Women Under the Sexual Harassment and

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Athletes do not know what to do about abuse they experience and, if they do lay a complaint, are unlikely to be satisfied with the outcomes or with the penalties for the abuser.

Le harcèlement sexuel et les abus sont des problèmes importants et souvent cachés aux athlètes féminines. Cet article rapporte des exemples tirés d'un sondage national réalisé dans des équipes canadiennes. La riposte sociale, légale et éthique au harcèlement sexuel et aux abus dans un contexte sportif, crée un «dome de silence» Ces ripostes sont teintées d'impératifs sérieux comme l'hétérosexualisme, le patriotisme, le nationalisme, la compétition. Ce sont les athlètes interviewées qui ont identifié et illustré dans leurs propres mots, les effets spécifiques aux femmes.

Sexual harassment and abuse in sport is a significant and often hidden problem for female athletes. Sport remains a complex cultural phenomenon and, in an effort to understand the nature and scope of the problem of sexual harassment and abuse, it has been necessary for researchers to consider "not just the athlete and her coach but also sport organizations, the police, child protection and legal agencies, other coaches, peer athletes, siblings and parents" (Brackenridge 2001: 44). The research started with Crosset's study on male coach/female athlete relationships and Brackenridge's (1986) article on codes of practice for coaches. By 2001, some 26 pieces of research had been completed by 33 different researchers in eight countries and WomenSport International had formed a Task Force of Sexual Harassment in Sport to inform governments and sport practitioners around the world. Canadian researchers such as Lenskyj, Holman, Kirby and Greaves, Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky, and Donnelly figure prominently among them.

Research findings reveal consistancy on four points. First, they all agree that sexual harassment and abuse affects significantly more female athletes than male athletes and that for male athletes, there is even more of a problem of under reporting than for the female athletes. Second, all agree that like sexual abuse in other institutions, sexual harassment and abuse is debilitating, shaming, isolating and traumatic to its victims (Kirby *et al.*). Third, all agree that athletes do not know what to do about abuse they experience and, if they do lay a complaint, are unlikely to be satisfied with the outcomes or with the penalties for the abuser. And fourth, all agree that sport organizations and practitioners are not doing enough to identify the problem areas and people and to protect their participants from harassment and abuse. With those results in mind, we argue here that a "dome of silence" exists to keep athletes complacent in sport and that seven imperatives (patriotism/nationalism, militarism, competition, media sport, the work ethic, heterosexism/hypersexuality and familism) dictate the shape and strength of that "dome of silence."[1]

The experience of female athletes

In the original survey of 1200 Canadian national team athletes (Kirby and Greaves), the authors addressed four questions about sexual harassment and abuse: did athletes think these were important issues; what had athletes seen and heard; what had they experienced; and what did they think needed to be done about the problem. In this article, we use the voices of the female athletes to fill in the picture and thus, it is from their perspective that we carefully draw out how female athletes live under the "dome of silence" in the complex sport world.

The female athletes who responded to this survey averaged 25.8 years of age and 5.4 years of experience on the national team. We specifically did not ask what sport they participated in to avoid any individual identifiers. However we did ask who they had been coached by while on the national team and 66 per cent reported being coached by males, 17 per cent by females and 17 per cent by both males and females. Half of the athletes were single and/or lived alone and another 11 per cent had children. On average, they reported being sexually active on or about 18 years of age. The majority had already completed college or university degrees, including graduate degrees. This makes them among the more educated of Canada's popula-

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tion. Because their average income was less than $10,000 in 1996 dollars, they are also among the poorest.

First, did female athletes think these were important issues? There is a difference between knowing about and issue and being informed about it. We can comfortably conclude that many athletes, particularly female athletes, are well aware of instances of sexual harassment and abuse. And, while it is heartening to know that female athletes are generally aware of the issues, they appeared to get the majority of their information about the issues from outside of sport. Only one-third of the athletes heard about these issues specifically within the sporting context. Also, female athletes are much more likely to feel vulnerable, unsafe or fearful in sport than are male athletes, with 45 per cent of female athletes feeling "less than very safe" in sport. Female athletes are likely to fear, in order of priority, rape/sexual assault, sexual harassment, child sexual assault, and physical harassment. These results show that feelings of vulnerability, feelings of safety and fear of sexual violence are a very real part of the experience of many female athletes. Here are some examples:

