to become more representative of the players at the heart of the game.

A call to allies and for a "team think attitude" My third and final call is to allies across the footballing community, from coaches, to players, supporters, stadium stewards, to game legislators and everyone in between. In so many ways, players are embracing their platform, their power and their voice to lead the way on positive social change. But it cannot always fall to those most affected by discrimination to fight this disease plaguing our game. Let's create a 'team think attitude', so when a racist, sexist or homophobic incident occurs we can all spring into coordinated action and remove the emotional burden from the players concerned.

### IF WE WANT THEM TO BUY OUR SHIRTS, WE MUST BUILD A SPACE THAT IS SAFE FOR AND INCLUSIVE OF ALL

The damage caused to players by discrimination runs deep. It also has repercussions well beyond the game: when young Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority girls and boys see what current players must endure it is damaging to their dreams and ambitions. The lack of forthright punishment in cases of discrimination may deter them from reporting their own experiences of racial, sexual or homophobic abuse in their daily lives. If we want them to buy our shirts, share in our hopes and dreams and join our wonderful family, we must ensure that we build a space that is safe for and inclusive of all. The beauty of football is that it is often seen as a space that has the ability and opportunity to unite people with a shared passion, no matter our differences. Racism, misogyny and homophobia do not belong in our society let alone in football. So, let's unite and protect the game we all love.

**"BUT I STILL FEEL WOUNDED WHEN I SEE SO LITTLE BEING DONE. THE GAME CAN AND SHOULD DO BETTER."**

# ***CHAPTER 1:***

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# ***THE PLAYERS' EXPERIENCE***

On a November evening, Shakhtar Donetsk is leading Dynamo Kiev 1-0 in a league match between two of Ukraine's biggest clubs and pushing for a second goal when its Brazilian forward Bruno "Dentinho" Ferreira Bonfim is shown a yellow card for fouling Dynamo goalkeeper Heorhiy Bushchan.

A group of fans of the visiting team began to make monkey noises, upsetting Dentinho. He remonstrates with the referee. "Are you going to do something?" he shouts, above the noise. Ukrainian police will later say around 20 supporters are responsible for the racist abuse.

A few minutes later, Dentinho is fouled, and the same Dynamo fans make the monkey noises again. In eight years playing in Ukraine, he has never heard such loud and persistent racist abuse. Then Taison, his Brazilian teammate, is ruled to have committed a foul. As he complains to the referee, Dynamo fans make the monkey noises for the third time in barely ten minutes.

Losing his patience, Taison grabs the ball, kicks it in the direction of the fans, and makes a one-finger gesture towards them. The referee takes the players off the pitch for five minutes, the second step of a three-step protocol on how to deal with crowd racism in European football.

There is an announcement on the public address system, saying why the match is being suspended. Taison, 31, and Dentinho, 30, are crying as they leave the pitch. Ukraine has been their home for nine and eight years, respectively. Players of both teams try to comfort them.

"It's difficult to know what it feels like unless you have experienced it," Dentinho says two days later, still trying to come to terms with what has happened. "We are doing what we love and this happens."

When the players return to the pitch, the referee walks up to Taison and shows him the red card for his one-finger gesture.

Taison says two days later he is dealing with a "truck-load" of feelings about what happened. It's as though the wrong person has been punished for a crime. The following week, the Ukraine football federation hands him a one-match ban, effectively endorsing the red card.



# WIDESPREAD DISCRIMINATION ACROSS MEN'S AND WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Before COVID caused games to be played in empty stadia, the experience of Dentinho and Taison was a common occurrence. FIFPRO's first worldwide survey of working conditions in men's professional football, based on responses from nearly 14,000 current players across 54 countries, found that racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination continue to be of significant concern.

Almost **one in five** players playing in foreign leagues **faces discrimination**, including in the form of physical violence, based on ethnicity, sexuality or religious beliefs.

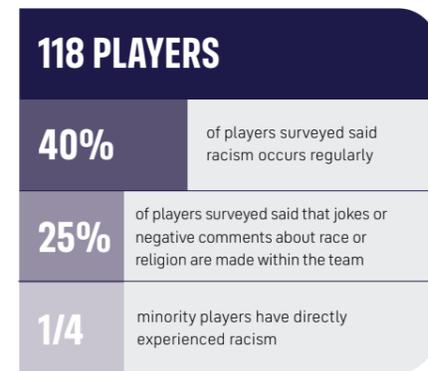
In the women's game, the 2019 Women's World Cup's record viewership was accompanied by unprecedented online sexist and homophobic trolling and rape threats. In April 2020 FIFPRO released its Raising The Game report, addressing specific working conditions in the women's game.

The starting point of this report was the acknowledgement that **the lack of professionalisation and unionisation makes it much more difficult for women players to even highlight and combat abuse and discrimination.**

Beyond this information very little statistical data is available. There is no official public record of discriminatory abuse faced by players across the board, because football's governing bodies rarely record or publish this data. That means that the full extent of the scale of abuse suffered by players is unknown. Instead, we can only rely on evidence gathered by organisations such as FARE (a network set up to counter discrimination in European football), and ad hoc initiatives by researchers and players' unions.



For example, in August of this year, the Mulier Institute conducted a survey in partnership with the Dutch Players' Union VVCS of 118 professional male players. The survey found that:



The starting point for this Report, therefore, has been an acknowledgement of two key issues:

1. First, that the available data indicates clear *prima facie* evidence of widespread discrimination.
2. Second, that quantitative evidence of the scale of discrimination is limited, especially in the women's game and in the less high-profile leagues in the men's game.

In short, we know that there is a significant problem, but it is impossible to point to global quantitative data that demonstrates just how widespread discrimination is. For that reason, the report builds on the evidence that we do have available to us: the qualitative data, based on narratives and experience, from the players.

### AN UNSAFE WORK ENVIRONMENT

This evidence suggests that the figures from FIFPRO's earlier research are just the tip of the iceberg and that, year-on-year, little is improving. For example, according to FARE's Observer Scheme, **the Europa League alone saw five racist and xenophobic incidents on the pitch in a single day** at the start of the 2019/20 season. There were 26 more reported incidents that month in Europe across the men's and women's games including misogynist abuse in the Scottish Women's First Division, four homophobic incidents in the French leagues and 20 incidents of far-right, racist or xenophobic abuse.

As the season progressed, discriminatory abuse continued: for example, throughout the month of January 2020, Europe saw **at least one discriminatory on-pitch incident a day**. This ranged from Nazi salutes by

Barcelona B and Atletico Madrid fans to monkey chants by Lazio and Espanyol fans. **In a single day, the English professional game alone recorded four racist and two homophobic incidents in the men's game.**

In an interview with BBC Sport, Sutton United defender Coby Rowe asked why the standards for footballers were so drastically different than those in other work environments:

**"I went to get the ball out of the net and that's when someone shouted at me 'you Black \*\*\*\*'**

(...) During your normal job if you were at your office and someone was to say that to you, the person would be sacked. So just because you're kicking a ball around a pitch for people to watch it shouldn't be accepted at all."

In the women's game complaints of racism, sexism and homophobia on the pitch are less common. The consensus seems to be that the game attracts a different crowd with women's football occupying a different space and playing a different role in society. But the game is not free from discrimination: in 2019, then Tottenham Hotspur defender Renee Hector was racially abused by Sheffield United Women's Sophie Jones during a Championship game. Jones was given a five-match ban, but Hector's ordeal continued. She received extensive online abuse, was sent pictures of baby gorillas and abused about her weight.

Hector's experience highlights a range of reoccurring themes that require further consideration: first, that players reporting discrimination often face further abuse and victim blaming over their experience. This is discussed more in Chapter 2. Second, that for women players and Black women players in particular, discriminatory abuse often is or becomes intersectional. This was recently chronicled by Olympic Gold Medallist and NWSL player Sydney Leroux. Leroux shared screenshots that she had kept on her phone from years of Twitter abuse. Not only did the abusive tweets show horrific racist language, they also contained extensive misogynist and homophobic language. The following section examines in more detail the issue of discriminatory abuse on social media.



## NAHUEL 'PATON' GUZMAN

Nahuel Guzmán, nicknamed Patón, is a goalkeeper for Mexican club Tigres UANL and the Argentina national team. He began his career with Newell's Old Boys, helping them win the domestic title in 2013. In 2014 he moved to the Mexican league with Tigres, reaching the final of the Copa Libertadores in 2015 before losing to River Plate. In 2016 he helped Tigres win the Mexican league, saving all three penalties in a shoot-out in the final and being named best goalkeeper in the Apertura.

After a 6-0 loss on 15 July 2019 and losing the League's Cup Title on 19 September, abuse on Twitter against Guzman spiked. Guzman received offensive messages relating to his family and was also repeatedly called a homophobic Spanish term, possibly in response to his outspoken position opposing homophobia.

In 2020, Guzman published photos on his Twitter and Instagram pages of a rainbow haircut, declaring that "cases of homophobic discrimination are still present in our society, and football is no exception."



