

# Sexual Violence Prevention: The Critical Role of Sport

vawlearningnetwork.ca



Sport is an active part of many individuals' lives from a young age. There are numerous benefits to involvement in sport including fostering relationships, supporting physical health, building leadership, promoting confidence, and improving wellbeing. As such, sport can be a powerful and effective means to transmit values of safety and wellbeing in society.

One area of opportunity for sport organizations is to set an example as leaders in ending sexual violence. [Sexual violence](#) refers to acts done without consent either by using sexual means or by targeting sexuality. Included in the continuum of sexual violence are acts such as unwanted sexual advances, slanting comments with sexual overtones, groping, unwanted sexual contact, sexual harassment, and rape. Women, girls, and gender diverse people are more likely to experience sexual violence.<sup>1</sup>

**Sexual violence is intertwined with rape culture. In response to rape culture, there is a need to build consent culture.**

Rape culture reflects beliefs that consent is not necessary so that sexual violence is normalized and survivors are blamed for sexual violence. Rape culture manifests in myths that promote sexist, racialized, ableist, and further oppressive discourses.

Common examples of rape myths in sport are:

“Suck it up - we need you in the court!”  
“Their uniforms are so slutty... they're asking for it.”  
“You're so sensitive - I was just joking...”

Consent culture normalizes asking a person for consent and respecting their response. [Consent is vocal, continual, clear, and engaged](#). Building consent culture requires addressing how power and privilege inform consent and sexual violence.

Common examples of consent culture in sport are:

“What do you need right now?”  
“Uniforms don't equal consent.”  
“I'm sorry that my joke was offensive.”

This Backgrounder explores how rape culture in sport contributes to the presence of sexual violence more broadly in society and offers ways to build consent culture in sport to promote healthy and safe environments for all. It seeks to support the existing work taking place within sport organizations and anti-sexual violence agencies to end sexual violence, in and outside sport.

## Sexual Violence in Sport

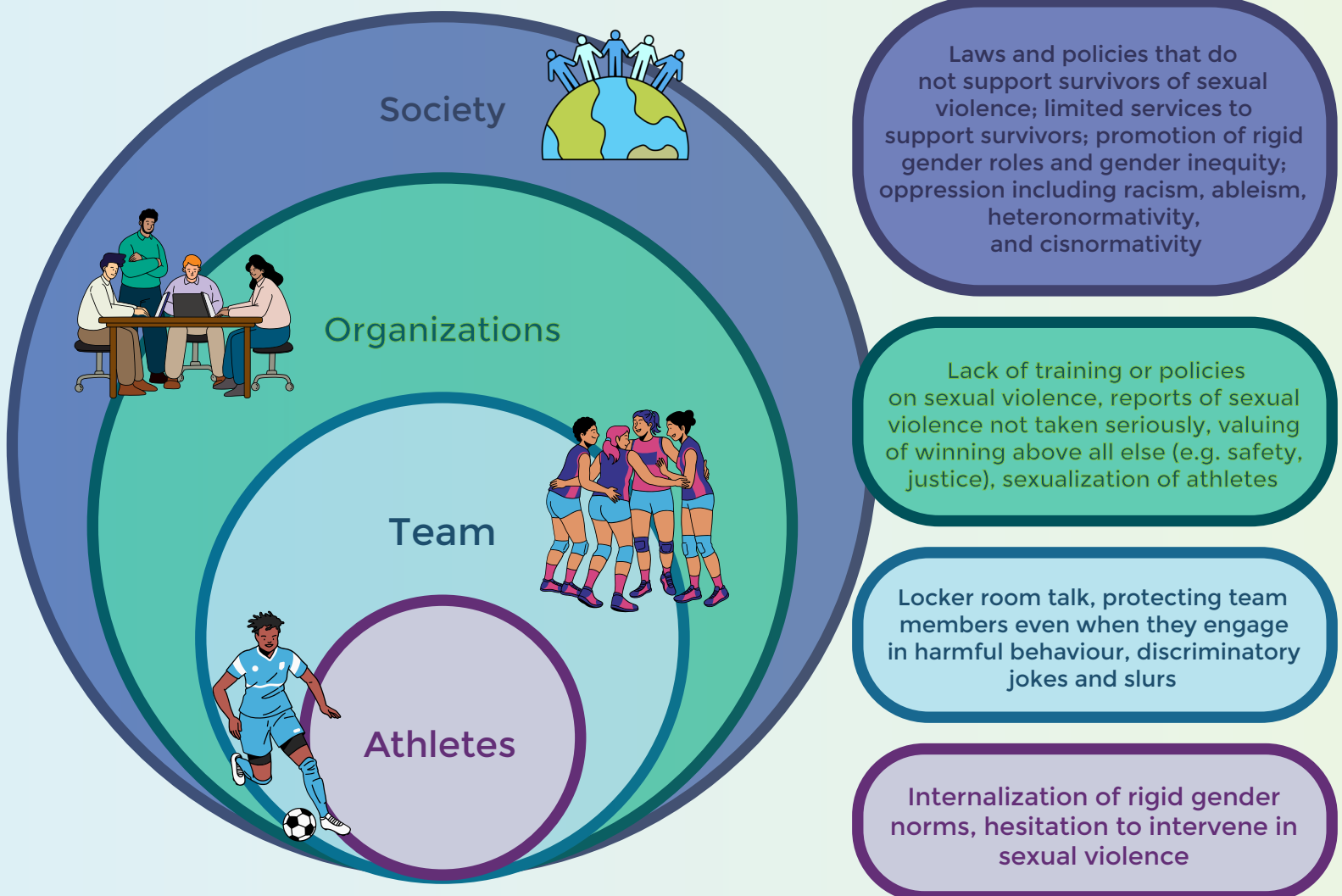
It is essential to acknowledge as well that sexual violence occurs within sport organizations against members. It can occur among all members of sport (e.g., athletes, administration, volunteers, coaching staff, medical professionals). Learn more in this Resource Spotlight with Gretchen Kerr and Erin Willson on [Maltreatment in Sport: Current Knowledge and Future Directions](#).

