

## **Brief for the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (FEWO) for its study on the Participation of Women & Girls in Sports**

**January 19, 2023**

The attempt to improve the participation of women and girls in sport is indeed a notable pursuit: sport can have positive effects on an individual's mental and physical health. However, given the climate around maltreatment and abuse in sport, we encourage the Government of Canada to do all in its powers to ensure that the increased participation of women and girls is met with an increased commitment to respectful, inclusive, and safe sport.<sup>1</sup>

Our brief and recommendations focus on gender-based violence (GBV) in sport. We acknowledge that there are harms beyond GBV in sport which are outside of our scope but would like to note that there is not enough acknowledgement in government plans on GBV in sport. Our recommendations draw heavily from literature produced by athlete-survivors, as well as our experience in advocacy on GBV in Canada. Research into the dangers to athletes, particularly young women athletes, quickly demonstrate clear channels or patterns of abuse: psychological harm caused by a power imbalance between coaches and athletes, a lack of action on reported cases of abuse; and a lack of education of coaches and athletes on consent, abuse, and maltreatment.

### **Power Imbalances in the Coach-Athlete Relationship**

The relationship dynamic between coaches and athletes in the competitive sport culture in Canada has created what athletes call a "culture of fear and silence".<sup>2</sup> In large part, this culture is due to the power imbalance and the threat of an athlete losing their position on a team if one were to speak up about abuse.<sup>3</sup> Willson et al. (2022) contribute that "the power imbalance is too great to allow for consent" in cases of grooming or sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> We also know that athletes identifying as female have reported more experiences of harm.<sup>5</sup>

The World Health Organization (2020) deems psychological abuse as the most common form of maltreatment in sport, reported at rates of 38-72% of athletes, while sexual abuse has been experienced by 9-30% of athletes, and 11-21% of athletes noted experiences of physical abuse.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the power imbalances are the result of a toxic and exclusionary pursuit of "excellence"

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<sup>1</sup> Athletics Canada. (2023). Safe Sport. Retrieved on January 13, 2023 from: <https://athletics.ca/safesport/>

<sup>2</sup> Willson, E., Kerr, G., Battaglia, A., & Stirling, A. (2022). Listening to Athletes' Voices: National Team Athletes' Perspectives on Advancing Safe Sport in Canada. In *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* Vol. 4. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.840221>

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> Kerr, G., & Willson, E. (2022). Maltreatment in Sport: Current Knowledge and Future Directions. Webinar Presentation for Violence Against Women Learning Network. Retrieved from <https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/resource-spotlights/recorded-resource-spotlights/maltreatment-gbv-sport-kerr-willson.html>

<sup>6</sup> Willson et al. (2022)

and an overemphasis on international achievements and financial rewards associated with Olympic medals. While we recognize there are many respectful, competent coaches for our athletes at every level of sport, these statistics demonstrate a need for a cultural and institutional shift.

A cultural shift to what Willson et al. (2022) describe as “holistic athlete development” would work to eliminate the *commodification* of athletes, include mental health in measurements of overall health and wellness, put an increased focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), and establish a zero tolerance for sexual relationships between athletes and coaches, amongst other key factors.<sup>7</sup> CFUW recommends that a new culture of *holistic athletic development* be part of institutional change in the programming, goal-setting and mandates for Canadian sports organizations, supported by the federal government Safe Sport policies.

### **Gaps in Reporting and Accountability**

Increasing access to victim services and establishing an independent third party for reporting of abuse are integral channels for justice for affected athletes. In recent months, we have seen the outcomes of gaps in reporting and accountability with the Hockey Canada scandal – where [victims of sexual abuse](#) by hockey players or coaches were treated like isolated incidents – further alienating victims and stagnating important cultural and institutional shifts needed within the organization.

These gaps in reporting, accountability, and transparency could be ameliorated by enhancing policy and procedures on reports of abuse and maltreatment, including a gender analysis component in monitoring and evaluation frameworks, increased efforts in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and annual reports on incidents. Even more, these mechanisms need to have real consequences for actors who fail in their implementation – such as financial repercussions. Hockey Canada is a prime example of how losing public and private funding can lead to change – and we recommend that strict conditions for funding be implemented and monitored closely to ensure accountability.<sup>8</sup> We have the institutions to monitor claims of abuse and maltreatment (e.g. [OSIC](#), [the Red Deer Declaration](#), [SDRCC](#)), but accountability needs to be a top priority to ensure victims achieve justice and perpetrators are not allowed to maintain their positions and potentially create more harm.

