

Sexual diversity in the eyes of sport managers

Are we building inclusive physical activity and sport contexts?

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Introduction

The present essay presents information relative to the LGBTQ community in Gipuzkoa with the aim to analyse sport managers' meanings related to their workplace equity practices. Public sport managers, who work in public sport organisations, take responsibility for promoting physical activity and sport (PAS) policies in their municipality. The research project Gipuzkoa EquitActive (EkitAktiboa), a neologism created by Aldaz et al. (2018), merges the concepts of equity and activity. The Department of Sports of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa considers these two concepts fundamental to promote PAS policies. Gipuzkoa EquitActive is based on a request made by aforementioned institution, which focuses on understanding the state of equity within sports policies on a local level. The study addressed different aspects of equity.

Gipuzkoa is a small province in the north of the Spanish state and part of the Autonomous Community of Euskadi. It is made up of 88 municipalities, where diversity ranges from the cosmopolitan capital of Donostia/San Sebastian to a variety of rural municipalities in the interior of Gipuzkoa. It is within this diverse context that the Department of Sports of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa performs its political activities within the framework of competencies concerning the promotion of PAS.

The promotion of PAS and equity: EquitActive, an inseparable couple

The European Sports Charter (Council of Europe, 1992) manifests that PAS should not be seen as a luxury product, but rather as a right of citizens to lead a full life. Therefore, it is a right that state institutions should guarantee, setting out principles to ensure participation in sport and physical recreation in a safe and healthy environment. Although the approach to PAS promotion policies can be seen from varied explanatory frameworks, as Piggin (2019) posits, one debate

stands out in relation to health promotion. This explanatory framework, which necessarily ties the promotion of PAS to equity, is the guiding principle in the promotion policies of PAS within the Department of Sports of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa. The concept of EquitActive was created as a result of this guiding principle (Aldaz et al., 2018), and it involves transforming reality through a process of co-creation (Esposito & Murphy, 2000), with the direct participation of the people involved. This highlights the firm conviction that the approach to the promotion of PAS cannot take place without becoming involved in the conflicts on equity that arise from its management.

Social inequalities persist in the existing relation between promotion policies of PAS and equity in this context as well as in society (Donnelly, 1996). This results in dynamics of exclusion and inclusion (Aldaz, 2010, 2014) within the context of socio-cultural change, from more common structured traditional sports practices within the framework of sports clubs to other individualised, streamlined, and deregulated sports (Wheaton, 2004, 2013). Far from eradicating exclusion–inclusion dynamics, this change seems to have exposed them to a new source of exclusion: the constant influx of sports on offer seems to hold a direct relation to purchasing power (Coalter, 2010; Hylton & Totten, 2007). Similarly, more traditional forms of sport, particularly those within the context of sports clubs (Elling & Claringbould, 2005) and federations, seem to continue to “attract” the dominant sectors of society, excluding those who find themselves in a more vulnerable position (Spaaij et al., 2014).

Indeed, the arena of PAS, far from being a mere passive reflection of the inequalities within a population, should be seen as an actively involved agent in the production, reproduction, and preservation of these social inequalities. However, it should also be seen as an agent for change and resistance (Fletcher & Dashper, 2014), a sort of Trojan Horse (Eitzen, 2016, p. 169) that, having penetrated our lives so clearly, can be used for social transformation.

Spaaij et al. (2014) developed, in their view, key questions to delve into a deeper understanding of the relationship between PAS promotion policies and the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion that are tied to the challenges posed by equity, in relation to challenging social exclusion in and through sport: the effect of social exclusion in sport participation; the (re)production, resistance, and challenges of social exclusion in sport contexts; and the use of sport to fight social exclusion and promote social inclusion in other areas of society.

The aim of this study was to analyse the awareness of public sport managers in the promotion of PAS with respect to the LGBTQ community.

The EquitActive perspective in the LGBTQ community in PAS promotion policies

These questions are of crucial importance not only in relation to a general outlook towards equity but also in understanding LGBTQ people in relation to promotion policies of PAS. In this sense, Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020) highlight the

fact that certain sport contexts are much more inclusive than others. Furthermore, despite the progress made over the last decades concerning general social change, heterosexism and its consequences are deeply rooted in the sports context (Anderson, 2011; Sartore-Baldwin, 2012), and they seem to continue to be a challenge in the battle against LGBTphobia in Gipuzkoa, according to a study published in 2018 by the Basque Association of Gays, Lesbians, Transexuals, and Bisexuals Gehitu (Asociación de gays, lesbianas, transexuales y bisexuales del País Vasco) and the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (García & Exposito, 2018).

