

# The Right to *PLAY* Safely



A Report on Violence against Women in  
Sport & Recreation

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**CASA** house  
Centre Against Sexual Assault

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# Section 1

## Introduction to the project

### 1.1 Background to the project

The Right to Play Safely was initiated by CASA House (Centre Against Sexual Assault) and Womensport and Recreation Victoria (WSRV). The project was funded by the Victorian Women's Trust.

The project began as a response to a call from a young woman who contacted WSRV seeking assistance about an incident of sexual assault while she had been playing sport. This opened a dialogue between CASA House and WSRV about the extent of sexism and sexual violence that women faced in the sporting environment.

Anecdotal evidence from WSRV suggests that sexism and sexual violence against women is prevalent in many sporting communities. WSRV believes that this creates an environment that is unsafe for women and a barrier to many women participating in sport or recreational activity. Because of this information about the prevalence of sexual assault across a broad range of organised and less formal activities this project does not target any particular sport or organisation.

On a social level, the fear of sexual assault can impact on women's health and wellbeing. On an individual level women are at risk of suffering the effects of sexual violence in their everyday lives. These concerns are supported by a document published recently on the web site of the Australian Sports Commission which reports high levels of sexual violence against women within sporting communities (ASC, 2002).

CASA House and WSRV recognise that sexual violence against women is a symptom of the prevailing sexist attitudes and stereotypical images of women, therefore women's experience of sexual violence needs to be viewed within the context of violence against women throughout society.

### 1.2 Project rationale

There is a considerable amount of research into the issue of sexual harassment in sport. In 1998 the Australian Sports Commission surveyed 300 athletes and administrators to identify the status and nature of harassment in sport. The ASC reported:

*What was disturbing about this, is that nearly one in four males consider it acceptable to touch others uninvited in sport, more than one in two males considered sexually explicit language as part of sport and one in ten female athletes perceive sexual propositions as part of sport and therefore acceptable.(ASC, 2002)*

## • Introduction to the project •

Sexual assault in all areas of Australian society is greatly under reported. Research indicates that in 80 per cent of cases the perpetrator is known to the victim (Scott, Walker & Gilmore, 1995). One of the defining characteristics of violence is that it usually takes place when one person is in a position of power or trust over another. Participants in sport can be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, as it is an environment characterised often by close physical contact and significant emotional relationships and power dynamics such as between players and their coaches or trainers.

In January 2000 there were approximately 32 cases of sexual assault reported to the Australian Sports Commission via their web site. Some examples of these include the following:

- Softball at the national level - male coach sexually assaulted a female player.
- Roller sport at a recreation centre in NSW - offensive behaviour by a man to woman.
- Athletics at a club in Tasmania - verbal and physical harassment of female runners.
- Judo at a club in Tasmania - sexual assault of a junior female member.
- Rollerblading in a NSW neighbourhood - inappropriate comments and touching by a man of a woman.
- Women's soccer at a club in South Australia – sexual harassment of a woman by male coach.
- Gymnastics at a club in the ACT - verbal and physical abuse by a man of a woman.

These cases reflect the prevalence of sexual harassment in a range of sporting arenas and at every level. (Refer to 1.4 for definitions of sport and recreational activity.)

While the ASC research provides an indication of the extent of sexual harassment in sport, it did not endeavour to address the concerns and fears specifically identified by young women. For instance it did not attempt to ascertain whether or not young women were not participating because they were fearful of harassment or sexual assault.

The right of all women to participate in sport and recreation without threat to their personal safety provides an impetus for documenting their experiences in sporting environments.

### 1.3 CASA House philosophy

It is important to outline the philosophy of the service that CASA House delivers. It provides the basis for the all work undertaken in crisis care, support, counselling, research and public advocacy. This philosophy also underpins the research framework utilised in this project.

CASA House recognises that:

- Sexual assault is a violation of human rights and is a crime against the individual and society. Therefore, the entire community and all levels of government must take responsibility for its prevention and elimination.
- Sexual assault is both a consequence and a reinforcer of the power disparity existing between men and women. It is a violent act of power, which in the main is carried out by men against women and children.
- Sexual assault occurs along a continuum of violent behaviour that includes any sexual behaviour which makes the recipient feel uncomfortable, harassed or afraid.
- The impact of sexual assault on both the individual victim/survivor and society is multi-faceted and complex. It includes emotional, social, psychological, legal, health and political consequences.
- The impact of sexual assault can be compounded by factors relating to the stratification of society on the basis of socio-economics, class, age, ethnicity and race (Watson, 2000).