**Addressing rape culture and building consent culture benefits everyone, including members of sport!**



# Rape Culture Manifests at All Levels of Sport

Values and practices that enable rape culture occur in many contexts. How they may occur in sport specifically includes:



## Moving from Rape Culture to Consent Culture

This section explores two major ways that rape culture can manifest in sport and how to respond by building consent culture:

### Rape Culture: Enforcement of Rigid Gender Norms

Sport contexts can encourage harmful and restrictive ideas about gender that deny gender equity and diversity.

For men and boys: Sport can promote hypermasculinity associated with strength and dominance that denies the need for consent (for example, phrases like “you’re a man – toughen up!”, “boys will be boys”, and “take what you want”).<sup>2</sup> In these ways, sport can shape ideas about masculinity including how men and boys should and should not act. Hypermasculine values can also result in a lack of belief or dismissal of sexual violence survivors who are men and boys as it is perceived as conflicting with narratives of strength and dominance; for example, phrases like “men cannot be raped.”

For women and girls: Rigid gender norms in society tell women and girls they should be passive and submissive while sexualizing them. The result is that women and girls are viewed as sexual objects whose own voices and needs do not matter. In sport, such norms could manifest in sexualized but not functional uniforms and media reporting on sport that focuses on women’s and girls’ bodies.<sup>3</sup>

For gender diverse people: Gender diverse people may be excluded from social activities and spaces that promote only two genders (men and women). Their rights may be denied. In sport, this could look like not allowing transgender athletes to compete and promoting gender binaries through changing rooms and sport split by only two genders.<sup>4</sup>

Encouragement of rigid gender roles in sport may mean athletes carry such attitudes into their social lives, resulting in acts contributing to sexual violence more broadly. For instance, a boy may believe he should be sexually aggressive with a girl in the same way he is told to be aggressive on the court.

Rigid gender norms impact individuals from diverse groups in different ways. For instance:

- Racialized men face stereotypes that they are violent and aggressive which may be promoted by sport media, team mascots, and announcers.<sup>5</sup>
- Women with disabilities in sport are often excluded from mass media attention as they do not fit the ableist norms of sexual desirability.<sup>6</sup>



## Consent Culture: Creation of Safer and More Inclusive Spaces and Identities

There are many actions that can be taken within sport to create safety for athletes of all genders including:



- Create welcoming environments for all that encourage respect, communication, and diversity.
- Use inclusive language that supports diverse people and promotes healthy behaviours.
- Develop the whole athlete inclusive of education around inequity and oppression.
- Challenge rigid gender norms:
  - Promote healthy masculinities through role modelling.
  - Interrupt sexist and discriminatory language.
- Uplift diverse role models throughout sport from athletes to coaches to administration.
- Avoid objectifying and demeaning language.
- Hold media responsible for discriminatory reporting on sport.
- Advocate for equal opportunity in sport for all genders.
- Have flexible uniform policies and options.

