



THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT AND CARE FOR WOMEN VICTIMS OF SEXIST AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE THROUGH SPORT: A NATIONAL ANALYSIS (BELGIUM)



BELGIUM REPORT



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RESEARCH & ANALYSIS



IMPRINT

This document has been written by the SAFE Consortium, led by the Alice Milliat Association, project focused on the recovery of women survivors of sexual abuses through the practice of trauma-informed fencing.



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BRIEF

SAFE is a European project that focused on the **recovery of women survivors of sexual abuses through the practice of trauma-informed fencing**. For this purpose, the SAFE consortium works on the development of a **European protocol of fencing therapeutic workshops** for women survivors of sexual assault. The first phase of the project is dedicated to research and analysis works (a literature review, national, a European sectoral analysis and a webinar) and the training and guidance of fencing supervisors to the trauma-informed approach.

RESEARCH & ANALYSIS (2025)

Literature review



30-page public report

State of play “reconstruction of women victims of gender-based and sexual violence through sport and especially fencing”

National sectoral analysis



10-page public report by country (National Sectoral Analysis)

Collection of information from your country on existing good practice for women victims of violence, including treatment through sport and consideration of body therapy & production of a 10 pages national report that will gather data valuable

European analysis & synthesis



D2.3: European synthesis of the national sectoral analysis

A summary of all the national reports that have been produced will be written to gather all the data and information collected and compiled.

European workshop



D5.5: Online European Workshop

- A conference: presentation of the study results
- A presentation of the fencing therapeutic protocol



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PURPOSE

A national analysis of therapeutic support and care for women survivors of sexual violence through sport in Belgium

Objective of the research

- Identify the **consideration** and **specificities** of “sport for health” in each country involved in the project;
- Research focuses on the interest of **trauma- and violence-informed physical activity** (TVIPA) programs as healthcare & knowledge about this approach
- **Safe conditions of practice:** guarantees for welcoming and supporting sensitive publics, in particular women victims of GBV and sexual abuses in sport area;
- European perspective thanks to national analysis, with a special **focus on fencing organisation and practices.**

Methods

In each country of the consortium, **a qualitative analysis** was conducted by the partners involved in the project to **study the consideration of health-related sports at the national and local levels**. A particular **focus** was placed on projects related to **fencing**.

At the same time, an **online questionnaire** was distributed. The aim was to gauge the **level of commitment and awareness** regarding these issues (sport for health, TVIPA approach, consideration of women survivors of SV) **in sports federations and clubs, particularly in fencing.**

DATAS FROM THE SURVEY

An online self-administered questionnaire was conducted. It was aimed at coaches and managers of French sports clubs and federations between July and October 2025. Specific targeting was carried out towards those involved in fencing.

Responses to the survey for Belgium : 19 (16 explicitly in fencing)



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INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuses in Europe. A health & political priority

At world scale, one in three women experiences sexual violence during her lifetime (Borumandnia et al., 2020). **In the European Union, one in three women (30.7 %) have experienced sexual threats and/or physical violence over their lifetime.** More precisely, 17.2 % of women experienced sexual violence (including rape and other unwanted sexual acts) (Eurostat, FRA, EIGE, 2024).

The spread of these violences - as shown by the diversity of the spheres concerned with these violence, both in private and public settings, and their high prevalence - emphasizing **the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence.**

Sexual violence lead to serious consequences has been widely demonstrated with particularly high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite consideration of these impacts, **care strategies remain limited and insufficient** to date.

Physical exercise as space for healing

Physical exercise is an effective, low-cost, cross-diagnostic health promotion strategy that benefits physical, mental, and psychosocial health (Nyberg et al., 2025). Physical exercise programs could thus be **a promising option for helping women survivors of SV in their recovery.**

The SAFE project therefore aims to study the consideration of health-related sports and the provision of physical exercise programs for women survivors of sexual violence in four countries (France, Belgium, Portugal, and Luxembourg). SAFE will also directly respond to this issue by offering a space for healing sexual trauma through the practice of adapted fencing.

Borumandnia, N., Khadembashi, N., Tabatabaei, M. et al. (2020). The prevalence rate of sexual violence worldwide: a trend analysis. *BMC Public Health*, 20. DOI: 10.1186/s12889-020-09926-5.

Eurostat, FRA, EIGE. (2024). EU Gender-based violence survey. Key results. DOI: 10.2811/6270086. [Link](#)

Nyberg ST, Frank P, Pentti J, et al. (2025). Health benefits of leisure-time physical activity by socioeconomic status, lifestyle risk, and mental health: a multicohort study. *Lancet Public Health*, 10(2).