> *... when a coach said to my team, "Boy, you look great in those sex suits. You look like sex." Another coach that same week told a girl to "suck my dick" while the athletes were changing positions during training.*

> *... It had gotten to the point where we heard this language everyday, we were desensitized to it. But charges [the man was charged] opened our eyes to the serious wrongdoing.*

In addition, the athletes complained about a thriving sexist environment where verbal abuse went unchecked, sexual jokes and sexual allusion to what athletes must do to make the team were commonplace and there was a high tolerance for homophobic and sexist attitudes among the coaches. In spite of the female athletes' feelings of being informed, they were not, or at least not to the point where they knew what to do in situations like the above.

Second, what had female athletes seen and heard, that is, what was the extent and content of the rumour mill about sexual harassment and abuse? What we found was that the rumour mill was live and well and functioned to warn female athletes about potentially dangerous situations. About twice as many female as male athletes report hearing rumours or actually seeing sexual harassment or abuse take place. While some athletes related personal accounts of harassment and abuse, many reported the ongoing nature of these activities. They happened in a number of places (on team trips, during training or in private locations like the home or vehicle of a coach or older athlete) rather than restricted to a single and predictable site. The female athletes wrote four times as many accounts involving coaches (48) than about others. Medical doctors or personnel, physiotherapists (5), strangers (5), national team committee members, or site managers (2) are also implicated in these reports but in far fewer accounts. Here are some typical examples of their accounts:

> *A 30-year old coach I know was sleeping with a 15-year old team members while on road trips. She was his girlfriend at the time.*

> *A coach who used his authority to take advantage of students, during regular training and also at his home. A long-time coach with a close and trusting relationship with a student began inviting her to his home for "extra" training-related sessions. He subtly began ti sexually harass/molest her in such a way that she was afraid to speak up about the issue for a long period of time.*

> *The sexist coach of the women's team was ... too touchy during regular training. He was also verbally abusive, sexist and he liked to get too close to the women during "private" coaching.*

"A coach said to my team, "Boy, you look great in those sex suits. You look like sex." Another coach that same week told a girl to 'suck my dick' [while the athletes were changing positions during training]."

Not to be allowed to say anything because you're a female or public arguments about girls not being capable of operating power tools to work on equipment or of operating a van. The coach and the male athletes concurred.

All these accounts of sexual harassment and abuse, we believe are testimony to the culture that exists in sport which pressures female athletes to put up with the sexist environment and gives the impression that those in positions of authority, who have sexual motives, have little or no difficulty in selecting vulnerable athletes upon whom they prey. So, these results confirm that the issues are not secret but apparently cannot be spoken about outside of sport, or perhaps even outside the team. We have asked ourselves whether this is because of apathy on the part of the female athletes or because they fear the consequences of speaking out. The latter is the more likely case.

Even more damning is that one in five athletes had sex with a person in a position of authority over them in the sporting context. The authority figures were almost always older males.

Third, what had these athletes actually experienced in the way of sexual harassment and abuse? Here, we asked athletes to share their personal histories of sexual harassment and abuse and to describe the situations which upset them the most.

Many athletes report experiencing put-downs or insults based on their being female, or gay or for some other reason or characteristic. Over half (55 per cent) of female athletes experienced put-downs or insults which are serious enough to upset them. And female athletes who experience such comments are also more likely to be upset if the comment is made by a coach rather than by teammates or some other person in the sporting context. This is testimony to the effect coaches can have on athletes, particularly male coaches on female athletes, when the communication is both negative and a cross-gendered put-down.

In addition, 43 per cent of the female athletes reported sexually suggestive comments and nine in ten comments came from males, usually older male coaches or athletes. The following are typical of the comments:

It varied. Nothing serious enough to be the "most upsetting"; just constant comments re: issues of attractiveness, looking feminine, being flat-chested, good or bad in bed because of being an athlete, etc.

I was called a dyke basically because I was athletic.

Female athletes also report receiving obscene phone calls, being stalked on training runs if they are alone, in corridors of training centres if they have a regular pattern of activity or when they are at home, being flashed (someone exposing their genitals).

We also found an abuse of power by some of those in positions of authority occurring in Canadian sport. Coaches and others must know where to draw the line, and what is foul play, behaviours crossing the line between responsible behaviour and abuse of authority. For example, 15 female athletes felt that an authority figure in a sporting situation had made them afraid by being sexually interested in them. The authority figures were always male. Some who were made afraid because of this attention from male authority figures and because of that fear, experienced sexual intercourse with them.