This project is consistent with both the philosophy and purpose of CASA House which is funded to provide a range of support services to victim/survivors of sexual assault. Through a variety of projects, research, publications and other activities, CASA House has consistently worked towards increasing community awareness of the issues of sexism and sexual violence against women and developing strategies aimed at changing inappropriate social values and norms of behaviour.

#### **1.4 Womensport and Recreation Victoria Inc**

Womensport and Recreation Victoria is the peak, non-government, non-profit women's sport and recreation organisation in Victoria. Its mission is to develop and support the aims of women in all aspects of sport and recreation.

The main roles of Womensport and Recreation Victoria are in:

- Organising participation programs for women.
- Research into topical issues relating to women in sport.
- Sharing information.
- Providing advice and support.
- Facilitating communication.
- Lobbying.
- Monitoring and making comment in relation to issues.
- Encouraging more women to participate in all aspects of sport and physical recreation.

## • Introduction to the project •

WSRV also commissions reviews and participates in research into the activities of women across all areas and how they pertain to sport and recreation. The aims of WSRV are to:

- Conduct projects and activities that increase the profile of women's sport and encourage greater participation by women and girls in all levels and areas of sport and recreation.
- Provide a support network and platform for women's sport and physical recreation groups to share their common problems and solutions.
- Provide support to individual and organisational members in their actions to increase the participation rates of women and girls (WSRV, 2001).

## 1.5 Language and definitions

### **Young women**

For the purpose of this project young women are defined as being between 16 - 25 years of age.

### **Sport and recreational activity**

This was taken to mean any:

- State organised sport regulated by a sporting body.
- Organised sport at a local level.
- Sport activity in a social environment.
- Sport activity at a recreational level.
- Organised sports activity in a school or club.

### **Recreational activity**

Recreational activity was interpreted to mean any physical activity that is not regulated by a sporting body, for example walking, rollerblading and so on.

### **The continuum of violence model**

The continuum of violence model (MacDonald, 1999) identifies the numerous ways in which women and children, in particular, are sexually assaulted. At one end of the continuum are forms of sexual abuse that women may experience in their everyday lives. This involves many forms of sexual harassment including leering, innuendo, and unwelcome sexual jokes and advances. Rape and aggravated rape are at the other end of the continuum.

*Sexual assault is any sexual behaviour that makes you feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened. It is sexual activity that you have not agreed to, where another person uses physical or emotional force against you.*

*(CASA Forum, 1996)*

### **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is defined in the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act (1995) and the Federal Sex Discrimination Act (1984). The legislation identifies appropriate behaviour in workplaces, educational or other institutions. Sexual



harassment can include rape, indecent assault or other unwanted sexualised advances by employers, coaches, teachers, tutors or shopkeepers.

There are also legal definitions of sexual offences under the Victorian Crimes Act (1958). They are detailed below.

**Indecent assault**

Indecent assault includes non-penetrative sexual behaviour without consent, for example unwanted touching or indecent exposure.

**Rape**

Rape is defined as occurring when someone does not agree to penetration (to any extent) of the vagina, mouth or anus by a penis, finger or other object. Vagina also includes external genitalia and surgically constructed vaginas.

Failure to withdraw upon becoming aware that a person might not be consenting is also rape. In no case where rape is charged is it necessary to have an emission of semen.

Sexual assault is not an act of sexual gratification, it is an act of power with the motivating force being the desire to dominate and overpower.

**Aggravated rape**

Is the act of penetration accompanied by additional physical violence, for example use, or threat of use of a weapon.

**Attempted rape**

Involves attempted penetration of the vagina, mouth or anus with a penis, finger or any object.

**Child sexual assault**

Includes a range of sexual behaviours including rape and indecent acts against a person 17 years or younger.

**Physical violence**

Includes the exertion of force or power over another person, including hitting, kicking slapping, pushing, hair pulling and other forms of physical assault.

# Section 2

## Approach to the project

### 2.1 Research framework

This research was based on three feminist ethnographic goals as outlined by Shulamit Reinharz (1992:51). They are to:

1. Document the lives and activities of women
2. Understand the experience of women from their own point of view
3. Conceptualise women's behaviour as an expression of social contexts.

It is within this context that this research has ensured that young women's stories provide the primary source of information for the findings.

In all aspects of the project the young women's consent to the use of the information they provided was crucial. They were assured it would be reproduced in a confidential and non-identifying way. All information was collected without any reference to names, sport or geographical position. Age was the only identifier that was sought.