## JOHN MIKEL OBI

Nigerian international and Olympic bronze medallist John Mikel Obi, currently playing in Kuwait, spent the 2019/20 season at Trabzonspor in the Turkish Süper Lig.

On 1 February 2020 Trabzonspor beat Fenerbahçe 2 - 1 in a league battle. During the game Obi fouled Fenerbahçe's Emre Belozoglu. Belozoglu had previously been accused of racism on three separate occasions while playing for Newcastle United from 2005-08 before ultimately being convicted by the Turkish courts for racial discrimination against Trabzonspor's Didier Zokora in 2014.

But it was not Belozoglu who was berated: after the game, Mikel was viciously targeted with racial abuse online. Both he and his girlfriend received racist and threatening direct messages on Instagram, some of which were aimed at his four-year-old twin daughters.



### ABUSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The astronomical rise of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok has fundamentally altered players' experience of discrimination. Before these platforms took hold, fans seeking to exchange or comment online would gather in chat rooms or club fora. These spaces were not free from abuse but, like the commentary under online news articles, there was a clear responsibility on the hosting platform to moderate content. That meant that discriminatory discussions could be addressed, often before players became aware of it. In fact, if players wanted to avoid the risk of seeing abusive comments, they could simply elect not to visit those platforms.

The arrival of Twitter and Instagram have drastically changed that dynamic. Social media engagement is now a must for any player. \*Recent research by KPMG has highlighted the importance of a social media presence for players, clubs, and associations: "A player with a huge followership may have a higher value in the transfer market, as he can bring his fans to his new club as well." This means it cannot be ignored by players and their teams. Simultaneously, social media has created a space where anyone can become an almost untraceable and anonymous publisher, often with a direct line of communication with players. On some platforms such as Instagram, abusive messages can be sent direct to someone's inbox even if that person doesn't follow you.

The changes brought in by these new platforms also means that the onus now falls on the victims of discriminatory abuse to review, record, and then report abuse. Players are not protected from seeing abusive messages, and instead must often engage with the content if they want it to be flagged and tackled. In many cases, social media platforms have been too slow to respond, or have failed to respond at all. This has compelled players to call out the likes of Twitter and Instagram. For example, in April of this year former England international Lianne Sanderson, who has also played for Arsenal, Chelsea, Orlando Pride and Juventus, posted screenshots of flagrant homophobic abuse alongside a message from Twitter stating that it "didn't find a violation of [their] rules."

Manchester United and England forward Marcus Rashford has repeatedly been the victim of racist abuse online, most notably following the recent penalty shootout in the European Championship final. Rashford, alongside two other young Black England players Buyako Saka and Jadon Sancho, received extensive online abuse after coming off the bench and missing a penalty. But for Rashford this abuse was sadly nothing new. For example, on 24 August 2019 Rashford missed a penalty against Crystal Palace in the Premier League. In the following 24 hours Rashford received around 30 abusive tweets. In January 2021 he received extensive racist abuse on Instagram, and elected to call out the social media giant but refused to repeat content, saying:

**"I am not sharing screenshots. It would be irresponsible to do so and as you can imagine there's nothing original in them. I have beautiful children of all colours following me and they don't need to read it. Beautiful colours that should only be celebrated."**

It is now abundantly clear that online abuse must be tackled more robustly. Indeed, figures from the 2019/20 season in England, collated by football equality and inclusion organisation Kick It Out, show shocking increases in the levels of race hate and homophobic abuse. Kick It Out recorded a 53% increase in reported racial abuse in the professional game from last season and a 95% increase in reports of abuse based on sexual orientation.

Another study conducted by Signify and the Professional Footballers Association, covering the 2020/21 season, found that 44% of Premier League players received discriminatory abuse, and that there was a 48% rise in unmoderated racist online abuse in the second half of the season.

These figures appear to reflect a global trend, with no shortage of examples of online abuse against players and their families.

### SOME PROGRESS BUT NO CLEAR INDICATION THAT THE PLAYERS' EXPERIENCE HAS CHANGED

In the aftermath of this year's men's Euros, both Twitter and Instagram made announcements about their efforts to combat racist abuse. Twitter outlined that, in advance of the Euro 2020 Tournament, it "put in place specific plans to quickly identify and remove racist, abusive Tweets targeting the England team and wider Euros conversation." On the night of the final between England and Italy, and in the 24 hours that followed, Twitter identified and removed 1622 Tweets. Twitter also continued to take action from reports, stating that "over 90% of the Tweets we removed for abuse over this period were detected proactively."

On the same day, Instagram announced a set of new features to help protect people from abuse on Instagram. These include:

- The ability for people to limit comments and DM requests during spikes of increased attention;
- Stronger warnings when people try to post potentially offensive comments;
- The global rollout of our Hidden Words feature, which allows people to filter abusive DM requests including filtering by offensive words, phrases or emojis.

This is important progress, but it is not yet clear whether this has significantly altered players' experiences and thus has made social media a sufficiently safe place for players and their followers. Twitter's announcement also hints at the need for greater collaboration across private and state actors. Its final paragraph reads:

**"However, we also have to be honest that the progress we will be able to make alone would be magnified by greater interventions across the board. (...) Everyone has a role to play - including the government and the football authorities - and we will continue to call for a collective approach to combat this deep societal issue."**

## PARTICULAR RISKS OF GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE IN WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Women's football is rapidly growing, with FIFA reiterating its commitment to greater investment since the start of the pandemic. The injection of additional funds is much needed in the women's game. However, the increase in revenue also brings new risks which must be acknowledged and mitigated.

As football's major powerbrokers – the heads of national federations and national team coaches – hold the purse strings to these funds, there is an inevitable risk that this power is misused. These senior figures become the gatekeepers to a player's future. In the absence of appropriate checks and balances and better gender diversity, women players are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and gender-based violence. In the last two years alone, two former presidents of national federations, in Afghanistan and Haiti, have been banned for life for sexual harassment and abuse of players. As one Haitian player reported:

**"My chance to play overseas depended on sleeping with the president of the federation."**

These are two of the most prominent and recent cases of abuse, but they are far from isolated incidents.

At the time of writing, a further high-profile individual, this time a prominent FIFA instructor in Argentina, was under investigation by FIFA for inappropriate sexual conduct including towards players as young as 14 or 15 years' old. In the US' NWSL, fixtures were suspended and NWSL Commissioner Lisa Baird was forced to resign following a major abuse scandal, with multiple reports of alleged abuse of players and claims that the league had failed to address allegations of sexual coercion by a male coach.

Khalida Popal, founder of the Afghanistan women's football league and whistleblower in the first major sexual abuse case in women's football, highlights the need for better protection of women players.

"When we first raised concerns about the abuse in Afghanistan we didn't know how big the issue would become. We thought, or at least hoped, that this was one bad guy exploiting his position of power. But since then, more and more cases have come to light. We are seeing patterns emerge: women's football, and the increased opportunities it now brings, are used as leverage against female players. And because there is no oversight or transparency, nobody monitoring or checking in, it is almost impossible for these players to raise concerns.

If they do, they will lose their spot. Football's governing structures are slowly waking up to the issue, but still not enough is being done and we cannot afford this delay. We know this is happening in different countries, different continents. National and international federations need to get better and quicker at preventing and responding to sexual abuse and harassment. Or it will never stop."

These cases show that efforts to create equitable conditions must be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the risk of abuse of power and sexual exploitation to women players, and improved strategies to combat that risk.



In the following OpEd, Gaby Garton, Goalkeeper for Melbourne Victory and Argentina highlights the challenges in the women's game, the risks associated with the lack of professionalisation, and the solidarity that underpins the rivalry among players.



## MEGAN RAPINOE

Two-time World Cup winner, Olympic gold medallist, Golden Boot and Balon d'Or winner Megan Rapinoe is an outspoken advocate for several LGBTQIA+ organizations. Between 3 July 2019 and 11 July 2019 she received approximately 400 sexist and homophobic tweets. Between 7 July and 11 July alone Rapinoe was called a deeply offensive homophobic term over 250 times on Twitter.

In December 2019 Rapinoe was interviewed after winning the Balon d'Or. She told ABC News: "With the Golden Ball, I can say without pretension that I am one of the biggest names in football". A comment that, in light of her astonishing list of accomplishments, many would consider uncontroversial. Yet the original post quoting Rapinoe received only 319 retweets and 963 likes, while a response, calling both her and her grandmother a sexist and misogynist term, received over 13,000 retweets and almost 24,000 likes



## THE FIGHT FOR EQUITY IN WOMEN'S FOOTBALL: RIVALS AND SISTERS, BY GABY GARTON

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In February of this year, travel restrictions caused me to miss the opportunity to represent Argentina in the She Believes Cup organised in the United States. However, my disappointment from missing out was replaced by pride, not necessarily because of the results my teammates achieved, but rather because of a clear demonstration of the sorority that exists in our sport, as women and as footballers.



