

**SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE OF WOMAN ABUSE
IN SPORTS-RELATED CONTEXTS:
THE KNOWN AND UNKNOWN**

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ABSTRACT

There was a vibrant surge in the 1980s and 1990s of social scientific work on men's abuse of women in sports-related contexts, but this wave receded over the past two decades and eventually disappeared. Recently, however, an international cadre of scholars have revisited the off- and online victimization of women in these settings, and the main objective of this paper is to examine what the extant scholarly literature tells and does not tell us about this social problem.

Keywords: sports, woman abuse, feminism, masculinities

Introduction

It is an understatement to declare that empirical and theoretical social scientific work on various types of male-to-female violence in private and public places has mushroomed over the past 50 years. Conclusive evidence of this proliferation is that the widely read and cited peer-reviewed journal *Violence Against Women* is now published 16 times a year, recently entered the top 50% of social science journals, and 355 articles published in this useful periodical have, at the time of writing this article in the summer of 2024, been cited 855 times (see <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal/violence-against-women>). However, some common types of male-to-female abuse continue to receive scholarly *selective inattention*, and prime examples are the off- and online assaults on adult women in sports-related contexts (DeKeseredy et al., in press). There was a vibrant surge in the 1980s and 1990s of creative investigation into this problem (e.g., Benedict, 1997, 1998; Robinson, 1998), but this wave receded over the past two decades and eventually disappeared (DeKeseredy et al., 2023a; Schwartz, 2021). Buttressing this claim is that DeKeseredy et al.'s (2023b) *Skating on Thin Ice: Professional Hockey, Rape Culture, & Violence Against Women* is the first sociologically informed book on the specific relationship between participation in elite male sports and adult variants of woman abuse published since 1998.

Shortly before the release of DeKeseredy et al.'s (2023b) offering, though, there was a resurgence of academic theoretical and empirical work on the connection between masculinities, sport, and violence against adult women. The main objective of this paper is to document what we know and do not know about this correlation. It is, however, first necessary to define the concepts *SportsWorld* and *woman abuse*.

Definition of SportsWorld

As noted by the Clearinghouse for Sport (2023), “What we perceive as ‘sport’ in one instance may not be in another; sport takes on many forms and is constantly changing based upon societal norms, trends, and new directions” (p. 1). For example, for George Orwell (1945), author of the popular 1949 dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, sport is “war minus the shooting” (p. 1). For others like Jamieson and Orr (2009, p. 3), definitions of sport include the following:

1. *Sport* – “an activity experience or business enterprise focused on fitness, recreation, athletics, or leisure” (Pitts et al., 1994, p. 15).
2. *Sport Management* – “the total process of structuring the business or organizational aspects of sport” (Mull et al., 1997, p. 7).
3. *Recreational Sport* – “playing cooperative or competitive activity in the game form” (Mull et al., 2005, p. 7).
4. *Athletic Sport* – “located within the recreational sport continuum as it pertains to the entire sport experience of athletes and spectators, defined as directing individuals toward a margin of excellence in performance that can be identified as wanting and needing to win” (Mull et al., 2005, p. 10).
5. *Professional Sport* – “a system where the very best are brought together to participate at the highest level” (Mull et al., 2005, p. 10).

The varied definitions and meanings that are attributed to sport make it “an ambiguous concept” (Woods, 2011, p. 1). Some would argue that the absence of a uniform definition is not a “failing but a necessary freedom” that enhances social scientific understandings of sport. Even

so, many others would argue that a “clear and working definition” of sport is needed to “move away from this messy and slippery idea” (Saunders, 2015, p. 3).

A line must be drawn somewhere and thus, following Groombridge (2017), throughout this article sport “is generally taken to mean organized institutional activities” (p. 3). Yet, guided by Smith’s (2010) concept of SportsWorld, this point made by him and three of his colleagues must be emphasized (See Hattery et al., 2023):

[S]ports is more than the games played on the field or court. It encompasses all of the attendant structures, including travel, television and broadcast rights, and highly lucrative contracts for both players and coaches. Gender-based violence is prevalent in SportsWorld... [It] is a mirror of society, and many sports have a culture that promotes traditional expressions of masculinity, including aggression and sexual exploits (p. 1).

