

Research on Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport

Kari Fasting

Institutt for Samfunnsfag, Norges idrettshøgskole

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Introduction

Violence against women is a worldwide problem, occurring, to a greater or lesser degree, in all regions, countries, societies and cultures. It affects women irrespective of income, class, race or ethnicity. Internationally, the most comprehensive policy statements about gender-based violence have been the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993, and the Platform for Action from the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Both documents define gender-based violence as a violation of women's human rights and a form of discrimination that prevents women from participating fully in society (and here we can include the world of sport), and fulfilling their potentials as human beings. According to the UN General Assembly the many forms of violence to which women are subject include sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work and in educational institutions.

WHO summarizes the studies on violence against women in the following way:

- The perpetrators of violence against women are almost exclusively men
- Women are at greatest risk of violence from someone they know

Violence against women has, according to WHO, serious consequences for their physical and mental health. It further presents an undue burden on the health care system and has other impacts on society. It represents a drain on the economically productive workforce and generates a climate of fear and insecurity.

What then about sport; can these findings be applied to sport organizations, or are they relevant for sport? Since sport in many countries plays an important role in society, one may question whether there are perpetrators and victims connected with sport. But one can also turn this question around – can, for example, sport organizations play a role in

reducing violence against girls and women? For example, by having a policy to protect women in sport, but also by promoting and increasing women's participation in exercise and sport. One may speculate whether the self-esteem gained from exercise and sport may act as a protective factor against increased violence in society at large (Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot-Borgen 2003).

Only during the last 20 to 30 years has research been conducted on the variety of ways in which people experience sexual exploitation, its effects on their lives and its costs to society (Stockdale, 1996). Internationally, these studies may be considered under two broad headings: those concerning children (more often focused on sexual abuse) and those concerning adult women (more often concerned with sexual harassment and rape).

Studies concerning child abuse has drawn more extensively from studies of abuse in *private*, family locations (Brackenridge 2000) and has therefore also incorporated some of the literature from clinical and social work perspectives (Brackenridge 1997b, 2001) The majority of this research outside sport has been conducted on *intra-familial* abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect, since this is the site of highest incidence (Fisher in Morrison et al. 1994). Gallagher (1999, 2000) reports that institutional sexual abuse is now a major focus of concern for policy makers, practitioners and the public but it is clear from the literature that comparatively little attention has been paid to this arena. Public concern about 'stranger danger', 'date rape' and community-based abuse, however, has recently drawn researchers' attention to other areas (Parrot and Bechhofer 1991; Gonsiorek 1995; Benedict 1998). Especially noteworthy in this regard have been several major enquiries into institutional abuse of children in residential homes, boarding schools and special schools (La Fontaine and Morris 1991; Brannan et al. 1993; Corby et al. 1998).

Relatively little research has been conducted on *extra-familial* abuse and even less on sexual and other types of abuse in the voluntary or not-for-profit sector, including amateur sport. One reason for pursuing more research on extra-familial abuse is to ascertain whether there are distinctive situational factors associated with abuse, and whether institutional abuse resembles or differs from abuse in the family context.

Research on sexual harassment was first undertaken in the workplace and in the educational system where it seems to be very widespread. According to Fitzgerald (1993), different surveys indicate that as many as half of all women in the United States will be subjected to some form of harassment during their academic or working lives. Different European studies place the proportion of women experiencing workplace sexual harassment to be between 45 and 81 percent, and those reporting it to be between only 5 and 22 percent (International, Regional and National Developments in the Area of Violence Against Women 1994-2003, 2003). This indicates that harassment is the most widespread of all forms of sexual victimization.

Research on sexual harassment in sport grew out of earlier studies in the *public* settings just mentioned, (Gutek 1985; Stockdale 1996; Hollway 1996), where it was problematised as an issue of employment conditions, gender relations and 'organisation sexuality' (Hearn et al. 1989). The literature on sexual harassment in sport has thus tended to take a more

organisational approach (Lenskyj 1992b; Volkwein et al. 1997) than research on sexual abuse in sport.