KEY DEFINITIONS

Gender-based violence (GBV)

“**Violence** directed against a person **because of that person’s gender** (including gender identity/expression) or violence that affects persons of a particular **gender disproportionately**” (European Commission, 2014, p.47). It may include physical violence, verbal violence or hate speech, psychological violence, sexual violence, socio-economic violence, intimate partner violence, and/or harassment and sexual harassment (Council of Europe, 2023).

Sexual violence (SV)

“**Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances**, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality **using coercion**, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including at home and at work. **3 types of sexual violence are commonly distinguished**: sexual violence involving intercourse (i.e., rape), contact sexual violence (for example, unwanted touching, but excluding intercourse), and non-contact sexual violence (for example, threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, and verbal sexual harassment)” (WHO, 2014, p. 84). The term can encompass child sexual abuse. (Glossary on safe sport, Council of Europe, 2024)

Physical exercise (PE)

Exercise is a **planned, structured, repetitive, and targeted physical activity** in which the improvement or maintenance of one or more components of physical fitness is the goal. Physical exercise (PE) is a set of body movements performed repeatedly over an extended period of time **for the purposes of health, performance, and physical fitness**.

Trauma- and violence-informed physical activity (TVIPA)

A trauma- and violence-informed physical activity is a **sport environment adapted to peoples victims of trauma and violence**. There are 4 principles:

- Trauma awareness;
- Safety and trustworthiness;
- Choice and collaboration;
- Strengths-based and capacity building.



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HEALTH-ENHANCING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN BELGIUM

A global apprehension of “sport for health”

Definition and apprehension of sport for health in Belgium

“Sport for health” refers to an approach that **uses physical and sport activities as a tool for prevention, maintenance, or improvement of health**. It doesn't focus on performance or competition, but on physical, mental, and social well-being. This concept includes **activities adapted to all ages and fitness levels**, with a special emphasis on preventing chronic diseases (diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases), reducing stress, and enhancing quality of life.

In **Belgium**, Sport for health is integrated into **a comprehensive public health strategy**, with initiatives at federal, regional, and local levels.

Here are the main aspects of this strategy:

- **Government Promotion:** Federal and regional governments (Wallonia, Flanders, Brussels-Capital) encourage regular physical activity through awareness campaigns and specific programs.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Sport Santé is often addressed in connection with public health, education, and sports associations. For example, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Sport Vlaanderen develop projects to make sport accessible to everyone.
- **Medical Prescription:** Some Belgian doctors can prescribe physical activity as a complement to treatment, especially for patients with chronic diseases.



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Actions développées dans le pays

- **"Exercise on Prescription" Programs:** Pilot projects allow doctors to prescribe adapted physical activities, in collaboration with sport clubs or rehabilitation centers.
- **Adapted Infrastructure:** Many Belgian municipalities develop public spaces (parks, bike paths, gyms) to facilitate access to sports.
- **Partnerships with Health Insurance Funds:** Some health insurance providers partially reimburse sports activities (yoga, swimming, fitness) for their members as a preventive measure, especially for children.

Target Audiences

- **Elderly People:** Programs like "Bougez +" in Wallonia aim to maintain senior's autonomy.
- **Children and Adolescents:** Schools are increasingly incorporating physical activities into their curricula.
- **People with Disabilities or Chronic Illnesses:** Associations offer adapted activities in collaboration with healthcare professionals.

Research and Evaluation

- Belgium participates in European studies on the impact of Sport for health, notably through universities (ULB, KU Leuven) and public health research centers.

In summary, **in Belgium, Sport for health is seen as a key lever to improve population health, reduce healthcare costs, and promote social well-being**. Actions are taken at multiple levels: political, associative, medical, and educational.

Is sport for health an *identified priority at national level?*

At regional scale?

In Belgium, sport for health **is not currently identified as a national priority at the federal level, as sport is not a federal competence**. However, the promotion of physical activity and sport for health is **a strong regional priority**.