Following Argentina's loss to the USA in the final match of the tournament, players carried out the post-game ritual of exchanging jerseys. One image, in particular, caught my attention. Yamila Rodríguez, a young forward who also plays at Boca Juniors, was featured with Megan Rapinoe. Rodríguez is holding Rapinoe's jersey which has her last name above her number while Rapinoe appears holding an Argentinian jersey with the number 11 but no name. We were the only country in the tournament not to have our names on our jerseys.

For a bit of context, until 2017, Argentina's senior women's team did not even have a coaching staff, let alone participate in any kind of international competition. The domestic league was still poorly organised, amateur, and its players were in highly precarious situations. Some were able to live (or survive) off the game through a combination of 'benefits' such as monthly stipends, housing, and part-time work through the institution, but they could just as easily be dismissed from their club without any prior notice. The amateur nature of the sport also implied a lack of protection from abuse and harassment, as clubs preferred to drop 'whiny' players rather than have to fire or investigate staff accused of violent behaviour, protecting the reputation of the club over that of young women, some of them even minors.

In 2017 Argentina's senior women's team sent an open letter to the President of Women's Football at the Argentinian Football Association, demanding better conditions in preparation for the Copa America in early 2018. This would be the team's only opportunity to qualify for the 2019 World Cup, 2019 Pan-American Games, and the 2020 Olympics, and we felt we were being set up to fail. When there was no response, the team went on strike for the first time in its history.

The initial strike did not generate the desired response from the FA, but it united the players and demonstrated the importance of collective action. By 2018, the FA started to pay us a minimal stipend and granted us the use of a natural grass pitch. But things were far from perfect. We travelled to Chile having trained as a team for only two weeks before the competition, with no representative from the FA's media department, mismatched clothing from what had been left over from the men's side over the past decade, and no agreement regarding whether there would be a reward for a top finish in the tournament. Throughout the tournament, we had meetings amongst ourselves and some with the President of Women's Football to try to solve some of these issues, but we felt nothing was changing. We decided to act.

Prior to our match against Colombia, we posed as an entire squad with an arm around each other and the other hand behind our ear. Each of us posted the photograph on our social media accounts with the caption 'We want to be heard'. The photo went viral, and we received coverage from both domestic and international media as well as support from leaders of the Feminist movement in Argentina, female players in the domestic league and in other state leagues around the country, and the general public.

This image was more than a photograph. It was a collective act of defiance, and it was spreading. In August of 2018, we joined the Puerto Rican National team in a protest against their FA, demanding support and better conditions. At the final whistle, players of both sides embraced, and the Caribbean side expressed their thanks for our support. At home our actions, and the voices of local players, eventually put enough pressure on the FA to carry out improvements in conditions for the national team and to professionalise the domestic women's league in Argentina in 2019.

So what of Rapinoe and Rodriguez? The American player reposted the image on one of her Instagram stories – with a small but significant edit. She had added the name 'Rodríguez' to the back of the Argentinian's jersey with the caption 'Fixed it. But let's really fix this' while tagging the Argentinian Football Association's official account.

**Women's football is football at the end of the day, but it is also something more. We are sisters. We compete against each other, we battle, we tackle, we celebrate victories and mourn losses, but come the end of the match we look across the pitch at one another and we see a reflection of our own struggles for equality.**

We see ourselves and our teammates in the future, in the present, and in the past. From the United States' battle for equal pay to Jamaica's battle to be paid at all, from Ada Hegerberg's demands for equal conditions to Afghan players demanding to be respected as human beings, from the top leagues fighting for better broadcasting deals to the countries still trying to organise an official competition through their FA: this is women's football, and we are all in it together.



## PREJUDICE AND STEREOTYPING IN THE MEDIA

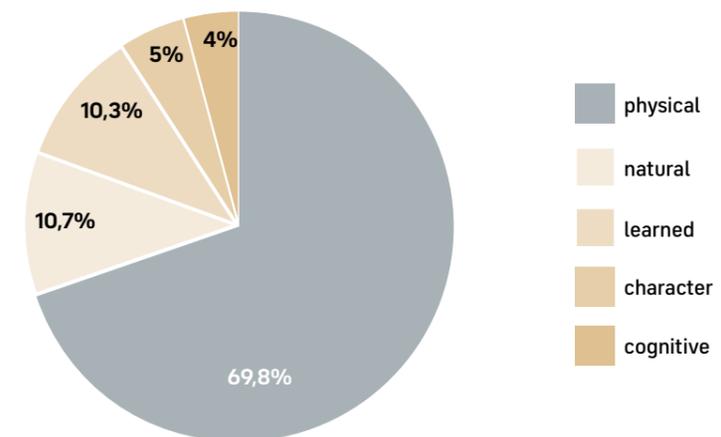
Finally, there is mounting evidence that the racism that players experience from the terraces and on social media also manifests in media coverage.

A recent study\* analysed 2,700 minutes of commentary during the FIFA World Cup in 2018 reviewing 1,009 comments across 20 matches, between 19 of the 32 competing teams. It found that Black and white footballers are talked about very differently by pundits and journalists, and that the extent and manner of positive praise "continues to differ for different visibly 'raced' players".

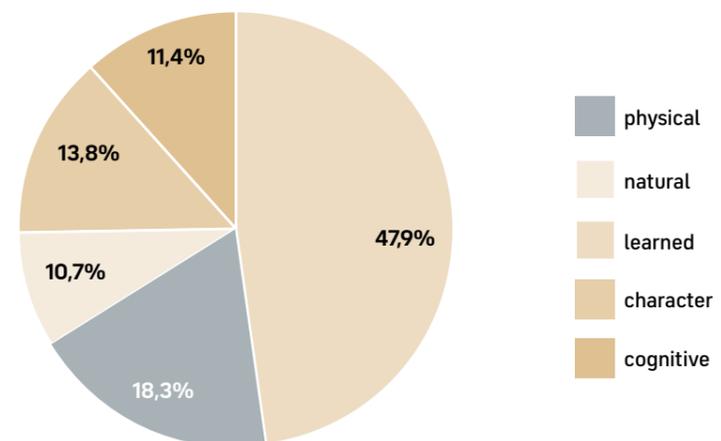
One of the study's authors, award-winning researcher Dr Paul Ian Campbell, later wrote:

"We found that Black players were overwhelmingly praised for their perceived physical prowess and natural athleticism, and white players for their intelligence and character."

The percentage breakdown of 281 praise comments given to visibly Black players centred on physical (69.8%), natural (10.7%), learned (10.3%), character (5%) and cognitive (4%) attributes.



Of the 448 praise comments given to white players 47.9% were for their learned attributes, followed by physical (18.3%), character (13.8%), cognition (11.4%) and natural (8.6%) attributes.



The World Cup commentary report's authors argue that "We need to expand our definition of what constitutes racist behaviour and attitudes. Instead of focusing only on those forms of discrimination and abuse that require intent, we need to understand that unintentional practices also contribute to racism."

For players, this lazy punditry and racial stereotyping risks skewing public perception and limiting the professional opportunities available to players. The next chapter explores the impact of discrimination in greater details.

\*Paul Ian Campbell & Louis Bebb (2020): "He is like a Gazelle (when he runs)" (re) constructing race and nation in match-day commentary at the men's 2018 FIFA World Cup, *Sport in Society*

# ***CHAPTER 2:***

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# ***THE IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION ON PLAYERS***



**On 16 February 2020 Moussa Marega, then playing for Porto, warmed up with his teammates before the start of their away fixture at Vitoria de Guimaraes. The Estadio D. Afonso Henriques was familiar ground to the Malian forward, who had spent a season on loan at Vitoria in the 2016-17 campaign, scoring 15 goals in 25 games.**

Trouble started brewing early on, when in the warmup Marega was subjected to racist abuse, without any apparent repercussions from officials. As the teams kicked off, and throughout the game, monkey chants were clearly audible. But, in an apparent breach of the protocol, no action was taken.

Instead, when Marega scored an hour into the game, the 28-year-old celebrated his goal by pointing at his skin in front of a section of the stadium's home supporters. He was met with further racist chants. Opposition fans started hurling chairs at Marega from the stands. The following minutes were tough to watch. Marega's face was an image of agony as he tried to leave the pitch but was physically held back by players from both teams. All the while, the monkey noises intensified. Eventually, in the 69th minute a visibly distressed Marega was substituted. As he left the pitch the striker put his middle fingers up at the crowd and gestured with his thumbs down amid a chorus of jeers.

Marega's goal secured his side's 2-1 win over Vitoria de Guimarães, but the Portuguese league's disciplinary committee decision left little to celebrate. Vitoria de Guimarães was fined for incidents during the game: 4,017 euros for bringing flares into the stadium, 3,392 euros for throwing objects at the Porto bench and 7,140 for removing and throwing seats.

For the racist incidents they were fined a mere 714 euros. The paltry fine elicited a sarcastic response from Marega on social media, stating: "No! It's too much! Can I pay it for them?"

