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Performance Level and Sexual Harassment Prevalence Among Female Athletes in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article investigates whether there is a relationship between the sport performance level of female athletes inside the sport (at clubs, competitions, or training events) and outside sport (in family or community settings) and the likelihood that they will be victims of sexual harassment. The study sample consisted of 595 women from the Czech Republic and was divided into three performance groups: elite, non-elite/competing, and exercisers. No significant differences were found between the groups in relation to overall cases of sexual harassment, but when their experiences of sexual harassment inside and outside sport were examined, the picture changed. The chances of being harassed by someone in sport increased with performance level, from 29.7% among the exercisers to 55.2% among the elite-level athletes. However, the highest proportion of women experiencing sexual harassment was seen in the group of the exercisers outside of sport (73%). This article discusses the prevalence of sexual harassment in relation to the gender order in Czech society.

The results presented in this article are from a larger research project on issues related to women in sport in the Czech Republic. The project was initiated by the Women and Sport Committee of the Czech Olympic Committee in cooperation with the Czech Sport Union. The goal of the research was to assess the present role and situation of women in sport organizations in the Czech Republic. One of the main research questions was that of female athletes' experiences of sexual harassment.

Previous research on sexual harassment among athletes has generally been guided by assumptions about the pattern of gender relations in sport (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2007). In particular, sport has often been conceptualized as a male-

dominated culture, which facilitates various forms of discrimination against female athletes, including sexual harassment from coaches and male athletes (Messner, 2002; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Volkwein, Schnell, Sherwood, & Livezey, 1997). A Norwegian study indicated that female elite athletes suffer higher levels of sexual harassment while inside sport (from authority figures) than their non-sport peers experience outside sport (from teachers or supervisors) (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2003).

Conversely, researchers have argued that athletic participation can *protect* female athletes from sexual victimization through a variety of social-psychological mechanisms (Choi, 2000; Haywood & Dworkin, 2003; Miller, Sabo, Melnick, Farrell, & Barnes, 2000). These accounts suggest that sport is a source of empowerment in many girls' lives, helping them to develop a positive body image and identity and to make confident choices about relationships and sexuality. To this extent, and within the context of research and theory on sexual harassment prevention, sport might be said to protect females from some forms of sexual victimization (Fasting et al., 2003). Fasting et al. also suggested that sport offers some protection to female athletes because it develops their strength, self-confidence, and sense of physical adeptness, characteristics that have previously been associated with rape resistance and avoidance (Bart, 1981). However, limited support for this hypothesis was found in a large dataset from college-aged students in the USA (Fasting, Brackenridge, Miller, & Sabo, 2008).

In relation to sport performance level, most of the research on the prevalence of sexual harassment in sport has been conducted on elite or former elite-level female athletes (Brackenridge, 2001). The study of Norwegian elite-level female athletes by Fasting, Brackenridge, and Sundgot-Borgen (2000) found a higher prevalence of sexual harassment among the very best athletes (those who had participated in a World Championship and/or the Olympic Games) compared with elite-level female athletes in the sample who had not participated in such international championships.

Based on her qualitative research in the Netherlands, Cense (1997) suggested that the risk factors for sexual harassment in top-level sport are different from those in recreational sport. In recreational sport the power

relationship was less influential than the 'organization sexuality' (Hearn, Sheppard, Tancred-Sheriff, & Burrell, 1989) and the gender culture of sport clubs. This culture was often characterized by sexual permissiveness, with many remarks and jokes from men about the appearance and sex life of women.

In their study of sexual harassment and abuse in Australian sport, Leahy et al. (2002) compared prevalence data between elite and club-level athletes: the elite group reported significantly higher rates of sexual abuse in sport than did the club group but, as with other studies of sexual harassment in sport (Kirby, Greaves, & Hanvkiivsky, 2000; Volkwein et al., 1997), data were not collected from exercisers. Accordingly, relatively little is known about the comparative sexual harassment experiences of non-elite athletes and exercisers. Further, we know of no published data on this topic in former communist countries.

From the literature, we identified the following research questions:

1. Does the overall prevalence of sexual harassment of female athletes differ when they are inside and outside of sport?
2. Does the prevalence of sexual harassment differ between female elite athletes, non-elite/competing athletes, and exercisers?
3. Are there any differences in the prevalence of sexual harassment among elite athletes, non-elite athletes, and exercisers when inside and outside of sport?