An understanding of the trauma and impact of sexual assault on the lives of victim/survivors meant that support to the women participating in the project was of paramount importance. The counselling and support services of CASA House were explained to all participants. Additional written information was also handed out to participants at the end of each interview or focus group and follow up sessions were offered if required.

In addition the message that sexual assault is a crime and that the victim/survivor is never to blame was emphasised throughout the project.

All participants were informed that they could terminate their involvement in the project at any time and that they could choose not to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable.

### 2.2 Aims of the project

The aims of the project were to:

- Increase the knowledge about the incidence of sexual assault against young women in sport and recreation through research.
- Identify appropriate strategies to increase young women's safety when participating in sport and recreation.
- Provide a report document that would be used in education programs for young women, relevant professionals and the wider community about the issues and the rights of young women to participate in sport and recreation in a safe environment.

- To enhance networks with sporting organisations, clubs, schools, local councils and Sport and Recreation Victoria as a basis for promoting interest in young women's safety when participating in sport and recreation.

### 2.3 Evaluation of the project

The project will be evaluated through:

- Feedback from young women participating in the project.
- Measuring the dissemination of information, including media coverage of the issues.
- Measuring involvement and engagement in the project of key stakeholders.
- Identification of strategies and recommendations to address the issues of sexist violence against young women in sport and recreation.

It is also hoped that the project will benefit the young women who participated and others who read the report by increasing their awareness of the issues and their rights in all aspects of their lives, but particularly whilst participating in sport. It is anticipated that a safe and positive environment for women will lead to improved participation levels of young women in sport.

### 2.4 Literature review

Until recently issues of harassment and abuse in sport were not widely recognised and often denied. However these issues have been addressed through the work and determination of women researchers and activists in the UK, Norway, Canada and Australia. These include women such as Celia Brackenridge, Kari Fasting and Sandra Kirby.

In 2002 members of Womensport International formed a Sexual Harassment Task Force. The members included Celia Brackenridge, Sandra Kirby, Mariah Burton Nelson, Tod Crosset, Karin Volkwein and Hasel Hartley. Their findings were presented at the 2002 World Conference of Women and Sport in Montreal, Canada. The task force concluded that:

*In sport we believe that women and girls are more frequent victims of harassment and abuse than men and boys. Many females drop out of sport rather than continue being subjected to the undermining effect of constant harassment and abuse: others endure the sexual attention of their male coaches or peers because of fear, desire for athletic reward, low self esteem or ignorance of who to turn to for help. Typically, abused athletes keep quiet because they fear that they will either be accused of consenting or of inventing the whole thing.*

*(Womensport International, 2002)*

## • Approach to the project •

This view is also supported by Sandra Guiry (1999) in her review of *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada's National Sport* by Laura Robinson (1999). Robinson spent many years travelling as a freelance journalist and collected the experiences of women who suffered from abusive coaches, sports officials and other athletes. Guiry (1999) quotes Robinson as saying that, 'Coaches especially operate in unspoken terms. Athletes are made to feel obligated and it is rare that the abuser makes propositions explicitly'.

Much of the literature also identified the attrition of women from sport as being related to the dominance of male sporting images, myths and stereotypes usually perpetuated by the media. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the participation rate of young women in sport decreases dramatically after the age of 16. This is also supported by a Western Australian study in 2000 that looked at why some girls don't play sport.

The above study surveyed teenage girls to gain a perception of participation in sport in that state. It concluded that a significant number of teenage girls perceive the sporting arena to be male dominated. Also girls were deterred from physical activity because they thought sport was too serious or competitive, felt inadequate due to lack of skills acquisition in primary school and did not like playing with or being watched by boys (Womensport West, 2000).

The Right to Play Safely project focused on young women between the ages of 16 - 25. Anecdotal evidence suggests that young women are more likely to stop participating in sport or recreation activity at about the age of 16 but return to sport after the age of 25. According to the 1999-2000 Australian Bureau of Statistics report on Participation and Physical Activity, the overall rate of participation for men and women is almost the same. However it reported that girls start to drop out of sport before they reach high school and their involvement in sport throughout their teens and beyond decreases dramatically (ABS, 1999-2000).

