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Consequences of sexual harassment in sport for female athletes

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Summary: Sexual harassment research was first undertaken in the workplace and educational settings. Research on sexual harassment in sport is scarce but has grown steadily since the mid-1980s. Even so, very little is known about the causes and/or characteristics and/or consequences of sexual harassment in sport settings. This article reports on the findings from interviews with 25 elite female athletes in Norway who indicated in a prior survey ($N = 572$) that they had experienced sexual harassment from someone in sport. The consequences of the incidents of sexual harassment that were reported were mostly negative, but some also reported that their experiences of sexual harassment had had no consequences for them. “Thinking about the incidents”, a “destroyed relationship to the coach”, and “more negative view of men in general” were the most often negative consequences mentioned. In addition, a surprising number had chosen to move to a different sport or to drop out of elite sport altogether because of the harassment.

Keywords: female elite athletes, sexual harassment, sport, consequences

Introduction

Only during the last 20-30 years has research been conducted on the variety of ways that people experience sexual harassment, its effects on their lives and its costs to society (Stockdale, 1996). 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 one in two women will be subjected to some form of harassment during her academic or working life, which indicates that harassment is the most widespread of all forms of sexual victimization.

Very little is known about the causes and/or characteristics and/or consequences of sexual harassment in sport. The findings of studies on sexual harassment in the workplace and educational settings indicate that sport organisations may also represent a culture in which sexual harassment can easily occur. Gutek (1985) found that prevalence rates were highest in workplaces where women had traditionally been underrepresented, and Grauerholz (1996) pointed out that women who worked or studied in an environment that was largely female were less likely to be sexually harassed and/or abused. Since men, masculinity and traditional male values heavily dominate most sport organisations this raises the question of whether sport is a particularly risky location for sexual harassment.

Research on sexual harassment in sport

Research on sexual harassment in sports is scarce but has grown steadily since the mid-1980s (Crosset, 1986; Lackey, 1990; Lenskyj, 1992; Yorganci, 1993; Brackenridge, 1997, 2001; Volkwein et al., 1997; Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot-Borgen, 2000; Cense and Brackenridge, 2001; Toftegaard, 1998, 2001; Leahy, 2001).

These studies of sexual harassment in sport include both qualitative investigations and quantitative surveys. Qualitative studies have been used to gather descriptions of harassment experiences and, from these, risk factors have been described. In addition, theoretical models and propositions grounded in athletes' experiences have been generated (Brackenridge, 1997; Cense and Brackenridge, 2001). The 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 described risk factors under the three major headings of the coach, the athlete and the sport. She further divided risk factors for the sport into normative risks (to do with the organisational culture) and constitutive risks (to do with organisational structure, including technical or task demands).

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 the differences in: definitions, sampling, ethics and consent, validity and reliability, underreporting/non-response and so on.

In their study of 210 female campus athletes in the USA, Volkwein et al. (1997) found that 2% had experienced sexually harassing verbal or physical advances from a coach and just under one in five had experienced sexist comments or derogatory remarks. Students responding in this study were clearly able to separate instructional behaviours from those that crossed the line between trust and exploitation.

Yorganci (1993, 1994) carried out a random survey of 377 female athletes in Britain from which she received a 40% response ($n = 149$). This yielded data about

varying degrees of harassment and abuse by both coaches and male peer athletes. She found evidence of 'particular influences' by coaches over diet/weight (56%), sleep (27%), dress (17%), hair style (10%), social life/parties (30%) and boyfriends/sex life (14%). She also found that the kinds of behaviours *objectively defined* by researchers as harassment originated more from male peer athletes than from coaches, and that victims also subjectively perceived these experiences as harassment.

Summarizing four Canadian studies with relatively small sample sizes, McGregor (1998) suggested that between 40 and 50% of sport participants experience a negative and uncomfortable environment in their encounters with other people in these settings, caused by everything from mild harassment to abuse.

A Danish study by Toftegaard (1998) of 250 male and female sport college students found that 25% either knew about or had themselves experienced situations where a sport participant under the age of eighteen years old had been sexually harassed by the coach. Almost none of these studies have looked at the consequences for the athletes or the impact on their sporting career.