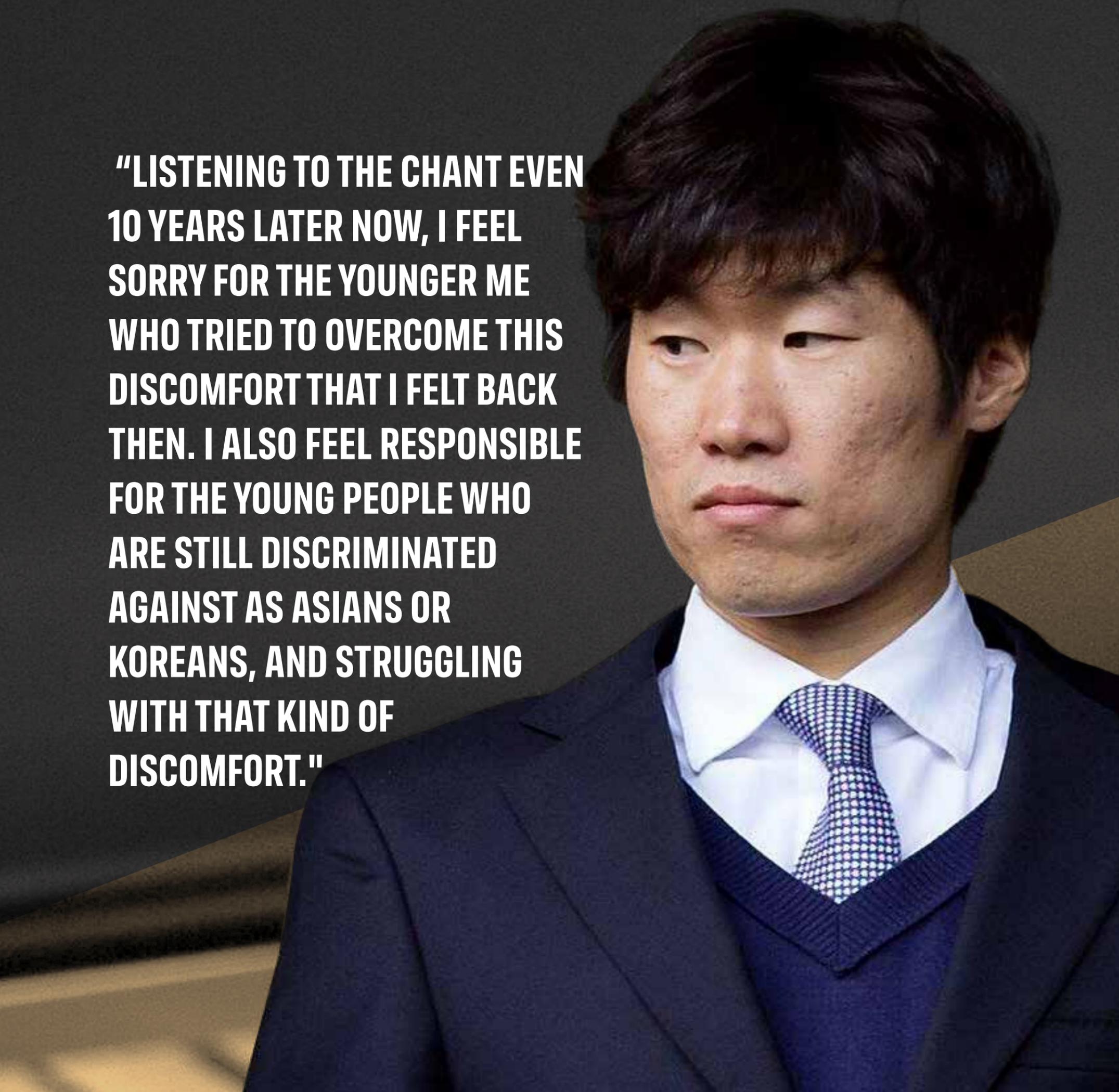
### **AN ATTACK ON PLAYERS' IDENTITY AND SENSE OF SELF-WORTH**

In 2018 Brazil and Manchester City midfielder Fernandinho temporarily ruled himself out of the national team after receiving racial abuse on Twitter following Brazil's World Cup defeat by Belgium. In 2019, England international player Danny Rose said that the blight of racism in the game and the authorities' inaction meant he could not wait to walk away from football. Marvin Sordell, a former Watford and Fulham forward, cited racism in the game as one of the biggest contributing factors to his decision to retire from football in July 2019, aged only 28.

Earlier this year, Hume City forward Andy Brennan shared his experiences of being the first openly gay male Australian footballer: "When you go to training you need to focus on your game... not on your sexuality. But it's hard not to think about it because the two are so intertwined." Brennan, 28, explained that the "being gay, in sport, and in the closet, it has been a mental burden". "When I was growing up, "that's so gay" was used all the time as an expression for something that was bad. (...) It builds connotations that being gay is a negative thing, and it took a long time for me to recondition this in my head." Brennan goes on to explain: "I didn't have any gay role models, or players that I could look up to that were going about their lives despite their sexuality." This made it hard for Brennan to see a world where he would be accepted.

Canadian international, Olympic gold medallist and OL Reign midfielder Quinn is the first out, transgender, non-binary athlete to compete at the Olympics. Speaking with FIFPRO, they reflected on their experience: "A huge component of playing sports well is being confident on the field. I think it was really hard for me to have confidence in my identity when I knew that if other folks on my team didn't accept me. I think it is really difficult to be in such an emotional environment, in terms of helping your teammates, going towards a collaborative goal when you have folks that aren't validating your identity essentially. So I think through my experience with coming out and seeing my teammates who are supporting me in environments, for example my national team have been super supportive of me coming out and they've really tried to adjust their environment to be more accepting, has made me feel a lot better."





**"LISTENING TO THE CHANT EVEN 10 YEARS LATER NOW, I FEEL SORRY FOR THE YOUNGER ME WHO TRIED TO OVERCOME THIS DISCOMFORT THAT I FELT BACK THEN. I ALSO FEEL RESPONSIBLE FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE STILL DISCRIMINATED AGAINST AS ASIANS OR KOREANS, AND STRUGGLING WITH THAT KIND OF DISCOMFORT."**

Brennan felt comfortable coming out in 2019 after realising that he could not continue denying who he was, and has since expressed his joy at being able to play as an openly gay player: "I just never thought for a second that I could be as happy as I am today". But he is not alone in remarking on the insidious effect of discrimination, undermining one's own very sense of self-worth. Liverpool and England's Trent Alexander-Arnold has spoken about the significant difference between racist abuse and other types of derogatory comments received from the stands. He told *The Guardian*:

**"Racist abuse is more personal. Obviously we can't control what colour skin we are, so it's unfair to be mocked and to be victimised for something we can't control... You get used to the hostile environment at Old Trafford and European away games, and in big stadiums and finals, but it's a whole different feeling when there's a racial feel about it."**

Napoli and Senegal centre back Kalidou Koulibaly has also spoken out about the racial abuse received, this time while playing in Italy's Serie A: "You are just playing the game you love, like you have done a thousand times before. You feel hurt. You feel insulted. Honestly, it gets to a point where you feel practically ashamed of yourself." Women players, too, have spoken out about the impact of discrimination on their wellbeing, and the longer-term mental health implications. Renee Hector says she sank into depression after suffering online abuse when she reported racist discrimination on the pitch: "The online abuse affected me really deeply, but it wasn't just me, it affected my family. I was just spiralling out of control, I started sinking into depression (...). My lowest point was when I had to have a week off work, because I couldn't physically leave my bed and didn't really leave the house."

We also know from players that the impact of discriminatory remarks often continues long after they leave the club. In October 2021 Ji-sung Park appealed to Manchester United fans to stop singing a song about him which contains a negative stereotype about his native Korea. The United legend said he wanted to educate fans about why their words were hurtful.

Park's comments shed light on one of many other examples of anti-Asian discrimination in football, often with career-altering impacts. For example, Japanese striker Yuki Nakamura left Slovakia after just one season on loan at Rimavska Sobota in 2013. He commented at the time:

**"It's a real shame but I have come home because I have been subjected to racism at Rimavska Sobota and I can't carry on living there."**

*"Foul play: how racism towards Black footballers is moving online",  
The Guardian, 15 December 2019*



## NO ESCAPE FROM DISCRIMINATORY ABUSE

There can be no doubt, based on these powerful and courageous accounts, of the horrific impact of racist sexist and homophobic abuse. And the modern game, with its reliance on social media, adds a layer of complexity to those seeking to mitigate that impact.

