



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

FRENCH REPORT



Co-funded by
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RESEARCH & ANALYSIS



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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.



The project is *funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union* (EU).



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Citation

SAFE Consortium. (2025). *Therapeutic support and care for women victims of sexist and sexual violence through sport: a national analysis · France*. [SAFE Project].

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BRIEF

SAFE is a European project that is 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 assaults. The first phase of the project is dedicated to research and analysis works (a literature review, a National and European sectoral analysis, 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

PURPOSE

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

Objective of the research

- Identify the **consideration** and **specificities** of “sport for health” in each country involved in the project;
- Research focus 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 France : 36 (31 explicitly in fencing)

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 - emphasizes **the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence.**

Sexual violence leads to serious consequences. It has been widely demonstrated with particularly high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite considerations 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 to help women survivors of sexual violence 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 people victims of trauma and violence**. There are 4 principles:

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

HEALTH-ENHANCING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN FRANCE

A global apprehension of “sport for health”

*Definition and apprehension of **sport for health** in France*

The term ‘**health-related sport**’ refers to all **initiatives aimed at improving quality of life through physical activity and combating sedentary lifestyles** throughout life, with or without medical conditions.

Health-enhancing physical activity (or sport-for-health) has really been understood as such in France **since the late 2000s**, thanks to a research published by Inserm in 2009. In France, it is **based both on a commitment by institutions** (Ministries of Sport and Health, healthcare structures) and **local initiatives** (particularly those led by **associations** and **sports organisations**).

Actions has expanded in recent years, with **more stakeholders** becoming involved and **more programs** being implemented. However, key figures available in recent years show **the need to go even further in promoting health-related sports** in order to benefit the entire population.

In 2021, **30% of men and 40% of women** are below the recommended levels of physical activity in France.

- Health Barometer (Santé Publique France, 2024)

Furthemore, **the cost of a sedentary lifestyle remains very important.**

50,000 premature deaths / year are linked to a **sedendary** lifestyle.

In France, sedentary lifestyles are responsible for 50,000 premature deaths per year and at an annual cost to the health insurance system of nearly €500 million. Although there is a greater commitment to these issues, **there is still a long way to go to respond to the challenge of getting the entire French population active.**

Actions developed in the country

In recent years, France has developed a **network of 'sports-for-health houses'**, comprising 432 accredited establishments in 2025. Beyond Ministry of Sport, other **national actors** from the **health sector** (Santé Publique France, Mange Bouger PNNS, the Order of Physicians, HAS) and the **sport sector** (Onaps, CNOSF) play an essential role in these policies.

Focus n°1 : The national resource centre for sport, health & well-being



The National Sports and Health Resource Center (PNR2S) is a tool of the French Ministry of Sports. The PNR2S's mission is to **develop skills**, promote and implement the **national sports for health strategy**, lead **public debate**, share **best practices**, and monitor information.

It also **lists a network of health and sports organizations** at both the national and regional levels, with a number of **information portals available in each region** of France with the aim of **ensuring effective territorial coverage**.

Focus n°2 : Sport-for-health houses ('Maison Sport-Santé')



The ministries of Sport and Health **created** the Sport-for-Health Houses (MSS) program **in 2019** to **facilitate and ensure access to daily physical and sporting activities at all stages of life and for everyone**.

Maisons Sport-Santé enables priority groups (people suffering from long-term conditions, chronic illnesses, or who are largely inactive), as well as anyone else who wishes to do so, to **receive care and support from sports for health professionals** in order to follow **a personalized physical activity program** tailored to their specific needs.

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

According to the Sports Code (national legal code relating to the organization of sports), the **development of sport for all** is in the **public interest** in France. Since the report on health and sport produced by the researchers from INSERM in 2009, the **Ministry of Sport has implemented several measures**. It pursues in particular a **national health and sport strategy** (renewed in 2025) and relies on a **national resources centre** dedicated to this issue.

Despite **significant announcements** concerning mental health in France (identified as a ‘major national cause’ in 2025), **the specific issue of sport for health remains limited** to date and deserves to be officially designated as a national interministerial priority, in order to **strengthen links between the worlds of health and sport**.

Legislation and laws about “sport for health”

In France, the **political and legislative recognition** of sport for health has grown significantly **since the mid-2000s**.

- In **2007**, sport and health were brought together under **a single ministry** for the first time, demonstrating the convergence of these issues and the desire to address them jointly.
- In **2011**, the **HAS** (French National Authority for Health) validated **physical activity as a non-drug therapy**, marking a first major change of direction.
- In **2012: regional implementation** of the Sport-Health Plan
- **December 31, 2016** marked a **real legislative breakthrough** in the field of sport for health with the law known as “**sport-health on prescription**” and its implementing decree in 2017.
- In **2019**: A **national sport-health strategy** with the existence of 137 “Sport for health houses” (‘Maison sport-santé’). and **renewed in 2025**.