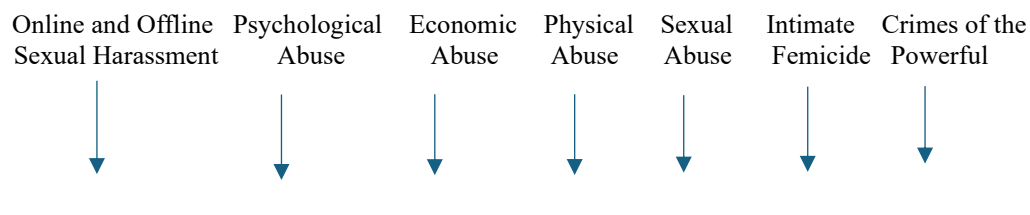
Informed by Jamieson and Orr (2014, pp. 6-7), the violent acts committed against women in SportsWorld that are examined in this piece are those perpetrated by one or a combination of the following, all of whom are situated on the *continuum of woman abuse in sport* depicted in Figure 1:

- Player: One engaged in a sport experience.
- Coach: Volunteer or paid leaders of sport teams.
- Referee/official: Those who regulate game, contest situations.
- Fan/spectator: Those who observe practices, games or contests either in person or through media.
- Volunteers: One who serves in a number of roles to help support a sport delivery system and include helpers at events, board members, coaches, parent representatives.

- Administrator: An individual or group of individuals having direct or indirect authority over the sport environment.
- Parent/guardian/family: Those related to a player or players.
- Adult role model: Coaches, teacher, recreation leader, athletes, or anyone who has direct or indirect influence on a player.
- Business associate: One involved in investing, donating, or supporting the sport with a monetary exchange.

FIGURE 1

THE CONTINUUM OF WOMAN ABUSE IN SPORT



Definition of Woman Abuse

What DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2001) observed nearly 25 years ago still holds true today. Reading the voluminous interdisciplinary literature on woman abuse makes it clear that the scientific community still has not dealt particularly well with one of the most basic questions. Is it possible to have all of these numerous researchers studying male-to-female victimization when there is no widely agreed-on definition of this harm? The answer must be “yes,” because we have thousands of studies of woman abuse in public and private places, but the lack of definitional consistency means that their utility and validity remain in some doubt.

It is beyond the scope of this article to revisit key definitional debates in the field (e.g., broad vs. narrow definitions and gender-neutral vs. gender-specific conceptualizations).

Nonetheless, a central argument of this article is that how one defines woman abuse is one of the most important decisions that a researcher will make (Ellis, 1987). Major debates over definitions, too, are not trivial; they seriously affect how data are gathered, as well as the quality and quantity of social support services for women who are beaten, sexually assaulted, and abused in other ways by intimates or acquaintances. Further, definitions are used politically as tools in social struggles. Together with poverty, unemployment, terrorism, and other social problems, woman abuse is a highly politicized topic of social scientific inquiry, and definitions of this behavior reflect this reality.

It is crucial to clearly name what one is talking about, and the abuse termed here is primarily committed by men and by male-dominated organizations and government agencies. Moreover, the people who are the targets of such abuse are primarily (although not only) women (DeKeseredy et al., 2023b; Pease, 2019). Hence, the term woman abuse instead of the now fashionable (but highly problematic) name *intimate partner violence* is frequently used throughout this article. Further, the following review of the extant literature is conceptually informed by: (1) DeKeseredy's (2021) *continuum of woman abuse*, which is a modified version of Kelly's (1988) *continuum of sexual violence*, an offering that "stands the test of time" (Kelly, 2012, p. xvii), and (2) Brackenridge's (2001) *continuum of sexual exploitation in sport*. Referred to as *the continuum of woman abuse in sport*, my conceptualization of abuse depicted in Figure 1 views violence against women that occurs on and off the playing field as ranging from nonphysical acts like nonconsensually sharing pictures of consensual sexual acts on social media to deadly physical ones like *intimate femicide*, which is the killing of females by male partners with whom they have, have had, or want to have, a sexual and/or emotional relationship (Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997). Yet, unlike the conceptualizations crafted by Brackenridge and Kelly, but

following DeKeseredy (2021), Figure 1 includes nonphysical and physical male acts, as well as *crimes of the powerful*¹ committed by university/college administrators, professional team executives, and politicians.