For example in **Wallonia** and **Brussels** (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles) the Adeps (Administration de l'Éducation physique et du Sport) actively encourages physical activity for all, with programs like "Commune Sportive" and "Sport sur Ordonnance" (prescribed sport), which aim to make sport accessible and adapted to all populations, including seniors and people with chronic diseases. The minister of sports has repeatedly stated that "the development of sport for all is one of [her] major priorities"

Legislation and laws about "sport for health"

In Belgium, and specifically in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, there is **no single, comprehensive "sport for health" law, but several decrees and regulations** address health promotion, risk prevention, and the integration of physical activity in sports policy:

Key Legislation and Regulations in Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles:

- **Décret du 3 mars 2014 relatif à la prévention des risques pour la santé dans le sport**
 - The main legal framework for health protection in sports. It aims to prevent health risks linked to sport's practice, including:
 - Obligations for sports organizations to inform & train staff on health risks.
 - The creation of a Commission for the Prevention of Health Risks in Sport.
 - Sanctions for non-compliance by organizers and sports clubs
 - It applies to both organized and non-organized sports activities.
- **Décret du 3 mai 2019 concernant le mouvement sportif organisé**
 - The recognition and funding of sports federations and clubs.
 - It emphasizes the promotion of physical activity, social integration, and ethical values in sports.
- Recognized federations and clubs must include health education and accessibility in their annual plans

The Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles has specific decrees to ensure health and safety in sports, promote PA, and support prescribed sport initiatives. However, there is no single, overarching *sport for health* law at the federal or regional level.



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*Is sport for health **identified as priority**
for the **national fencing federation**?*

The **Francophone Federation of Fencing Clubs of Belgium (FFCEB)** **does not explicitly mention "sport santé"** (health sport) **as a major strategic priority** in its official communications or main objectives for 2025.

- The FFCEB focuses mainly on:
 - The general development of fencing practice in French-speaking Belgium;
 - Training athletes (both amateurs and elites), coaches, and referees;
 - Promoting the discipline and managing the federation's administrative and financial organization;
 - Diversifying practices (e.g. sport-, handi- and artistic fencing).

No training, campaign, or "sport santé" section is currently announced by the FFCEB. But the **FFCEB emphasizes that fencing is accessible to all ages and offers adapted activities**, including for those over 40, but without a direct link to public health or medical prescription approaches.

Women in fencing (national and local level)

Women hold **an active and growing role** in fencing in Belgium, both in competitive and recreational practice.

25% of license members of the FFCEB are women.

Women are **fully integrated into all age and weapon categories** (foil, épée, sabre) in Belgian championships and national circuits. Each category (U11, U13, U15, U17, U20, seniors) includes women's events, with dedicated podiums and rankings.

In 2025, Belgian female fencers participated in World and European Championships, and in 2024 Jolien Corteyn won the European championship in the U23 category

Clubs and federations (FFCEB, FRBCE) **encourage girls to take up fencing from a young age**, promoting it as an elegant, technical, and accessible sport. Fencing is presented as a fast, dynamic, and noble sport, developing qualities such as self-control, courage, and perseverance, which appeal to a diverse female audience.



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Good practices about fencing for health
in Belgium (especially for women)

While **Belgium does not yet have a structured "fencing for health" program specifically for women**, the groundwork exists through inclusive club practices, gender equality initiatives, and general health promotion. The potential for future projects — inspired by international models — remains strong, especially as "sport santé" gains traction in the country.

SEXUAL TRAUMA- AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED FENCING

A safe space of practice

Based on the survey responses, highlighting the key elements that **define a safe and secure sports club in Belgium**:

1. Physical Safety and **Infrastructure**

- Approved sports center, meeting safety standards with access control or room under video surveillance.
- Facility Layout : Separate changing rooms and toilets by gender.

2. **Clear Rules and Supervision**

- Constant Supervision: Coach + manager present during training sessions.
- Structured Framework for Activities: Match/training rules to prevent risky behavior.
- Clear internal regulations, displayed and known to all (e.g., prohibition of non-consensual physical contact).
- Consent and Respect for the Body: Always ask for consent before any physical contact (e.g., technical corrections). Respect refusals without pressure or justification

3. **Kindness and Trust**-Based Relationships

- Teachers/Coaches attitude: Kindness, active listening, and positive language.
- Accessibility of Responsible Parties: Multiple points of contact (coaches, committee members) reachable by email or in person.
- Spaces for Expression: Allow members to speak up (feedback, reporting issues).

4. **Prevention** and Risk Management

- Dedicated Resources Persons: Ethics officer or delegate appointed to handle safety and respect issues.
- Mandatory Training: Sensibilization of coaches and managers to violence prevention and discrimination.

5. **Inclusion** and Non-Discrimination

- Integration Policy: Non-discriminatory welcome (gender, origin, level, disability).
- Adapted activities to include all audiences.
- Culture of Respect: Fair play, mutual aid, and non-violence actively promoted.
- Clear sanctions for misconduct (e.g., sexist, racist, or violent behavior).



