

# The diversity of organised grassroots football in Denmark

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This article presents selected results from the most comprehensive mapping of diversity in Danish grassroots football ever conducted. Results reflect quantitative measures of diversity amongst 8053 respondents, including club members (players), club boards, educated licensed coaches, educated licensed referees and the Danish Football Association's political level. Results illustrate multiple measures of diversity, including age, gender, sexuality, ethnic origin, and attitudes to and experiences of participation. Results demonstrate the existence of inequality in the DFA football landscape, particularly related to gender, whilst those outside the 'dominant' group experienced discriminatory language and perceived their membership and participation to be more challenging. Although such perceptions were lower within the dominant group, results suggested a level of awareness that such issues exist and could be problematic amongst them. The causative mechanisms behind these results require further investigation, and we hope the results stimulate interest, debate, and further research. Specifically, we see a need to investigate the underlying causes of the structures and mechanisms which drive trends in these data, and in grassroots football globally, in order to generate solutions or best practice for increasing diversity.

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## Introduction

Association football (or soccer in North America) remains the most popular sport in the world in terms of direct participation at all levels from grassroots activity to professional competitions, and in terms of spectatorship both at matches and through the media. As far back as 2006, the world governing body of the game (FIFA) conducted a large-scale survey which suggested that over 265 million people played the sport at some level, 5 million participated as officials or referees at matches, and several previously under-represented groups' participation, such as women, was increasing (FIFA, 2006). Such assertions were backed in 2018 by the Nielsen Report (Nielsen 2018), which reported that the levels of interest in football were higher than any other sport in a sample of 20 international 'markets'. In a similar fashion to global trends, football is highly popular in Denmark. According to the national survey on sports participation, 7% of the adult population (16+) and 37% of children (7–15) play football regularly (Pilgaard & Rask 2016), of which a majority play in local grassroots clubs under the auspices of the Danish Football Association (DFA). According to the membership count in the DFA internal database (ID) pr. May 2019, 366,135 members are organized in 1611 grassroots clubs across the country (Foda, 2019). This makes football the most popular sports-club-based activity in Denmark (Bennike et al., 2019). (Please note that professional football players representing professional clubs positioned in the commercial sector were not included in this study, nor were football players who do not play at a club which sits under the auspices of the DFA. See Bennike et al. 2019, for a detailed analysis and understanding of the organization of football in Denmark.) Yet, recent data related to the level of diversity within this population has been lacking. Indeed, the DFA has highlighted a need for action with regards to supporting more inclusive football. As outlined by the DFA chairperson Jesper Møller:

Football is something very special. It can bridge differences, both in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, and in terms of friendships among people who might otherwise be assumed to be opposites. The community of football can overcome these differences, because on the football field everyone is equal. That's why DFA's position is clear: Football is for everyone – no matter where you come from; this is why we wish to focus upon diversity. In 2018 we achieved a 30% representation of women among the members in committees appointed by the DFA. Yet, there is a need for more action. (Møller, 2020)

As part of a response to the above call for action, this text, written in collaboration between practitioners and academics, outlines selected results from the largest and most comprehensive mapping of diversity in organized grassroots football ever undertaken in Denmark. Results presented focus specifically upon diversity amongst club members (players), club boards, educated licensed coaches, educated licensed referees and the DFA's political level. These include multiple foci, including age, gender, sexuality, participation of immigrants and descendants, and other specific issues regarding attitudes and experiences related to participation in organized grassroots football. First, however, we outline the methods of data collection.