Some of the literature also revealed a focus on the prevention of harassment in order to avoid litigation rather than changing sporting culture or validating the experiences of young women. CNN Sports Illustrated (1999) posted an article with the heading 'As women's sports grow, so do harassment suits'. The article quotes Dr Joel Fish, Director of the Centre for Sports Psychology in Philadelphia as saying:

*The whole issue of sexual harassment with athletics, of coaches trying to understand the boundaries of what's right and wrong, of when to yell and when to pat her on the back, of whether or not to hug, is still being defined.*

This statement suggests that some organisations which are perhaps run by men still have no understanding of the complicated issues of the power dynamics and social control associated with sexual harassment in our society. They may think that women need to be treated differently only to prevent cases of litigation.

## 2.5 The target group

While there are many reasons why women stop participating in sport, this project was aimed at exploring whether sexual harassment was a factor that impeded young women from participating in the 16 to 25 year age group.

## 2.6 Young women's participation

As information exists regarding harassment in sport by those already participating, this research did not focus on sporting teams but sought to speak to young women with the only criteria being that they need to be within the target age group.

Over a three-month period we conducted individual interviews with 24 women and conducted three focus groups. The focus group discussions were conducted in the Melbourne Metropolitan area. The individual interviews were sourced by the project worker from amongst women who had attended CASA House as service users and by networking with women in the general community and the sport and recreation area.

The focus group started with general questions regarding the young women's level of participation in physical activity, and the aims and purpose of our research. The discussion was then moved to issues of harassment with an explanation and discussion regarding the definitions used. The participants were asked to complete a survey of questions about their experiences of harassment in sport.

## 2.7 Survey design

A survey was considered to be less threatening to young women in terms of exploring the sensitive nature of the topic. The same method was utilised for individual interviews.

While the survey was designed to identify incidents of sexual harassment, it was also intended to assist in ascertaining if the young women sought any assistance or support pertaining to the incidents, and if those incidents had influenced their decision to stop participating in sport.

## 2.8 Limitations of the research

Due to the sensitive nature of the information being requested it was difficult to gain a consistent level of data. It must also be noted that some of the younger women (16 to 20 years) interviewed were not able to identify behaviours or incidents as sexual harassment. Some perceived harassment by young men as an acceptable part of how 'boys behave'. This may reflect how entrenched sexual harassment is within youth and popular culture.

While the surveys helped to gather snapshot information, it did not provide in-depth information as to how young women view the culture of sport or the pressure to conform to certain types of behaviour or social expectations.

# Section 3

## Culture and context of women's sport and recreation

### 3.1 Social context

Despite the advances that the women's movement has made in helping women deal with sexual assault and pressuring government and law makers to acknowledge this as a serious issue in the community, it is still greatly under reported. However, it is generally acknowledged that by the age of 18, 38 per cent of women will have been sexually assaulted (Scott et al, 1995).

There are many fears that deter victims from reporting sexual assault:

- of not being believed.
- of a long and unsupportive legal process.
- of the perpetrator.
- of being blamed (D'Arcy, 1999).

These fears keep women silent and protect the perpetrator. For instance, young women are often socialised to accept that 'boys will be boys' and that their unwanted advances are a result of hormones that cannot be controlled. At the same time young women realise that physically they cannot compete with men.

### 3.2 Sports culture

The Australian Sports Commission is addressing this problem to some extent by ensuring that the sports environment is free of harassment by encouraging sporting organisations to implement their Harassment Free Sports Strategy. This was developed in 2000 in response to research conducted via their web site.

However, Debbie Simms, Manager – Ethics and Women, ASC stated in a report to the World Conference on Women in Sport that their Harassment Free Sport Strategy was a

*risk management tool established to assist organisations to protect themselves and their members...although women and girls are not specifically targeted by this approach, they are usually the main beneficiaries of pro-active and preventative policies, practices and programs that sports implement.*

*(International Working Group on Women and Sport, 2002)*

The ASC Harassment Free Sports Strategy is focused on prevention as well as dealing effectively with the behaviour when it occurs. It contains Harassment Free Sport Guidelines for:

- sporting organisations
- coaches
- athletes
- administrators
- officials

A male athlete talking to the ASC said:

*My coach and several other fellow male athletes continually make sexual references in front of the female athletes. My coach also makes comments regarding female athletes that are generally degrading calling them 'stupid' and 'useless'. There is no doubt that his comments influence the other male athletes to have a general disrespect for not only the girls in our squad but for females in general.* (ASC, 2002)

The common stereotypes and myths that continue to be perpetuated by the media are well known and may have discouraged women from playing sport. Often the only images that are portrayed in mainstream media are sexist or physically unrealistic images of women; generally models who may never have played sport. Qualities in women such as strength, power and competitiveness are often seen in a negative light because they require women to demonstrate 'unfeminine' characteristics (Lopiano, 2001).