A prominent feature in the literature in this field of study is the invisibilisation of sexual minorities in the policies of different sports actors, resulting in discrimination and prejudice, even if involuntary (Fynes & Fisher, 2016; Melton & Cunningham, 2014). All in all, homonegativity continues to be a serious problem that hinders the integration and acceptance within sports of the LGBTQ community (Symons et al., 2017). The prevalence of gender stereotypes and rigid perceptions of hegemonic masculinity and traditional femininity among different agents of the sports system must be underlined. In accordance with Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020), the LGBTQ community continues to suffer homonegativity in sports despite the progress made in the inclusion of LGBTQ people within the context of PAS. Therefore, in alignment with a multilevel viewpoint that allows us to understand the experiences of the LGBTQ within the context of PAS, we cannot ignore, as Cunningham (2019) warns, the influence of elements on a social level (macro), an organisational level (meso), and an individual level (micro) on prejudice and on the opportunity for LGBTQ to have positive experiences in PAS.

The changes that are taking place within the organisations involved in the administration of sport are slow and oftentimes inconsistent and superficial. It is therefore necessary to establish proactive policies against discrimination, abuse, and bullying that also include sexual orientation on all institutional levels (Griffin, 2014). It is along these lines that we have adopted the focus of Spaaij et al. (2014, p. 33), whereby the “relational, multidimensional, and multilevel characteristics of social exclusion” are brought to the fore, emphasising and forcing our attention towards the agents and/or institutions (including us) that, voluntarily or not, generate it. It is from this perspective of social exclusion as a dynamic and relational process (according to Spaaij et al., 2014, p. 34) that the emphasis turns towards the agents involved, granting them the potential to influence change or its reproduction.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used in this study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Ruiz Olabuénaga & Ispizua, 1989; Valles, 2009) and the document analysis technique (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) were conducted to analyse the status quo of implementation of sport for all sexual minorities. In 2018, 43 interviews were carried out with people holding positions of responsibility at an administrative or political level within the public management of sports policies across 37

municipalities in the province of Gipuzkoa. The interviews covered questions on key issues of sport for all policies (e.g. the [non-]existence of a diagnosis and assessment of sports practices in their municipality, municipal actions to foster sport for all for different communities, and an assessment of these) and were complemented by a small-scale questionnaire. The document analysis process was based on analysing the websites of the 37 municipalities and every type of document related to the Planning in the Municipal Sports Area, such as municipal ordinances or equality plans. In terms of the ethics of this research, participants were informed that their collaboration was voluntary and signed an informed consent form before the interviews. Their anonymity was guaranteed by a pseudonym, and no personal data were collected.

Results and discussion

Sport for all = equitable sports policies?

“Our aim is to promote access to sports activities for all” was one of the interviewees’ (Arkaitz) statements. However, although those interviewed may have referred to “all”, we did not observe any specific policies or plans for promotion of, or access to, sports arenas for certain vulnerable populations, such as the LGBTQ population in the document analysis. In this respect, Melton and Cunningham (2014) note the need to create safe spaces with positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. It is known that institutional inaction to develop inclusive sport policies occurs especially when LGBTQ people challenge the inherent logic of the sport system, such as the sex binary, and this leads to different challenges and stressors that influence their participation (Braumüller et al., 2020).

No existing specific diagnosis was drawn from the documents referring to the reality of the LGBTQ community within the PAS context. Among all the eligible research literature, only García and Exposito’s (2018) study on the battle against homophobia in the sports context was identified. As Spaaij et al. (2014) concluded, it seems that reference to “all” merely implies hegemonic groups, keeping the non-normative population on the sideline.

When asked about the work they were doing with respect to equity, many of the participants asked what was meant by the term equity, what it included, or towards whom it was directed. Thus, most interviewees showed difficulties in understanding the term:

When you say equity, what do you mean exactly? Because I’m not at all sure.
(Urko)

We have specific programmes that are aimed at certain age groups, another one for women . . . not necessarily because of equity, if you’re talking in economic terms. So my first question would be, what do you mean by equity?
(Arrate)

Sport managers and LGBTQ people: (In)Experience, conflicts, and challenges for the future

Lack of experience and lack of sensitivity

Asked about experiences surrounding the LGBTQ community, sport managers responded with an awkward silence. Out of the 43 managers who were interviewed, only a few were able to mention something about it. With this information in mind, we agree with Kavoura and Kokkonen's (2020) idea that emphasises the fact that sports contexts reinforce gender stereotypes and reiterate the invisibilisation of sexual minorities (Fynes & Fisher, 2016).