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What does **trauma- and violence-informed physical activity** mean?

Trauma- and violence-informed physical activity refers to an approach that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and violence on individuals and integrates this understanding into the design, delivery, and environment of physical activity programs. The goal is to create safe, supportive, and empowering spaces for participants, especially those who have experienced trauma, abuse, or systemic violence.

Respondents who understood the concept **associated it with**:

- **A calming and empowering environment;**
- **Adaptation to individual needs;**
- **Safety and active listening.**

However referring to the result of the survey it appears clearly that **there is misunderstanding or lack of awareness about this notion.**

The mobilisation of club for safety

We can summary the club engagement and mobilisation for safety in Belgium into the following way :

- Support for Staff (Coaches, Managers): Mostly Engaged;
- Athlete Participation in Decision-Making: Moderate to strong engagement;
- Teaching Skills to Manage Trauma: Low engagement;
- Partnerships with physiotherapists : Variable engagement;
- Partnerships with specialized associations: Very low.

A majority of clubs (about 50-60%) report "**absolute**" or "**some**" **engagement in supporting their staff**, indicating awareness of the importance of training and supporting supervisors. Around **60% of clubs encourage athlete participation**. Less than 40% of clubs teach skills for calming down, self-centering, or recognizing trauma triggers.

About **40% of clubs have partnerships with physiotherapists**, but a significant portion (about 30%) respond "not at all". **Less than 20% of clubs have partnerships with specialized associations** (violence against women)

*Interest and pertinence of **fencing for women**
victims of sexual abuses*

The majority of respondents of the survey **believe that fencing can be beneficial for women who are victims of violence**, provided that the coaching is appropriate.

Yes	15	83,30%
Not really	3	16,70%
Not at all	0	0,00%

Overall Perception: A therapeutic and empowering potential

Here are the main arguments and positives points put forward:

- **Empowerment and Self-Confidence:** Fencing helps women reclaim control over their bodies and emotions, which is critical for survivors of trauma. The sport's emphasis on strategy, precision, and self-discipline fosters a sense of mastery and resilience.
- **Catharsis Without Physical Contact:** Unlike many combat sports, fencing involves no direct physical contact, reducing the risk of triggering traumatic memories related to physical or sexual violence. The use of a weapon (foil, épée, or sabre) allows for symbolic release of tension and anger in a safe, controlled environment.
- **Neutral and Respectful Environment:** The neutrality of the fencing uniform and the sport's strict rules of mutual respect create a structured, egalitarian space where women can focus on technique and strategy without fear of judgment or discrimination.
- **Defense and Counterattack Skills:** Learning fencing techniques can symbolically (and practically) help women regain a sense of power and safety, reinforcing their ability to set boundaries and respond to threats.

*Existing offer and **programs of fencing for women**
living with sexual traumas*

Nowadays **in Belgium** there is **no offer or program** of fencing for women with sexual traumas **other than this actual SAFE project**.



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CONCLUSION

Using fencing for women victims of sexual abuses in the belgium context

A Promising Therapeutic Tool

Fencing is increasingly recognized as a valuable activity for women survivors of sexual or interpersonal violence, particularly due to its unique combination of physical, psychological, and symbolic benefits.

Challenges and Limitations in the Belgian Context

Despite its potential, the integration of fencing as a trauma-informed activity for women survivors in Belgium faces several challenges:

- **Lack of Awareness and Training:** Many Belgian fencing clubs and coaches are not trained in trauma-informed practices. The survey responses reveal a gap in understanding how to adapt fencing for survivors, with some clubs even lacking awareness of the issue.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Most clubs are not structured or funded to support vulnerable populations. There is a need for partnerships with specialized associations (e.g., women's shelters, mental health organizations) and training programs for coaches to create safe, inclusive environments.

To harness the potential of fencing for women survivors of sexual violence, Belgian clubs should:

- **Develop Trauma-Informed Training**
- **Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces**
- **Promote Gender Equality in Fencing**
 - Encourage more women and girls to participate by addressing the sport's masculine and elitist reputation.
 - Highlight female role models in fencing to inspire confidence and participation.

The **FFCEB** (*Fédération Francophone des Cercles d'Escrime de Belgique*) is **clearly determined** to implement such a policy and, through its participation in the **SAFE program**, to demonstrate the **true effectiveness of fencing in supporting women** survivors of sexual violence.



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