While these images are still prominent there is a recognisable shift in the female stereotype towards something stronger, more skilled, competitive, active and athletic. Many sporting organisations such as cricket, basketball and golf have made great advances in promoting women's sport. But as with all social change it is a slow process.

One young woman who participated in this research had the following anecdote to share. She was shopping in a well-known Melbourne sports store for netball shoes. Not satisfied with the selection available at that store, she informed the sales assistant that she was going to 'look around'. The sales assistant replied, 'When you're running around the court in a tight T-shirt and a short skirt no one is going to be looking at your shoes'.

# Section 4

## The findings

### 4.1 How the young women responded

#### **Sports participation**

It was reassuring to note that all the women we approached to participate in the research were extremely keen to do so.

Forty-four young women participated. Their ages ranged from 16 - 25, with 16 year olds making up the largest age group. Of the 44 only 29 were participating in sport or physical activity at the time of the study. All except one had participated in some sort of physical activity. When asked why they were no longer participating the remaining 14 offered the following reasons. They:

- Were bored
- Couldn't be bothered
- Didn't want to
- Lost interest
- Didn't want to go to training
- Needed a break
- Didn't feel motivated
- Were doing VCE studies
- Moved away
- Thought the team took it too seriously
- Didn't have enough time
- Felt uncomfortable in a gym environment
- Had been assaulted while playing sport
- Had an injury

These findings are supported by the recent study conducted by Womensport West (2000) that found that sport is a 'turn off' for young women when:

- It's boring and repetitive
- It's too serious and competitive
- It requires playing with boys
- Boys are watching girls play.



## Sexual assault

When using the CASA house definition of sexual violence, 17 of the participants said that they had experienced sexual harassment while participating in sport. Nine participants had also experienced sexual assault, including one of attempted rape, and four had experienced physical violence. No participants reported that they had been raped in the context of sporting or recreational activity.

## The young women's experiences

Most of the young women recalled incidents where male spectators had made sexist and derogatory comments about their bodies. The young women felt that often whistling and cheering were a response to their bodies rather than what was happening during the game. They commented:

*Some guys say, 'nice arse', shit like that.*

(Age 16)

*Guys have said to me stuff like, 'nice arse', and a couple have grabbed my arse too.*

(Age 16)

*Just guys saying things about girls that is sexual harassment and stuff. Like guys tooting horns, waving, yelling out.*

(Age 16)

*Well, like at the footy when guys whistle. And at the soccer when guys beep their horns.*

(Age 16)

*One guy kept looking at my tits because they were jumping up and down when I ran.*

(Age 16)

The young women who provided the incidents described above were all participating in compulsory Physical Education classes at school at the time of the study.

Two other participants gave the following examples.

*With horse riding the boys always gave rude comments. Like you're riding bareback, no saddle. They would say, 'I bet you like having that bone between your legs'.*

(Age 24)

*I felt uncomfortable with the men groaning at the gym or checking me out.*

(Age 25)

Neither of these young women is now participating in these activities nor did they draw a direct connection between their experiences and deciding to withdraw.

## • The findings •

In the context of this study, the secondary students thought that some high school teaching staff have similar attitudes to the boys. In one focus group students commented that sometimes the behaviour of teachers and coaches made them feel uncomfortable. Although no specific incidents were given participants in the same group said that when they had their Physical Education class some teachers would allow boys to sit around and watch when they should have been participating or in other classes.

One group commented that when teachers gave the class the chance to choose what game to play the boys' preference would invariably decide what games were played. This meant that classes were mainly focused around contact sports. The participants believed that this gave the boys an opportunity to make inappropriate physical contact, such as touching them. Also, some teachers would 'pick you up' and move girls to a position where they wanted them, whereas they would ask or tell boys what to do.

The participants did not state directly that these incidents and the attitudes associated with them accounted for dropping out of sport, however there is a high attrition rate of young women from Physical Education after compulsory classes in Year 10. It is worthy of note that of the 20 young women in the 16 year old age bracket who were surveyed, only seven participated in sport outside of school.

Participants were asked specifically about any experience of sexual assault while playing sport. They provided the following examples:

*I was in water aerobics and this guy was next to me and he was giving me the creeps. We had to do this exercise where you kinda lift your leg to the side and he grabbed my foot and kissed it. I told him to piss off and the teacher said, 'don't worry he's only being friendly'. Then when the class was over he followed me to the spa. So we just left.*

(Age 20)

This young woman said that when she started aqua aerobics classes it was the first time she had been consistently physically active. Since this incident she has not participated in another class. She will not return to the particular fitness centre, although she may be willing to participate at another venue.

