

# **WSI POSITION STATEMENT**

## **SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE OF GIRLS AND WOMEN IN SPORT**

*According to The commission on the Status of Women in the United Nations , the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Examples mentioned are: Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere (The Commission on the Status of Women in the United Nations 200)1. The most comprehensive international policy statements about gender-based violence have been the Declaration Against Violence Against women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993, and the Platform for Action from the UN fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Both documents define gender-based violence as a violation of women’s human rights and a form of discrimination that prevents women from participating fully in society and fulfilling their potentials as human beings (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2000).*

### **Context:**

Awareness of sexual harassment and abuse grew during the 1980s and 1990s as a consequence of earlier initiatives for gender equity and against gender discrimination. There is much anecdotal evidence of physical, emotional and sexual abuses of females by male coaches and peers in both Asian and African countries and research evidence of the problem in even the world’s leading sporting countries. In Australia, Norway and Canada, for example, high levels of harassment have been reported in athlete surveys. Research knowledge on this subject now underpins both harassment-free sport and child protection policy initiatives which should have practical benefits for *all* athletes, whether male or female.

### **Trust and authority:**

Sport frequently involves close personal relationships, both among groups of athletes and between individual athletes and their coaches or leaders. The trust that develops between the athlete and leader is often regarded as an essential part of training for success. Leaders are most often (but not exclusively) male so the gender order within sport is an exaggerated version of that found outside sport, with males holding most of the positions of authority. Many girls with female teachers in their early athletic years are passed on to male coaches when they show talent and begin to climb the sporting ladder. This often reinforces the

view that only males can be good leaders and that women should defer to the 'superior' knowledge and skill of men in sport. It also makes it even more difficult for females to report men who harass or abuse them sexually since they are often disbelieved or suffer recriminations.

There is also evidence of high levels of sexual bullying between athletes, sometimes serious enough to cause an athlete to leave her sport. It is easy for more powerful individuals, whether senior male peers or coaches, to take advantage of those with less power, using demeaning sexually harassing behaviour - such as sexist jokes or unwanted touching - or in the most extreme cases abusing them sexually, emotionally or physically. In the most serious cases it is thought that the abuser is motivated by a desire to control the athlete: he may thus use sex to achieve and maintain power, rather than power to achieve sexual gratification.

### **Gender and sexuality:**

Sexual exploitation affects both males and females athletes and may be perpetrated by both adult authority figures and by athletes themselves. Given the gender distribution in sport, and the over-representation of males in coaching and other authority positions, it is much more likely that perpetrators of sexual exploitation will be males. The sexually abusive coach is frequently a kind of 'father or mother figure' for the girl athlete, especially where her parents or carers are either absent or show no interest in her sporting progress. Homophobia is linked to sexually exploitative behaviour, often where the perpetrator is himself uncertain about his sexual identity and seeking to reinforce his own perceived boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable. Much of the sexual ridicule perpetrated by male athletes and non-athletes against females in sport is thought to be associated with uncertainties about sexuality and the challenges that female athletes pose to traditional notions of femininity. Sexual denigration in sport is also linked to the rigid sex divisions (into male and female sports) that no longer apply to many other areas of cultural consumption, such as dress.

### **Hazing:**

Sexual exploitation can also occur in group settings where senior athletes engage 'rookies' (newcomers) in bullying, physically challenging or sexually explicit rituals as part of hazing or initiation rites. Such rituals have been observed in some women's sports but are much more commonly associated with male sports, especially traditional team sports. As women's sports become more widespread some have also begun to mimic the hazing and other practices characteristic of traditional men's sports in order to try to be accepted by men in sport. Girls and women who lack confidence or who feel anxious about their athletic identity may fall prey to such practices much more easily than those for whom sporting status is part of a self assured identity.

### **Resilience building through sport:**

In addition to its health and fitness benefits, sport has long been promoted as a medium for the development of self-confidence and assertiveness. Physical fitness helps to develop self-confidence and this, in turn, can assist with building an individual's capacity to resist sexually harassing behaviours. Self-confident athletes with strong family support are less likely to exhibit the vulnerability that marks out a potential victim of a sexual abuser.

### **Risk of sexual exploitation in sport:**

In any sports club there will be a number of young athletes who have suffered sexual abuse in their family. These individuals require particular support and care in order to avoid them being targeted a second time. Sports which involve early peaking i.e. where elite level performance is reached in the lower teenage years, at or around puberty, are thought to present more risk of sexual exploitation to athletes than those sports with higher peaking ages, since this time coincides with the transition from child to adult during which sexual identity and maturity are achieved. At the club level, female athletes may fall prey to their 'sporting idols' – senior male or female athletes or coaches - in whom they may place unqualified trust. At the elite level, girl athletes are often expected to accept 'adult' responsibilities such as arranging travel or foreign currency. Their athletic development or 'sport age' is thus well in advance of their social and physical development, which can create tensions and sexual uncertainty. It should also be remembered that some athletes with disabilities are less well equipped to defend themselves against sexual harassment or assault because of difficulties with mobility or communication. These athletes may therefore need particular protection.

### **Recommendations for minimising the risk of sexual exploitation in sport**

1. adopt harassment-free policies and procedures that are in line with international ethical and human rights statutes and that are inclusive;
2. encourage open debate about sexual harassment, homophobia and exploitation of women and men in sport;
3. embed both an equitable balance of males and females in all roles and also democratic leadership styles to mitigate against abuses of power;
4. act as advocates of harassment-free sport through education and training programs for every member of the sport;
5. actively monitor the effectiveness of all anti-harassment initiatives;
6. initiate research into men's, women's and children's experiences of abuse and bullying within their sport;
7. give active representation to athletes in decision-making at every level of the sport.