



2021

ABUSE IN FOOTBALL

**LESSONS LEARNED,
CALLS FOR ACTION
&
FIFPRO'S
COMMITMENT**

A decorative graphic consisting of a grey curved line with several grey circles of varying sizes and arrows pointing in different directions, overlaid on the text.

In the last five years, FIFPRO has repeatedly intervened to protect and enforce the rights of players to participate in an environment free from sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse. From Afghanistan to Haiti to Argentina, we have supported courageous players who raised their voices. While providing legal, logistical, and technical support to victims, survivors and whistle-blowers, we have observed patterns across many of these cases.

In recent weeks alone we have seen reports of abuse from players in the US, Venezuela, Australia, Sierra Leone and Spain, among others. This will likely trigger further concerns and conversations around the world. In any event, there can be no doubt that football has a widespread problem. This document summarises our analysis of the conditions that allow sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse to continue, shares some of our learnings, and reaffirms our commitment to stand with players to fight for their safety and wellbeing.

It contains three sections. First, we outline our understanding of the circumstances that allow abuse to occur in our **Situational Analysis**. Second, we extract some of the common systemic failures that need to be addressed by way of **Recommended Actions** for the footballing industry. Finally, we outline **Our Commitment** to support players and fight for change, based on FIFPRO's experience, expertise and remit.

"For a long time, we had all convinced ourselves that these experiences were normal. I had assumed that this machista environment built on exploitive control and degradation was the price a woman athlete had to pay to be a professional player."

Deyna Castellanos, Venezuela
National Team Player

"There's this term, it's called institutional betrayal, and I learned it because of this."

Sinead Farrelly,
former NWSL player

"No more silence. This is the uniting message from the brave players, survivors and whistleblowers who we have had the honour to support over the years against systemic discrimination, harassment and abuse in football. It is now louder and more clear than ever before as the wave of reports of sexual abuse continues to hit football and organisations. This report - while by no means exhaustive - is a comprehensive view of what we and the players we represented have experienced, what we see needs to happen and what we commit to keep doing ourselves."

Jonas Baer-Hoffmann,
FIFPRO Secretary General



1. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

FOOTBALL IS A HIGH-RISK ENVIRONMENT

Football creates particular power dynamics that leave players vulnerable to abuse. The game's tremendous popularity and high financial reward for the most elite players means there is a huge pool of individuals hoping to break into topflight clubs or play for their country. That huge pool often includes vulnerable young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds hoping to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. The administrators, coaches and technical staff holding the keys to these young people's dreams wield extraordinary amounts of power and influence. And with that power comes significant risk of abuse.

Alongside those interpersonal dynamics are a variety of regulatory and industrial factors that increase risk: contrary to public perception, most footballers are not well remunerated. Moreover, they often go months without receiving their due payments; football regulations restrict freedoms (provided to other workers) to move between clubs; and the scarcity of professional clubs in most countries creates great dependency and the risk for black-listing of players who raise concerns about abuse.

...WITH INADEQUATE CHECKS AND BALANCES

Simultaneously, footballing institutions are often allowed to operate with great autonomy and inadequate checks and balances. In almost all cases we have supported, abuse was accompanied by poor financial management and insufficient financial transparency, a lack of diversity in decision-making structures, leadership that had remained in power for long periods of time, and unsafe or unfair playing conditions. Finally, those most affected by the decisions of sports entities are not sufficiently consulted or engaged, and have little opportunity to share concerns, question policies or influence systemic change. This setup creates a perfect storm: unchecked power in the hands of a few, who make or break the dreams of many, with little or no oversight or accountability.

A LACK OF TECHNICAL EXPERTISE...

For many in the footballing industry sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse are unfamiliar and even uncomfortable topics. To date, almost all sport governing bodies have struggled to get this right. They lack the technical expertise required and are sometimes more worried about protecting their reputation than meeting the needs of victims and survivors or learning from their mistakes. Where technical

expertise is present, it is too often confined to and siloed within roles or departments, rather than mainstreamed throughout a responsible organisation.

