



Brief on the Impact of Sexual Violence Perpetrated Against, or By Athletes on the Participation of Women and Girls in Sport

Prepared by the Ending Violence Association of Canada for submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women on its Study

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About the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada)

The Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada) is a national organization that works to address and respond to gender-based violence. Through research, policy-change, advocacy and education, EVA Canada is focused on leading a growing movement to build and expand national coordination for ending sexual violence in Canada. In this role, EVA Canada serves as an umbrella organization that brings together provincial/territorial networks and organizations representing community-based sexual assault centres, as well as other community-based organizations committed to ending sexual violence. All of EVA Canada's work is grounded in a commitment to break down silos across sectors, jurisdictions, and communities to promote an intersectional and systemic approach to ending sexual violence. Due to its capacity to connect with a range of sexual violence advocates and organizations across the country, EVA Canada is regularly consulted to provide subject matter expertise on promoting culture change to address sexual harm within male-dominated institutions.

Overview

Sexual violence perpetrated *against* those in sport, and *by* those in sport is neither new nor undocumented. Since at least 1989, media reports about [sexual violence perpetrated by coaches and other authority figures against young athletes](#) and [sexual violence perpetrated by athletes, particularly against young women and girls](#) has been extensively and publicly documented in the Canadian media. Despite extensive documentation of sexual violence associated with sport in the media, there remains a paucity of research on current prevalence rates of sexual violence victimization, particularly among athletes. [Parent et al. \(2016\)](#) found that among a representative sample of adolescents aged 14-17 years old (athletes and non-athletes) in Quebec, 10.2% had experienced lifetime sexual violence. Of those adolescents who had experienced sexual violence, 5.3% indicated that the violence was perpetrated by a coach.

Evidence suggests that women and girls¹ in sport experience sexual violence victimization ([Leahy et al., 2002](#)) with young women and girls experiencing higher rates of such victimization than young men and boys ([Kirby et al., 2013](#); [Willson et al., 2021](#)). Athletes with disabilities and athletes who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ may be particularly vulnerable to sexual violence victimization ([Kirby et al., 2013](#)) There appears to be no sport immune to sexual violence, with allegations of perpetration against young athletes in [gymnastics](#), [hockey](#) and [water polo](#) among others, as well as [allegations of gang sexual violence perpetrated by members of Canada's junior hockey team](#) making recent headlines.

The benefits of participating in sport are numerous and well-documented ([Milroy et al., 2022](#)). When women and girls are sexually mistreated while participating in sport, the negative consequences are not just significant mental health and other injuries ([Dworkin et al., 2017](#)), but also the perpetuation of a sport culture in which women and girls are not treated with dignity and perpetrators are not held to account. Such cultures are not safe and inclusive for sport participation, nor are they environments in which young athletes can thrive ([Gattis et al., 2022](#)).

¹ Given the purpose of this study is to examine the experience of women and girls in sport, this brief focuses specifically on women and girls. We would note however that people of all genders experience sexual violence in sport. It is therefore important to develop strategies that acknowledge and respond to the lived experience of people of all genders.

As [Kirby et al., \(2013\)](#) write: “A sport environment with sexual exploitation means that sport cannot produce strong healthy athletes” (p. 153).

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations to the *Committee on the Status of Women* for its study to identify ways to ensure a safe and inclusive sport environment for women and girls in Canada, with a particular focus on the problem of sexual violence associated with sport.

1. Prioritize sexual violence prevention and cultural change through funding the establishment of communities of practice comprised of partnerships between national sports organizations and organizations with expertise in sexual violence ([Milroy et al., 2022](#)). These communities of practice should engage diverse stakeholders and focus on developing a coordinated response to sexual violence prevention and meaningful cultural change in sport across Canada ([Milroy et al., 2022](#)).
2. Provide research funding that prioritizes community-academic partnerships to further develop the evidence base on sexual violence associated with sport in Canada, as well as best practices for supporting survivors of this violence ([Willson et al., 2021](#)). Nationally consistent and disaggregated data is needed. It is not enough to simply generate the evidence-base; this knowledge needs to be translated into policy and practice which is best done in consultation with [community based sexual assault centres \(SACs\) and other service-providers who are on the frontlines](#).
3. Provide increased funding to frontline community based sexual assault centres (SACs) to support athlete-survivors in crisis. [High-profile media coverage of sexual violence has been associated with more survivors seeking crisis services](#); the coverage of sexual violence in Canadian sports is likely to result in athlete-survivors coming forward. Many SACs already have difficulty providing timely services due to substantially increased numbers of survivors needing assistance. [SACs are underfunded across the country](#), wait times average upwards of 12 months, and most rely on inconsistent, project-based funding from the federal government.
4. Ensure accountability mechanisms and safe avenues for survivors in sport to report sexual violence. All federally funded sports organizations should become Program Signatories of the new Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner and adhere to the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS).

Conclusion

We hope that these recommendations can further strengthen the Committee’s study on ensuring a safe and inclusive sport environment for women and girls in Canada. We urge the Committee to understand the need for immediate action, and stress the importance of considering these recommendations.

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