Very little is known about the prevalence, causes, characteristics and consequences of sexual harassment in sport. The findings of studies on sexual harassment in the workplace and educational settings, however, indicate that sport organisations and even the sport sciences may represent cultures in which sexual harassment can easily occur, because gender ratios, sexualized atmospheres and organizational power have been found to influence both the incidence and maintenance of sexual harassment in the workplace and in academia (Hotelling & Zuber 1997). Studies also show that prevalence rates are highest in workplaces where women traditionally have been underrepresented (Gutek & Morasch 1982), and lowest in those workplaces dominated by women (Grauerholz 1996). In the United States, scholars have revealed that sexual harassment is particularly virulent in male-dominated professions such as the military (Sagawa & Duff Campell 1992). Since men, masculinity and traditional male values heavily dominate most sport organisations and most of the sport sciences, this raises the question of whether sport is a particularly risky location for sexual harassment.

What is sexual harassment and abuse?

Sexual harassment is a ‘difficult term’ to define and therefore deserves some clarification. In many western countries such as the USA, Canada or Norway, sexual harassment is often defined as an illegal practice under labour or equal rights laws. Sport organizations may or may not be covered by such laws.

In legal terms, in the US there are two kinds of sexual harassment: *Quid Pro Quo* and Hostile Environment. *Quid Pro Quo* is a Latin legal term, which in sport exists when benefits are granted or withheld as a result of an athlete’s willingness or refusal to submit to the sexual demands of a person in authority. A coach, for example, might cut an athlete from the team because she refused sexual advances. A hostile environment exists when a person’s conduct is pervasive or severe enough to disturb an athlete and interfere with his or her ability to perform. A hostile environment can affect more than the targeted person. For example a team member, who witnesses repeated incidents, even if they are not directed at her or him, may be considered a victim of sexual harassment as well.

There is no universally accepted definition of sexual harassment. Central in all definitions, however, is that it is unwanted sexual attention. This implies also that what is called “gender harassment”, such as generalized sexist remarks and behaviour not designed to elicit sexual cooperation but rather to convey insulting, degrading or sexist attitudes about women and seductive behaviour which is unwanted or inappropriate, and offensive sexual advances which have a subjective element in it. Sexual harassment will also vary with culture and environment, but it often occurs in situations where one person has power over another.

One example of a European definition related to a sport organization is that of the Netherlands Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sport (1997). In the code of conduct, which it adopted, it states that:

“Sexual harassment” is any form of sexual behaviour or suggestion, in verbal, non-verbal or physical form, whether intentional or not, which is regarded by the person experiencing it as undesired or forced. (p. 3)

Examples of behaviour that are covered by such a definition would be:

- Derogatory or demeaning jokes and comments of a sexual nature
- Non-verbal behaviour such as whistling, sexual staring or leering
- Unwanted sexual suggestions about one’s body, clothes or private life;
- Unwanted telephone calls, or letters with sexual content;
- To be shown or receive pictures or things with unwanted sexual content;
- Ridicule or sexist jokes about women in general;
- Repeated unwanted sexual proposals or invitations concerning sexual behaviour;
- Unwanted touching of a sexual nature:
 - pinching
 - attempted kissing
 - unwanted body pressing and body contact
- Forced sexual acts
- Attempted rape or rape

It is difficult to distinguish between sexual harassment and abuse, and there is definitely a grey area between them. Some authors distinguish between them, while others include abuse under the concept of sexual harassment. The definition from the Netherlands is an example of such an ‘inclusive’ definition. Others (Brackenridge 1997) attempt to resolve this definitional problem by focusing on the fact that there is a continuum from sex discrimination to sexual harassment to sexual abuse. This distinction may be very useful in trying to understand what sometimes goes on between coaches and young athletes. There is a process of grooming someone for sexual abuse in which the person in authority slowly gains the trust of a child or youth before systematically breaking down interpersonal barriers. It can begin very innocently such as when the coach offers rides home or other special privileges. The young athletes can become trapped, because compliance is assured by using threats such as being cut from the team and/or giving or withholding privileges.