## Methods

Data were initially obtained through an exploration of the DFA internal database (FODA, 2019), which holds information on the age and gender of participants, and secondly by application of an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent via e-mail to more than 125,000 recipients in total, of whom 8,053 completed the survey. The process of distributing questionnaires, sending out reminders, and extracting the data was carried out from May to December 2019. As illustrated in table 1, specific subgroups were invited to participate in the survey, to whom invitations were sent in a prioritized order based on the size of population. These populations ranged from the DFA's political level (encompassing 164 persons in the central board, the board of representatives and a number of committees) to club members (players) (encompassing 366,135 individuals). In all subgroups aside from 'club members' the full population were invited to answer. Regarding club members, a random sample size of almost 125,000 were invited (see table 1). In the invitation it was highlighted that all guidelines in the Danish Data Protection legislation would be respected, including the General Protection regulation and the Data Protection Act on a European level. The questionnaire was written in Danish, English, Turkish and Arabic, with the latter two languages relating to the largest migrant groups in Denmark. Moreover, the questionnaire was addressed to a responsible adult for respondents under the age of 15, most usually a parent. In regard to sending out the questionnaires and collecting the data the DFA collaborated with Kantar Gallup (KantarGallup, 2020) owned by Kantar, a leading data and insights company. Data sources are indicated by 'ID', which refers to data obtained within the DFA's 'Internal Database', and 'KG', which refers to data provided by

‘Kantar Gallup’ in the following tables and figures. Please note that due to the way subgroups are categorized, participants’ responses could be included in multiple target group categories. This was the case for both ‘members of club-boards’ and ‘members’ (players). The result is that 8053 participants are represented 9076 times in the table.

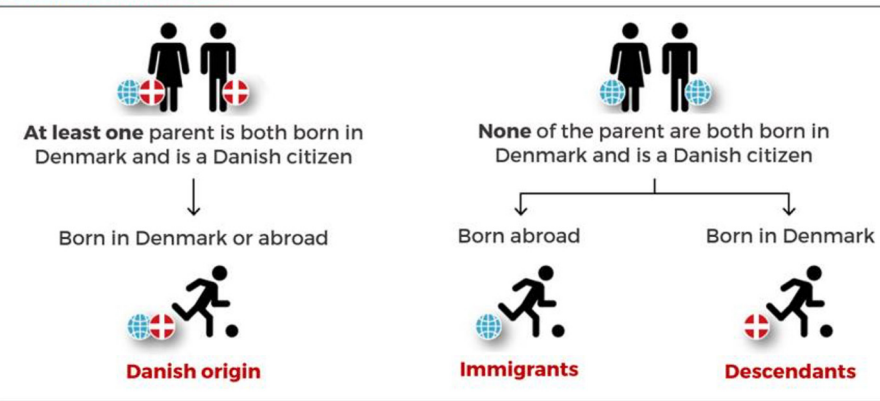
**Table 1** *Overview of data sources and respondents*

Data Sources	Subgroups	Focus areas	Respondents (N)	Total populations	Survey invitations	Response rates
Internal Database (ID) 2019	the DFA political level	Age & gender	164	164		
	the DFA political level as per July 2019	Age & gender	243	243		
	Educated licensed coaches	Age & gender	2469	2469		
	Educated licensed referees	Age & gender	2952	2952		
	Club members (players)	Age & gender	366,135	366,135		
Survey by Kantar Gallup (KG) 2019	the DFA political level	Age, gender, ethnic origin, sexuality (15+), attitudes and experiences.	52	164 <sup>1</sup>	164	32%
	Club chairpersons		260	1611	1186	22%
	Educated licensed coaches		494	2469	2469	20%
	Educated licensed referees		1066	2952	2952	36%
	Club boards		666	- <sup>2</sup>	-	-
	Club members (players)		6538	366,135	122,347	5%
<p>1: The number refers to the tot. population at the time. Since the data has been collected this subgroup has changed (July 2019) to 243 people due to restructuring in the DFA political level.  2: The exact number of all club board members are unknown and contact information is not present.</p>						

Specific definitions relating to ethnic origin and sexuality were constructed based upon the methods used by Statistics Denmark, which is the central authority on statistics in Denmark. Respondents were asked about the birthplace (country) and citizenship of their parents and the birthplace of them-

selves in terms of defining their ethnic origin. Subsequently results were classified as being of Danish origin, or of immigrant origin or a descendant of immigrants. In so doing, the method of defining a participants' ethnic origin [in Danish *herkomst*] used by Statistics Denmark in their role to measure population and population projections (SD, 2020), as illustrated in figure 1, was followed. If the respondent answered "I do not know" or "I do not wish to answer", the answer was excluded from the results. In the results section immigrants and their descendants are reported as a joint category relating to those with a cultural heritage from outside Denmark. It is important to note that this method does not differentiate between immigrants/descendants from a western and a non-western background, and therefore conclusions regarding ethnicity are grounded in citizenship and migration status.