Sarah Gregorius, former New Zealand international and now Director of Global Policy & Strategic Relations for Women's Football at FIFPRO, explains how life has changed for players:

**"There is no escape. Discrimination isn't something that ends when the final whistle is blown. When the fans have left and your teammates have gone home, the racist and homophobic chants ring on in your head. And because social media is now an essential part of being a footballer, it creeps into the places you go to escape the pressure of football."**

That is because social media is now an intricate part of any player's brand. As the KMPG commentary highlighted\*: "Social media is definitely one of the most spectacularly developing tools for all stakeholders in football to raise their profile, grow their audiences, increase fans' engagement through personalized brand experience, and ultimately, monetize their passion."

For many players it is a major source of income, but nevertheless a source some feel they must forego. Northern Ireland and Charlton Athletic footballer Rachel Newborough has chosen to mostly avoid social media, precisely because of the abuse sportswomen receive:

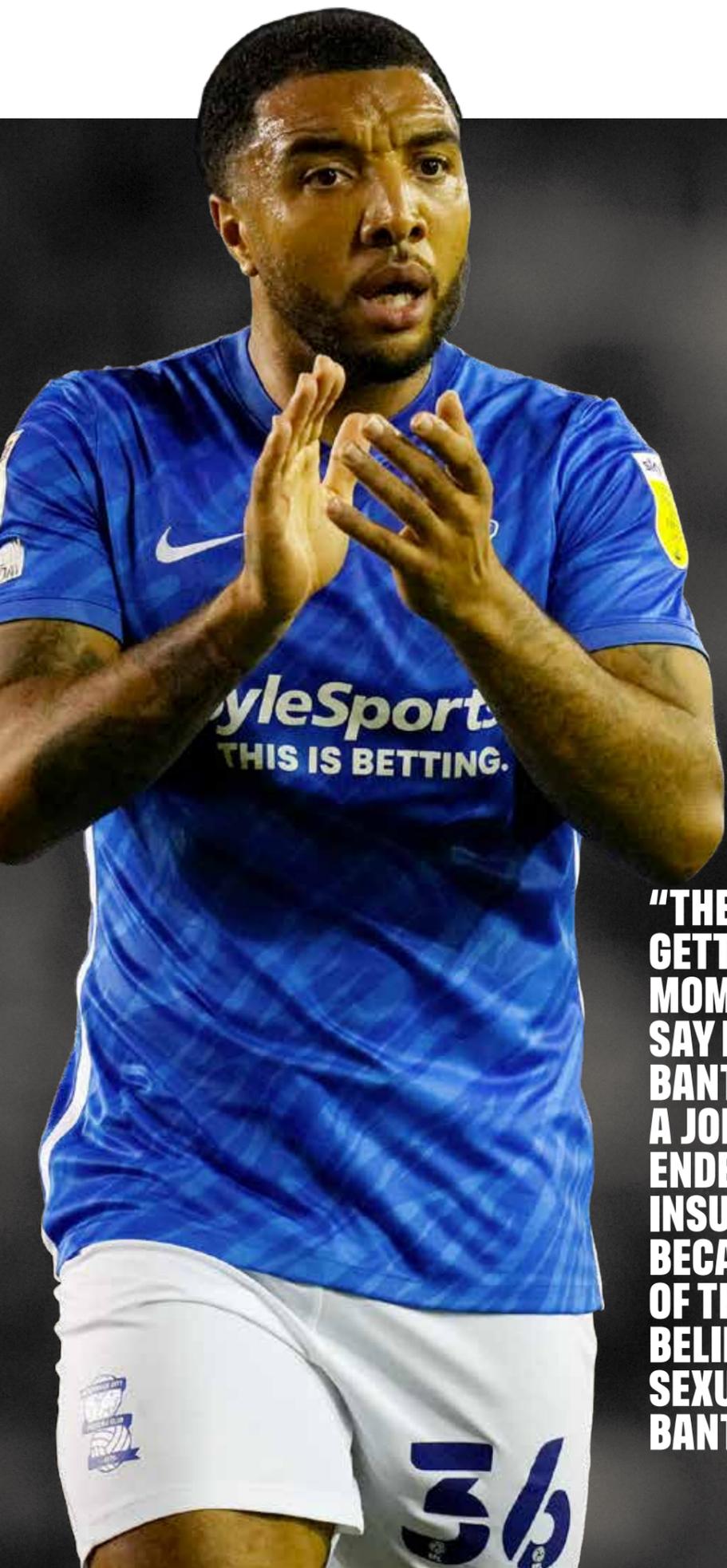
**"I do have social media accounts but I'm not overly engaged with it because you open yourself up. The downside to that is if you're a real presence on social media, then you can get brilliant sponsorships and earn a side living from it. It's a great opportunity."**

Chelsea right back and England international Reece James also elected to temporarily leave social media in January 2021, weeks after sharing a racist string of messages he had received. When James' previous plea to social media companies to take a more proactive role in protecting players from discriminatory abuse went unanswered, he deleted his account. James has since rejoined Instagram and used his platform to challenge racial injustice.

Reece James' sister, Lauren James, who recently resigned for Chelsea after a stint at Manchester United, has also spoken out about racial abuse she has suffered online. Writing for The Telegraph\*\* James said: "I'm 19 years old and I'm sitting here, writing about racist abuse (...) All because of the colour of my skin. It is mad. I'm proud of my skin, I love my skin colour. But when I saw the comments on my Instagram feed, it hurt."

\*"KPMG tool highlights value of social media in the business of football", 15 October 2019

\*\*"Receiving racist abuse online was a shock" The Telegraph, 11 February 2021



**"THE THING THAT'S GETTING TO ME AT THE MOMENT IS THAT PEOPLE SAY IT'S BANTER, BUT BANTER IS MEANT TO BE A JOKEY TERM OF ENDEARMENT. IF YOU'RE INSULTING SOMEONE BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF THEIR SKIN, THEIR BELIEFS, THEIR SEXUALITY, HOW IS THAT BANTER?"**

### **FACING ABUSE, AND THEN FACING TRIVIALISATION**

Deeney is, of course, correct. Discriminatory language is never trivial or harmless and should never be treated as throwaway comments. As the commentary from players above describes so vividly, it is offensive, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to a structure that devalues and excludes certain people. Yet such trivialisation has long been used to minimise incidents that are called out by the media or activists. Last season saw former Liverpool and England player Jamie Carragher apologise to ex-Manchester United and France international Patrice Evra over defending Luis Suarez' insulting remarks towards Evra. Suarez claimed that his use of a racialised term towards Evra in 2011 was descriptive, similar to calling him "handsome", "skinny" or "blond".

This trivialisation of discriminatory language and abuse has several negative impacts on players. In very practical terms, it means players are often left to fend for themselves as they process and recover from the incident, as was the case for Dentinho. In the case of Taison, himself the victim of a racist incident, the officials' failure to acknowledge the trigger event saw him punished by the league in a shameful incident of institutionalised victim blaming.

The failure to acknowledge - or, perhaps more accurately, the decision to ignore - the pain and suffering caused by discrimination has been recognised by clinicians and trauma experts. This pattern of wilful ignorance, in particular in the context of systemic racism, has been called out as a harmful practice in itself which fails to account for the enduring experience of those living in systems that oppress and violate them.

Another implication of this trivialisation is that those experiencing discrimination are often forced to become advocates and educators, burdened with explaining their experience in an attempt to educate. As Quinn puts it: "I think that in a lot of different topics about the LGBTQIA+ community it's often put upon the person who identifies with the community to do that education in those spaces. I think that institutions don't put enough resources to that."

In the following opinion piece, the Black Women's Players Collective shares experiences of playing in a structure which fails to fully appreciate the pain and suffering caused both by the direct discrimination faced by some of their players, and the wider societal systemic racism that players are fighting.

# BLACK PEOPLE

## **THIS IS NOT A CHOICE. THIS IS OUR LIFE, AND IT'S EXHAUSTING – BY THE BLACK WOMEN'S PLAYER COLLECTIVE**

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Women's soccer in the US has always been an affluent white girl's game. It is prohibitively expensive for most people, and the higher up you go the more it costs. So it's no surprise that Black players make up a tiny minority of the NWSL: it's quite common to be the only Black person in a team, or on the pitch. Sometimes we're one of just a handful of Black people in the whole club, certainly among playing, coaching and senior staff. It's never been easy, but this year has been particularly tough.



Women's soccer in the US has always been an affluent white girl's game. It is prohibitively expensive for most people, and the higher up you go the more it costs. So it's no surprise that Black players make up a tiny minority of the NWSL: it's quite common to be the only Black person in a team, or on the pitch. Sometimes we're one of just a handful of Black people in the whole club, certainly among playing, coaching and senior staff. It's never been easy, but this year has been particularly tough.