... COUPLED WITH PROCESSES UNFIT FOR PURPOSE

Football's procedural infrastructure was not designed with sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse in mind. The codes and regulations are simply not fit for purpose. Abuse cases carry particular procedural and evidential challenges and risks that impact on reporting and investigation processes. For example, widespread stigma around abuse and common feelings of shame and guilt that victims and survivors frequently experience means existing reporting mechanisms don't facilitate safe and trusted opportunities to inform sports bodies about concerns. Further, traditional interviewing techniques often fail to take into consideration the trauma of abuse, and how it impacts on recalling and recounting events. Also, sport judicial bodies law, who focus on sports law expertise, are often inexperienced and unprepared for the particular challenges associated with these cases. The failure to acknowledge and address these particularities of abuse cases, places players at even greater risks and impedes federations' ability to tackle poor practice and unlawful conduct.

ZERO-TOLERANCE ON PAPER ONLY

There is much talk of "zero tolerance" in football, whether that is about racial discrimination or sexual abuse. But in practice we see the opposite: too often sport turns a blind eye to misconduct. Poor and abusive practices are not acted on, or acted on with too much leniency. Coaches are allowed to quietly move on with no transparency or accountability and are thus able to take up new roles and continue to harm players. Players report with great frequency the existence of an impermeable culture of silence, where staff are fully aware of what is happening but it is never spoken about.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Below is an unexhaustive list of some of the actions that could be taken to address the factors that allow abuse to thrive in football.

CULTURE CHANGE, FROM THE TOP DOWN...

In most reported cases, abuse had been ongoing and unchecked for many years, and an abusive culture was allowed to develop, just below the surface or sometimes in plain sight. Leadership in governing



bodies, leagues and clubs therefore needs to urgently and actively address a series of cultural problems within football. First, we need to move away from protectionist approaches that seek to defend the reputation of the organisation and instead protect the wellbeing of players. Too many sports bodies respond to abuse allegations by being defensive, rather than accepting that mistakes may have been made and welcoming the chance to create a safer environment. This defensive attitude can derail reporting mechanisms from the outset, and compound the suffering of those who faced abuse.

Second, responsibility for player safety and wellbeing needs to be mainstreamed across organisations. Organisations should ensure staff do not see safeguarding duties as a burdensome process with a paper-based compliance approach. Instead, leadership should cultivate an attitude where everyone understands their overarching responsibility to create a safe place to work.

... RECENTRING THE PLAYER'S WELLBEING, SAFETY AND REPRESENTATION AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

This process begins with an acknowledgement that players' rights and welfare sit at the epicentre of the sport, and that player unions have a critical role to play in representing and upholding their rights. In many of the cases where FIFPRO intervened, footballing entities had intentionally undermined efforts to unionise, to maintain abusive power structures and control. If football is serious about tackling abuse, it should embrace and encourage players to organise through representative bodies, and promote the involvement of player representatives in active cases so that players can be independently advised and supported. The players' input should also feature prominently in the solution-building process. Players' voice should be acknowledged as an additional opportunity to encourage reporting, early detection and to create a learning loop to refine and improve prevention practices and policies.

LIVING THE ZERO-TOLERANCE COMMITMENT THROUGH GREATER UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSPARENCY...

Responsible authorities should live their zero-tolerance commitment. This requires an improved and in-depth understanding of some of the key issues, including:

- The scale and scope of the problem;
- The particular risks of abuse occurring in the footballing context, and how different forms of abuse can be interlinked and escalating.
- What types of behaviour can amount to abuse (to include verbal abuse, and consent in the context of power differentials);
- How grooming occurs and manifests in the footballing context;
- The role of bystanders in reporting of persons of concern;

- The intersection of abuse and protected characteristics, especially gender and child rights.

It also requires greater clarity and transparency around decisions that have been taken. Responsible authorities, as well as clubs and leagues, where legally possible, should publish decisions and reasons when staff is released, or their contracts are not renewed on the grounds of unlawful conduct. Such publicly available information will create transparency in the sector. It should be accompanied by regular information and education campaigns highlighting that the responsibility for checking qualifications and compliance remains with institutions, but that players and other stakeholders can also access the information, with clear signposts for reporting.