**Determination of origin**



Danish Statistics

**Figure 1** *Determination of origin*

As part of preliminary work prior to sending out the questionnaires, KG coded respondents based on names from a list of current club members (players). These names were matched with data from Statistics Denmark, which contains a list of all Danish residents' first names, broken down by ethnic origin. The results showed that 10% of all club members (players) are immigrants or descendants of immigrants (having an ethnic origin from outside Denmark). The data presented below presents a similar number of club members with an ethnic origin from outside Denmark at 7% of respondents.

Survey respondents were also asked about their gender, and which gender they feel attracted to as a way of characterizing their sexuality. Responses were then categorized as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, as illustrated in figure 2. Heterosexuality was defined as people being physically

and/or emotionally attracted to the opposite sex. Bisexuality was defined as people being physically and/or emotionally attracted to both sexes. Finally, homosexuality was defined as being physically and/or emotionally attracted to the same sex. If respondents answered ‘other’ to the question regarding gender (0.02% of respondents), their sexuality was subsequently defined as ‘other’ (0.3% when combined with the response ‘other’ in the question regarding sexual attraction). If the respondent answered “don’t know” (1.1%) or “do not wish to answer” (2.8%) to the question regarding attraction they are classified as “don’t know/do not wish to answer” (3,9%). It is important to note that the survey focuses upon grassroots players, and therefore does not include professional football players. Hence, conclusions relating to the proportion of elite footballers of different sexualities are beyond the scope of this article.

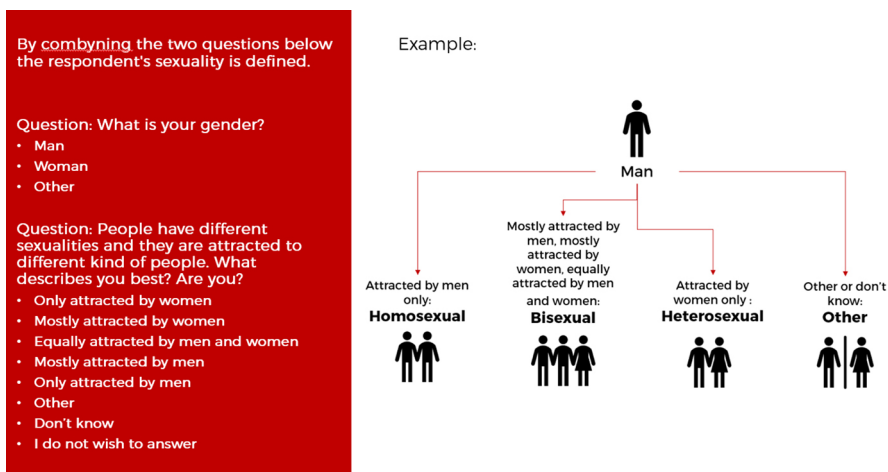


Figure 2 Defining sexuality

## Results

Results are divided into 2 sections; first, we focus on ‘age’, ‘gender’, ‘ethnic origin’ and ‘sexuality’ in terms of the composition of specific subgroups involved in grassroots football in Denmark. Second, we focus upon respondents’ attitudes and experiences in relation to issues regarding gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Results shown for all respondents combined are weighted by subgroups (see table 1) gender, age, geography and origin, the latter based on the KG coding mentioned earlier.

**Table 2** *Percentage of respondents categorized by age group*

Subgroup	0-9 y/o	10-18 y/o	19-29 y/o	30-49 y/o	50+ y/o	Respondents (N)	Total Population	Data source
the DFA political level after July 2019			3% (21-30)	39% (31-50)	59% (51+)	243	243	ID
Educated licensed coaches			20% (<30)	59,5%	21,5%	2469	2469	ID
Educated licensed referees			26% (<30)	31%	43%	2952	2952	ID
Club chairpersons			7%	42%	51%	260	1587	KG
Club boards			9%	46%	45%	666	.. <sup>2</sup>	KG
Club members (players)	20%	37%	22%	17%	5%	366,135	366,135	ID

<sup>2</sup>: The exact number of all club board members are unknown and contact information is not present.