Crimes of the powerful take different shapes and forms, but research on the experiences of women in SportsWorld shows that two in particular stand out: (1) *exclusion* (also frequently referred to as *sex-segregation*) and (2) *corporate/organizational* and *state-corporate violence against women* (e.g., pressuring athletes, such as female gymnasts to compete with injuries). Many people are reluctant to label these harms crimes if the victim and offender do not meet in a face-to-face encounter, or if the offense is one in which the offender did not target a specific victim. Even so, some of the injurious acts covered in this article do not involve face-to-face encounters and do not involve the targeting of specific victims. Why, then, are they examined here? The short answer to this question is that even though the victim and perpetrator do not meet, and the offender may not single out a specific person, the offender's actions are usually planned. The offender, in other words, knows that his or her behavior will threaten someone's health (DeKeseredy et al., in press). As Reasons et al. (1981) in their analysis of corporate violence against workers:

The violations of safety and health standards and/or the failure to establish adequate standards is usually a rational, premeditated, conscious choice concerning capital expenses and business profits. The rational, premeditated, conscious choices endanger real people.

There are enough data from a variety of sources to demonstrate that crimes of the powerful are very harmful and endemic in SportsWorld.² Still, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain accurate statistics on their extent and distribution. Even world-renowned

experts on other types of corporate and state crimes offer little more than educated guesses on the “dark figure” of these problems. The number of crimes of the powerful known to government agencies, the media, and to social scientists, and the incidence and prevalence data included in scholarly books on crimes committed by economic elites (e.g., Reiman & Leighton, 2023), amount to little more than the tip of the iceberg. Made explicit in virtually every criminology text that examines corporate, white-collar and state crime are distinct measurement problems that continue to exist no matter how much money, time, and energy researchers devote to studying crimes of the powerful. For example, what Clinard and Yeager (1980) stated half a century ago is still applicable in the present day: many corporate and state violations “are exceedingly hard to detect, to investigate, or to develop successfully as legal cases because of their extreme complexity and intricacy” (p. 6).

Many more examples of how difficult it is to precisely count crimes of the powerful could easily be presented here, but they do not answer an important question: What, then, is the extent of this problem in North America and elsewhere? The most general and valid answer seems to be that it is more widespread than most members of the general public, government agencies, and criminologists realize. Given the paucity of in-depth studies of crimes of the powerful in SportsWorld, researchers are forced to rely primarily on journalistic accounts of women’s experiences.

Major examples of crimes of the powerful against women in sports-related contexts were uncovered in 2022 when news sources reported that Hockey Canada – minor hockey’s governing body in Canada – had settled 21 sexual misconduct claims since 1989, paying out CAD\$8.9 million in compensation. Nine victims were paid from Hockey Canada’s National Equity Fund, which is partially funded by membership fees paid by parents entering their children into this

sport (Leavitt, 2022). A related event was, in the words of *Montreal Gazette* journalist Jack Todd (2022), “the mother of all hockey sex scandals, the Hockey Canada Eight and the decision made by hockey’s national governing body to pay off the victim of an alleged 2018 gang sexual assault to settle a CAD\$3.55 million lawsuit and buy her silence on behalf of her assailants” (p. 1). Todd is referring to the alleged behavior of eight members of the 2018 Canadian men’s World Junior team in London, Ontario.