## Promising Practices

- The [Toronto Maple Leafs and White Ribbon Men of Quality](#) campaign role models healthy masculinities and allyship to promote gender equality in sport, at home, and in the community.
- [Creating Inclusive Environments for Trans Participants in Canadian Sport: Policy and Practice Template for Sport Organizations](#) by the [Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport](#) offers policy and practice templates to help sport organizations create their own Trans inclusion documents for all involved in sport including athletes, staff, and volunteers.
- [The Gender Equity Playbook](#) by [Canadian Women and Sport](#) helps organizations look inward to make change. By establishing good internal policies, processes, and programs, organizations can build their competence and confidence to explore and solve gender equity gaps.
- The [Outsport Toolkit: Supporting Sport Educators in Creating and Maintaining an Inclusive Sport Community based on Diversity of Gender Identities and Sexual Orientations](#) aims to address homophobia and transphobia in sport through communication, awareness-raising, training, and scientific research by using sport itself as a tool to improve inclusion in and through sport.



## Rape Culture: Normalization of Sexual Violence

When sexual violence is normalized, it is expected and accepted. Normalization can occur through:

**Jokes about sexual violence and sexism:** The regular use of sexist attitudes, rape jokes, and “locker room talk” contributes to the normalization of sexual violence.<sup>7</sup> For instance, boys are viewed as “manly” if they joke in sexually abusive manners, but the person who calls out such behaviours is labelled as “weak” or “coward.” Coaches, clubs, and institutions have the responsibility to discourage and stop the use of sexist and abusive language to address rape culture within sport.

**Victim-blaming:** Victim-blaming harmfully questions people who experienced sexual violence about their role in the violence. It stems from the false belief that people always get what they deserve. Instead of exploring the root causes of violence and the actions of the person who harmed, victim-blaming targets the victim with phrases like:

- “You said you wanted to drink with them to celebrate the win.”
- “Why did you go back to the hotel room? Didn’t you know what was going to happen?”
- “She knew what she was doing.”
- “They are making up things because they want attention.”

**Protection of those who cause harm:** A focus on protecting the person who harmed may involve those aware staying silent or lying about what happened. It could also involve focusing on potential consequences for the person who harmed, as opposed to the harm they caused and holding them accountable. It also involves sayings like:

- “He has so much potential – one night shouldn’t take that away.”
- “They are just kids. It happens.”
- “She was confused about what consent was.”
- “We can’t let this ruin their life.”

The result of normalization is that survivors are silenced as their experiences of sexual violence are deemed acceptable, and they may be punished and shamed for seeking justice.<sup>8</sup>

Silencing disproportionately impacts marginalized groups that are told their voices do not matter or that they are just being “angry” or “difficult” when reporting sexual violence. For instance, Dr. Janelle Josephs captures how: “On one hand, racialized athletes, particularly women, are penalized more harshly for everything that they do. On the other hand, they’re assumed to be tough and resilient, and they’re under-cared for.”<sup>9</sup>



## Consent Culture: Interventions to Challenge Sexual Violence and Promote Accountability

Sport can take an active role in promoting consent culture including:

- Offer ongoing equity, consent, and bystander training.
  - Have members at all levels (e.g. athletes, coaches, medical professionals) attend.
  - Partner with existing sexual violence organizations to offer training in recognition of their critical expertise.
- Provide safety information that shares how one can seek help, sexual violence services, and culturally-informed supports.
- Listen and validate an individual's experience should they disclose sexual violence.
- Build and model consent culture. For instance:
  - Define and ask what is meant by consent and consent culture.
  - Involve athletes in understanding and learning about consent through their thoughts and experiences.
  - Ask for consent when working with athletes.
  - Invite athletes to be models of consent for others.
- Challenge broader power inequities in society including gender inequity, racism, and ableism.
- Hold those who cause harm accountable.