**Table 3** *Percentage of women respondents*

Subgroup	Percentage of women	Respondents (N)	Total population	Data source
the DFA political level after July 2019	16	243	243	ID
Educated licensed coaches	3	2469	2469	ID
Educated licensed referees	2	2952	2952	ID
Club chairpersons	11	260	1587	KG
Club boards	14	666	.. <sup>2</sup>	KG
Club members (players)	21	366.135	366,135	ID

<sup>2</sup>: The exact number of all club board members are unknown and contact information is not present.

### *Mapping of diversity in selected subgroups*

The following four tables displays a mapping of diversity of Danish organized grassroots football. Table 2 shows different subgroups divided by age. Please note, specific groups are presented according to different age intervals arising from the management of data from multiple sources. It is worth highlighting that participants in grassroots football ‘management activities’ were the oldest (the DFA political level, membership of club boards and club chairpersons). Table 3 shows the percentage of women involved in different subgroups. Here it is worth highlighting the relatively low number of women involved as educated licensed coaches and educated licensed referees. Table 4 shows the ethnic origin of respondents. Here it is worth mentioning that the number of immigrants/descendants in Danish society is 14% overall

**Table 4** *Percentage of respondents with immigrant/descendant ethnic origins*

Subgroup	Percentage of immigrants/descendants	Respondents (N)	Total population	Data source
the DFA political level before July 2019	8	52	164	KG
Educated licensed coaches	5	494	2469	KG
Educated licensed referees	8	1066	2952	KG
Club chairpersons	3	260	1611	KG
Club boards	5	666	~2	KG
Club members (players)	7	6538	366,135	KG

2: The exact number of all club board members are unknown and contact information is not present.

**Table 5** *Percentage of respondents who identify as bi- and homosexual (aged over 15 years)*

Subgroup	Percentage of bisexuals	Percentage of homo-sexuals	Respondents (N)	Total population	Data source
the DFA political level before July 2019	6	0	52	164	KG
Educated licensed coaches	8	1	494	2469	KG
Educated licensed referees	6	1	1.066	2952	KG
Club chairpersons	5	1	260	1611	KG
Club boards	8	1	666	~2	KG
(all) Club members (players) 15+ y/o	8	1	4139	192.663 <sup>3</sup>	KG
(men) Club members (players) 15+ y/o	5	1	3182	155.587 <sup>3</sup>	
(women) Club members (players) 15+ y/o	17	3	955	36.986 <sup>3</sup>	

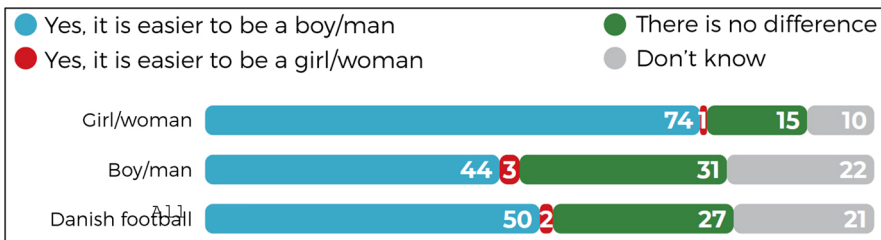
2: The exact number of all club board members are unknown and contact information is not present.  
3: These numbers are retrieved March 2020 (FODA 2020), whereas others are retrieved May 2019 (FODA 2019) (ID)

(Statistics Denmark, 2019). In football more specifically, the lowest proportion of persons of immigrant/descendant ethnic origin is to be found among club chairpersons, whilst the number of persons with immigrant/descendant ethnic origin at the DFA political level or amongst educated licensed referees is higher than the amount of persons with immigrant/descendant ethnic origin who are club members. Finally, table 5 shows the percentage of bi- and homosexual respondents in the survey data. It can also be observed from data relating to the subgroup 'club members' (players) that sexuality varies according to gender (i.e. relatively more bi- and homosexual women than men participate in football).