Although the idea of a continuum is often used to portray movement from least to most serious, in this case, all the behaviors in Figure 1 are serious and share something in common. As Kelly (1988) notes, they are all means of “abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force” used to control women (p. 76). Kelly also correctly points out that women’s experiences “shade into and out of a given category such as sexual harassment, which includes looks, gestures and remarks as well as acts which may be defined as assault or rape” (p. 48).

Many people might make a judgment about seriousness in a particular case, but no behavior on the continuum is automatically considered more harmful than another. Rather, the entire point of Figure 1 to remind readers that behaviors like stalking, cyberstalking, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and some social media attacks are seen by many women as more terrifying than some acts the criminal law defines as assaults (DeKeseredy et al., 2019; Ptacek, 2016). Furthermore, non-physical forms of abuse, especially verbal sexual harassment, are much more common in women’s lives than are physically violent acts committed by male intimate partners (DeKeseredy, 2021; DeKeseredy & Rennison, 2019), and these behaviors influence women to avoid entering public places.

Like conceptualizations provided by Brackenridge (2001), DeKeseredy (2021), and Kelly (1988), Figure 1 enables researchers to document and name a broad array of painful interrelated

behaviors that thousands of women experience daily in SportsWorld, many of which are exempt from the purview of the criminal justice system and that are trivialized or minimized by the law, general public, and the media. While researchers may analyze sexual harassment, unwanted sexual touching (e.g., breast grabbing), forced intercourse, beatings, and Hockey Canada's facilitation of players' gang rapes separately, for countless numbers of women like the one Jack Todd mentioned above who was sexually assaulted by eight hockey players, the forms of abuse in Figure 1 can "seep into one another" (Ptacek, 2016), p. 128). Usually this means that a woman has been the victim of micro- and micro-aggressions since she first had men catcall and proposition her, often before she reached her teen years (Castillo, 2018; Kolysh, 2021; Vera-Gray, 2018). Her later reactions to men, the continuum warns us, must be taken as a whole over years of experience, to understand her reactions. In case of the above woman gang raped in 2018, not only was she the target of male hockey players' interpersonal violence, but she was also harmed by Hockey Canada's response, which is a variant of what Collins (2016) defines as *indirect forms of state-perpetrated violence against women*. Such violence "indirectly facilitates interactional, institutionalized and structural harms suffered by women" (p. 88). This is in addition to this survivor's unknown lifetime experiences of harassment, aggression, humiliations, or possible child abuse.

What We Know and Don't Know About Woman Abuse in SportsWorld

Sexual Violence

A sober, unvarnished assessment of the current state of social scientific knowledge of woman abuse in SportsWorld reveals that what leading experts in the field definitely know is that there is much they do not know about violence against adult women. In fact, of all the forms of victimization examined in the general literature on woman abuse, sexual violence receives the

bulk of the attention in the field of sport studies and exercise science, and especially sexual abuse in children's sport (Forsdike & O'Sullivan, 2022). Further, contemplate what Kerr (2023), one of the world's leading experts on gender-based violence in sport, says about the empirical work done so far on sexual violence in children's sport: "The related literature is hampered by a lack of consistent terminology, conceptualization, and operationalization of sexual violence, making comparisons between study findings difficult" (pp. 78-79). What the available data say is that reported prevalence rates of sexual violence in children's sport range from 2 to 49% (Fasting, 2015; Kerr, 2023), which is not surprising due to the methodological heterogeneity of the studies thus far conducted. All the same, the research consistently shows that girls are more likely to be sexually assaulted than boys (Bjornseth & Szabo, 2018; Hartill et al., 2021). Similarly, studies regularly show that among adults, female athletes are more likely to be sexually assaulted than are males (Ohlert et al., 2021; U.S. Center for Safe Sport, 2021; Vertommen et al., 2016; Willson et al., 2022). Additionally, female adult sexual assault prevalence rates vary considerably between studies, from 1.9 to 86.8% as documented by Forsdike and O'Sullivan's (2022) scoping review. Still, these scholars caution us that it is unclear to what extent many of the prevalence rates they examined relate to sexual harassment and/or physical types of sexual abuse. What is transparent, though, is that elite girl and women athletes are at the highest risk (Kerr, 2023).

