



## Introduction

WomenSport International (WSI) is an advocacy-based organization using validated data to fight for the rights of girls and women to participate in sport at all levels in a safe, equitable and fair environment. Our members consist of researchers and practitioners who use their expertise to educate, advise and recommend change in policy, supportive procedures, and systems. WSI has been active in changing the sport eco-system for the past 30 years with emphasis on interpersonal violence against girls and women in sport. We have been effective in demonstrating the need for a rights-based systems approach to managing violence on a local, national, regional, and global level. This has and continues to include advising national governments (Ministry of Sport), UNESCO, UNICEF, the International Olympic Committee, other national and international sport governing bodies as well as educating sport participants on their rights in sport.

We strongly believe that sport has the power to transform lives. We aim to ensure that all women and girls have the right to participate free from abuse and discrimination of any kind.

The following submission is to contribute to the examination of the issue of violence against women and girls in sports to be presented to the UN General Assembly in October 2024.

## Forms of Violence against Girls and Women

Violence against girls and women in sport is experienced at all levels of sport from recreational, competitive, and high-performance. Although much of the available research on the prevalence of violence in sport is focused on athletes as the victims, there is evidence that violence is experienced by all ages and types of participants in all areas of the sport eco-system. UN Women and UNESCO's Tool Kit: "Tackling Violence Against Women and girls in Sport Violence against Girls and Women in Sport", reports globally, 21% of females experienced one form of sexual abuse at least once as a child in sport. Although sexual violence is the most studied area of violence impacting girls and women, there are several different forms of violence in sport, often with higher percentages of female victims. Also, most criminal cases studied are between a female athlete and their coach, whereas few cases get reported or go to the courts. Violence in sport is much broader than criminal acts of violence.

Violence in sport is often classified into categories of psychological, physical, and sexual violence. Within each category there are different acts of violence. For example, psychological violence (often referred to as emotional abuse) represents the highest prevalence rates of all forms of abuse and the second most documented form of interpersonal violence after sexual violence and is frequently reported by athletes. It can include acts such as bullying, ridicule, humiliation, intimidation, online abuse other forms of verbal abuse and neglect. (Note, neglect is its own category of abuse as it can be neglect

to care from physical as well as psychological needs). In terms of exposure to psychological violence, multiple studies show elevated exposure in women, disabled, LGBTQ+ athletes, elite athletes, and those training 16 hours or more weekly. Prevalence rates range between **21% and 79%** (Bermon, 2021; Hartill, 2021; Marsollier, 2021; McPherson, 2017; Ohlert, 2021, with **girls and women** experiencing significantly higher rates of abuse than male participants).

Physical violence can include for example, beatings, slapping and grabbing, forced over training and other actions that lead to physical harm. Available studies show prevalence estimates range from 4% to 66% for physical violence (Bermon, 2021; Hartill, 2021; Marsollier, 2021; McPherson, 2017a; McPherson, 2017b; Ohlert, 2021; Pankowiak, 2023; Parent, 2021; Parent, 2022; Peltola, 2017; Stafford, 2013; Veldhoven, 2022; Vertommen, 2016; Vertommen, 2022; Willson, 2022). These figures include male and female respondents, but **females experienced higher levels than males**.

Sexual violence can range from sexual harassment to actual sexual abuse including rape. In the reviewed literature, the prevalence in sport ranges from 44% to 86%, with most studies utilizing a low threshold measure (having experienced at least one event) (Hartill, 2021; Ohlert, 2021; Pankowiak, 2023; Parent, 2021; Parent, 2022; Veldhoven, 2022; Vertommen, 2016; Vertommen, 2022; Willson, 2022). Sexual harassment prevalence rates showed a range of 11% to 78%, while sexual abuse showed a range of 0.5% and 12%.

These rates of violence are strong indicators of the critical need for change within the sport sector to manage and ensure that sport meets its potential as a contributor to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and building healthy and active global citizens.