There are **specific programs for people with chronic conditions** and whose medical condition requires adapted exercise and enhanced psychological and behavioral support. “Adapted Physical Activity” programs for therapeutic purposes are programs that comply with the specifications of the **HAS 2022 guide** (duration, consistent content, supervision by a trained professional).

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

The French Fencing Federation supports **specific projects in terms of sport for health**: the **federation's training institute** offers courses for the development of specific sessions for women who wish to combine fencing with reconstructive therapy, **particularly women affected by breast cancer**. The fencing **therapy dedicated to people exposed to interpersonal violence offered by ATPE** is also promoted by the federation.

Women in fencing (national and local level)

In its own words, the French Fencing Federation (FFE) is “highly-committed” to numerous social initiatives, particularly in the area of women’s fencing.

In response to the Ministry of Sports’ drive to increase the number of women in federations, the FFE has set up the **“Mesdames, en garde!” program**. The aim is to **increase the number of women in leadership positions** at national and local level, **ensure the integrity** of female practitioners, and **encourage women to choose and get involved in fencing courses**.

33% of license holders are women in the French Fencing Federation

In 2024, **one-third of license holders are women** (18.098/54.747), a rate that is experiencing **steady but limited growth over the years** (33% in 2024 compared to 30% in 2022). On average, women make up 39% of federation members in France. The FFE is therefore **lagging behind in terms of female participation**.

It should also be noted that the FFE is **one of the few French Olympic federations who had a woman as its president** (Isabelle Spennato-Lamour, between 2013 and 2020). However, women’s representation in decision-making bodies remains more limited at the local level.

- French Fencing Federation website. Our actions (Consulted in novembre 2025). [[Link](#)]
- Quelain, G. & Riotton, V. (co-rapporteur) (2025). *Femmes et sport. Bâtir des carrières, conquérir l'égalité*. Haut Conseil à l'Egalité. [[Link](#)]
- Injep-MEDES. (2025). *Annual licences by gender for the 2024 or 2023/2024 season?*

Good practices about *fencing for health* in France (especially *for women*)

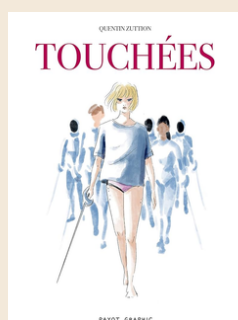
Fencing programs against breast cancer

For several years now, fencing clubs have been offering **fencing lessons for women with cancer**. The “**Solution R.I.P.O.S.T.E.**” network offers adapted and safe fencing practice for cancer patients, particularly **women who have undergone breast cancer surgery**, and currently has more than 100 affiliated clubs. New approaches based on this “riposte” solution have also emerged.



Fencing programs for women survivor of sexual violence

Founded and ran by two fencing masters, the association **Active Ton Potentiel par l'Escrime (ATPE)** aims to support the physical and mental development of children and adults through sport by setting up adapted fencing sessions (health sports). In this way, ATPE intends to develop **a protocol dedicated to the corporeal reparation of sexual violence's survivors**. The protocol uses **fencing as a “therapeutic booster”**. For several years, ATPE has been organizing workshops combining fencing with therapeutic support to help survivors of sexual violence to recovery. This project was promoted through the comic book *Touchées* (Quentin Zuttion) and the fiction of the same name (directed by Alexandra Lamy).



Other initiatives have been launched using **fencing for the same audience**, such as the therapeutic workshops offered by “Stop aux Violences Sexuelles” (SVS) or those proposed by ATVS33 in Bordeaux.

Book cover and movie poster ('Touched')

SEXUAL TRAUMA- AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED FENCING

A safe space of practice

Based on the survey responses from clubs/federation coaches and managers, the main elements that make sports spaces safe and secure and are:

- the implementation of **preventive measures**;
- the application of “universal **sporting values**”;
- the establishment of strict **internal rules**;
- a **human and collective presence**;
- specific **management of interactions**.

The mobilisation of clubs for safety

Mobilisation and engagement of clubs/federations for safety in France is marked by a **good support for staff** (coaches, managers) and a strong engagement for **an active participation of athletes in decision-making**:

50%

of respondents report “absolute” or “some” engagement in **supporting their staff**

65%

of clubs/federations represented **encourage athletes participation** (particularly during training)

The **consideration of trauma and violence remains limited**, both internally (team training) or in terms of external resources.

- There is **low engagement in teaching skills to manage trauma**: Less than 32% of clubs teach skills for calming down, self-centering, or recognizing trauma triggers. More broadly, **less than one in two clubs/federations report having staff trained in the effects of GBV and sexual trauma** (21% no training at all).
- From an external point of view, it is clear that there is **limited engagement with physiotherapists**: 55% of clubs don't have partnerships with psycho or physiotherapists (about 45% “not at all”) and **a very low engagement with specialized associations is observed**: 80,5% of clubs don't have partnerships with associations against women’s violence (52,6% “not at all”)

Fencing for vulnerability groups

Only **one-third** of respondents belong to an **organization** that **pays particular attention to vulnerable groups**. In most cases, accommodations are for **people with disabilities** (46%) **and women** (38%), particularly those affected by breast cancer.