Even more damning is that one in five athletes (90 per cent of them female) had sex with a person in a position of authority over them in the sporting context. The authority figures were almost always older males, sometimes much older males. In addition, a quarter of those abused athletes experienced physical and/or emotional abuse during the encounter or encounters. This shows that these people in positions of authority have abused the trust given to them by the sport system and by the athletes to gain sexual access to those athletes based on the presence of that fear. Here is an account in one athlete's words:

One of my teammates had slept with the coach (43 years old when it started) since she was 13. She felt awful because she couldn't say anything to anybody. The sexual abuse happened on team trips, in his trailer, in his vehicle, in the hotel and in many other places. The coach said how special she was and he took her on as his special project... he slept with her until she was 18. He completely isolated her from the rest of us.

Further, child sexual assault, like the situation above, was experienced by two per cent of the female athletes in the sporting context. A further ten per cent of female athletes reported experiencing attempted or forced sexual intercourse after the age of 16 years:

I was 20 he was 34. At a training camp, after the training in the evening, only once, he forced himself on me. After that I trained only with others present. (200: 36F)

A male athlete on another team forced me. I was 18 and he was 26. It was in an hotel room after the championship competition. There was drinking involved. It

was sexual intercourse from behind. I was basically asleep. I told no one. (259: 23F)

This introduces a new relational context, almost an incestuous one, into our understanding of sexual harassment and abuse. Team-mates are like family and as such, should be safe confidants and supports.

Fourth, and finally, we asked what did they think needed to be done about the problem. An overwhelming majority of harassed and abused athletes did not lay an official complaint, particularly when the perpetrator was someone the athletes knew well and trusted like members of the family. This introduces a whole new dynamic into our understanding of the issue. Fellow athletes are like family and coaches, and perhaps other authority figures, are somewhat like parental figures for the national team female athletes. For the few who did lay a complaint, not only was the process a difficult one, but the athletes were generally unsatisfied with the outcomes. Thus, the athletes do not appear to have faith in the existing complaint process or outcomes, and they describe strong pressure from teammates and authority figures in sport not to "rock the boat" if they wish to continue to be successful.

Thus, from this section on female athletes' experiences, we can conclude that not only are the above accounts alarming, but also they are a clarion call for education for the athletes. They have a right to enjoy sport free from sexual harassment and abuse and education can give them some of the skills in recognizing the discriminations and abuses—an important first step to eradicating them. At this time, female athletes are uncertain about what supports are around them, many feel maligned if they complain and sport organizations have not yet developed effective ways of handling complaints and communicating these processes to the athletes. It is not a very encouraging picture.

The dome of silence

These reports are extremely disturbing, revealing patterns of systematic sexual harassment and abuse of athletes often by authority figures and requiring further investigation on a sport by sport basis, and at all levels of sport competition. The harasser is most often male, the victim most often female. However, there may be harassment by a member of the same sex, or a female harassing a male. The harassment can happen on the playing fields, tracks, rinks, pools or waterways. It can happen in change rooms, on buses, in cars, in hotel rooms and in elevators. It can occur on team trips or training courses, at conferences or team parties. It can happen to any member of the public using sport facilities or any member of a sport organisation before, during, or after the regular sport participation. It usually happens repeatedly over a short or long period of time. Most often, it happens in private. Not only does sexual violence diminish the quality of sport performance but it negatively affects the quality of the experience for all concerned; the athletes, coaches, administrators, and officials alike.