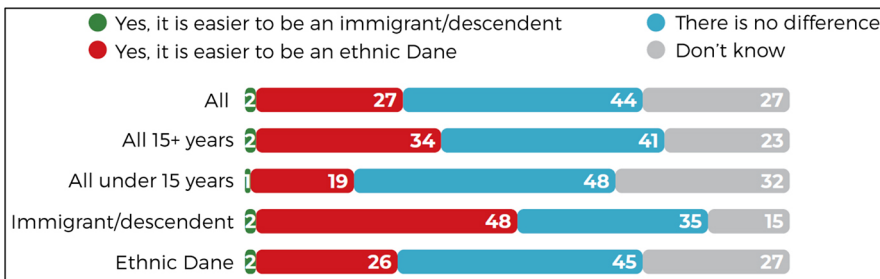
### Attitudes and experiences

In addition to the above data, respondents were asked several questions regarding their attitudes and experiences towards ‘club life’ in organised grassroots football. Below, we present key results in relation to specific minorities, including women, people of immigrant/descendant ethnic origins, and those who identify as bi- or homosexual. The questions asked in the questionnaire are used as titles for the figures. Results suggest that respondents from each of these groups experience challenges to their participation and involvement in football that were less apparent amongst ‘majority’ groups (i.e. respondents of Danish ethnic origin, heterosexuals or men). For example, 50% of respondents felt it was easier to be a boy/man than a girl/woman in Danish football. When girls’/women’s responses are considered in isolation, the proportion of respondents who answered this specific question in this way increased to 74% (see figure 3).



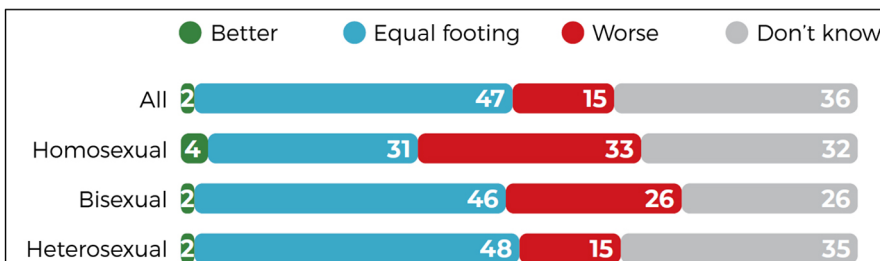
**Figure 3** Do you believe that there is a difference between how easy or hard it is to be a girl/woman or boy/man in Danish football? (%)

Moreover, 27% of all respondents stated that it is easier to be an ethnic Dane than a person of immigrant/descendant origins. When divided by cultural heritage (see. Figure 1), this observation was considered true by 48% of all with immigrant/descendant ethnic origin, as illustrated in figure 4. Moreover, differences existed when participants were divided by age. For example, members 15 y/o and older felt that it is easier for a person with Danish ethnic origin to participate in football than those aged under 15 years. The terms ‘ethnic Dane’ [in Danish *etnisk dansker*] and ‘immigrant/descendant’ [in Danish *indvanderer/efterkommer af indvandrere*] was used in the questionnaire (see appendix). In that way it is subjectively understood by the respondents. In common parlance, we believe that the terms often have connotations relating to linguistic skills and accent as well as to skin color (i.e. an ethnic Dane would often be assumed to have a northern European appearance and speak Danish fluently).



**Figure 4** *Do you believe that there is a difference between how easy or hard it is to be an immigrant/descendent or an ethnic Dane in Danish football? (%)*

Regarding sexuality, 15% of all respondents stated that, in their experience, non-heterosexuals were treated worse than heterosexuals in football in Denmark. When results are divided by the sexuality of respondents (see figure 5), 33% of respondents who identified as homosexual and 26% of respondents who identified as bisexual considered this to be true. Moreover 38% of all respondents stated they considered it to be easier to be non-heterosexual woman than non-heterosexual man (see figure 6).



