The forgotten child – abusive behaviour towards young referees in Swedish sport clubs

Background
There is ongoing evidence in Sweden that, in sports, young referees must deal with abusive behaviour. If the phrase 'young referee' is searched on the internet, there are many negative stories found, however, almost no research on the subject exists. Abusive behaviour towards referees may be a severe obstacle to the recruiting and retaining of match officials in many team sports. However, in the worst cases, emotionally abusive behaviour hurts young referees personally.

Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, i.e., physical and mental violence, including abuse and maltreatment, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19, UNCRC, 1989). The aim is to approach the issues and conditions young girls and boys experience when refereeing children’s games with a gender sensitive and child-right perspective, and the research will be framed from the sociology of childhood.

Aim
The overall aim of this research project is to study young referees' experiences and conditions when engaged as Swedish sports club referees. The specific aim is to describe and analyse the existence, experiences, and effects of emotionally abusive behaviour towards 14–18-year-old referees working as match officials in children’s team sports.

Implications
One important implication for practice is that the study will provide valuable knowledge about young referees’ experiences, which may be important to use to develop strategies to prevent and deal with abusive, offensive, or insulting behaviour enacted towards male and female referees in sports. To meet the behavioural challenges of emotionally abusive behaviour towards young referees, the results will inform sport-governing bodies and protection initiatives to develop and deliver a trustworthy management of support, protection, and education of young referees. Furthermore, this research means that the young girls and boys who are involved as referees in children’s sports will be given the opportunity to express their views about matters concerning them and their life, which is a UNCRC right.

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