It is also important to mention that sexual harassment or abuse is normally not about sex, but about control. The motivation behind sexual harassment is often power – the harasser having or wanting to have power and control over another individual. This issue of power is particularly relevant to and easy to see in the sport environment, where most powerful positions are held by men and where coaches and other leaders hold positions of considerable power over athletes, particularly young athletes.

Research on sexual harassment and abuse in sport

Research on sexual harassment and abuse in sport is scarce but has grown steadily since the mid-1980s (Crosset 1986; Lackey 1990; Lenskyj 1992; Yorganci 1993; Holman 1995; Brackenridge 1997; Volkwein et al. 1997; Fasting, Brackenridge & Sundgot-Borgen 2003, 2004; Cense & Brackenridge 2001; Toftegaard 2001, 2004; Leahy 2002; Fasting, Brackenridge & Walseth 2002). Given the relatively recent history of research in this area, it is not surprising that there is a marked variety of approaches to the subject, both theoretical and methodological. Theoretical perspectives adopted include feminist and pro-feminist, psychological, constructivist, sociological, medical/health and philosophical/ethical. Variation in methods and measures includes the use of quantitative surveys, tests and scales, qualitative interviews, documentary content analysis, biography and narrative analysis, and discourse analysis. Amongst all this variety there is some common ground, however. This common ground lies in feminist politics and advocacy. In other words, all the researchers engaged in this subject up to now share a common commitment to the transformation of sport through praxis. These studies of sexual harassment and abuse in sport include both qualitative investigations and quantitative surveys. Qualitative studies have been used to gather descriptions of harassment and abuse experiences, and their consequences (Fasting, Brackenridge & Walseth 2002). From these, risk factors have been described. In addition, theoretical models and propositions grounded in athletes' experiences have been generated (Brackenridge 1997; Cense & Brackenridge 2001). These studies have mostly concerned former athletes who have been abused by their coaches, often when they were relatively young, for example around or after puberty. Based on these qualitative interviews and non-sport research, Brackenridge (2001) has set up risk factors under the three major aspects of the coach, the athlete and the sport. Risk factors for the sport have been divided into normative risks (to do with the organizational culture) and constitutive risks (to do with organizational structure, including technical or task demands).

Prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse

Very few large-scale quantitative studies have been carried out that explore the incidence or prevalence of these experiences in sport. Also, just as with studies on sexual harassment in the general population, the few quantitative studies in sport are difficult to compare, due to differences in definitions, sampling, ethics and consent, validity and reliability, underreporting/non-response, and so on.

Very little is also known about differences between the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse inside and outside sport. Without such data it is impossible to verify arguments concerning whether sport is "worse" than other life activities, the relative immunity of sport from the problems of sexual harassment and abuse or arguments about the value of engaging in sport as a protection against sexual harassment and abuse more generally.

In the first ever national level survey of sexual harassment and abuse in sport, a questionnaire was administered to the total population (N = 1200) of Canada's high performance and recently retired Olympic athletes by Kirby and Greaves (1996). 22 per cent of the 266 respondents replied that they had had sexual intercourse with persons in positions of authority in sport. Nine per cent reported they had experienced *forced* sexual intercourse, or rape, with such persons. Twenty-three respondents were under 16 years of age at the time of the sexual assault, in other words they experienced child sexual assault.

Another Canadian study of 1024 female and male student athletes (Holman 1995) found that 57 per cent had experienced some form of sexual harassment. Most of these experiences could be defined as gender harassment, like sexist jokes or comments, but also seductive behavior, coercion or physical intrusion/assault was reported.

A Danish study by Toftegaard Nielsen (1998) of 250 male and female college sport science students found that 25 per cent either knew about or had themselves experienced situations where a sport participant under the age of eighteen years had been sexually harassed by the coach. Four of these reported having been sexually abused. In a later study (2004) Toftegaard Nielsen analyzed 160 court cases about sport and sexual abuse in Denmark. Among these cases that had been taken to court, two thirds of the victims were boys, with a average age of 12 years when the abuse had taken place. All perpetrators here were men, even though 37 per cent of all coaches in sport in Denmark are women.