We can clearly see: 1) The shift from private to public has been noticeable and dramatic. Practices that were previously secretive and shameful have become publicly deplored and increasingly criminalized. 2) An increased awareness of the dynamics of violence in relationships, and a growing respect for victims' rights to disclose and seek help and compensation have also been developed. 3) There is a strong similarity between sport and other institutions in the unveiling of the private agony of sexual abuse and harassment, institutions such as churches, schools and the military. Another powerful social institution to come under scrutiny is the media. There are numerous critiques of the impact of portrayals of violence (McLelland; Brink) for their role in socialization by perpetuating violence through the use of violent imagery. For example, in the sport of ice hockey, commentator Don Cherry's "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em" videos focus on the hardest, most aggressive "hits" in the sport and encourage young players to make the hits but to stay within the rules while doing so. Television, print, film and recently, the Internet and video games have been challenged for endorsing violent behaviours in youthful audiences (Larkin). The linkage between pornography and sexual violence has been much discussed over the past two decades. Research on the quality of the link between violent media imagery and violent behaviour is not fully conclusive. And, the most profound changes, however, have occurred in the family. Traditionally the most private of places and ideally the sanctuary of emotional support and love has been transformed into a site of intense public interest. Physical, emotional and sexual abuses of women and children within family life have become exposed, publicized, analyzed and often criminalized. The characterization of these abuses as either private, justifiable or insignificant has been largely rejected in Canadian life. The confounding context of love and security, contaminated by violence and abuse has deterred many from disclosure. Even with disclosure, the spectre of re-

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victimization by the perpetrator or "the system" looms large.

For a variety of reasons, sport has evaded the same level of scrutiny and exposure.

Explaining this delay in applying the relationship violence lends to sport prompts us to assess the ideological underpinnings of sport and the structure of the sporting context. What are the values that are paramount in the institution of sport, and how have they affected disclosure and scrutiny of sexual abuses within it? What are the structures in place that affect the sport experience, and how have these contributed to this delay, or the reaction to abuse when it does arise?

Men who succeed in sport are deified and granted high status and prestige. This sets the stage for the use of power as a way to control others, the absolute underpinning of interpersonal violence.

Ultimately, these are questions about values. What is the place of sport in our culture, and how has this insulated sport from analyses of sexual violence?

The Imperatives: Seven values appear to have a huge impact on sport. These imperatives or main drives in sport are both positive and, when taken to extremes, negative. Briefly, the seven are:

1) *Patriotism/nationalism:* Patriotism is the love for and devotion to one's country. Nationalism is the specific support for the well-being of the country (supporting the culture and collective interests on the nation).

2) *Militarism:* The identification with the ideals of the professional military.

Both patriotism/nationalism and militarism are overlapping concepts characterized by athletes' loyalty to team (community, nation), ambassadorial roles (opening ceremonies, media appearances), wearing of uniforms and hence, a "uniforming" of athletes (elimination of diversity), and adherence to rules, unquestioning obedience and commitment to "toe the line"and "be like the rest." However, shared values and preparedness for competition also reinforce long standing discriminatory attitudes and behaviours (race, class, sex, language are enshrined as bases for discrimination and race and ethnicity) almost disappear from the winner's podium. The patriotism is also gendered, where females in sport are still living and training in a paternalist, patriarchal environment filled with institutional sexism.

The next three of the seven have to do with upward mobility.

3) *Competition:* Competitive sport is filled with ideologies of liberalism and individualism. Competition, or doing well in sport, is seen as being successful against others, against a standard, or against "the mountain," but not as many female athletes describe competing with one's competitors to bring out the best of performances for all. Skill and prowess are seen as equivalent to health, and are often seen as morally good. Competition is further characterized by a pecking order that exists among athletes. And, although sport is seen as liberating for the human body, extreme training can often compromise health. The liberation expected of the human body in sport is manifested in the notion that athletes have supreme control over their bodies and have trained long and hard to perfect their strength and endurance. This is very much at odds with the serious loss of control involved in being sexually abused or sexually harassed. As a result, a complex rejigging of self, identity and team participation is required to absorb the experience of abuse in the sport context.

So too, the gendered valuing of the outcomes persists. In Canada, sport remains a place where men's outcomes are of higher value and according greater space in public accounts. Recently, Canada's women's and men's team won gold medals at the Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. While the media commentators tried very hard to remember that the women had also won gold, they clearly spent more time on the build-up, games and outcome analysis for the men's team. More critically, for the analysis of abuse within sport, it is a site of creating the male and defining masculinity. Men who succeed in sport are deified and granted high status and prestige. This sets the stage for the use of power as a way to control others, the absolute underpinning of interpersonal violence.

4) *Media sport:* This is the creation of sport as a virtual reality (larger than life, records, valour, and more recently, one of extremes). The media frames how sport is viewed (as "news" of the Olympics rather than the actual events themselves). However, the sport media have been both excellent for bringing the issue forward and poor in how they have framed the issues of sexual harassment and abuse.