Thus, most interviewees confirmed having no experience or information about the LGBTQ community. A lack of knowledge and involvement in this respect was observed. In fact, on one occasion, having had no experience with "those things" was a relief for the sport manager.

No, we haven't had any for now. We haven't had any experience with those things, and I've been here for 30 years, and I haven't met any . . . transsexual [person]; those things haven't happened. So much the better for me. I'm very sentimental and those things . . . they hurt me, they hurt me a lot.

(Aratz)

No, I haven't had any of that. I don't even know what it is. Well, I know what being transsexual is, but . . . I haven't seen any of that here.

(Enaitz)

The thoughts expressed by the sport managers reflect the lack of sensitivity found in the document analysis. Furthermore, a binary and heteronormative perspective appeared in the tools for intervention, such as grants, regulations, or agreements that the sport managers had access to, in which funding and fostering seem to be more guided by established social categories and inequalities, such as gender and people with handicap, and neglect other categories like sexual or gender minorities. It seems that creating inclusive spaces for "others" becomes more of a personal option rather than a goal that becomes part of their work as sport managers. In line with conclusions by Anderson (2011) and Sartore-Baldwin (2012), heterosexism is deeply rooted within the sports system and seems to go unnoticed by the sport managers.

Changing room conflicts: Binary outlooks and binary sports centres

There were several conflicts around the binary structure of changing rooms that came up in more than one interview. Just as Sartore-Baldwin (2012) observed, the issue of changing rooms was delicate. Most of the comments related to sexual

diversity were linked to the management of changing rooms. In this sense, among public sports spaces, the locker room is perceived as an unsafe and vulnerable space by the LGBTQ community, especially by transgender people (López-Cañada et al., 2021). These are spaces in which users show their naked bodies, causing trans people embarrassment, stress, lack of privacy, and even feelings of fear of the reactions of others (Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Hargie et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017a). This discriminatory predominance that occurs in the contexts of PAS (Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019) leads trans people to opt for individual and unorganised practices that do not require body exposure (Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2017).

Many participants stated that the issue was around the lack of funds when dealing with situations involving people of the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, many sport managers coincided in their affirmation that they had not invested any time in this until the issue arose. Our study confirmed the idea put forward by Spaaij et al. (2018) that any work in diversity within the sports community is usually done on a case-by-case basis and rarely based on a strategy. In fact, the solution that was offered in the face of the traditional binary structure within the changing rooms was a momentary substitution with another form of space, generally isolated from other people:

We've had problems with people who were transitioning. Obviously, we have common changing rooms, so there were problems with certain people. The truth is that there are certain cabins that are usually independent, the ones that are meant for the disabled, so it was suggested they could use those cabins. There was no problem with that. What's more, we have no issues if someone with a psychological problem uses them.

(Arkaitz)

There was an employee at the sports centre who went through a sex change, but I don't know if we responded the right way. He was a boy who had been a girl, but he used the changing rooms normally, so in this case he went to the boy's. We haven't had any other experiences like that, although these kinds of cases do happen in all the towns, and we haven't tended to them in a specific manner. We adapt, I guess, using some general privacy measurements in the bathrooms and changing rooms. I don't know if we're doing the right thing or not, but well.

(Orhi)

Some of the sport managers talked about how the binary organisational system of the changing rooms can create conflicts with the people involved and those surrounding them. That is why they thought it was alright to assign the referee's changing room or a separate one for transsexuals or intersexuals, even if it was just another solution based on circumstance (Spaaij et al., 2018).

We are still trying to figure out the solution to the changing room issue. As you can see, we have family changing rooms for the pool, or genderless changing rooms that are separate.

(Leire)

The issue with the changing rooms is that there comes a moment when they separate, and that is where the problems come up. In those cases, we have made available a separate cabin in the changing rooms so that that person (transsexual) can, to a certain extent, share the changing room with people of the sex they identify with.