Using a screening questionnaire of 2,118 Australian athletes, Leahy (2002) found that 31 per cent of the female and 21 per cent of male athletes reported experiencing sexual abuse at some time in their lives. Of these 41 per cent of females and 29 per cent of males had been sexually abused within the sports environment.

Both the Kirby and Greaves (1996) survey and the Leahy (2002) survey suffered from low response rates (22 and 19 per cent respectively). This raises questions about underreporting and bias in the data. However, they do offer benchmarks for further investigations.

The studies referred to here have all taken place in Australia, North America or Scandinavia. What then about the rest of the world? Many sad individual stories concerning both physical and sexual violence towards female athletes have been told at women's conferences in sport, but we don't have any systematic studies. Concerning Asia a string of sexual harassment cases over the past few years has shocked the Japanese sports world. (www.asahi.com 7.11.02). Just now the first criminal trial on a charge of sexual harassment is going on in Japan. A former teacher and manager of a track and field club has been arrested on suspicion of indecent assaults.

In Africa, sexual harassment and abuse seem to be a barrier for girls and women's involvement in sport. In her master thesis, titled *Women in Sport: feminist analysis of the sport development policy of Tanzania* (2001), Prisca Bruno Massao carried out interviews with 13 leaders from different sport organizations, 10 women and three men. Her interview guidelines did not contain any questions about sexual harassment, but the theme came up in the interviews as a barrier towards girls and women's involvement in sport. The following paragraph is a quote from her thesis:

Although the issue of sexual harassment was not the major theme at the beginning of this study, through the interviews it reoccurred to the extent of indicating it is one of the important experiences for women in Tanzanian sport. It was presented that sport was a distrusted institution for girls and women due to sexual harassment suspicions. This situation is said to be the reason that many parents and husbands do not allow their daughters or wives to participate in sport.

A Norwegian research project, “Females, Elite Sports and Sexual Harassment”, was a part of The Norwegian Women Project, administered by the Norwegian Olympic Committee from 1995-2000. The study consisted of two parts. Part one was a survey of all Norwegian female elite athletes. One purpose of this study was to get an overview of sexual harassment, the degree to which it exists and the degree to which it could be characterized as a problem for Norwegian sport.

Elite athletes who participated in this study were defined as athletes who qualified for the national team at junior or senior level, or as a member of a recruiting squad for those teams. A total of 660 female athletes aged 15-39, representing 58 sport disciplines, were invited to participate in the study. Once the structure of the respondent female athlete sample was known, a control group from the general population was defined and matched by age. A total of 572 athletes (87 per cent) and 574 controls (73 per cent) answered the questionnaire. The female athletes’ experiences of sexual harassment were measured through 11 questions. These measured experiences ranging from light harassment such as ‘repeated unwanted sexual remarks concerning one’s body, private life, sexual orientation etc.’ to severe sexual harassment and abuse defined as ‘attempted rape or rape.’ The respondents were asked to mark for each of the 11 questions as to whether they had experienced it or not, and whether it had been perpetrated by a man or a woman. The elite athletes were asked to mark if they had experienced it from an authority figure¹ in sport, from peers in sport, or from someone outside of sport. The equivalent categories for the controls were from a supervisor at work or a teacher at a school, from fellow workers or students, or from someone outside these settings. In view of the fact that sexual harassment was measured relatively roughly and that the study might suffer from under-reporting, it was decided that the results should be presented by comparing experiences of sexual harassment between the athletes and the non-athletes and between different subgroups among the athletes. The results reported below are therefore based on a threshold measure, not a quantity or severity measure; in other words, *any* reported sexual harassment was counted, regardless of type or frequency of experience. Where the results ‘experiences of sexual harassment’ are presented this therefore means that a subject has marked one or more forms of sexual harassment on the 11-item scale: it does not indicate the severity, or the number of those experiences.