## Promising Practices

- [\*Be More Than a Bystander\*](#) is a training and education program that inspires change towards making communities safer. It started in 2011 as EVA BC and the BC Lions Football Club formed a partnership to provide high school students with the confidence and the skills to break the silence on gender-based violence.
- [\*Sexual Violence Prevention Tool Kit\*](#) by the [\*National Collegiate Athletic Association\*](#) provides athletics departments with collaborative strategies to support safer campus environments for all.
- [\*5 Ways You Can Call Out Your Mates for Sexist Behaviour\*](#) shares ways you can point out sexist behaviour depending on who you're talking to and what you feel comfortable with.
- [\*Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence: Online Training\*](#) offers tips on responding to victims/survivors who disclose or report an experience of sexual violence in effective and supportive ways that will sustain support and intervention from that point forward.

**Sport can be a positive force to  
end rape culture.**

**Support efforts to promote consent  
culture in sport and beyond!**



**Contact Us!**

[vawlearningnetwork.ca](http://vawlearningnetwork.ca)

[vawln@uwo.ca](mailto:vawln@uwo.ca)

[twitter.com/LNandKH](https://twitter.com/LNandKH)

[facebook.com/LNandKH](https://facebook.com/LNandKH)

[linkedin.com/company/ln-and-kh](https://linkedin.com/company/ln-and-kh)

**Western**  Centre for Research & Education on  
Violence Against Women & Children

**LEARNING NETWORK**

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Cotter, A. & Savage, L. (2019). *Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00017-eng.htm>; Jaffray, B. (2020). *Experiences of violent victimization and unwanted sexual behaviours among gay, lesbian, bisexual and other sexual minority people, and the transgender population, in Canada, 2018*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00009-eng.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Ramaeker, J. & Petrie, T. A. (2019). “Man Up!”: Exploring intersections of sport participation, masculinity, psychological distress, and help-seeking attitudes and intentions. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 20(4), 515–527. <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000198>; Adams, Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2010). Establishing and challenging masculinity: The influence of gendered discourses in organized sport. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 29(3), 278–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X10368833>; Messner, M. (1990). When bodies are weapons: Masculinity and violence in Sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 25(3), 203–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269029002500303>
- <sup>3</sup> Weaving, C. (2014). It is okay to play as long as you wear lingerie (or skimpy bikinis): A moral evaluation of the Lingerie Football League and its rebranding. *Sport in Society*, 17(6), 757–772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2014.882905>; Sailors, Teetzel, S., & Weaving, C. (2012). No Net Gain: A critique of media representations of women’s Olympic beach volleyball. *Feminist Media Studies*, 12(3), 468–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.698093>
- <sup>4</sup> Greey, A.D. (2023). A part of, yet apart from the team: Substantive membership and belonging of trans and nonbinary athletes. *The Canadian Review of Sociology*, 60(1), 154–164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12415>; Harmon, S. (2020). Gender inclusivity in sport? From value, to values, to actions, to equality for Canadian athletes. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 12(2), 255–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2019.1680415>
- <sup>5</sup> Sung, Victoria. (2010). Manhood as Commodity: The NBA as Reinforcer of Black Masculinities. *Gnovis Journal*. <https://gnovisjournal.georgetown.edu/journal/manhood-as-commodity-the-nba-as-reinforcer-of-black-masculinities>
- <sup>6</sup> Hardin, M., Lynn, S., & Walsdorf, K. (2006). Depicting the Sporting Body: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Disability in Women’s Sport/Fitness Magazines. *The Journal of Magazine Media*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmm.2006.0006>
- <sup>7</sup> Curry, T. (1991). Fraternal bonding in the locker room: A profeminist analysis of talk about competition and women. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8(2), 119–135. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.8.2.119>
- <sup>8</sup> Côté, I. (2017). A culture of entitlement, silence and protection: The Case of the University of Ottawa’s Men’s Hockey Team. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 32(1-2), 99–110. <https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/37699>
- <sup>9</sup> Joseph, J as cited in Wilson, S. (2022). “Be physical, Don’t talk, Don’t have a personality.” *Sports Net*. <https://www.sportsnet.ca/more/longform/how-sports-silence-black-female-athletes/>