By 'inside sport' we refer to sexual harassment perpetrated by someone involved in a club, competition, or training event, such as a coach or a peer athlete. By 'outside of sport' we mean sexual harassment by someone unconnected with the participants' sport activity in the family or community, such as a relative, friend, or stranger.

Material and Methods

Sample Characteristics

A total of 595 women participated in the study, comprising 169 elite-level athletes, 212 from the club

level and 214 sport students. The sport students were recruited from the three universities in Czech Republic where it is possible to study sport. Most of the students were in their third or fourth year. The participants lived all over the country, but most of the elite athletes lived in Prague.

The participants were divided into three performance-level groups for the purpose of analyzing the sexual harassment data: elite-level athletes (n=229), non-elite level athletes (n=224), and exercisers (n=142). The criteria for inclusion in the elite group were that the athletes trained at least four times a week and had participated in an Olympic Games, a European Championship, or a World Championship, or had competed at the international level within the previous 1-2 years. The non-elite level/competing group consisted of those athletes who were competing in sport but who did not qualify for the elite group. The exercisers were those who simply practiced a sport but who did not compete.

The average age of the participants was 22.8 years with the youngest being 15 years old and the oldest 55 years old. The elite athletes were the youngest (mean=21.8 years) and the exercisers the oldest (mean=23.7 years).

Methods

Data were gathered through a questionnaire, which was written in English, then translated into Czech and then back into English to ensure that the Czech version had the correct meaning. It was also pilot tested on a group of 10 people representing different levels of involvement in sport.

Data collection took place where the athletes were training and where the students were studying. The reasons for not doing the survey through the mail were that we wanted to secure the highest possible response rate and wanted the participants to have the opportunity to ask questions if there was something in the questionnaire that they did not understand. The questionnaires were coded and analyzed with SPSS version 13 (Statistical Program Package for Social Sciences). Chi square tests were used to test the relationship between variables in the cross-tables. Testing for differences between experiences of sexual harassment inside sport

and experiences of sexual harassment outside of sport was carried out by the use of a nonparametric binomial test. This is an exact test of the statistical significance of deviation from one distribution of observations in a category (experience of sexual harassment inside sport), compared with the distribution of observations in another (experience of sexual harassment outside of sport).

Within the overall questionnaire on sport experiences, three questions measuring the athletes' experiences of sexual harassment were asked. It is important to note that for a sexual attention to be defined as sexual harassment it had to have been experienced as unwanted or threatening, troublesome, insulting, or offensive (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997). One issue frequently discussed in the research literature on sexual harassment is that women will report experiencing unwanted sexually harassing behaviors but not necessarily label those experiences as sexual harassment (Barak, Fisher, & Houston, 1992; Welsh, Carr, MacQuarrie, & Huntley, 2006). For example, in a comparative study among American and Brazilian female students there was a large discrepancy between the prevalence of sexual harassment when objectively and subjectively defined and measured (Barak, 1997). Accordingly, we deemed it particularly important to measure the participants' objectively experienced behaviors, particularly because sexual harassment was virtually a non-issue in the Czech Republic, both in sport and in society at large, when data gathering was underway. Therefore, we asked the athletes if they had ever experienced the following situations:

- a) Unwanted physical contact or body contact (e.g., pinching, hugging, fondling, being kissed against your will, etc.).
- b) Repeated unwanted sexually suggestive glances, comments, or teasing and jokes about your body, your clothes, your private life, etc.
- c) Ridiculing of your sport performance and of you as an athlete because of your gender or your sexuality (e.g., "Soccer is not suitable for girls").

For each of these questions, participants were asked to indicate on the survey whether they had experienced it from a male or female coach, a male or female peer-

athlete, a male or female member of the sport management team, a male or female teacher, a male or female peer-student, a male or female family member, and/or from other males or females outside the sport or family. In presenting the results, *experience of sexual harassment* means that a respondent marked one or more forms of sexual harassment on the survey; it does not indicate the severity, frequency, or total number of these experiences. *Experience of sexual harassment from someone inside sport* means that a respondent marked one or more of the categories 'from a coach,' 'members of the sport management team,' and/or 'peer athletes.' *Experience of sexual harassment from someone outside sport* means that one or more of the following categories were marked: 'teacher,' 'peer-student,' 'family member,' and/or 'males or females outside the sport family'.