In the first ever national level survey of sexual harassment in sport, a questionnaire was administered to the total population of Canada's high performance and recently retired Olympic athletes ($N = 1,200$) by Kirby and Greaves (1996). The data showed that sexual harassment and abuse by authority figures in sport were widespread practices. 21.8% of the 266 respondents replied that they had had sexual intercourse with persons in positions of authority in sport. 8.6% reported they had experienced *forced* sexual intercourse, or rape, with such persons. In their book *The Dome of Silence Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport* (which is reviewed in this journal issue), Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky (2000) wrote that the outcomes for the

athletes in this study who were victimised by sexual assault or attempted sexual assault were serious in both the short and the long term:

For many, it changed how they behaved in sport and in their day-to-day lives. Athletes found ways to take care of themselves by not associating with the perpetrators, by changing the training routine, by changing personal behaviour to become more professional, or by changing the situation or location so they would be less at risk. Several athletes continue to have long-term personal problems. They sought psychotherapy/counselling, refused media interviews, lost interest in sport and/or remained unable to deal with the experience and are now “violent and temperamental” (p. 96)

In addition to the seriousness of the impacts, the conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that the consequences of sexual harassment in sport seem to affect the lives of the athletes not only when they are in a sport setting but also in their general daily lives.

The impact of sexual harassment

In the absence of data from sport, knowledge about the impact of sexual harassment must be drawn from research on sexual harassment in the workplace and in educational settings. But the question arises, therefore, whether it is valid to apply such knowledge to sexual harassment experiences in sport settings.

According to Gutek and Koss (1993), there is no single impact of sexual harassment. There seem to be many different impacts depending on the domain examined and the point in the process where assessments are made. These authors point to the fact that, in addition to the impact of the sexual harassment itself, the after-effects are often influenced by disappointment in the way others react and the stress of harassment-induced life changes such as moves, loss of income, the trauma of litigation and so on. Garlick (1994) claimed that as many as 90% of sexual harassment victims suffered from a significant degree of emotional stress and Koss

(1991) wrote that, depending on the severity of the sexual harassment, between 21% and 82% of all women reported that their emotional and/or physical condition deteriorated as a result of their experiences. She further stated:

... experiencing sexual harassment transforms women into victims and changes their lives. It is inevitable that once victimized, at minimum, one can never again feel quite as invulnerable. (p. 37).

The impact of sexual harassment is often measured within domains such as somatic, physical and psychological/emotional health, well-being, work variables and career development. Examples of impacts related to work and career are: a change in job assignment, job loss, decreased job satisfaction, and damaged interpersonal relationships at work. For university students sexual harassment may lead to: dropped courses, changed majors (main subjects of study), changed academic departments and programmes, and altered career intentions. Psychological and somatic outcomes include: negative effects on self esteem and life satisfaction, low sense of self-confidence, negative effect on women's relationship with other men, anger, fear, anxiety, depression, feelings of humiliation and alienation, a sense of helplessness and vulnerability, headaches, sleep disturbance, weight loss or gain, gastrointestinal disturbances and nausea (Gutek and Koss, 1993, Fitzgerald, 1993).

What, then, is the impact of experiences of sexual harassment in a sport setting? What would the consequences be for elite athletes? Will the same findings emerge as those from studies in the workplace or in university settings? Being an elite athlete is often associated with a strong self-esteem. Does this mean that the experiences and coping strategies of elite athletes differ from those who experience sexual harassment outside sport? The main question addressed in the current study is therefore: What is the impact of experiences of sexual harassment on the lives of

female athletes, with particular respect to their health and their involvement and performance in sport?

Method

The data presented here came from a larger Norwegian Women's research project financed by the Norwegian Olympic Committee. The research on sexual harassment consisted of two parts: the first was a quantitative survey of all Norwegian female elite athletes, the purpose of which was to establish an overview of sexual harassment incidence. This was followed up by a qualitative phase, using semi-structured interviews with elite athletes who had experienced one or more forms of sexual harassment (identified from the survey returns). The purpose of part two of the project was to gather more information about risk factors, about elite athletes' reactions to sexual harassment, and about the consequences these experiences had for them.