What do the data say about sexual assaults on professional female athletes and victimization prevalence rates for women who hold other roles in sport, such as coaches, referees, team owners, and team managers? There is a conspicuous absence of research on such attacks. Sport sexual violence victimization studies done to date focus almost entirely on amateur athletes, both male and female (Forsdike & O'Sullivan, 2022; Kerr, 2023). What is more, the perpetrators that receive the most scholarly and policy attention are coaches and authority

figures. Note that a study conducted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 2019 found that 222 amateur sport coaches were convicted of sexual offenses in the last 20 years, in cases with more than 600 children under the age of 18 listed as being victimized (Moore & Shah, 2021). This is, of course, not a representative sample, but rather cases where offenders were caught, handled appropriately by the police, witnesses came forward, and offenders were prosecuted. There is no reason to doubt that the true number of children affected was a multiple of 600.

In another attempt to obtain information on this issue, a June 2021 digital survey of 800 U.S. adults, both male and female, under the age of forty-five, found that more than one in four current or former student athletes were sexually assaulted by someone in a position of power on college or university campuses, compared to one in ten of those in the general population. Athletes were nearly three times more likely to report such abuse, and coaches were most identified as the abusers (Lauren's Kids, 2021). It is unclear from reports based on this study, however, whether women or men were more likely to be victimized.

Much empirical attention, too, is devoted to the *grooming techniques* used by coaches and other sport authority figures. Grooming “is the process by which a perpetrator isolates and prepares an intended victim. Entrapment may take weeks, months or years and usually moves steadily so that the abuser is able to maintain secrecy and avoid exposure” (Brackenridge, 2001, p. 35). The grooming process typically involves using these strategies:

- targeting a potential victim by deliberately selecting a vulnerable athlete like one with mental health issues or a disability, or perhaps very low self-esteem;
- engaging in behaviors that make the athlete feel special;

- exchanging sexual content with the athlete; complimenting the athlete's performance;
- establishing a romantic relationship or making a declaration of love;
- establishing emotional closeness with the athlete and befriending them by discussing personal matters;
- giving gifts; and
- spending time together outside of training environments (Kerr, 2023, p. 77; Lanning, 2018).

It is not only coaches who engage in behaviors that are sexually aggressive and degrading. Other authority figures may also feel free to do things even in public that humiliate athletes. Although not grooming, one event that fits into what sports sociologist Kevin Young (2019) would probably define as “an episode seen around the world” (p. 38), was a very public example of sexual violence committed by an authority figure. Thirty minutes after the final whistle sounded, during a trophy presentation ceremony for the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup champions, Spain's then soccer federation president Luis Rubiales gave Spanish star player Jennifer Hermoso an unwanted kiss on the lips. Hermoso, during an interview with broadcasters afterward said, “I didn't enjoy that,” Irene Montero, Spain's Minister of Equality, labeled Rubiales' conduct “a form of sexual violence that women suffer on a daily basis.” Moreover, journalists' cameras captured him grabbing his crotch immediately after Spain's victory over England (Brennan, 2023, p. 1-2).

Institutional factors can also contribute to sexually abusive acts committed by coaches and other types of authority figures. A salient one is *institutional betrayal*. This involves insensitive responses by trusted persons in authority or leadership positions that “are experienced

by victims as an especially acute form of disbelief and rejection because they come from social groups that victims often identify with and consider important parts of their self-concept” (Swartout & Flack, 2019, p. 291). A recent case in point is what elite University of Utah gymnast Kara Eaker endured.³ In late October 2023, she announced her retirement from the gymnastics team and withdrawal as a student, citing verbal and psychological abuse from a coach and the absence of support from the university’s administration. Eaker said the abuse “often happened in individual coach-athlete meetings. I would be isolated in an office with an overpowering coach, door closed sitting quietly, hardly able to speak because of the condescending, sarcastic and manipulative tactics.” She stated that when she reported this to university officials, “One administrator denied there was any abuse and said, ‘You two are like oil and water, you just don’t get along.’ Today I was shocked would be an understatement and this is a prime example of gaslighting. So therein lied the problem – the surrounding people and system are complicit” (quoted in Zillgitt, 2023).