### **Human rights of women and girls in sports violated because of the exposure of women and girls in sports to violence or the risk of violence:**

The categorizing of violence in sport is used to assist us in the understanding of interpersonal violence. Violence is a complex act; the categories often intersect, and victims may suffer from more than one form of violence at a time, especially if they have intersection of identities. The psychological and physical impacts of sport-related interpersonal violence on girls and women coupled with other factors such as economic barriers, access to facilities and activities that limit their participation in sports negates their Rights. In particularly their right to good physical and mental health, to equal participation in their community, and the right to protective systems such as security and protection from harm. Violence directly contradicts the Convention on the Rights of the Child – for example, particularly **Article 2, Article 19, Article 24, Article 31**. As well as the Convention of Universal Human Rights, and The Rights of the Child, violence directly contravenes The Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

On a global scale the sport sector is not adequately prepared to eliminate or manage systems to protect or respond to violence against its participants, regardless of gender identity.

### **Causes of Violence Against Girls and Women**

There are many different causes of violence against girls and women participating in sports. Some examples informed by research include:

- Systemic discrimination (a threat to athlete welfare).

- Power imbalances not only between the coach and athlete but can be peer to peer, or management to participant/volunteer.
- The normalization of abusive practices as part of participating in sports, coupled with a win at all cost attitudes.
- Cultural and religious beliefs.
- Patriarchal societies where there is a systemic bias against women,
- Sexual orientation and gender identity,
- Age and sport level
- Disability
- Race and ethnicity
- Lack of systems and support to report, monitor and require accountability for acts of violence.
- Lack of recognition or acceptance of the pervasive nature of violence in sport.

### **Groups of Girls and Women Experiencing Violence:**

#### **Female athletes:**

Most research has dealt with the prevalence of violence in sport from a gender perspective. The rates of violence against the female athlete are much higher than male athletes. Sexual harassment and abuse victimization in a recent study was reported by one in three elite athletes.

#### **Children participating in sports:**

Recent research is demonstrating that young girls and recreational participants in sport are often exposed to violence at a rate of nearly one in two recreational athletes and reference students, respectively. The recreational violence is more prone to be psychological and sexual violence from sport leaders and peers while elite athletes have higher rates of physical abuse particularly due to over training and performance factors. All participants' health and wellbeing are impacted both physically and mentally.

#### **Athletes and other sport participants expressing sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTQ+):**

A more recent and serious situation is the issue of 'sexual orientation and gender identity' in sports. Persons identifying as LGBTQ+ particularly Trans women are experiencing high levels of discrimination and negative actions limiting access to sports. This is impacting all girls and women. Related to this is that sport is largely a binary place. Athletes who do not conform to this binary based on sexual orientation and gender identity, challenge beliefs, and often face discrimination and violence in sport. Again, this violence is higher for female than males especially with the sport practice of sex testing.

The fear or excuse of fairness in sport is becoming an argument that is discriminatory and impacting the rights to a safe environment for women and girls.

Before reaching puberty, evidence suggests that gender disparities in neuromuscular development are minimal, thus supporting the inclusion of trans children in sports activities. Typically, both boys and girls exhibit similar developmental progressions, with variations in motor skills attributed to factors such as genetics, prior athletic experiences, and environmental influences. Studies present mixed findings regarding gender-based disparities in gross motor competence and fundamental motor skills, with girls often excelling in locomotor and fine motor abilities, while boys may demonstrate advantages in object control skills. However, the underlying reasons for these differences remain inconclusive, with additional factors like weight status, physical activity levels, and socioeconomic background influencing motor skill

proficiency. Moreover, prior to puberty, boys and girls generally exhibit comparable levels of physical strength, speed, and endurance. Biologically, there is scant evidence to warrant gender-based segregation in sports and physical activities during pre-pubertal stages.