Concerning the results from the quantitative study, I have chosen to present briefly results which focus on questions that have been raised in the literature, but for which little or no empirical data exists. The first one concerns the question of whether female elite athletes are exposed to sexual harassment from women as well as from men. The second question is if the female athlete is more exposed to sexual harassment and abuse than

other groups of women in society, and the third question is whether participation in elite sport itself can be looked upon as a protecting factor for experiencing harassment.

The results show that the female athletes had experienced sexual harassment from both women (15 per cent) and men (45 per cent). There were no significant differences between the athletes and the controls concerning prevalence of male sexual harassment and abuse, 47 per cent of the controls and 45 per cent of the athletes had such experiences. Concerning sexual harassment from women however a few more controls than athletes had experienced sexual harassment (21 and 15 per cent) (Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot-Borgen 2000).

There was no difference between the athletes when we compared their experiences in a sport setting with the controls work/school experience, but both groups had experienced more sexual harassment and abuse from settings outside of sport or outside of school and work; however, the athletes have experienced less sexual harassment than the controls. This is particularly true for the oldest athletes, i.e. those above 23 years of age. Based on these results one may therefore conclude that elite female athletes in Norway are not exposed to sexual harassment and abuse more than other female groups in society. Concerning the so-called 'protection' hypothesis, it is interesting that among the oldest participants fewer athletes than controls have been exposed to sexual harassment outside a sport setting compared to outside a work/school setting. A further argument relative to sport participation building the capacity for resistance and resilience to harassment is that it increases women's self esteem. We found that the controls (20 per cent) had been exposed to much more serious forms of sexual harassment and abuse than the athletes (4 per cent) such as forced rape or attempted rape or 'forced into sexual behavior'. Bart (1981) also found strength and athleticism to be associated with successful rape avoidance in women. It might be that as they grow older, female elite athletes become more adept at protecting themselves, and are thereby able to avoid or escape potentially dangerous harassment situations which they may experience in non-sport settings.

However, being an elite female athlete in a sporting environment can also be looked upon as a risk factor, due to the fact that further analysis of the data revealed that there was a distinct difference between the athletes and controls with regard to experiencing male sexual harassment from an authority figure in sport compared with a supervisor at work or a teacher. More athletes had experienced sexual harassment from a male authority figure in sport (28 per cent) than non-athletes had from supervisors or teachers (16 per cent). The number of athletes with these kinds of experiences increases with age from 17 per cent among the youngest to 42 per cent among the eldest. This indicates that authority figures in sports exhibit behavior towards athletes that is not tolerated or accepted at a workplace or in an educational institution. An explanation for this might be that the best athletes are more likely to be in the older group, and also to spend more time in the company of authority figures in sport, for the purposes of travel and/or competition. As has been shown in other studies it is during such occasions that the main risks seem to occur (Kirby and Greaves 1996; Cense and Brackenridge 2001). Another explanation might be that, as the athletes get older, they come to understand that behavior which was not previously defined by themselves as sexual harassment is defined as such some years later.

Policy and prevention

Over the last 10 years countries such as USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, UK and the Netherlands, to mention a few, have developed policies and codes of practice for preventing sexual harassment and abuse to occur in sport. But in a world wide perspective, however, sexual harassment and abuse in sport is in many countries an ignored issue. A common reaction from sport leaders and organizations seems to have been denial, but as more and more data have been put on the table, neglecting the evidence has not been possible any more, particularly after some major scandals, such as in the UK, where in 1993 Paul Hickson, a former Olympic swimming coach was charged with sexual assault against former teenage swimmers in his care. His prison sentence of 17 years was the longest ever rape sentence imposed by an English court.

In May of 2000 in Bratislava, the 9th Conference of European Ministers responsible for sport took place. For the first time in history the ministers from all of Europe discussed sexual harassment and abuse in sport. At this meeting a resolution on the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse of women and children in sport was adopted. Among the items relating to sport policy was:

To Prepare a national policy which would:

- make a clear statement about the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and women in sport;
- define harassment and abuse of women and children in sport, and provide specific guidance on what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour;

This meeting took place only a few months after IOC had its second world wide conference for women and sport in Paris in March 2000. The IOC conference also adopted a resolution, which should have worldwide impact if it is implemented into practice. It reads as follows:

Urges the International Olympic Committee, the International Sports Federations, the National Olympic Committees and the National Federations to develop and implement a policy on sexual harassment including codes of conduct for athletes, coaches, sport leaders, and other Olympic parties to include this theme in all workshops and conferences organized by the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees.