The female elite athletes who participated in the survey were defined by their membership of a junior, development or senior national team. Altogether 572 athletes, representing 58 different sports, answered the questionnaire about the prevalence of sexual harassment (Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot-Borgen, 2000). The female athletes' experiences of sexual harassment were measured through 11 questions. The instrument used was an eleven-item scale, derived and adapted from Brackenridge's (1997) original definition of sexual harassment and abuse. 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.*' Respondents were asked to indicate for each of the 11 items whether or not they had experienced it, and

whether it had been perpetrated by a man or a woman. The athletes were also asked to indicate if they had experienced this from an authority figure in sport, from peers in sport, or from someone outside sport (authority figures in sport is a translation from the Norwegian concept ‘støtteapparatet’. It refers to those persons who surround an elite athlete including, in the main, the coach but also the medical doctor and the trainer/physiotherapist, sport leaders etc.). The main result from this phase of the study was that 28% of the female elite athletes reported having experienced sexual harassment, either by an authority figure in sport or by other athletes. Among these, two-thirds had experienced harassment from other athletes and about half from an authority figure in sport.

It further turned out that the athletes themselves had more experiences of sexual harassment outside-than inside sport (39% compared with 28%). One of the conclusions from this part of the study therefore was that sexual harassment exists in Norwegian elite sport but not at levels different from other areas of Norwegian society (Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot-Borgen, 2000).

Among those female athletes who had experienced one or more forms of sexual harassment from someone in sport, 27 qualitative interviews were conducted in phase two. Two of these were excluded from further analysis due to the fact that their experiences of harassment (in both cases perpetrated by a coach) could not be defined as specifically *sexual* in nature. The interviews, which lasted between one and two hours, were transcribed and analysed with the WinMax computer program for text analysis.

Sample

The age of the interviewed athletes ranged from 15 years to 33 years, with a mean of 23 years. Three lived alone, ten with their parents, seven with a husband/partner, and two with friends. Only one of them had a child. For three, their sport was their major occupation. Three were working full time, six had part time work and the rest reported that they were students. They represented 15 different sport disciplines, out of which 11 were individual sports and four team sports. All of them were among the best in their sport in Norway. Accordingly, a lot of time was spent on competition and practice. In the period where they did not compete, more than half of them practised for 16-20 hours per week or more. Further, it turned out that many of them (n=13) had competed internationally for Norway for five seasons or longer. Fifteen of the athletes had competed in Olympic Games, world championships or world cups, from which seven had received a medal. In other words, this interview group of female athletes was a very high performance sport group. Pseudonyms were adopted for all respondents.

Experiences of sexual harassment

Most of the athletes' experiences of sexual harassment were perpetrated by authority figures in sports (59, of which most were from coaches), compared with 27 experiences reported to have come from other athletes. Most commonly reported experiences were "repeated unwanted sexually suggestive glances, jokes, comments etc."(27), "unwanted physical contact" (22), "ridicule" (21). As an example of unwanted comments Nina described her coach as follows:

He says things in a way that maybe are meant as a joke but sometimes I get very hurt by it. He can for example say something about - that I have too small 'boobs' or comments on other parts of my body ... and it doesn't have anything at all to do with the sport I am competing in.

As an example of unwanted physical activity, Rita told us the following about a coach she had from when she was 12 to 16 years of age:

... when we didn't perform well, then the punishment was that we should sit on his lap. I remember I thought it was disgusting. He touched us and was really very disgusting. I don't understand today that we accepted it at all. We had a drill where we had to sprint, and the one who came last had to sit on his lap, so everyone were running like hell...

As mentioned above, many of the female elite athletes had also experienced ridicule. This particularly concerned those who participated in so called ‘masculine sports’, i.e. sports that for a long time were played only by men. Turid had participated in such a sport for 15 years and yet she could still experience harassment:

When you move to a new place and tell them that you are playing this sport, than it is many who laugh at you ... it is a lot of sayings like ‘what are you doing on this field’, and many men believe we are there only because it is a men's sport, it is many people still who are saying things like that.

In addition to these three major categories of experiences, “threatening sexual suggestions, proposals etc. (8)”, “stalking” (3), “humiliating treatment” (2), “flashing”(2) and “rape or attempted rape”(1) were also mentioned.

The impact of sexual harassment

The analyses of the qualitative interviews revealed that some of the incidents of sexual harassment seemed to have no particular consequences at all for the athletes. This was especially the case among those who had been harassed by another athlete:

No, I don't think so. It may have something to do with the way I grew up, my socialization and previous experiences ...and the fact that I am quite ‘hard’ towards myself. (Birte)

To be bothered by “thinking about” the incident was mentioned frequently.