Last year, George Floyd's murder meant that we were once again forced to raise our voices and shout that our lives matter. The anguish and the anger at yet another Black person's murder runs deep: it is not just a hashtag that we put on social media – it reawakens generations of trauma and suffering, of exploitation and brutality. But our white coaches, teammates and managers didn't get that. They didn't live through what our families lived through. Our coaches made it clear that, whatever this moment should or could mean for Black people, our focus should be on the field. We were left in no doubt that our performance should be business as usual. It was a simple matter of professionalism, they said. There was no recognition that none of our white teammates were grappling with this existential crisis. That our minds and timelines were crowded with stories that threaten our lives, our families and our futures

Our explanation that these feelings can't simply be turned on and off fell on deaf ears. We were being asked to ignore that, when we leave the pitch, we face a devastating reality that our lives and the lives of our loved ones could be taken at any time, most likely with impunity. Like many Black people, we were being asked to hide our feelings under the guise of professionalism, to swallow them whole and hope they don't resurface while we play.

Then the clubs started to make statements. Some were good, some were bad. What now, we asked ourselves, was our role? We wanted to engage and encourage internal discussion and reflection. We felt a strong sense of responsibility to educate well-intentioned teammates and colleagues, many who we consider friends. But, like many Black people going into mostly white spaces, it was just so exhausting. We were having to relive trauma while holding space for others, in spaces that were often ironically unsafe for us. And we witnessed discussions being watered down so non-Black players felt more comfortable. Worse still, we were being asked to tone down our language and modify our action to accommodate the white fragility of teammates and other stakeholders.

We faced constant resistance to our suggestions of peaceful protest. Up and down the country, our experiences were being minimised and glossed over, while we tried to display compassion to non-BLACK people struggling to come to terms with the deep racial divides and injustice in our society. And in the midst of this, our voice was getting lost.

We did not feel our interests were properly represented, or that our concerns were being heard. When we expressed our opinions, these were branded as "political". We were not consulted, and many of the actions that were being taken felt performative and tailored to avoid discomfort. For example, when the question of taking a knee could not be resolved, the league simply decided that it would not play the national anthem, ostensibly for logistical reasons but more likely avoid controversy. This in turn removed from us an opportunity for peaceful protest.

That is why we set up the Black Women's Player Collective (BWPC). BWPC consists of 43 women competing in the NWSL. Our aim is to provide a collective voice to the Black perspective and experience of a professional female athlete amidst the incessant and pervasive racial inequality and social injustice plaguing our society.

We are proud of this work, and the courage and tenacity many of our members show. But we are also tired. We have a rewarding but gruelling job, which we have done amidst a global pandemic. We hear tell of this significant and overdue racial reckoning but are frustrated, exhausted and disappointed with the lack of change. For us, this is not simply a cause we believe in, this activism is about our very right to exist, to play and to thrive. It's not a fight we can afford to lose. We hope that you will join us in this fight, we know that many share our desire for a fairer and more just community, in soccer and beyond. But that cannot be achieved if the impact of discrimination – the harm caused by systemic oppression – is not recognised. It's time for the soccer world to sit up and listen, to learn from our experience and the other experiences in this report, so we are not forced to retell it time and again. Only then, when the impact of discrimination is fully acknowledged and our experience is no longer trivialised, can we start to heal and move forward.

***CHAPTER 3:***

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***SOLUTIONS***

The first two chapters of this report chronicle just a few examples of the discriminatory incidents that have plagued football in recent years, and the devastating impact that they have had on players. This final chapter highlights the inspiring actions of players and some of the solutions that are within our reach. Change can happen, and change is happening. Our job now is to make it happen without delay.

# UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

As outlined in the first chapter of this report, there is little accessible and global data about the scale of this problem. With the exception of European initiatives by FARE, and a few national efforts, we were unable to source reliable and comparative figures that accurately inform us just how much discriminatory abuse players are forced to endure. This carries two challenges: first, it almost inevitably means that the extent of such discrimination is underestimated, especially when it comes to players' experience of discrimination from colleagues and teammates. Such incidents, likely to happen away from the public eye, go unreported and unchecked. Second, if we do not understand the scale of the current problem, it is difficult to track and monitor change. Without this, we cannot confidently say whether existing initiatives are effective. We cannot learn what works, and it is much harder to hold those responsible to account.

Earlier this year, the Dutch FA launched an initiative change that. The federation has created an app that allows anyone to report discrimination in or around the pitch directly to the Dutch FA. The app is the latest development in a wider action plan designed by the FA in partnership with leagues and national government, sparked by an incident that occurred in November 2019, in a game between first division teams FC Den Bosch and Excelsior. After Excelsior's Ahmad Mendes Moreira received racist abuse from opposition fans, the Dutch Cabinet pledged 14 million euros over a period of three years to tackle racism and wider discrimination in

football. The app facilitates reporting at both the elite and grassroots level, and in professional games any report is shared in real time with a safety coordinator in the stadium who can take immediate action. The app also shares data with a dedicated prosecuting entity. The Dutch app therefore enables the federation to track data but also tackle incidents of discrimination in real time. If such initiatives could be coordinated and scaled, and data could be coded to track players' experiences and the efficacy of any intervention, we would be a step closer to keeping players safe.

## FIFPRO's commitment

To help understand the scale of the problem we have committed financial and institutional support to a multi-year, independent University Chair and Research Centre to gather data, raise awareness and guide and inform meaningful action. We have also committed to host regular opportunities for players to feed in their experiences so that we can collate and track anecdotal evidence.



# WALKING THE TALK

In October 2019, UEFA launched a three-step protocol granting officials the power to act when discriminatory incidents occur. The protocol allows officials initially to halt play and, if the racist behaviour continues, abandon the match. FIFA rules also allow for significant action. They state that clubs or international teams can suffer points deductions or even be disqualified or relegated from a competition if their supporters engage in discriminatory behaviour.

The issue is therefore not that authorities lack the power to take robust action. Instead, it is that those robust measures are rarely applied. Since the protocol has been introduced its inconsistent and overly-lenient application has undermined any claims of "zero tolerance".

Worse still, even those lenient decisions are being ignored: on 1 October 2021, Sparta Prague played Glasgow Rangers. The match should have been played behind closed doors, after previous racism by Sparta fans against Monaco's Aurelien Tchouameni on 3 August 2021. Astonishingly, UEFA allowed 10,000 under-14s into the stadium, some of whom in turn targeted Rangers' Kamara, a previous victim of racism by Slavia Prague midfielder Ondrej Kudela.

In the meantime, and as is highlighted by the Marega case and many others since, the burden continues to fall on individual players, and to a lesser extent their teammates, managers and clubs, to decide in the moment how to respond to an incident. With strong economic disincentives to substitute top players or forfeit games, victims of racism are faced with an unenviable choice: play in hostile and even dangerous conditions or take a stance that may cost your team the game.

These circumstances have made it far too tempting for clubs and coaches to praise players who stoically grin and bear racist abuse while discrediting and sometimes even blaming players who refuse to continue playing in such circumstances. Without decisive, consistent and clear action taken by those regulating the game, victims of racist and sexist abuse are often left feeling isolated and unprotected. In other words, it is time for football to go beyond words, and walk the talk.

## FIFPRO's commitment

**To help protect players experiencing discrimination, FIFPRO will continue to provide direct legal advice and representation in defence of players' rights to play free from abuse, and in defence of their freedom of speech and right to peaceful protest. We will continue to work directly with players as well as offer support to our national member unions. FIFPRO also commits to convening an expert task force to address the ineffectiveness of the three-step protocol.**





## DIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP & DECISION MAKING BY VINCENT KOMPANY

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Football has given me so much. I've seen the world, experienced new things and met some incredible people. I've been lucky enough to play alongside footballers from more than 50 different countries and six continents. This, and growing up in a multicultural household and neighbourhood, has taught me to value the experience and viewpoints of others. It has shown me how powerful it is to learn and share ideas with people from a range of backgrounds in an inclusive and collaborative environment. And it has demonstrated to me that greater diversity leads to better and fairer decision-making.



But don't just take my word for it: research shows diversity and inclusion in leadership makes good business sense. In 2015, a report by management consulting firm McKinsey found that companies in the top quarter for ethnic and racial diversity were 35% more likely to have above-average financial returns. Three years earlier, Credit Suisse conducted a global analysis of 2,400 companies and found that organisations with at least one female board member increased profits faster than those with no women on the board. A 2016 Harvard Business Review article put it best: diverse teams are "simply smarter" because they process facts more carefully and are more innovative.

Sadly, this thinking has not yet found its way into football. The diversity that so benefited the teams I played in is not reflected in football's power structures. Take the boardrooms of football clubs. Even a cursory glance at their members' profiles shows that they are still a hotbed of inequality. Footballing boards and management rooms remain profoundly unrepresentative of the diversity of players, with a notable absence of people of colour and women. In February 2020, the International Football Association Board published a picture of the top table at its AGM. Of the 26 people seated there none were Black, and none were women. And it barely caused a stir. That same season, I returned to my boyhood club Anderlecht, and embarked on the first player-manager role of my career. I've again seen how increasing diversity at a senior management level brings some much-needed balance to the environment. Just being around the club made a difference. So just being here, in a senior capacity, has improved inclusivity at the club.

Because of my experiences and background, I see things through a different lens. I can help identify and address problems that impact negatively on players and ultimately the game, but that previously went undetected.