... SUPPORTED BY MULTI-DISCIPLINARY EXPERTISE

To facilitate this improved understanding, as well as an effective reporting and investigation process, football needs to bring in greater specialist and multi-disciplinary expertise including from the clinical and human rights community and from those with lived experience. Football must consistently deploy a trauma-informed approach: obtaining evidence in sexual abuse, harassment and misconduct cases differs substantively from how we investigate other sport integrity matters such as match fixing and doping. While some broader investigatory principles and processes may aid us, sexual abuse frequently causes serious trauma in victims and survivors. Trauma manifests differently in everyone but it often affects how investigations can be safely conducted.

It is also important to recognise that, for many players and especially those who experienced grooming and abuse in their youth, engaging in any reporting and investigation system will be process. Victims and survivors will often be groomed to think that no one will believe them if they speak out – it is an intentional and common tactic of abusers. Some victims and survivors may not have spoken about their abuse for years. They may first be alerted to the scale of the problem through public reporting, and this is likely to trigger powerful emotions that can impact on their wellbeing and professional performance. It is important that players are supported in processing and managing this potential fallout and are given time to carefully reflect on all their options. Players need to be offered tailored advice so that they understand what engaging in an investigation will involve and yield. Such informed consent is essential, as otherwise investigations can inadvertently replicate the power imbalance that caused their abuse, and also replicate the associated harm. Note also that there are specific additional guidelines about ensuring participation of children in an appropriate and rights-based manner.

Responsible authorities should therefore ensure reporting and investigating processes are designed in accordance with national and international human rights standards, and with the help of clinical experts to mitigate the risk of exacerbating trauma. This will include:

- actively avoiding the replication of power imbalances that create undue pressure on victims and survivors



- appointing trauma-informed interviewers and/or training staff
- acknowledging how traumatic memories are stored and accessed
- avoiding situations whereby victims and survivors have to repeat their evidence
- noting and responding appropriately to traumatic reactions in the reporting/interviewing and investigation process.

TRUSTED AND INDEPENDENT REPORTING MECHANISMS...

Even following the epidemic of abuse scandals in football, we believe most abuse goes unreported because players and whistle-blowers lack trust in the existing reporting mechanisms. Football must acknowledge from the outset that victims and survivors of abuse, misconduct and harassment have been failed, and that often irrevocable damage has been done. In our experience, players felt deeply betrayed by the sport they loved, and abandoned by those who should have cared for them. This leads to a profound lack of trust, with players asking: "Why should I go through the pain of reliving my worst nightmare to tell you about my abuse now, when you never cared before?"

Victims and survivors may not believe that reporting abuse will deliver the justice or remedy that they wish to bring about. This means that responsible authorities must take the time to understand what those with lived experience wish to see happen when they report, and that they publicly communicate the anticipated processes to build faith in the system. A key action point therefore is that football must regain the trust and buy-in of victims, survivors and whistle-blowers. Such buy-in will not be forthcoming unless (a) those affected feel that responsible authorities are willing and able to create change and (b) care and protection is available.

Any process must be independent and transparent to achieve this. It must show that progress is being made and that those in charge are willing and able to make difficult decisions. There also needs to be far greater clarity about what the reporting process entails, and that appropriate care and protection will be provided to those who report concerns about abuse. Poor reporting mechanisms that fail to do this can exacerbate the suffering of victims and survivors.

Simultaneously we must recognise that reporting abuse is incredibly difficult, regardless of how good the mechanism is. That means that sports bodies cannot rely solely on victims and survivors to report or act only when a report is received. They must learn to be more alert to early warning signs that power differentials are being exploited and educate staff to err on the side of caution and raise concerns even if they are not certain that abuse has occurred. But bystanders also often fail to report, likely because they fear that their report will jeopardise their career or ruin the career of someone else who they are not certain has done something wrong. Staff should therefore understand that it is their role to flag any concerns behaviour, and that the organisation will then take over to diligently and fairly investigate concerns, with whistleblowing processes in place to protect the whistle-blower's identity and position.

... FEEDING INTO EXPERT AND SAFE INVESTIGATORY PROCESSES

Players frequently criticise investigations for lacking the requisite technical expertise (including cultural and linguistic expertise and expertise about gender dynamics, sexual violence and/or trauma) and a lack of independence or perceived independence. It is critical that any investigations are therefore handled impartially by people who have the required competence and necessary training. Players must also be offered independent professional advice and representation, for example through the player union or FIFPRO, so that players can make informed decisions and provide informed consent to participation in the investigation.