Other examples of sexual assault include:

*In horse riding if you dink someone they sometimes grab your breasts or rub close to you.*

(Age 24)

*Guys do stuff like undo your bra strap.*

(Age 16)

*While the teacher was talking this guy pretended to hump my leg.*

(Age 16)

*Well this boy flashed his arse at me.*

(Age 16)

*When you play basketball guys stand behind you and grab your arse.*

(Age 16)

*A couple of guys grabbed my arse too.*

(Age 16)

*[When I was 16, I] was on my way to netball practice on my bike I was pulled up by a young man who seemed to have a weapon on him and he lead me to an isolated place where he fondled me and tried to rape me.*

(Age 25)

This young woman said that she had stopped playing netball at the time because she did not want to ride the same way in case she saw the man again. Eventually she did return to playing.

The participants also shared experiences of physical violence that had occurred while playing sport. One young woman, aged 23, recalled an incident when she was playing touch football in a mixed team at the age of 16. The team was mixed because it was a small country town and young women were allowed to play to make up the numbers. She said that while most people were supportive of the women playing there was one young man who held the view that women should not be playing football. He made this view very well known to the coach and to other members of the team. During one game she dropped a mark which gave the advantage to the other team. This young man ran up to her on the field and yelled, 'What did you do that for you stupid bitch', and punched her in the face.

This incident is consistent with the research of the Feminist Majority Foundation (1995) in the United States which found that there is a link between aggressive sports such as rugby, football and basketball and violence against women. A study of 10 different universities in the US reported that of the male student athletes reported for sexual assault 67 per cent were football or basketball players.

It should be noted that as well as their personal experiences of violence, ten participants had heard of or had friends who had experienced sexual assault associated with playing sport.

## **4.2 The impact of sexual assault on participation**

As well as the actual incidence of sexual violence experienced by the participants in sporting or recreational contexts it was important to identify, where possible, the impact of sexual assault on the women's sporting or recreational activity.

While most young women in this study continued to play sport some stopped participating for a short time or changed sport or venues. The group that was participating at school suggested that they would be 'dropping' Physical Education as soon as it was no longer compulsory.

Twenty-one young women said that sexual assault or the fear of sexual assault was a factor in young women's lack of participation in sport.

One young woman noted that in her local town men's football and women's netball were played at the same time in the same club, and that when girls

## • The findings •

reached puberty they dropped out because they were conscious of the boys being around.

### **Disclosing and reporting sexual assault**

Often an important part of the recovery process for victim/ survivors of sexual assault is to relate the incident to someone and to have that experience believed and for their feelings to be validated. In this study eight participants had told someone: one had told her coach, six told a friend and one told her mother. In all cases the women said that they had been believed. However, the following examples reflect the sort of unsatisfactory outcomes that followed the young women's disclosure of sexual violence.

*My friend went up to him and told him to fuck off.*

*Not much [happened]. We just laughed and talked.*

*They told me to expect it sometimes.*

*Nothing.*

*My mum called the police but nothing happened.*

Apart from the first instance in each case the perpetrators of the violence bore no consequences for their actions.

One focus group of high school students felt that it wouldn't do any good to tell anyone in authority. For example the young woman who was assaulted during an aqua aerobics session felt that once the instructor had made the comment that the offender 'was only being friendly' her experience was not taken seriously. As a consequence she left the centre without reporting the incident to management. Eight of the participants did not report incidents either, but did not elaborate on their reasons for not doing so.

Only one participant was aware of any support services available. None had sought any counselling or support.

### **Making sport young woman friendly**

The young women who took part in the study were asked to suggest ways to make sport safe and more enjoyable for them. These were some of their ideas.

*More female teachers.*

*Separate classes for boys and girls.*

*More education about young women's rights.*

*Information about strategies to deal with sexual harassment.*

*Giving women the confidence to speak up.*

*Staff should be able to do something.*

*Don't dink boys. If they fall off their horse let them walk.*

*More awareness.*

# Section 5

## Themes and issues: violence against women in sport

### 5.1 The environment of sporting clubs

Some sections of the fitness industry and some sporting associations have attempted to create environments where women feel comfortable and able to participate. While in some centres images of scantily clad bodies are still displayed, many have recognised that this only creates anxiety for most clients as they strive to achieve their physical fitness goals.