(Alaitz)

Nevertheless, if the concept of Sport for All really does include the whole population, specifically sexual minorities, then the starting point should be different and go beyond binary changing rooms. With regard to this, the responses received from the sport managers display a simplistic point of view with hardly any afterthought, classifying every citizen in the binary system:

I was told [by a transsexual person] that society is organised in a binary way and we already always accepted it as it is, but what about those of us who are in between? With that in mind, where do we start?

(Aiala)

In line with what Cunningham and Hussain (2020) concluded, it is necessary for sport managers to become active agents in the promotion of inclusive and equitable policies, because otherwise they will continue to be accomplices in the perpetuation of the normative system. However, according to Cunningham (2007), there appears to be significant resistance to change among sport managers, which is indicative of the barriers that exist at the institutional and political levels (Jones et al., 2017b). Based on this study, it seems that the idea that sport managers should be proactive and generators of change (Spaij et al., 2014) is still utopian.

Funding, difficulties, and challenges for the future

Several sport managers expressed hardship in carrying out their job. Generally, the problems were rooted in a lack of financial resources, as well as a lack of facilities. In this sense, each municipality had its own reality, no matter the size of the territory:

From the point of view of leisure, health, prevention . . . in order for there to be a promotion of physical activities, the job needs to be done properly, and in fact, you only have the funding that you have. . . . So we have done things, but they were one-offs, and really, we do what we can with what we've got.

(Joar)

It seems that the lack of certain resources that might be considered primary may affect other aspects of social interest when it comes to a more in-depth consideration. Apart from the lack of funds, there was also a significant deficiency in sport managers' training and in how to take on public policy from the perspective of

equity, as expressed by Urko: “Well, in that case [that of equity], I don’t have those lenses. I think we lack training”.

Even though sport managers worked on some issues related to social justice and equal opportunities for all citizens such as language, gender equity, or inclusion, there was no specific training programme, and a void was noted in how the LGBTQ community was viewed. Indeed, one agent shared the experience she had in a course that was specifically related to gender equality where the lecturer did not have the security to answer a question about sex binary and gender identity.

These results confirm that, even though training in issues of diversity and other educational activities is common in many work atmospheres, it is less frequent in sports organisations (Cunningham & Hussain, 2020). The need to collaborate and share more in between departments within different town halls was highlighted, from the sports sector to social services or equity. Most town halls had no collaboration with other departments, except in some occasional cases. Many administrative agents said that there was not much coordination and that it would be necessary in order to create synergy and therefore communication and collaboration between the different departments. Saioa, for example, said, “I know what type of society we want, and something that is essential is coordination between departments. So we can all head in the same direction”.

Conclusions

One of the main conclusions drawn from our study is that public sport managers only see what they want to see, much as we do. They create a “normalising” perspective, or, we might even dare to call a “naturalising” one, which, like any other perspective, builds an always partial image of the reality, including some realities and excluding others.

First, obstacles and silence emerged from the results, making invisible the LGBTQ community, already discriminated and ignored by sport managers who are responsible for promoting sport for all. Even though some small initiatives or experiences did arise in the arena of sexual diversity, the invisibility of sexual minorities was significant. In addition, this study has shown how sexual minorities continue to suffer discrimination in the sports context. No awareness was detected regarding the issue of strategic planning by the municipal institutions and sport managers.

Second, the existing binarism in the sport system is perpetuated by the organisers. As observed in our study, sport managers make decisions at specific moments to manage changing room conflicts, instead of setting established strategies to challenge the difficulties related to LGBTQ people, such as the changing rooms’ design and use.

Third, given the need to create and maintain inclusive and significant sports cultures, it would be important to promote inclusive policies for the LGBTQ community. Such policies include training courses on sexual diversity, promotion campaigns, awareness raising, and/or strategic plans towards equity in sports and

physical activity contexts. If we are not aware of equity issues, we will be, for sure, inequitable in our praxis.

All in all, the LGBTQ community was left out of the spotlight of public policy. In accordance with Phipps (2020), it is necessary to continue the promotion of sport for all, with inclusive policies being of vital importance to combat discrimination of the LGBTQ community. This is why it is particularly relevant to involve different sports agents in the design, implementation, and assessment of sports programmes and policies of which they are, or could be, beneficiaries. Indeed, the key is to establish a dialogical relationship (Habermas, 2001) that will allow construction and reconstruction of PAS habits that will make our life a better life for all.

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