Players also frequently report concerns about their professional or personal wellbeing being jeopardised because of engagement with investigations. Investigations into reports should therefore always be preceded by a risk assessment, conducted in consultation with the player and their representative. This risk assessment should take into consideration risks to:

- The player's physical safety and wellbeing, and the physical safety and wellbeing of their family and loved ones
- The player's mental health and wellbeing, to include input from expert clinicians regarding the risk of retraumatisation through the investigatory process
- The player's professional opportunities and development.

Following the risk assessment, the investigating authority should develop a risk management plan, in conjunction with the player and their representative. This risk management plan should include logistical and security support, clinical and psychosocial support, and professional assurances and protections.

Finally, when an investigation is conducted into allegations of systemic abuse or misconduct, players and players' representatives must be provided with an opportunity to feed into the scope and Terms of Reference of any response to abuse allegations.

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF FUNDING AND HOSTING MEGA SPORTING EVENTS TO ENSURE COMPLIANCE

On more than one occasion, an influx of funding (for example through the FIFA Forward fund) has been connected with abuse. It is critically important that such funding comes with clear conditions and measurable targets, to ensure the funding is not exploited to create power imbalances facilitating abuse. Those targets must then also be regularly monitored, with sanctions and investigations triggered if they are not met. Similarly, the hosting of mega sporting events must be contingent on demonstrable



compliance with key standards for the adequate and effective prevention, reporting and investigation of abuse and misconduct. In short, if you can't demonstrate that a robust and tailored system is in place for responding to and investigating concerns, you should not be awarded the opportunity to host mega sporting events. Such systems should include dedicated funding for independent expert support for and representation of victims and survivors.

3. FIFPRO'S COMMITMENT

PROTECT AND REPRESENT

We are not a governing body with responsibility for regulating football, and we do not have the authority to compel persons of concern to comply with investigations or the power to sanction them. Instead, FIFPRO is the global representative body of professional footballers. Our remit is to protect and safeguard the wellbeing of professional players. However, we have seen over the years that abuse and a lack of professionalisation often go hand in hand, especially in the women's game. Indeed, in many cases players are promised access to contracts or scholarships on the condition of sexual favours (a form of abuse known as "sexploitation").

FIFPRO has therefore supported players in countries where elite and national level women's football has not yet fully transitioned into a professional space. We commit to continuing our support of players from these countries, and will work with players, their local legal teams, and advisors to seek to ensure that their rights are protected. Where appropriate and wherever feasible, we will represent players in disciplinary processes.

We also commit to advocate for players rights vis-à-vis governing bodies to seek to ensure that they receive the support and care required as they go through the investigation process. Further, we will continue to pressure federations and governing bodies to implement urgent and effective response mechanisms. These mechanisms are crucially important: they enable football to learn lessons from past mistakes, so that we can better protect players in the future.

LISTEN, LEARN AND EDUCATE

We pay tribute to the courage of victims and survivors who have reported abuse. We continue to work closely with many players to document and learn from their journey, in order to become better in defending them and to prevent this from happening again. We observe and discuss what was helpful and what was harmful, and advocate for systemic change. We also chart and reflect on our experience in representing players in abuse cases, and extract broad principles rooted in international human rights standards to share with others, as we have done in this document.

This year FIFPRO also commenced a global education campaign for national member unions, building localised capacity and expertise on how to appropriately respond to and support players who wish to report abuse and misconduct. We will continue to work with national member unions as we expand this programme, and also continue to offer individualised advice and support.

Finally, FIFPRO commits to launching a new educational campaign to co-create standards of acceptable behaviour with players. We will share examples of good and poor practice, and work with players to unequivocally draw a line that distinguishes between a healthy competitive environment, and an unsafe and abusive one. We will tackle the link between poor practice, poor conditions, discrimination, abuse and harassment, and challenge the prevalent concept that success justifies ruthless and toxic behaviour. We will work together to build a better understanding of the pathways to reporting, and create a support system and network of expert player representatives.