It is very positive that sexual harassment has been put on the agenda at these meetings. But it doesn't help if they are not put into practice. There is then a danger that they act as an excuse for not doing anything. It seems to me that there is a lack of willingness to follow up these resolutions. The ministry of Culture in Norway for example has taken no initiative. An answer to a recent letter to the IOC was that they didn't know of any National Olympic Committee or International Sport Federations that had done anything to follow up the resolution on sexual harassment from the Paris meeting. What does this mean?

How shall we understand it? Why this resistance from both governments and sport organizations to put these resolutions into practice? It could change some athletes' lives, and prevent others from being harassed and abused in the future.

Another question is whether policies and procedures work. Bringer et al (2001) summarizes that

abusers are more likely to remain undetected when sport governing bodies and clubs lack clear policies and procedures on child protection and sexual harassment. Guidelines on coach behaviour should clarify what is acceptable in situations such as legitimate instruction-based touching, training sessions, team trips, back rooms at training centre, and private vehicles, all of which have served as the context for sexual abuse. Consumption of alcohol has also led to abusive situations as both the coach's and the athlete's inhibitions are lowered (p 12).

Some authors (Pryor, La Vite, and Stoller 1993) argue that visible, proactive stances by organizational leaders change employees' perceptions and create 'local' norms that disapprove of sexist and harassing behavior. It is clear from the data in this and other similar studies that the structural and material conditions of sport are contributory factors in the experience of sexual harassment. Provided that the political will exists, these conditions can be addressed. For example, the gender distribution of organizations can be changed by the use of targets, quotas, minima, rule changes, co-chairing and a host of other mechanisms. Changing the organizational culture and the milieu of sport is a more difficult challenge but can nevertheless be addressed first of all through educational work, for example by developing and then implementing codes of conduct, through mentoring, and the use of sanctions and rewards for poor and good practice. It is important for the sport organizations and for its leaders to help in changing the culture of sport so that sport can become more woman friendly and a safer place for girls and women.

Further research

It should be clear from the overview of the research on sexual harassment in sport, that more knowledge is needed. There are many rumors and few facts based on research in this area. We still need prevalence studies, particularly in places and sports environments in which violence against girls and women in sport is a non-issue or is not talked about. But we also need more knowledge about risk factors who can be put into policies.

This article has been about sexual harassment and abuse in sport. We have little knowledge about physical and emotional abuse, even though we know from studies in other areas that the different forms of harassment and abuse often occur at the same time.

Another characteristic of the studies presented is that the victims have been female athletes. We have no systematic studies about male athlete victims, female coaches, trainers, referees or sport leaders. There is a worldwide lack of female leaders and female coaches in sport. Can it be that a chilly sport climate, which may lead to harassment and abuse in

sport is a barrier for women's involvement in these roles? What about the departments of physical education/kinesiology, i.e. the culture of the sport sciences. Does the professor who abuses and harasses female colleagues and graduate students also exist in our field? These are questions that should be answered through further research projects.

As mentioned before, policy and education have been utilized in only a few countries. But we know almost nothing about the effects of these initiatives. Monitoring research of such initiatives is therefore also strongly needed.

Last but not least, we need more research on what has been called "the protection hypothesis". The results from the Norwegian study indicate that being an athlete may protect one from sexual harassment and abuse outside of sport, but further studies are also needed in this area.

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Note

1 Authority figures in sport are a translation from the Norwegian concept 'støtteapparatet'. It means those persons who surround an elite athlete, including the coach but also the medical doctor and the trainer, sport leaders etc. In some English speaking countries the concept 'support personell' is also equivalent to authority figures.

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