However, the change in the physical environment also needs to be supported by changes in attitudes of staff and management. The incident with the young woman in the aqua aerobics class shows that some fitness professionals still need education and training about how to deal with issues of sexual harassment and assault that might arise in their sessions.

### 5.2 Barriers to reporting

There is a significant amount of information that suggests that sexual assault is one of the most under reported crimes. Often the reasons for this are embedded in embarrassment, fear and the expectation that it won't be dealt with appropriately. It is clear from the responses given by the young women in this study that they believed that reporting the incident would not have achieved any positive outcome. As well, it seems that the participants were not sure about to whom to report these incidents. This research also showed that none of the young women in our survey were aware of the ASC Harassment Free Sports Strategy. They were also not aware if their club, centre or school had a sexual harassment policy in place.

Anecdotal evidence and the responses of the young women in our study suggest that young women often disclose incidents of sexual harassment to their friends. In most situations they were believed however, the information was rarely passed on to an adult or authorities. Even where the appropriate authorities were notified no action was taken. Lack of knowledge about what to do or the belief that nothing will be done results in incidents of sexual assault not being reported.

### 5.3 Young women's understanding of sexual assault

All the young women that we interviewed had a clear understanding of sexual assault in relation to rape or indecent assault, however their understanding of sexual harassment was unclear and confused. This confusion was seen mainly in the group of high school students who attended the focus groups. At first when asked if they had experienced harassment in sport most said they had not. When prompted by a clear definition and examples such as comments about appearance, sexualised jokes and sexist comments the response was 'oh yeah all the time'.

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## 5.4 Young women's rights

The ability of the young women to assert their right to enjoy sport and recreation activity without the fear of sexual assault is of course linked to their knowledge and understanding of the issue and what they can do about it. Many young women may not possess the language, knowledge or ability to deal with incidents of sexual assault. As stated earlier, not being taken seriously, not being believed or being ridiculed often prevents women from speaking out.

## 5.5 Who is responsible?

### Organisations, Governments and Schools

Organisations, governments, schools and the wider community have a responsibility to legislate and implement policies that provide a safe environment for women.

The findings of this study indicate that young women did not recognise sexual harassment. Schools have a responsibility to educate and inform young women of their rights in regard to sexual assault in all areas including sport and recreation. Schools also have a responsibility to lead by example and as well as educate they need to also implement and enforce harassment free strategies across all areas of the curriculum.

While Commonwealth and State governments have laws against sexual assault, they should also make it compulsory for all sporting organisations to implement policies to protect participants from harassment and assault. The Victorian government recently passed legislation making it compulsory for all volunteers or employees working with children under the age of 18 to undergo a police check. However the abuse of children is only one type of sexual assault and this legislation does not apply to sex offenders working within the adult section of the community.

Sporting organisations also have a responsibility to educate their staff and become more inclusive of women. Sports that are male dominated are seldom sensitive to women's needs. Clubs often validate male dominated environments by creating a culture that is alienating to women. In New Zealand (weirdcandy.com, 2001) the female student union withdrew their support of the volley ball team because they were sponsored by an escort agency. A team spokesperson failed to see why this alienated women and stated that it was just like being sponsored by a cigarette or alcohol company.

### Media

Media could take responsibility to assist in challenging traditional sporting stereotypes. When it comes to women's sport often the focus is on the physical appearance, including outfitting of female athletes and not sporting attributes or performance.

Recent publications such as nude calendars and product-sponsored sports clothing and uniforms seem to promote women as sex objects rather than athletes. New technological advances have meant that sports apparel is now designed to be less restrictive to enhance performance. Uniforms are therefore tight fitting but expose less skin. In men this is seen as a positive display of physical strength and muscle conditioning. However within a wider culture which sexualises women's bodies the same is not true for women athletes. For example, Serena Williams's black lycra tennis suit was discussed at length by the sport commentators. While the media also acknowledged her sports performance they still found it necessary to comment on her appearance. This contrasts with how male sports celebrities are spoken about.

While sexualised images of women are most commonly associated with elite athletes, this type of marketing cannot help but have a flow on effect to women in amateur sports and the local community. It is undoubtedly associated with the larger issue of body image. Further research could be undertaken to examine links between body image and low rates of participation of women and girls in sport.