If I see him, or anything that has something to do with him, then I think about it. (Karin)

These thoughts also led to changes in behaviour:

I became afraid of going out alone ... I started to have a knife in my pocket when I was going out ... I also started practising karate at that time. (Ingrid)

Others felt that it was difficult to concentrate when the harasser was at the same place, for example at a sports event. Reflecting and thinking about the original experience occurred, even when the harassment incident had taken place many years before. Some seemed still to think about it and to feel anger, irritability, confusion, and anxiety. As Berit said:

When I read my diary that I wrote ten years ago, I realize that the same things are bothering me today. This disturbs me, makes me nervous, anxious and makes it difficult to sleep.

Nina was thinking about and afraid of rumours, because of an episode that happened with other athletes. Among other things, it affected her today in the following way:

I never walk over to them and sit together with them ... and sometimes I recognize the feeling that I am afraid of what they will say about me. When one is at practice it shouldn't be necessary to go around and be nervous that someone might be talking about you.

Many athletes also felt that the sexual harassment episodes had damaged the coach-athlete relationship, and had led to changes in their own behaviour towards the coach.

I try to have as little to do with him as possible... and avoid being alone with him. If we must look at a video for example, I always bring someone along... (Mette)

He tries, but I am much more reserved and try to avoid certain situations now. And I am a bit afraid to get to practice alone, and when I am alone on the field, then I hope that I will not hear the sound of his car. (Marit)

Some athletes also thought that what they had experienced had an influence on the way they behaved towards other men in general:

I don't know, you are maybe more reticent towards developing relationships with other males. (Karin)

or, as Inger said:

One gets a bit more negative view of men in a way ...I didn't have much respect for him when I left.

Further, when the interviews took place, some of the athletes had left elite sport because of sexual harassment. Others had left a sport for the same reason earlier in their sport career but now participated in a different sport. As Turid said:

I believe that many girls left the sport because of the negative attitudes towards us.

Heidi left her sport because of the coach but did not lose the joy of practising and she now competes in another but similar discipline:

Yes, I dropped out after that season, but I didn't lose my joy of sport, so I continued with practising and am doing that today too, just with other people.

The athletes' experiences of sexual harassment had affected both their self-esteem and their body image. As Hanne said:

He destroyed much of my self-esteem ...and I left Norwegian sport because of that episode.

Lisbeth talked about this particularly in relation to competition:

When you just have started the competitive season and he [the coach] suddenly finds out that my body looks totally unsuitable [too big] ...then one has a problem. And it definitely doesn't strengthen your self-confidence before the next competition.

Discussion and conclusions

The first conclusion that can be drawn is that incidents of sexual harassment, of which most can be characterized as 'mild harassment', seem to have a major impact and often negative consequences for the female athlete. 'Consequences' were

mentioned in relation to 49 incidents of sexual harassment, including 9 indications that there had been no consequences for the female athlete. A relatively larger percentage of those who had been harassed by another athlete, compared with those who had been harassed by an authority figure in sport, were of the opinion that the incident(s) had no consequences for them. Accordingly, it seems to be more ‘dangerous’ to be harassed by someone in authority than by another athlete. This is probably related to the inevitable structural power that authority figures in sport have over athletes. Such figures are also normally trusted by female athletes and may well be persons upon whom they are emotionally dependent (Gutek and Koss, 1993). Behaviour or incidents that lead to a breakdown in this trust relationship may have devastating effects, as described above. These findings accord with those of Quina (1991), who showed that women victims suffered long-term after-effects, and who argued that sexual harassment violated trust, especially when the harasser was in a position of authority.

The study reported here did not find any differences in the types of consequences suffered between those female athletes who had been harassed by a peer athlete and those who had been harassed by an authority figure. This could have been a function of the small number who indicated having experienced negative consequences as a result of peer harassment. But it might also have been related to the absence of any link in the data between *type* of harassment and type of consequences. So, for example, “unwanted touching” could have had the same negative impact on an athlete as “unwanted sexually suggestive glances, jokes, comments etc.”, whether perpetrated by a peer athlete or an authority figure.

