

Evidence – Women and Girls in Sport

When I was 13 years old, a person I thought was my friend approached me and asked if I would be willing to have my picture taken. She said she wanted to be a photographer. So, on different occasions, she took my picture. Without my knowledge she created a Facebook page and chatted with players on the local major junior hockey team. Together with her mother and because she was infatuated, she soon forced me to produce child pornography so she could continue chatting with them. Otherwise, they both threatened to report me to the DPJ and make sure I'd be taken from my family. What you need to know is that her mother was my remedial teacher when I was 8 years old. She used confidential information about my personal life to make sure I stayed silent. The players knew I was a minor and stuck in this situation. They asked for these pictures. Other people were victims too.

When I was 17 years old, I was a victim of sexual assault with a weapon, confinement and attempted murder. My attacker tried to strangle me with my key leash. Two friends I trusted helped plan the assault. They were all members of the same football team and had invited me to an after-party at my attacker's home (whom I hardly knew). They never showed up. So these "friends" were not involved in the actual act, but they were complicit in it and in the cover-up and continued harassment (along with other team members who honored the Bro Code¹) after I confided in a friend about what happened.

This friend, who had been raped by the same player the year before, decided to share what happened to me — without my permission — with one of the team captains. It was like a bomb went off. Adults in positions of authority then tried to silence me — with their institutional powers — and I witnessed first-hand other girls who were also silenced in other situations because the school's reputation, which was very sports-oriented, was more important to them than our lives. I gave up cheerleading and all physical training activities because I developed a phobia of being in the gym with other athletes who also supported this toxic culture in sport. Because I've heard horror stories about female adventurers (and backpackers) in remote areas, I even avoid outdoor spaces. The same goes for dancing, because too often society holds us responsible for the way others look at us.

I'm sharing these stories with you today because I don't want other young women and girls to bear the burden of violence alone. How many other athletes have turned their backs on their bodies and their passion because they were not supported? In my case, everyone at the Cégep knew, but no one wanted to get involved. On the contrary, they wanted to make me quit my sport and my studies for the sake of the Bol d'or, as my attacker was one of the best receivers in the league. He was a "blue chip," a CFL — even NFL — hopeful.

¹ In popular culture, the Bro Code is a form of "etiquette to be followed among men when they decide to join the same brotherhood. The unspoken purpose of the Bro Code is to gain horizontal solidarity from other bros, and to gain superiority over girls." [Translation] (Andrews, n.d.). Adhering to the Bro Code means never ratting out another 'brother,' even if their behavior is bad and even if you know it's wrong. If they do, they'll be ostracized from the brotherhood and may even become the next target of this subculture. The Bro Code not only keeps bad behaviour secret, it reinforces it. It stems from hegemonic masculinity. This concept analyzes the hierarchization, normalization and marginalization of masculinities by which certain types of men impose, through work on themselves and others, their domination of not only women but also other "types" of men (Connell, 1995/2005; Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2008). Against this dominant form of masculinity, which often constitutes the gendered subtext of power, there are three other types of masculinity: "complacent" (when men participate in or legitimize hegemonic masculinity but do not fully benefit from or realize it), "subordinate" (such as homosexual masculinities, which are culturally excluded from hegemonic masculinity as a repulsive figure, and are thus constructed in the background of hegemonic masculinity) and "marginal" (subject to the power of hegemonic masculinity) (Connell, 1995).

*Given the systemic sexism in sport, an athlete's "potential" career comes before the lives and safety of girls and women, as evidenced by the wall surrounding the identity of the players who participated in the gang rapes (covered up by Hockey Canada). It is this state of affairs that I believe explains why my story has been so coldly received, both by those around me and by those working in the justice sector. **Neither them nor witnesses are trained to properly intervene, and this is a major flaw in our rule of law.** Worse, some people could "misconstrue or misperceive what they saw, particularly when the accusations do not square with their experience of a well-loved and much-admired figure" [Translation] (Lamielle, 2011, n.d.).²*

For example, "Joe Paterno, the vastly popular and long-serving former head coach of Penn State University's college football team, was reportedly dismissed — among other reasons — for failing to go beyond the minimum in reporting a colleague's wrongdoing (former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky, who allegedly had sexually assaulted no fewer than eight children over a 15-year period). Paterno's firing sent shockwaves through the Penn State University community, erupting even in protests, as it was perceived by many as a threat to students, alumni and fans who had built their social lives and, in some cases, much of their identity, around rooting for the Nittany Lions" [Translation] (Lamielle, 2011, n.d.).

This culture needs to change. *Because the violence I experienced (and shared above) is a complex result of different forms of systemic violence, I recommend the [full implementation](#) of the [National Action Plan on GBV](#) to which I personally contributed. The idea is that it can initiate real systemic change and that access to services be no longer dependent on postal code or privilege. A pan-Canadian prevention and awareness program specifically dedicated to transforming the culture of sport must also be put in place as well as an independent commission of inquiry. We deserve better, and so do future generations of women and girls.*



– [Mélanie Lemay](#), co-founder of Québec contre les violences sexuelles (QCVS), art therapist and doctoral student in sociology at the University of Quebec at Montreal

² Lamielle, P. (2011, December). [Cultures of Silence: Why Penn State and other institutions don't bring wrong-doing to light - and how outsiders should react](#). Consulted on May 2, 2020.