Focusing on the physical attributes of female athletes could have a negative effect in many ways, such as by:

- Creating anxiety and embarrassment for women who may feel they do not measure up to the 'ideal'. This view was reflected in our study when young women felt uncomfortable when teachers let boys watch girls participate.
- Increasing self-consciousness amongst young women about their bodies especially, during puberty. Some young women in this study noted that the girls' netball matches were played on the same night as football. They perceived this as contributing towards the high drop out rate amongst girls who withdrew from participation as they approached puberty.
- Perpetuating sexist discrimination and placing women athletes at greater risk of harassment from both within or outside the sporting environment and further compromising women's safety in the community.

It should be noted that while the ASC Harassment Free Sports Strategy is a useful tool it does not address the specific needs and concerns of women and why the participation rates for women are so low.

# Section 6

## Outcomes and recommendations

### 6.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations have been drawn from this study. It is anticipated that the implementation of the recommendations will promote sports and recreation free of sexual assault and thereby improve women's experience of those activities.

### 6.2 Education campaign

An education campaign is needed in five areas.

#### Young women

- Develop products such as stickers and an information pack for young women reinforcing that sexual assault is a crime and not acceptable in sport and recreational activity.
- Celebrate women's achievements in sport.
- Provide more women as sports role models to visit schools.
- Provide girls with practical information and training about their rights to play and participate free from harassment and sexual assault in all areas of their life.

#### Young men

- Develop an education program with the help of young men and aimed at young men to promote appropriate behaviour towards girls and women participating in sport, such as a code of acceptable behaviour.

All information packs for both young men and young women should contain:

- A copy of ASC Harassment Free Sports Strategy.
- Information about sexual assault, including sexual harassment.
- How and where to get help.
- How to respond to someone who has been sexually assaulted.
- How and where to report sexual assault.
- How to get support and counselling.

#### School focused campaign

- An education campaign to start in primary school and be continued into high school as part of the Physical Education component of the curriculum. Aspects of the program should be presented every year and reinforced by teachers in Physical Education class and throughout the school.



- Schools should also be encouraged to create an environment where students especially girls can assist teachers to develop their own sports program and provide feedback.
- Develop a school-based education campaign featuring sports women. Highlight their sporting abilities and qualities. Provide more opportunities for high-profile sports women to visit schools.
- Encourage schools to include single sex physical education classes.
- The education program should also train teachers and educators to be more aware of body image issues for young women.
- Schools need to also provide an environment where sexual harassment is not tolerated in any area of the school. Teachers should be trained to deal with the issue. Students should be made aware of the specific roles of teachers should these circumstances arise.

### **Fitness centres and sporting clubs**

- Develop brochures which centres can distribute as part of their membership packs. Written material should promote appropriate behaviour and inform clients about what to do and who they can speak to if they feel unsafe, uncomfortable or if they experience sexual harassment or assault in the centre.
- Educate fitness professionals about the issues.
- Encourage fitness centres to have single-sex classes and areas.
- Educate sporting organisations about the issues and encourage them to adopt and implement the ASC Harassment Free Sport Strategy.

### **Community centres**

- Promote sport to women through the Women's Participation Program run by Womensport and Recreation Victoria.
- Through Womensport and Recreation Victoria develop a women friendly sports list where organisations who are sensitive to women's needs and who have an harassment policy in place can register.

## **6.3 Empowering women**

Gender equality in sport and our society will not happen by itself. While there are steps that governments, schools and the community need to take responsibility for women also need to act and speak out against harassment. Women can help by:

- Supporting women's sports by participating and attending women's sporting events.
- Joining a women's rights organisation and support activities for change
- Being informed about the myths associated with sexual violence and ways to challenge them.

## • Outcomes and recommendations •

- Speaking out against sexual harassment or inequality whenever it occurs
- Encouraging other women to participate in sport
- Seek advice about taking legal action (Feminist Majority Foundation, 1995).

### 6.4 The significance of this research

The health and social benefits of physical activity have been well documented and to be good at sport in many societies offers social status, respect and admiration. With so many barriers to participation were highlighted in this study it is of note that so many women do play sport.

Studies such as Womensport West (2002) and others show that women do want to be active, and participating in sport and recreational activity is one of the ways that women can improve their quality of life.

Women who participate in sport and recreational activity have

- A more positive body image
- Greater self esteem and self confidence
- More social contacts
- Improved physical and psychological wellbeing

However as we have seen in this study increasing women's participation in physical activity involves making sport accessible and safe for women. The recommendations put forward here will hopefully go some way in ensuring that women are safe from sexual assault in sport and recreation.

Overcoming these issues will benefit not only women who choose to participate but also the clubs and organisations that women join.

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