Trustworthiness

We could find no trace of formal ethics procedures for social sciences in the Czech Republic when this study was undertaken. Therefore, we followed careful guidelines that conform to good research practice elsewhere (American Psychological Association, 2003). Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed that the results would be presented in such a way that it would be impossible to recognize any individual, or even any specific sport. Some very high-profile female athletes participated in the study so, in order to secure valid answers from them, it was important that they trusted us completely in relation to confidentiality. This was also important for all participants, since some fairly personal and sensitive questions were asked.

Other factors that might have influenced the validity of the data were coding and data entry. Two research assistants systematically checked each other's coding to reduce errors. In addition, further visual scrutiny of the data was conducted to identify data-entry mistakes. We therefore have no reason to believe that the data do not have a high degree of validity. The participants in the study represented 68 different sports and physical activities in total. In addition, we are confident that there was a good geographical representation from across the country and that the results can thus be generalized to other Czech female athletes beyond our sample.

Figure 1

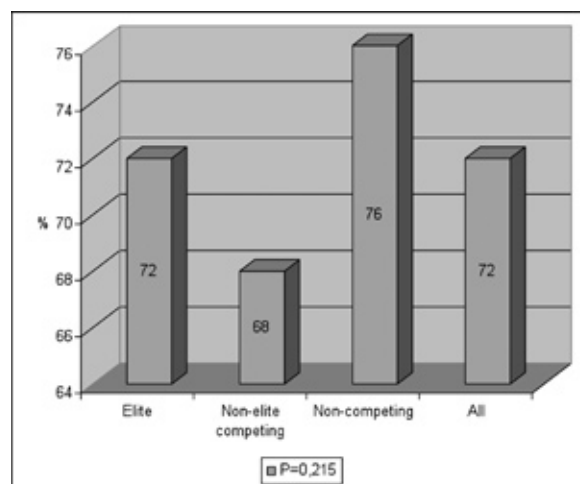


Figure 1. Female Athletes' Experience of Sexual Harassment and Performance Level

Results

Altogether, 72% of the athletes who responded to this survey had experienced some form of sexual harassment. As found in other studies (Fasting et al., 2003), the Czech athletes had experienced sexual harassment more often from someone outside of sport (58.3%) than from someone inside sport (44.9%). Therefore, regarding research question 1, "Does the prevalence of sexual harassment of female athletes overall differ when they are inside or outside of sport?" the answer for these Czech athletes is 'yes.'

Figure 1 shows that there are no significant differences between the three performance-level groups in relation to the sexual harassment experienced. The answer to research question 2, "Does the prevalence of sexual harassment differ between female elite athletes, non-elite/competing athletes, and exercisers?" is therefore 'no.'

Finally, regarding research question 3, "Are there any differences in the prevalence of sexual harassment among elite athletes, non-elite athletes, and exercisers when inside or outside of sport?" Table 1 shows that the chances of being harassed from someone in sport increase with performance level, from 29.7% among the

exercisers to 55.2% among the elite-level athletes. But there is a much higher chance of being sexually harassed by someone outside of sport for a woman belonging to the exercise group (73.2%) compared with one who is a sport competitor (53.2%) or elite athlete (54.1%). Among the elite-level athletes there is no difference in the prevalence of sexual harassment experienced inside or outside of sport. The difference that was found in relation to research question one is therefore only valid for the two other performance groups, whose participants experienced more sexual harassment outside than inside the sporting environment.

Discussion

The prevalence of sexual harassment among this group of Czech athletes is very high, both inside and outside of sport, when compared with data from similar studies in sport from other countries. But it is almost impossible to make confident comparisons of harassment prevalence rates internationally due to differences in sampling procedures, methodological approaches, vocabulary and connotative meaning of questionnaire items, anonymity and confidentiality of disclosures, etc. (Barak, 1997).