### **Need for Education**

In 2022, Premiers of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick [mandated](#) “every person representing Hockey Canada” to sign an anti-harassment policy and complete training on “sexual assault and harassment prevention” as a condition of hosting the 2023 World Juniors in their provinces.<sup>9</sup> This leadership is fundamental and shows an understanding of the echoing effects that these events can have on a community.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Clipperton, J. (2022). Tim Hortons latest company to pause Hockey Canada sponsorship over sexual assault allegation. CBC Sports. Retrieved from [CBC Sports](#).

<sup>9</sup> Donkin, K. (23 November, 2022). Sexual assault prevention training required for athletes, coaches and staff at 2023 world juniors. CBC News. Retrieved from: [CBC News](#)

In the case of gender-based violence (GBV), we see that the prevalence of rape culture in male-identifying team sports, such as hockey, can lead to significant harm.<sup>10</sup> Rape culture is the “normalization of sexual violence” and is perpetuated by toxic masculinity.<sup>11</sup> We stress that masculinity is not in and of itself toxic, but created by a society in which men do not feel safe to experience their full range of emotions and sexual aggression is considered normal and inevitable.<sup>12</sup> Examples of positive masculinity need to be modeled to break the cycle of harm, in addition to the education of all athletes about consent and its ramifications. Programs such as [“Beyond the Locker Room”](#) in Stratford, Ontario are a good example of how men can help prevent gender-based violence. In this way, team sports can be where young athletes can learn important lessons of community care, friendship, and leadership, as they are meant to.

Widespread education, for athletes, coaches, (and all personnel who have relationships with athletes) on maltreatment, the warning signs of grooming and manipulation, what constitutes abuse, and who to talk to if you’re in need of help – needs to be instituted across the sport. Though we would say that this education is necessary across greater society (it is estimated that only 1 in 3 Canadians understand consent)<sup>13</sup>, the repeated interactions and intimacy between coaches and fellow teammates means this education is urgently needed in this sphere. It should also be noted that at this point, there is no official accreditation needed to become a coach.

We commend the [recent investment into improving mental health literacy](#) amongst coaches and sports leaders in communities that face discrimination and social exclusion. We would encourage more funding to be allocated to all groups of society in this vein, with a focus on the repeated themes of abuse and maltreatment that have been seen in sport in recent years.

**To promote *safe sport*, CFUW recommends the Government of Canada to:**

- Provide annual funding to aid cultural changes to promote *holistic athletic development* as part of the goal setting and mandates for Canadian sports organizations, supported by the federal government Safe Sport policies.
- Close gaps in reporting of cases of abuse and maltreatment by:
  - Enhancing policy and procedures on reporting of abuse and maltreatment
  - Increased efforts in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)
  - Mandate annual reports, which include records of incidents.
  - Holding non-compliant actors accountable, with potential financial repercussions

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<sup>10</sup> Peters, A. (2022). Toxic masculinity is part of elite hockey. We need a culture shift. CBC News Calgary: Opinion. Retrieved from: [CBC News](#)

<sup>11</sup> WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre. (2013). What is rape culture? Retrieved from: <https://www.wavaw.ca/what-is-rape-culture/>.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation. (2015). Only 1 in 3 Canadians know what sexual consent means. *Canadian Women’s Foundation*. Retrieved from: [Canadian Women’s Foundation Webpage](#).

- Require education for **all** athletes, their families and guardians, and coaches and their staff, on consent, abuse, and maltreatment and ensure that this education requires meaningful engagement.

### **About CFUW**

[CFUW](#) (Canadian Federation of University Women) is a self-funded, non-partisan organization of over 6,500 women and 95 clubs across Canada that works to improve the status of women by promoting human rights, public education, social justice, and peace in Canada and abroad. CFUW is a member of the National Council of Women of Canada. CFUW also holds special consultative status with the United Nations (“ECOSOC”) and is a member of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO network. CFUW is the largest of the 61 affiliates of Graduate Women International and is a member of the International Alliance of Women (“IAW”).

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