

WSI Task Forces

The Sexual Harassment Task Force: Brochure on Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport (2004)

What are sexual harassment and sexual abuse?

Both sexual harassment and sexual abuse are expressions of the greater power of one person over another. In sport we believe that women and girls are more frequent victims of harassment and abuse than men and boys. Many females drop out of sport rather than continue being subjected to the undermining effects of constant harassment and abuse: others endure the sexual attention of their male coaches or peers because of fear, desire for athletic reward, low self-esteem or ignorance of who to turn to for help. Typically, abused athletes keep quiet because they fear that they will either be accused of consenting or of inventing the whole thing.

Research from allied fields, such as social work, suggests that the vast majority of perpetrators of sexual harassment and abuse are men. Sport-based research on these topics is lacking but recent studies, including those by WomenSport International, indicate that sexual harassment and abuse is just as much a problem in sport as it is elsewhere in society and that many sports organisations do not have adequate mechanisms in place to help protect frightened athletes and to exclude harassers and abusers.

What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is unwanted, often persistent, sexual attention. It may include:

- written or verbal abuse or threats
- sexually oriented comments
- jokes, lewd comments or sexual innuendoes
- taunts about body, dress, marital status or sexuality
- shouting and/or bullying
- ridiculing or undermining of performance or self-respect
- sexual or homophobic graffiti
- practical jokes based on sex
- intimidating sexual remarks, invitations or familiarity
- domination of meetings, training sessions or equipment
- condescending or patronising behaviour
- physical contact, fondling, pinching or kissing
- sex-related vandalism
- offensive 'phone calls or photos
- bullying on the basis of sex

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse often occurs after careful grooming of the athlete until she believes that sexual involvement with her abuser is acceptable, unavoidable or a normal part of her training or everyday behaviour. It may include:

- exchange of rewards or privileges for sexual favours
- groping
- indecent exposure
- rape
- anal or vaginal penetration by penis, fingers or objects
- forced sexual activity
- sexual assault
- physical or sexual violence
- incest

Who is at risk?

Risk of sexual harassment or sexual abuse arises from a complex interplay of factors including: weak organisational controls within sport clubs, dominating and controlling behaviour by coaches and vulnerability, low self esteem and high ambition amongst athletes. Particular dangers arise where such athletes become emotionally reliant on or obsessed with their coaches and where their coaches are not subject to independent monitoring

What should be done to help prevent sexual harassment and abuse in sport?

WomenSport International encourages all sports organisations to:

1. Prepare and implement codes of ethics and conduct for coaches, whether they work with adults or children.
2. Foster a climate of open discussion about the issues of sexual harassment and abuse so that athletes with problems feel confident enough to speak out.
3. Develop athlete autonomy wherever possible including adopting coaching styles which give optimum autonomy and responsibility to athletes.
4. Become involved in coach education programmes which inform and advise about the ethical and interpersonal issues of sexual harassment and abuse and about the technical aspects of physical touch in coaching the sport
5. Adopt athlete and parent education programmes which inform and advise athletes on their rights and how to maintain their integrity and autonomy
6. Introduce and use reporting and mediation systems for both athletes and coaches, ideally with the assistance of trained social work or counselling professionals
7. Ensure that parents are fully informed of the whereabouts of their children at all times and are involved as fully as possible in supporting the work of coaches
8. Adopt rigorous screening procedures for the appointment of all personnel, whether coaching staff or voluntary workers
9. Be constantly vigilant and avoid complacency and expect and demand the highest standards of accountability at all levels of the sport
10. Celebrate the good work of athletes and coaches on a regular basis.

If you have been a victim of sexual harassment or sexual abuse and would like help, or if you would just like to know more then please contact WomenSport International

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