All it takes sometimes is one person, who has seen and experienced these stereotypes, to come into the club, call it out and help others understand the consequences of their actions.

Few senior footballing executives will know what it's like to have bananas thrown at you while you're on the pitch, or to be subjected to unwelcome and inappropriate sexual comments. Nobody is walking through the corridors of power thinking this is a major topic, because it's not something they have experienced. Yet racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination are rife in football. If you haven't experienced it, chances are that's because you're not Black or a woman or gay. And the people we are asking to develop solutions and policies are not remotely in touch with what the players are experiencing, and so are ill-equipped to even start a debate on how best to tackle discrimination in all its forms and at all levels.

That is why players want to see more people of a diverse background across the whole footballing ecosystem, including the people who actually decide what the agenda is. They want to see people who feel in their bones and know in their hearts how crucial it is that we create change. And they want people in boardrooms who are actually capable of coming up with the appropriate solution. This is not difficult: there are thousands of qualified and willing candidates being overlooked. They just need to be judged on their competence and their desire to succeed rather than where they're from, or their gender. Because discrimination in football is not just about monkey chants. It is also about having institutions run by people who, with the best will in the world, can never really understand what players facing discriminatory abuse are going through.

Football has taught me that teams function best when people with diverse skillsets and attributes come together to work towards a common goal. We've seen it yield results on the pitch; now it's time to see that same diverse range of life experiences reflected in our boardrooms. Because until we achieve greater boardroom diversity, football will not truly be the world's game.

# DIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP

The decision to favour lesser sanctions over, for example, point deductions lies with football's senior leadership. This, as Vincent Kompany points out, has highlighted how leadership of clubs, leagues, associations and even member organisations remain unrepresentative of their players who form the talent at the heart of the game. The conclusion is that, with little experience of what it's like to live and play with abuse, leadership often fails to take sufficiently robust measures to eradicate it.

Few senior footballing executives will have in-depth understanding of what it's like to experience racist slurs while you're on the pitch, or to be subjected to rape threats online. As a result, there is a lack of lived experience of discrimination, a lack of expertise in detecting and tackling discrimination and a lack of visible and credible interest in effectively combating discrimination.

As Toronto FC full-back Justin Morrow told FIFPRO: *"So number 1, for us to make change, players have to be included in conversations, flat out. All these decisions affect us, so we must have our opinions heard, our voices listened to and valued"*

## FIFPRO's commitment

To help increase diversity in the footballing ecosystem FIFPRO will deliver the Ready to Board programme for women, and curate appropriate leadership initiatives for other underrepresented groups, focussing first on Black players and players of colour. FIFPRO will also work with our Member Unions to design strategies for diversity, equality, and inclusion. FIFPRO has already made the necessary statutory changes internally to increase diversity at Board level and will continue to work with Member Unions to replicate this across the player union network. Finally, FIFPRO commits to continued efforts to connect players to the governing bodies to directly input their experiences and ideas into decision-making processes.



# ATHLETE ACTIVISM

Athlete activism in football is a growing but not new phenomenon. And in the past, as now, players have been criticised and punished for speaking out. Such punishment, sports governing bodies say, is needed to keep football free from any political agenda. But increasingly players and civil society have questioned this, suggesting instead that regulation is used only when players seek to advance a political cause that is not approved (or at least condoned), controlled and sanitised by the governing bodies itself. Indeed, in reality, certain forms of social engagement have been suppressed while others have been promoted. This approach does not only fail to recognise the rights of athletes, as of any other individuals, to free speech. It also fails to acknowledge that athletes lend an important and often underrepresented perspective to debates on critical societal issues.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has rightly tested football's boundaries on this issue: as the Black Women's Player Collective opinion piece in Chapter 2 shows, what may be perceived as abstract political rhetoric for some is a question of core identity and basic rights for others. Following the murder of George Floyd, governing bodies have avoided an outright clash over BLM protests. When, at the start of last season, Weston McKennie, and Ashraf Hakimi wore armbands and t-shirts brandishing George Floyd's name, the German FA decided not to sanction the players. Since then, players and teams around the world have taken a knee to protest systemic racial injustice.

FIFA has urged governing bodies to "use common sense and have in consideration the context surrounding the events" when applying provisions that sanction players for displaying slogans, statements or images on their kit or other equipment which could be deemed as political. This kind of discretion was well exercised by the German FA, and until now no sanctions have been imposed on players taking the knee. Nonetheless uncertainty prevails. Indeed, in advance of the start of Tokyo 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) reiterated that athletes may be subject to sanctions if they make political gestures on the podium, in the Olympic village, at the opening and closing ceremonies, or on the field of play. Despite confirmation that Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which states "No kind of demonstration or political,

religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas", remained in place, many women's football teams took the knee during the game, with several players raising their fist. The US, Sweden, Chile, Great Britain and New Zealand were among the teams to take a stand.

FIFPRO has strongly criticised the IOC's attempts to stifle freedom of expression. FIFPRO General Secretary Jonas Baer-Hoffmann said: "We feel very strongly that the players' freedom of speech on political issues need to be protected. Their freedom of expression overrides any other interest that may be in play during the Olympic Games. It is hypocritical and unacceptable for sports event organizers to champion the role of strong athletes and personalities in society but say *'if you do this in our venues it is an offence that can be sanctioned'*. Football players should have the same rights as everyone else to express themselves and we will not hesitate to defend those rights if necessary."

## FIFPRO's commitment

**To support and encourage athlete activism, FIFPRO commits to ongoing legal advice and representation for players seeking to exercise their right to free speech and to peaceful protest. FIFPRO also commits to create and convene opportunities for players to come together and raise their voices on behalf of themselves and in support of others to affect change. Finally, FIFPRO will continue to facilitate player activism through our Global Player Council and related groups and initiatives.**



# MEANINGFUL ALLYSHIP

The movement for gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and racial justice has been led by those directly impacted by discrimination. But it cannot be incumbent only on those who face injustice to challenge the issue or come up with the solutions.

While players with lived experience have a unique perspective that must form the centre of the debate, those around them also have the power and agency to make a difference. Collective action by those affected, together with those who act in solidarity, remains one of the most effective vehicles for social change – and as a community that understands teamwork better than most, football is ideally placed to join forces and speak out.

Many players have embraced this responsibility. Megan Rapinoe has been at the forefront of campaigning not only for issues that directly impact her, but also as a staunch ally on issues of racial injustice. Receiving the 2019 FIFA Best Female Player Award, Rapinoe used her acceptance speech to challenge racism, as well as homophobia and unequal pay. In this year's Olympics, Britain captain Steph Houghton spoke passionately about the team's decision to take a knee, saying: "We felt strongly as a group that we wanted to show support for those affected by discrimination and equality".

Last season, San Diego Loyal Manager Landon Donovan, who has over 150 caps for his national team, displayed an excellent example of decisive and unwavering allyship following an alleged homophobic slur directed at one of his players. In discussions with the referee and opposition team, caught on camera, Donovan is heard saying "This is beyond soccer... We have to get this out of our game". When the opposition team challenges Donovan's objections to the homophobic remark by saying "How long have you been in football?", Donovan simply responds

"You're better than that." Donovan continued: "Homophobia, racism, it has no place in our sport." When the referee eventually failed to take appropriate action, Donovan led his team off the pitch.

Collin Martins, towards whom the homophobic slur was directed, issued a statement the following day. The former MLS player, who is openly gay, said: "I (...) want to focus on (...) the response of my coaches, teammates and the organization. Their collective decision to walk off the field in solidarity and forfeit the match speaks volumes of their support for me and what this organization is standing up to."

These examples show the importance of allies, and how those who share the responsibility for change can play a crucial supporting role. Of course, speaking out on issues of which you have no personal experience can be challenging. The most effective allies are those who have educated themselves about the causes they are supporting. This requires commitment, time, and a degree of humility, as Italy captain and Global Player Council member Giorgio Chiellini explains in the final opinion piece of this report.

## FIFPRO's commitment

To facilitate meaningful allyship FIFPRO commits to deliver educational opportunities and best-practice support to players and national member organisations.





## LEARNING THE LESSONS OF ALLYSHIP BY GIORGIO CHIellini

This summer, I had the honour of leading my national team to win the European Championship. It feels like a long journey for the Azzurri, and on the road to victory we were often tested. But we learnt from that adversity, and from our mistakes, and those challenges make success taste even sweeter.



Today, Italian football faces another challenge: the horrific racism experienced by Black players and players of colour in this league. This season we have already seen so many incidents. I feel ashamed as an Italian that my teammates and fellow players are forced to live through this. I have no idea how they do it. Of course, as a footballer I've had my fair share of heckling from the stands. Sometimes it was tough to stay focussed, to manage my emotions. But I have never experienced abuse for something that is part of me such as my skin colour, gender or sexuality. I can never understand what that feels like, but I know that it is unacceptable, and it has to stop.