As mentioned above, impacts of sexual harassment are often divided into psychological and somatic/physical and also characterised in terms of the

consequences for the victim's work and career. This was also the case in this study where there were implications for athletes' sport careers. For example, changes in behaviour towards coaches and peers other athletes, resulting from the athletes' experiences of sexual harassment, had negative effects on their performance and, for some of them, led to them dropping out of sport altogether. Psychological consequences were also found, such as frequently 'thinking about it' or reflecting on the experience, negative impacts on self-esteem, heightened anxiety and so on. No participants mentioned particular somatic or physical impacts but further analysis of the data from the survey phase of the project did show that, among those athletes interviewed in phase two, as many as one third suffered from an eating disorder. It must be said, however, that this was not mentioned by any of these athletes in their interviews as being an effect of their experiences of sexual harassment.

Stockdale (1996) wrote about sexual harassment in the workplace and differentiated between individual and organisational consequences, an interesting distinction in relation to athletes. Most of the impacts that were found in the data in this study can be characterised as individual. However, the fact that four of them had left a sport could also be regarded as organisational consequences. In addition, some of the interviewees knew of other athletes who had also left sport due to experiencing sexual harassment. Since the athletes that participated in this study were all survivors in elite sport, there is reason to believe that many more girls and women may leave sport because of sexual harassment. It could be that sexual harassment is influential in the large drop out of girls from sport that takes place around or just after puberty. One reason for this may be the so-called "chilly climate" in sport and physical activity which is often manifested as 'ridicule' and which gives female athletes a feeling that they are not welcomed or do not belong in some sports.

Based on research in the workplace, Gutek and Koss (1993) wrote that sexual harassment and sex discrimination appeared to be linked and Larkin (1991) suggested that “sexual harassment is one of the important ways in which inequality impacts directly on women’s mental health” (p. 112). This is probably also the case in sport settings, at least in sports which are heavily dominated by men. Despite the increased participation of women in sport during the last twenty years or so, sport organisations are still dominated and run by men (Acosta and Carpenter, 2000). Sport has also been described as one of the few areas where ‘men still can be men’ and where women are seen as intruders. Curry (1991), for example, found that male athletes’ conversations in the locker room generally treated women as objects, encouraged sexist attitudes toward women and, in extreme cases, promoted a rape culture.

In discussing these results one should bear in mind that very few of these female survivors had experienced *serious* sexual harassment or abuse. The results reported here demonstrate that, for some athletes, the effects can nonetheless be quite serious. This accords with a statement from the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport (CAAWS, 1997), which says:

Harassment is humiliating and degrading. It undermines self-esteem, and it undermines performance. Harassment can have devastating emotional and physical effects. While we might be inclined to dismiss verbal remarks as insignificant, the emotional toll created by mild harassment can be devastating. (CAAWS, Action, p. 9)

It is impressive that, in spite of their experiences of sexual harassment and the consequent impacts, all the athletes interviewed for this study were among the best in their sport in Norway, and some of them were also among the three best in the world. One wonders how it was possible to perform so well under such circumstances? The answer might be related to their perceptions and cognitive appraisals of the experiences. Shullmann (1989), also in Paludi and Barichman (1991) introduced the

concept of ‘cognitive readjustment’. Successful cognitive re-adjustment of beliefs includes a discovered ability to cope, learn, adapt, and become self-reliant. Cognitive re-adjustment produces a greater sense of self-confidence, maturity, honesty, and a sense of strength, according to Shullmann. Could it be that female elite athletes have better prerequisites for ‘readjusting’ than many other women, due to the personal qualities and skills that they have had to learn to in order to become elite athletes?

None of the athletes in this study had complained about their sexual harassment experiences to any authorities, or even to their parents, although some of them had talked to girlfriends about what had happened to them. In a chapter about ‘femininity’ and women’s silence in response to sexual harassment and coercion in education, Cairns (1997) wrote that it was surprising to still find a very high frequency and intensity of confusion, self-blame, guilt and shame being expressed by female victims of harassment. She criticized the university community as a whole for not having worked enough to reduce sex role stereotyping, and not having effective workplace equity programs. These arguments may also be applied to sport organisations. The results presented here indicate that Norwegian sport organisations have not done a good enough job in this area. At the time of writing there is no code of conduct for Norwegian coaches and Norwegian sport has never had a policy on sexual harassment. As one outcome of this project, however, the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports has resolved to prepare some anti-harassment guidelines for both athletes and authority figures in sport.

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