5) *Work ethic:* This is "a good day's work for a good day's pay" resulting in success and rewards. The promise is that if athletes work hard and follow the plan, they will be successful. If they are not successful, they must *not* have worked hard enough. There are no unions or workplace safety and health organizations to ensure the quality of the athletes workplace.

When competition and media

sport are added to work ethic—we still see that sport is *not* available on an equal basis (race, sex, disability, language, age and so on).

And the last two:

6) *Heterosexism/Hypersexuality:* Heterosexism is discrimination based on heterosexual privilege and in sport, heterosexuality is the sexual norm. Athletes are directed into heterosexuality, a stylized heterosexuality, where, for the female athletes, appropriate feminine behaviour is part of sport performance (eg. figure skating). For women and girls in sport, success often includes sexual attractiveness, sexual suggestiveness and conformity to a heterosexual image of femininity. Positive heterosexual role models are front and centre in the media coverage. On the other hand, there is limited room for not masculine enough men, androgynous or masculine women and if sexual harassment or abuse occurs, it is most often from males to females and to some extent is normalized as "boys will be boys." Hypersexuality is a word we are using for the stereotype of excellent male athletes as also highly virile and superactive sexually. Together these link to form the violent underbelly of sport (trash talk, sex talk, sexual and physical hazing/initiation and dangerous sexual practices (eg. unsafe sex). These also tell us that we must consider the intersectionality of sex and other forms of harassment is we want to understand and eradicate it.

7) *Familism:* This is the replication of the nuclear family model in sport. The family unit is paralleled in the sports team (male head = coach, children = athletes, relatives = teammates and other persons in authority). Familism adds an aura of democracy to sport. But also, as in all families, the "dirty laundry is not to be aired in public." The family has always been a fertile ground for abuse and the incest model of sexual abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, is applicable to sport. Abusers, as we have seen, can abuse with some impunity.

Together these imperatives are woven tightly over sport and work together to keep athletes from speaking out about any unhappy or negative conditions in which they train and perform. We call this the *Dome of Silence.* We think that if we emphasize the positive aspects of these imperatives and eliminate the negatives then we have gone a long way to eliminating the fertile ground for sexual abuse in sport.

Changing an institution as resilient and resistant as organized sport takes time and re-orienting those in sport to this new focus takes considerable effort. It is not just poor personal decisions made by individual harassers and abusers which explains the existence of sexual abuse. So too, the environment in which people engage in sporting activity influences what behaviours and attitudes are developed and encouraged. Thus, we reject the notion that sexual harassers or abusers are just "individuals gone bad" and accept that organized sport has a responsibility to ensure that a culture of harassment and abuse do not thrive in the sport environment. This is challenging because of the dedication of generations of young athletes who embrace the powerful "win at all costs" imperative that pervades sport.

Sexual abuse and harassment of athletes are significant problems that have been under-acknowledged to date. We have proposed some explanations for this, focusing on the values and imperatives that underpin sport, and illustrating the power of these features in securing and perpetuating the silence surrounding sexual abuse and harassment. We have argued that these features have led to sports being among the last major social institutions to be scrutinized and exposed with respect to sexual abuse issues.

Over the past few years, several incidents of sexual abuse and harassment, child molestation and sexual assault in the sporting context have come to light. As in all interpersonal and relationship violence, it can be safely assumed that these reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg and most cases remain hidden. Some of the individuals who have been victims have participated in criminal or civil suits against their perpetrators. Some have settled for public exposure in the media. The public and sport communities have reacted with typical, initial responses of shock, denial, anger, and disbelief. As can be seen in the comments of the athletes surveyed in this study, the personal emotional costs can be life-long and serious. Even so, early responses from many sport organizations often focused mainly on risk management and reducing liability by instituting screening training and protocol development for staff and volunteers. Some sport organizations or assocations have focused on particular elements within their sport, such as coaching or inter-athlete behaviour. More recently, some sport organizations have responded with more comprehensive foundational codes of ethics on which to build codes of conduct and behaviour. It is clear that the issues of sexual abuse, harassment and assault are important to athletes, sport organizations, their governing bodies and the public. Indeed, abusive behaviours in sport are important and of concern to the nation.

We reject the notion sexual abusers are just "individuals gone bad" and accept that organized sport has a responsibility to ensure a culture of harassment and abuse do not thrive in the sport environment.

[1]Note: The quotes used in this article have been previously published in Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky (2000).

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