The comparatively high prevalence of sexual harassment among this particular participant sample should be set in the context of the overall gender order of Czech society (Vaskova, 2006). Equal rights between women and men in a society and whether sexual harassment is prohibited by law may be crucial factors affecting the prevalence of sexual harassment. Equal rights and harassment legislation did not exist in the Czech

Republic when the data for this project were being collected. On the other hand, studies from other countries which have had such legislation in place for some years indicate that the problems appear to be more complicated (Timmermann & Bagemer, 1999). Vaskova points out that both past and current sociological research reveals that a degree of tolerance for mild forms of sexual harassment is characteristic of Czech society. This finding is also supported by Vesinova-Kalivodova (2005), who argues that the Czech Republic is both a pre-feminist and a post-communist society. In that context, substantial differences are evident between the new and old democracies in relation to the European Union and its policy on gender equality. Gender relations in these post-communist societies have not yet been transformed to match those in older democracies, in part due to the chauvinist culture associated with the communist past of these countries (Girginov, 2004; Haerpfer, 2002).

Many authors have stated that sexual harassment is primarily about control and power, but especially the kind of power that is based on the gender order—in other words, the privileges of heterosexual masculinity. From a feminist perspective, men's power over women has been related not only to individual men with power over women but also, according to Connell (2002), to patriarchal power that has been institutionalised and officially supported. Interestingly, 69% of athletes in this study had experienced some sexual harassment from men and 28% from women, but only 3% had some sexual harassment exclusively from women and 36% exclusively from men. This reinforces previous research that shows that males are overwhelmingly responsible

Table 1

Female Athletes' Experience of Sexual Harassment and Performance Level Inside

Performance Group	Inside Sport		Outside Sport		Non-parametric Binomial Test - Inside Sport vs. Outside Sport
	n	%	n	%	
Elite	123	55.2	120	54.1	p=0.391
Competing	94	43.9	115	53.2	p=0.004
Exercising	41	29.7	101	73.2	p=0.000
Total	258	44.9	336	58.3	p=0.000
Chi-Square Test - Performance Groups	p=0.00		p=0.00		

for perpetrating sexual harassment (Gruber & Morgan, 2005). Nonetheless, it also leads us to question earlier totalizing concepts such as 'patriarchy' that have been used to explain gender domination (Whelehan, 1995). The involvement of women in sexual harassment has yet to be clearly explained both within and outside of sport. It is possible that, as women's sport increases in prominence and cultural relevance, women begin to adopt negative male habits such as sexual harassment (Brackenridge, 2001).

The higher percentage of sexual harassment experienced by the athletes overall outside of sport compared to inside sport is primarily due to the experiences of the non-elite/competing respondents. In relation to the question of whether sport affords athletes some protection from sexual harassment, the data here offer some confirmation of this. The findings show that being a competitive female athlete does appear to offer more protection from being harassed outside of sport than is the case for exercisers. Being physically strong and having high self esteem—which are outcomes associated with female sport—may thus protect women from harassing situations in general (Fasting et al., 2008). However, this protective effect does not seem evident inside sport, since the highest risk group within sport is the elite athletes. This finding may indicate something particular about the culture of elite-level sport. The elite sport milieu is still structurally dominated by men (Women, Leadership and the Olympic Movement, 2004) and by an unequal power balance between men and women. This is also the case in the Czech Republic

(Fasting & Knorre, 2005). In addition to the emerging research trend showing increased risk at the highest performance levels, identified above, there is also some evidence from practice that coaches at this level are more resistant than their peers at lower performance levels to educational interventions that attempt to transform coach-athlete power relations and culture in elite sport (Collins, 2004).

Conclusions

This study examined the prevalence of sexual harassment experiences reported inside and outside of sport by female athletes at three performance levels. The study helps to illuminate previously unreported data about the sexual harassment of female athletes in an under-researched cultural location—the Czech Republic. To avoid perpetuating the bias of white, middle class, social democratic cultures in sport science and medicine, it is vital that systematic research is conducted in all ideological and political locations. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) Medical Commission has produced a Consensus Statement on Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport (IOC, 2007) that urges practical steps to improve athlete safety and health. At the same time, UNICEF is working toward the implementation of a global violence-prevention strategy and now includes sport within this remit (Brackenridge et al., in press). Only through international cooperation, and with a strong evidence base, will such initiatives have an impact on female athletes' safety and health. ■

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