Take the game on 3 October between Napoli and Fiorentina. During a post-match interview Napoli's Kalidou Koulibaly was called a racist name by a Fiorentina fan, during a game that also saw his teammates Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa and Victor Osimhen racially abused. The fan that abused Kalidou was banned for five years, and police and the club are actively searching for other perpetrators. But is this enough?

I was asked after that game for my opinion and I said honestly that I don't always know exactly what needs to be done, but that I know that we need to do more. I also said that it is everyone's responsibility to act, and I recognize that includes me.

Since that interview I have been reflecting on what I can do, as someone who has not experienced discrimination but who has a voice, has a platform, and has a responsibility. I realise this is an ongoing process for me, but here is my starting point: five things I can do to join the fight against discrimination as an ally.

#### **1. This struggle is my struggle**

I may not be the target of discriminatory abuse but as a captain of Juventus, as the captain of my national team and as a human being, this fight against discrimination is also my struggle and my responsibility.

#### **2. A responsibility to educate myself**

I do not have all the answers, but I can listen and learn. I acknowledge that I need to put in that work myself, rather than put the onus on people facing discrimination to educate me.

#### **3. Amplify the voice of others**

I will not be silent, but I will also not speak on behalf of those who live with discrimination every day. Instead, I will amplify the voices of others. I'll start here and highlight what Kalidou Koulibaly and Victor Osimhen said after the game against Fiorentina:

Kalidou posted on Instagram that fans who racially abuse players "need to be identified and kept out of the stadiums - forever." Victor took to Twitter after the match to urge people to discuss racism. I ask that you listen to these players and all those who have the courage to speak about their experiences.

#### **4. I will try my best, even if it feels uncomfortable and I don't have all the answers**

As a player I learnt that when we face great challenges, we may make mistakes along the way. But that does not mean we give up or do not try. The most important thing is that when we get it wrong, we take responsibility and improve. Being a good ally is like being a good teammate: I may not always get it right, and sometimes it will feel uncomfortable when I'm asked to do something different. But I will own my mistakes if I get it wrong and try and learn and do better.

#### **5. This conversation is not about me**

I feel pain when I see my teammates and fellow players abused. And I feel shame as an Italian. I am embarrassed that the world is watching and sees the worst of my country when there is so much to love. But I also acknowledge that I have to manage my feelings myself, because I am not the victim, and this conversation is not about me.

This is what we can do as players. Of course, our federations, leagues and clubs need to get together, in consultation with players and player unions, and develop a more effective strategy. We need officials and governing bodies to take the issue seriously, and to react swiftly and appropriately to any incident on the pitch, in the dressing room or online. And I will continue to raise my voice to encourage others to act.

But we ALL share the responsibility for solving the problems that racism and discrimination present. Too often, I have seen the expectation to tackle racism placed on the shoulders of those most affected. Or seen sexism and homophobia brushed off as a problem that only women and LGBTQIA+ people should address. This cannot be right.

That is why those of us who do not directly experience discrimination must stand up and be better allies - as captains, as teammates, as humans. That is why I pledge my voice and my support to all players who experience discrimination. I pledge to take responsibility to act against discrimination, to understand how we can better eradicate it, and to speak out against it. If you are lucky enough not to have experienced discrimination, I ask that you do the same.

# CONCLUDING REMARKS FROM OUR GENERAL SECRETARY

FIFPRO exists to protect the rights and interests of players. To do this successfully, we must understand the needs of those players. I am proud of the part FIFPRO has played in combating sexual abuse in women's football, in fighting for maternity pay and increasing the number of women on boards through our Ready to Board programme. I also recognise that there is still much to do when it comes to replicating that learning and those efforts across the game. And I acknowledge that, like many footballing institutions, our leadership does not always represent the diversity of the talent at the heart of the game.

As our Global Player Council grows and our own organisation's diversity improves, we continue to deepen our understanding of the rights and needs of all the players we seek to represent. I thank the players and my colleagues for their efforts in educating the organisation, and for teaching me how exhausting it is to not only experience discrimination but to then also patiently educate well-intentioned allies who cannot truly understand because they have not lived it.

I promise that we are listening: we acknowledge that the widespread discrimination that players face on a day-to-day basis, on the pitch and on social media, means it is an inescapable and corrosive presence in their lives. We recognise that the often-unchecked prejudice in football damages players, the game, and those viewing from around the world. Rightly, players are taking a stand and looking to their unions for support. FIFPRO has heeded that call.

As outlined in the opening pages of this report, we are committed to continuing and expanding our three pillars of antidiscrimination work:

## PROTECT:

- Provide legal advice and representation to defend players' freedom of speech and right to peaceful protest, with national member organisations.
- Convene an expert task force to address the three-step protocol; provide remedy for survivors of discrimination and abuse; assist and support players in tackling abuse through dedicated multi-sport global research and analysis.
- Deliver educational opportunities and best-practice support to national member organisations, including designing tools to protect players as they navigate both their national and international environments.

## SUPPORT:

- Host regular opportunities for players to share experiences and to highlight the voice of players.
- Continue to facilitate player activism through our Global Player Council and related groups and initiatives.
- Deliver the Ready to Board programme for women, and curate appropriate leadership initiatives for other underrepresented groups, focussing first on Black players and players of colour.

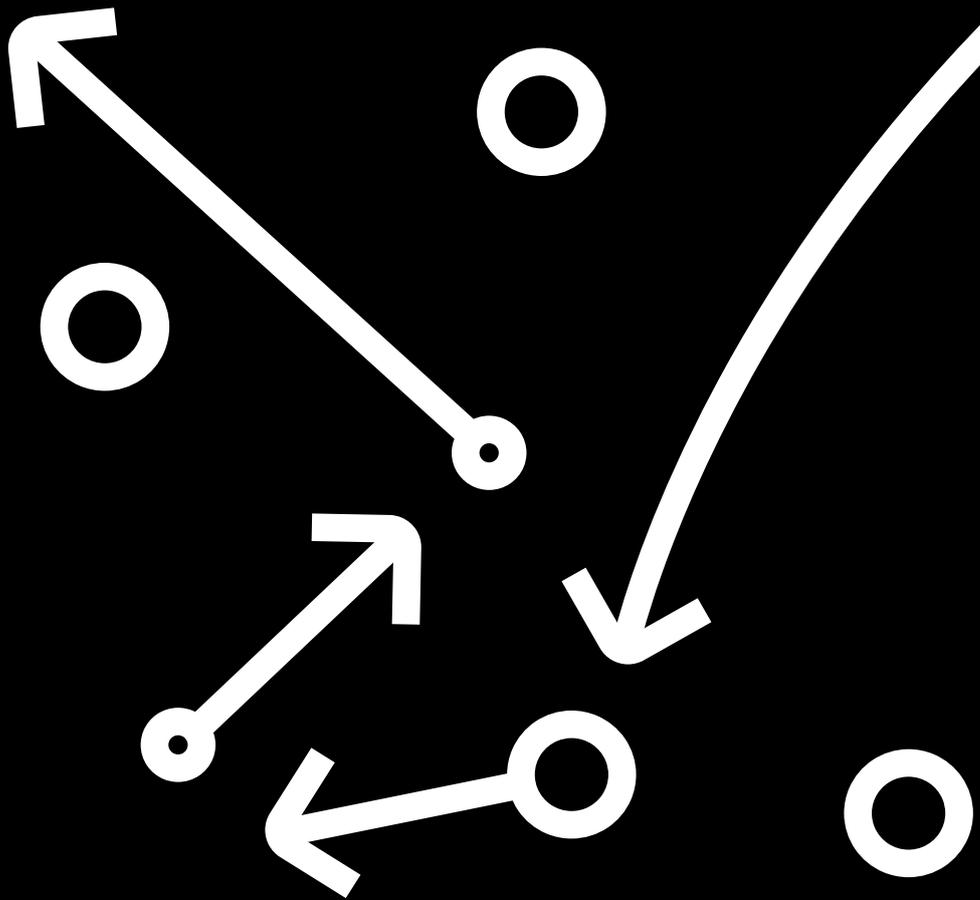
## CHAMPION:

- Pledge financial and institutional commitment to a multi-year, independent University Chair and Research Centre to gather data, raise awareness and guide/inform meaningful actions.
- Connect players to the governing bodies to directly input their experiences and ideas into decision-making processes.
- Work with our national member organisations to design strategies for diversity, equality, and inclusion, making the necessary statutory changes to increase diversity at Board level.

These commitments to find solutions are built on the power of collective action, and are only possible with the support of our member unions and players around the world. I firmly believe in the ability of unions to play a critical role in creating positive change, particularly if we continue to listen, learn and become more diverse. But we cannot create change by ourselves and we cannot delay. We must collaborate across the sport sector to demand change now to make football fairer, safer and more inclusive. I hope you will join me as we fight for an equal playing field for all.



Jonas Baer-Hoffmann  
(FIFPRO General Secretary)



**FIFPRO**  
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**PLAYERS**  
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