



WomenSport International Inc

The Global Voice of Research-based
Advocacy for Women and Sport.

WomenSport International POSITION STATEMENT

NON-ACCIDENTAL VIOLENCE OF GIRLS AND WOMEN IN SPORT

The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. Examples are: physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, and sport ought to be included here (The Commission on the Status of Women in the United Nations 2001). Women across the world are subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence, regardless of their income, age or education. Such violence can lead to long-term physical, mental and emotional health problems. Around one third of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives (The World's Women 2015 Trends and Statistics UN Economic & Social Affairs, UN New York 2015). Violence against women is a violation of women’s human rights and a form of discrimination that prevents women from participating fully in society and fulfilling their potentials as human beings (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2000).

Definitions

There are many types of violence. Gender based violence is used by the UN and EU as an umbrella concept. It is defined as "Violence directed against a person because of that person's gender (including gender identity/expression) or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately" (European Commission 2014).

WSI chooses to use “non-accidental violence” as the umbrella concept. It is used to distinguish between violent behavior deemed to be a normal part of a game, from that considered to overstep the ethical mark,-- maltreatment through harassment and abuse (such as deliberate or non-accidental violence).(Brackenridge 2010). Non-accidental violence can be neglect, psychological, physical and sexual. The most common forms of non-accidental sexual violence are gender harassment, sexual harassment and sexual abuse.

Neglect: The failure of parents, coaches and athlete entourage to meet an athlete's physical and emotional needs or failure to protect an athlete from exposure to danger

Physical: Physical injuries caused by punching, beating, kicking etc., it can also include forced or mandated inappropriate training loads, forced alcohol consumption or systematic doping practices

Psychological/Emotional: A failure to provide appropriate and supportive environment (e.g., denigration, ridicule, intimidation, etc.)

Sexual Non-Accidental Violence Forms

Gender harassment refers to a broad range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, not aiming at sexual cooperation but conveying insulting, hostile, and degrading attitudes about one's gender (male or female),

Sexual harassment. Any unwanted and unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal or physical

Sexual abuse: Any conduct of a sexual nature, whether non-contact, contact or penetrative, where consent is coerced/manipulated or is not or cannot be given.

Mechanisms for non-accidental violence: Cyber, bullying and hazing

Around 40% of the world population has an internet connection today, and much harassment and abuse takes place through social media. **Bullying** (or cyberbullying if conducted online) is unwanted, repeated and intentional, aggressive behaviour often among peers, and can involve a real or perceived power imbalance. Bullying can include actions such as making threats, spreading rumours, attacking someone physically or verbally and deliberately excluding someone. There is evidence of high levels of sexual bullying between athletes, sometimes serious enough to cause an athlete to leave her sport. While there is much research on bullying in the educational system worldwide, there is a lack of knowledge about bullying in sport.

Hazing involves degrading and hazardous initiation processes (rituals) of new team members by veteran team members. Non-accidental violence can also occur in group settings where senior athletes engage 'rookies' (newcomers) in bullying, physically challenging or sexually explicit rituals as part of hazing or initiation rites. Such rituals have been observed in some women's sports but are much more commonly associated with male sports, especially traditional team sports.

Context

Awareness of sexual harassment and abuse grew during the 1980s and 1990s as a consequence of earlier initiatives for gender equity and against gender discrimination. Research evidence about the types, prevalence and incidence of non-accidental violence (particular sexual harassment and abuse) in sport has grown considerably over the past 20 years. Whilst more data are needed, especially in relation to global cross-cultural comparisons, psychological non-accidental violence seems to be more common than the other forms. Non-accidental violence affects both males and females athletes and may be perpetrated by both adult authority figures and by athletes themselves. Given the gender distribution in sport, and the over-representation of males in coaching and other authority positions, it is much more likely that perpetrators of sexual and exploitation will be males. The sexually abusive coach (male or female) is frequently a kind of 'father or mother figure' for the young athlete, especially where her/his parents or carers are either absent or show no interest in the athlete's sporting progress. Entourage members, in positions of power and authority, are often perpetrators of non-accidental violence but peer athletes are far more likely to be perpetrators of sexual harassment than are coaches.

Psychological violence, which is the most commonly experienced form of violence, has been normalized as a required coaching practice to optimize athletic talent and performance. The acceptance, by coaches, athletes and parents, of comments that are humiliating, degrading or generally undermine the athletes' sense of self, have serious long-term effects for the athletes' well-being.

Research on non-accidental violence in sport however, now underpins safeguarding policy initiatives internationally, which should have practical benefits for *all* athletes, whether male or female (see for example IOC's consensus statement from 2016- <http://bjsm.bmj.com/>).