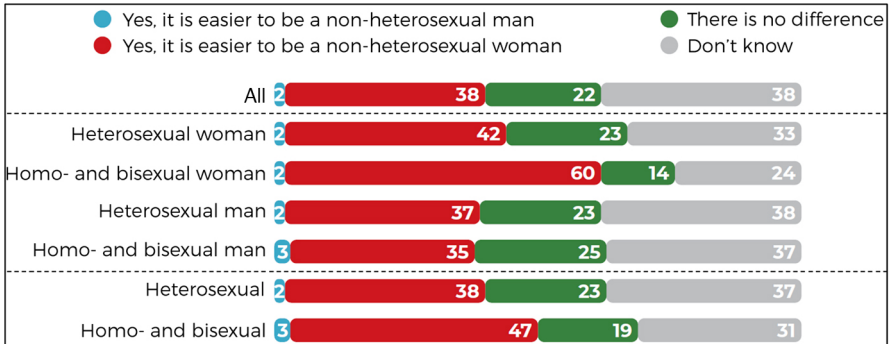
**Figure 5** (15+) *Do you believe that non-heterosexuals are treated better, worse or on equal footing with heterosexual in Danish football? (%)*

### *Discriminatory language in relation to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality*

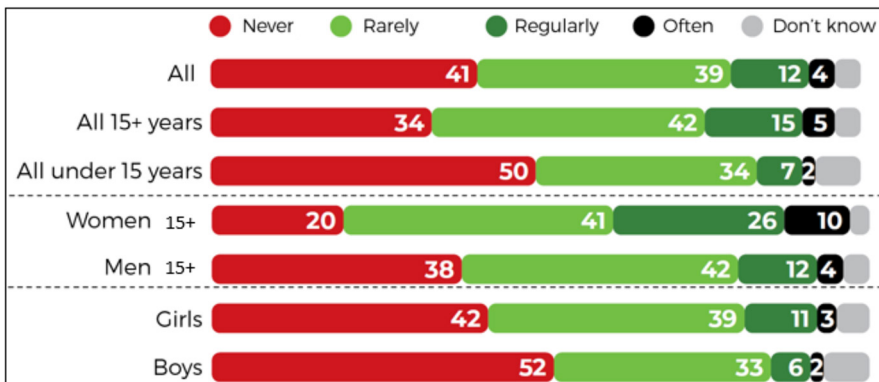
Respondents were also asked to reflect upon their experience of discriminatory vocabulary regarding gender, ethnicity and sexuality, together with how often they felt violated by the use of such language.

In relation to gender-based abuse, 16% of all respondents stated that they regularly or often experienced the use of discriminatory language (see figure 7). More positively, these trends were less apparent amongst respondents

under 15 years of age (9%). Conversely, more adult women (36%) than men (16%) stated that they had experienced the use of discriminatory language in relation to their gender. Similarly, although 6% of all respondents stated that they regularly or often felt violated by this language (see figure 8), this was less common amongst respondents under 15 years of age (3%), but was more apparent amongst adult women (25%) than adult men (4%).



**Figure 6** (15+) Do you believe that there is a difference between how easy or hard it is to be a non-heterosexual man or non-heterosexual woman in Danish football? (%)



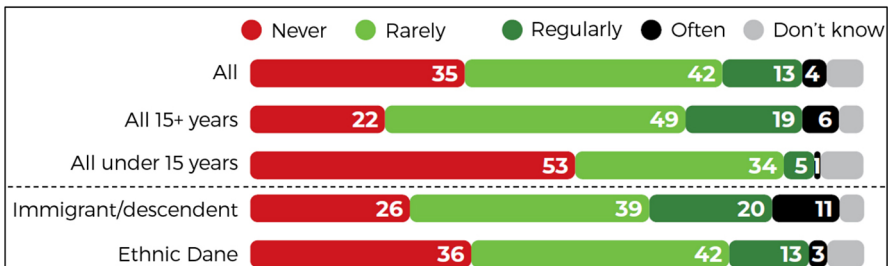
**Figure 7** In connection to football, how often do you hear discriminating language in relation to gender? (%)

Discriminatory language regarding ethnicity was also reflected upon. In total, 17% of all respondents stated that they regularly or often experienced the use of discriminatory language in relation to ethnicity (see figure 9). Again, the proportion of respondents who gave this answer was higher amongst

those of immigrant/descendant ethnic origin (31%), although once more such abuse was considered less common amongst those aged under 15 years (6%). Despite 17% of respondents saying they regularly experienced the use of ethnically discriminatory language, only 6% of respondents stated that they regularly or often felt violated by this language (see figure 10). Again, however, this number was higher amongst those of immigrant/descendant ethnic origin (17%), and again lower amongst the under-15 age group (3%).