Two respondents reported special attention for women who are victims of sexual violence.

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

In the French sample, **71% of respondents said they had already heard of TVIPA approach**. Among respondents who had heard of these approaches, this was mainly **through the media** (films, press, social networks) and **communications from the fencing federation**. For others, the information was linked with their **network** (fencing masters in their circle), **specialized associations** (such as ATPE, *mentioned*), the Ministry of Sports, or via internet.

The central aspect, according to respondents, is the fact of “**adapting**” **physical activity** (its **practice** and **organization**).

Respondents who understood the concept indeed associated it with:

- The **adaptation of practices and movements** as “gentle actions” or “unabrupt gestures”, but also the use of “adapted equipment”;
- A **collective but individualized framework**, “an activity adapted to each person” “but without isolating them”;
- The **supervision** of sessions by “trained professionals”, and if possible “with psychology and medical specialists”;
- Setting **specific objectives aimed at recovery** (self-confidence, autonomy)
- **Taking PTSD into account**

It is important to mention that **two participants were unable to provide any details** about what this approach might entail (“difficult to say”, “no idea”) and that **one participant confused the concept with the idea of sexism** (“discrimination based on gender”). The need to **go further in understanding an approach that takes into account trauma and violence** in the French sport, and in particular in fencing, is clearly necessary.

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

Almost all respondents (97%) of the survey believe that fencing can be beneficial for women who are victims of violence, provided that the coaching is appropriate.

Yes, absolutely	23	60,50%
Yes, probably	14	36,80%
Not really	1	2,60%
Not at all	0	0,00%

The arguments put forward concerning the **main and specific benefits of fencing** for this audience are linked to:

- the type of activity offered: **a combat sport**;
- the way in which the sport is practiced, with **uniform and masks**,
- the **specific physical commitment** and **emotional engagement** required.

“

"It is a combat sport but far removed from real-life situations (we no longer fight with swords). It is a sport that requires intense focus over a short period of time. It is a sport that is practiced in costume (protective clothing) and with a mask (which allows you to confront others' gazes and your own perception in a different way). fencing postures require you to use your whole body, to stand tall and open up." (One of the survey response)

”

Several respondents mentioned gaining **greater self-confidence and self-control**. Because it requires them “to focus on complex tasks and then release stress”, fencing also appears to be an “outlet”, a “way to vent emotions”, “let off steam”, and “express anger”.

Having to **manage a “codified confrontation” and “opposition to an opponent”** also appears to be central. To this end, wearing a “mask that provides symbolic and physical protection” is an important safety feature that allows fencers to fully engage in the sport and **“work on their distance from their opponent”**, and more broadly, relearn how to manage their distance and engagement in space.

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

To date, **half of respondents report a lack of specific measures for women victims of violence** in their club/federation (no answer / no action). This is justified by “**overly burdensome logistics**,” a “**lack of demand**”, or a preference for “**referral to specialized associations**”.

For clubs/federations that proposed specific actions, this primarily involves prevention (posters) and specific support. Two represented structures are currently offering specific fencing workshops for this audience.

There are currently **fencing programs in France for women who have been exposed to sexual violence**, but **they remain limited** in number. They are also not well known among coaches and managers, including those working in the field of fencing. Among respondents involved in fencing in France, **only 33% of coaches/executives are aware of the existence (and operation) of these programs**.

The programs identified and mentioned by respondents are as follows:

- **Active Ton Potentiel par l’Escrime** (ATPE), member of the consortium, which is the best known (most reported by participants)
- **Stop Violences Sexuelles** (SVS)
- “**Escrime toi**” a program offered in Paris (with sport for health structures)
- “**Les gouttes d’eau**” (based in Normandie)
- “**Toutes Sport**”.

The mention of “federal programs” also appeared... Although there is currently no specific program run by the federation on this topic (links are made with external structures such as *ATPE*).

CONCLUSION

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

For several years now, the **issue of “sport for health” has become a real issue in France**, as evidenced by the announcement of a new national “sport for health” strategy by the French government in octobre 2025. **Within federations and clubs, sport for health is beginning to gain traction, but remains limited.**

Although the majority of respondents have already heard of the TVIPA approach, less than half offer tailored initiatives aimed at vulnerable groups within their organizations. Similarly, **concrete initiatives targeting women who are victims of sexual violence remain limited to date.** However, sport appears to be a real solution for coping with trauma.



Our survey highlights that **fencing clearly appears to be a relevant and interesting solution for women who are victims of sexual violence** (for 97% of respondents).

More specifically, the practical aspects of fencing make it **a safe and protective space**, and **the specific physical, emotional, and social benefits of fencing** have been highlighted by the coaches and managers who responded to the survey.

In France, although **specialized programs have been developed** in recent years, these **initiatives remain little known and accessible to a limited number of women.**

The SAFE program therefore appears to be highly relevant in France. It could be a driving force in the **development and expansion of fencing programs adapted to women survivor of GBV and sexual trauma.**

DISCLAIMER

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