There is nothing “simple” about the Binary. Researchers say there are more than 200 genetic differences other than sex that affect athletic ability. There are at least 40 medical categories of ways that differences in anatomy may develop in infancy and childhood. Estimates are that .05 to .9 percent of births develop intersex characteristics. One to three percent of the population do not fit the Binary. It is relatively commonplace for medical personnel (in clinical specializations) to consult with parents to make sure that clinical and surgical interventions are correct as some anatomical features may be abnormal. (See citations below)

Trans women are a different population than intersex, however scholar-researcher Madelaine Pape was stated that elite trans sportswomen have a prevalence of .02% of the population. If the Olympic principles of fairness and inclusion have meaning, they apply to Transwomen. Any well-meaning individual would grasp that this is a complex situation calling for language and action that emphasize the need for collaboration and a commitment to compromise so that all person’s needs and efforts are acknowledged. Needed is creativity and a willingness to re-imagine traditional protocols that fail to recognize new circumstances. Instead, one finds inflammatory rhetoric that damages and stigmatized target individuals, even if they are children.

It is imperative that protection for trans athletes to prevent the health impacts of interpersonal violence are put in place and followed. Sport is not a welcoming or safe space for trans individuals.

The “language of science” is not to be found. Claims are designed to incite fear and division, incivility and even violence. Individuals with opposing views are maligned. (See pages 73-76 in L. Blade book, UNSPORTING).

The claims of those pursuing Trans bans are exaggerated, inconsistent and, often, fallacious. The work put forward to support the flaunted motto “the science is clear” features these terminal flaws:

- Absence of research based on Trans women study participants;
- No “control/experimental group” features;
- Little to nothing about the study is “blind” to participants;
- Literature reviews are outdated;
- Consistent overclaims of importance;
- Involvement of researchers with vested interest in outcome.

Of particular concern is the obfuscation of research on children. Individuals and organizations insisting on Trans bans claim to be non-transphobic. However, in virtually every opportunity they have taken to speak out or testify in legislative types of hearings, they have favored bans extending through public schools (Kindergarden-12<sup>th</sup> grade), and other schools who compete against public schools.

### **Girls and Women with a disability**

Athletes with disabilities are a high risk for violence. Studies are indicating there are significant differences in rates of violence based on dis/ability. Generally, athletes with a disability experience social and financial discrimination and suffer the effects of labelling and lack of respect. There is a need for more research in this area as inequities are present at all levels of the sport sector.

## **Responsibilities of the State and non-State actors in Prevention:**

It is the responsibility of the State to uphold its commitment to the UN Conventions to which they have signed. Violence in sport is systemic and requires education, legislation, and systems to manage reporting, investigations, sanctioning, and support/recourse for survivors of violence. Without these systems, girls and women will continue to lack the physical and mental health benefits provided by participation.

## **Recommendations:**

It is important that States:

- Implement laws to hold perpetrators accountable and support survivors of violence against girls and women.
- Develop independent systems from the sport sector, for reporting, investigating and sanctioning incidents of abuse in sport.
- Provide a national legal system outlawing abuse and sex testing and ensuring sport specific statutes are present.
- Provide, or advocate for, financial resource ensuring support and services are available for victims of violence in sports.
- Contribute to the development of a rights-based governance culture in sport through education and policy.
- Support on-going research and evaluation to measure prevalence and change.

The sport sector needs to:

- Understand the variables associated with discrimination and their links to violence against girls and women.
- Encourage participation in research and incorporation of findings into policy.
- Develop safeguarding policies in collaboration with athletes and other sport stakeholders.
- Develop reporting systems and mechanisms of recourse.
- Develop preventive programs targeting elite and recreational athletes.
- Ensure security and support for victims of violence and encourage trauma informed care/practice training of entourage and coaches.
- Identify sport specific risks of violence and mitigation practices.
- Encourage trauma informed care/practice training of entourage and coaches.
- Eliminate sex testing from any policy or protocols.
- Encourage translation of knowledge and practice to members.

In summary the sport sector needs to accept that violence is systemic within the sport eco-system, take action to change the behaviors and environment and ensure participation for all girls and women is safe and allows them to benefit from the participating.

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