Trust and authority

Sport frequently involves close personal relationships, both among groups of athletes and between individual athletes as well as their coaches or leaders. The trust that develops between the athlete and leader is often regarded as an essential part of training for success. Leaders are most often (but not exclusively) males so the gender order within sport is an exaggerated version of that found outside sport, with males holding most of the positions of authority. Many girls with female teachers in their early athletic years are passed on to male coaches when they show talent and begin to climb the sporting ladder. This often reinforces the view that only males can be good leaders and that women should defer to the 'superior' knowledge and skill of men in sport. It also makes it even more difficult for females to report men who harass or abuse them since they are often disbelieved or suffer recriminations.

It is easy for more powerful individuals, whether senior male peers or coaches, to take advantage of those with less power, using demeaning sexually harassing behaviour - such as sexist jokes or unwanted touching – or in the most extreme cases abusing them sexually, emotionally or physically. In the most serious cases it is thought that the abuser is motivated by a desire to control the athlete: he may thus use sex to achieve and maintain power, rather than power to achieve sexual gratification. The positions of power also have implications for the use and acceptance of psychological violence.

Disability

Data from sport research confirm that youth athletes with disabilities experience a two to three times increased risk of psychological, physical and sexual abuse and harassment when compared with youth athletes in general. Vulnerabilities to non-accidental violence for athletes with disabilities relate to making uninformed assumptions about the care needs

of athletes and exploiting the athletes' dependence on personal care (e.g., communication requirements, travel requirements and competition logistics).

Lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans-sexual athletes

A large study of homophobia found that 80% of the 9500 respondents witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport. Homophobia is linked to sexually exploitative behaviour, often where the perpetrator is himself uncertain about his/her sexual identity and seeking to reinforce his/her own perceived boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable. Much of the sexual ridicule perpetrated by male athletes and non-athletes against females in sport is thought to be associated with uncertainties about sexuality and the challenges that female athletes pose to traditional notions of femininity.

Building self –confidence through sport

In addition to its health and fitness benefits, sport has long been promoted as a medium for the development of self-confidence and assertiveness. Physical fitness helps to develop self-confidence and this, in turn, can assist with building an individual's capacity to resist sexually harassing and abusive behaviours. Self-confident athletes with strong family support are less likely to exhibit the vulnerability that marks out a potential victim of a sexual abuser.

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Risk of sexual exploitation in sport

In any sports club there will be a number of young athletes who have suffered sexual violence in their family. These individuals require particular support and care in order not to be targeted a second time. At the club level, female athletes may fall prey to their ‘sporting idols’ – senior male or female athletes or coaches - in whom they may place unqualified trust. At the elite level, girl athletes are often expected to accept ‘adult’ responsibilities such as arranging travel or foreign currency. Their athletic development or ‘sport age’ is thus well in advance of their social and physical development, which can create tensions and sexual uncertainty. It should also be remembered that some athletes with disabilities are less well equipped to defend themselves against harassment or abuse because of difficulties with mobility or communication. These athletes may therefore need particular protection.

Recommendations for minimising the risk of non-accidental violence in sport

1. Adopt harassment-free policies and procedures that are in line with international ethical and human rights statutes and that are inclusive
 2. Encourage open debate about non-accidental violence, homophobia and exploitation of women and men in sport
 3. Embed both an equitable balance of males and females in all roles and also democratic leadership styles to mitigate against abuses of power
 4. Act as advocates of sport free from non-accidental violence through education and training programs for every member of the sport
 5. Actively monitor the effectiveness of all safe guarding initiatives
 6. Promote research into men’s, women’s and children’s experiences of non-accidental violence within their sport
 7. Give active representation to athletes in decision-making at every level of the sport
- (2.05.18)

The aim of WSI is to bring about increased opportunities and positive change for women and girls at all levels of involvement in sport and physical education.

WSI is an UN-based Non-Governmental Organization devoted to women’s advocacy with special consultative status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). WSI regularly engages in side and/or parallel events in the annual meetings of UN Committee for the Status of Women (CSW) that take place every spring in New York.

WSI is also a Member of the CIGEPS Permanent Consultative Council (UNESCO). Participated in the 2015 revision of International Charter for Sport, Physical Activity, and Physical Education as well as in the preparations and follow up of the MINEPS VI (Kazan, 2017).

WSI is a member of the Associations Board of the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE), and active participant for the organization, as well as a partner of Safe Sport International (SSI). WSI has a permanent seat at the International Working Group for Women and Sport (IWG) and has participated in IWG events and projects since its establishment in 1994.

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