**Figure 8** *In connection to football, how often do you feel violated by discriminating language in relation to gender? (%)*



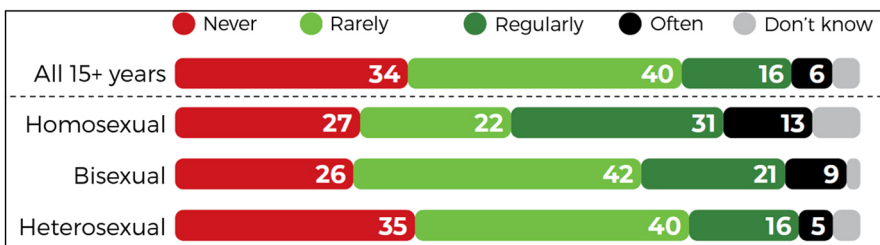
**Figure 9** *In connection to football, how often do you hear discriminating language in relation to ethnicity? (%)*

Finally, 22% of all respondents (aged 15+) stated that they regularly or often experienced the use of discriminatory language in relation to sexuality (see figure 11). This number was again higher for those identifying as homosexual (44%) or bisexual (30%) than those identifying as heterosexual (21%). Regarding the issue of feeling violated by discriminatory language related to sexuality (see figure 12), 6% of all respondents stated that they regularly

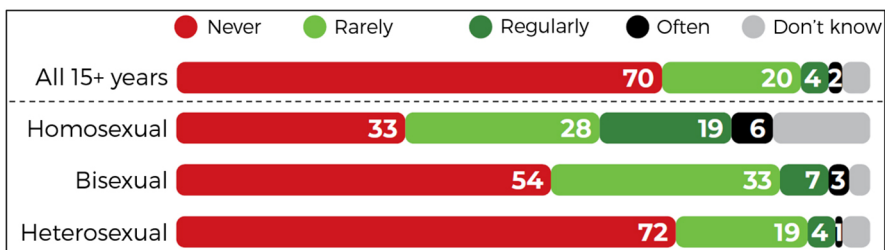
or often felt violated, although again this number was higher for those identifying as homosexual (25%) or bisexual (10%). Note that it is not known if the respondents are publicly open about their sexuality.



**Figure 10** *In connection to football, how often do you feel violated by discriminating language in relation to ethnicity? (%)*



**Figure 11** *(15+) In connection to football, how often do you hear discriminating language in relation to sexuality?*



**Figure 12** *(15+) In connection to football, how often do you feel violated by discriminating language in relation to sexuality?*

## Concluding remarks

The results provided demonstrate significant inequality in the DFA football landscape, especially related to gender, although such levels are perhaps lower than in other countries, where gender inequality is growing (e.g. Sport England, 2016). In addition, and as found in previous research in other contexts (e.g. van Haaften, 2019a, b) the results consistently demonstrate that those outside the ‘dominant’ group experience discriminatory language, and at the same time perceive their membership and participation in the sport to be more challenging. Although these perceptions were lower within the dominant group, there was still a notable level of awareness that such issues exist and could be problematic. Encouragingly, levels of discrimination were lower amongst children.

Moreover, data elsewhere has demonstrated that there is a desire for the DFA to take action to reduce such inequalities, particularly amongst minority groups. Indeed, this work has highlighted how such groups want the DFA to take greater responsibility to be more inclusive and to assist in reducing abuse and discrimination (Bennike & Schelde, 2020). This growing awareness is not limited to participants, and the fact that this large-scale survey was commissioned by the DFA board indicates a growing awareness of the issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in Danish football. In 2017 a political commission (DFA, 2017) was employed by the DFA to analyze and discuss the political structure of the organization. Among other things, they recognized the need for a higher degree of diversity regarding gender representation in boards and committees. Consequently, the DFA employed a ‘Women’s Commission’, led by former Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, which devised several recommendations with regards to gender equality in 2018 (DFA, 2018). The impact of such recommendations is yet to be seen, but the data presented here contributes towards highlighting the extent of the challenge the sport of football faces in the Danish case. What is more, the DFA has been increasingly focused upon widening diversity both in terms of gender and beyond. Consequently, it recently founded a Diversity Committee (DFA, 2019) with a wider remit which, according to its chairperson Nina Groes, aims to promote:

Football as a community for everyone. That is why it is so important that we get rid of the outdated stereotypes and prejudices that still exist everywhere in society – even in the world of football. Our goal is for football to be at the forefront [of tackling such issues], and that is the work we need to do now. I am very much looking forward to addressing the issues. (...) because we have

to ensure as broad and as representative a football environment as possible, and the work on diversity in football in Denmark is decisive for the future of football. (DFA, 2019).

This shift in terminology represents a change from sweeping, yet passive statements relating to football being ‘for all,’ towards the explicit recognition that specific groups might be underrepresented (e.g. women), whilst also recognizing that the lived experience of football can hold specific challenges even amongst groups whose participation levels broadly mirror their relative population size. Put simply; equality of participation rate does not equate to equality of experience. This differentiation demonstrates the multifaceted nature of actions required to support diversity, including both actions focused upon increasing the number of participants and members of clubs amongst underrepresented groups (e.g. helping to overcome barriers to participation), *and* actions related to ensuring the lived experiences of sport amongst members are supportive once they do participate (e.g. ensuring that participants experience the sport in a culturally welcoming and equal manner).

As highlighted elsewhere (e.g. Burdsey, 2012; Evans & Ottesen, 2020, Evans & Pfister, 2020; van Haften, 2019a, 2019b), such findings highlight the need for action at multiple levels, from macro-scale actions designed to increase participation amongst minority groups, through meso-level changes designed to ensure the adoption of supportive cultures at the organizational levels, through to micro-level action designed to educate participants to engage with one another in a more inclusive and tolerant manner. Such observations are backed by Bennike and Schelde (2020), who demonstrate how the strongest drivers for a member (player) to recommend a local football club to a friend is if he/she feel that there is room for everyone in the club. On addition, understanding the manner in which ethnicity, gender and sexuality intersect could be crucial in engendering the most effective actions (e.g. Ahmad, 2011; Andersen et al., 2019; Caudwell, 2011; Hanlon & Coleman 2007). Related to this observation, the data underlying the results presented above, present the opportunity to merge variables and further investigate the intersectionality of multiple social categories in defining opportunities and barriers to participation (e.g. how do women with minority ethnic backgrounds experience issues regarding grassroots football?). With regard to actions of creating changes, it is important to note that the DFA is likely to need allies to supplement its capabilities for ‘top-down’ action with ‘bottom-up’ approaches generated by its member clubs and associations, and even individual participants, in order for its diversity policies to be suc-

cessful. Nevertheless, implementing such policy changes is no easy task, particularly given that the DFA consists of multiple organizations and has a very broad agenda (see also Bennike & Ottesen, 2016).

The data presented here provide an important foundation upon which the work of the Diversity Committee can be enacted in order to widen diversity. Simultaneously, we recognize the significant challenges posed in determining the effects of the actions of this Committee, the measurement of which we consider academics to be key contributors of. Indeed, our desired purpose in this article, beyond sharing information with academics, practitioners, politicians and students, is to stimulate debate, interest and further research within the field of diversity in organized grassroots football and sport in a broader sense. Specifically, we call for research regarding the underlying causes of the trends presented here, both in Denmark and in other countries. In so doing, a focus on understanding the structures and mechanisms which drive trends in these data and how we can provide solutions or best practice would be particularly beneficial in supporting the work of the DFA and its partners in creating a more diverse football landscape. Such an observation would also be highly relevant in studies relating to competitive professional football, which we note has been subject to a longstanding issue relating to discussion of player and coach sexuality, in particular. Additionally, we note the importance of additional focus upon respondents of minority groups outside sport clubs (i.e. non-participants). We need to know more about what barriers exist which prevent them joining clubs. Indeed, although the data represents the case in Denmark, we note the global focus on diversity which should encourage similar research and action in other countries and football associations around the world. We look forward to hearing the results!

## Acknowledgement and declaration of interest statement

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