Sexual violence of all sorts in sport is committed primarily by males, and females are more likely to be targeted (especially by sexual harassment) by perpetrators *outside* sport than from athletic peers (Brackenridge, 2001; Hartill et al., 2021). Note, too, that one of the most common types of sexual harassment is the *homophobia* and *masculine-phobia* that plagues women’s sport. Almost all female athletes find that their sexuality is questioned, especially in sports deemed to be hyper-masculine, like hockey and rugby (Anderson & White, 2018).

Another harm endemic to many female sports is what Kerr (2023) denotes as the *sexual violence through the policing of women’s bodies*. For her, the difference between men’s and women’s beach volleyball attire is a major example of this. For those unfamiliar with this sport, men are allowed to wear shorts, but women are required to wear bikini bottoms with restrictions

on their size (Hincks, 2021). Also consider the sexist and abusive treatment of NFL cheerleaders, As Krattenmaker (2018) puts it:

Miss America has finally retired its antiquated practice of parading women onstage in swimsuits. The National Football League ought to go next.

Actually, a beauty-pageant swimsuit competition is mild compared to what passes for “cheerleading” in the NFL. Besides putting the sexy young performers on the sidelines in bikini-sized costumes, professional football teams have them shake and twerk in ways more akin to pole-dancing than traditional cheerleading.

In a time marked by the #MeToo movement and growing rejection of society’s fixation on female looks and sexuality – and by pro football’s continued failure to fully address a pattern of violence against women by its players – the NFL needs to put an end to this insulting nonsense (p. 1).

It is true, as stated by Kerr (2023), that “of all forms of violence in sport, sexual violence has received the most public and scholarly attention” (p. 78). However, empirical work on technology-facilitated sexual violence in SportsWorld lags far behind studies of this problem in other contexts. There are many books and journal articles that focus on the use of technology by perpetrators of woman abuse in intimate relationships, but I could not find one social scientific article that specifically focuses on male athletes’ use of digital media to harm women. There is growing scholarly interest in athletes who are targets of online hate (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2022) and sexual harassment done by strangers, but there is also a conspicuous absence of empirical and theoretical work on harms like the nonconsensual sharing of pictures or videos of consensual sexual relations between men and women (Forsdike & O’Sullivan, 2022).

Female track and field athletes are at especially high risk of being victimized by online abuse via X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram. During the 2022 World Championships, for example, World Athletics, the international governing body of track and field, found that female athletes received 60% of all such abuse. World Athletics analysis included 427,764 posts that targeted 461 athletes. Twenty-five percent of the abusive messages were related to unfounded doping accusations, 10% were transphobic, and one percent were homophobic. As well, 50% of all flagged comments directed at female athletes were sexual in nature (Strout, 2022).

Physical Violence

There is lack of quantitative research on the non-sexual physical abuse of women and girls in SportsWorld. The limited relevant literature reviewed by Forsdike and O’Sullivan (2022) reveals prevalence rates for women athletes victimized by intimate partners ranging from 30.5% to 59% (Bendolph, 2005; Milner & Baker, 2017; Cantor et al., 2021), which are higher than victimization rates for women in the general population. Yet, it is unclear from the research done so far which female athletes are the most vulnerable and which groups of men are most likely to be perpetrators. Likewise, there is no published research revealing which types of other women (e.g., wives of male athletes) in SportsWorld are at the highest risk of experiencing physical violence, and data on key risk factors associated with their victimization are unavailable.

At the same time, the sexual violence in SportsWorld literature and journalists’ reports reviewed by DeKeseredy et al. (2023b) strongly suggest that *male peer support* may be one of the most powerful determinants. This is attachments to male peers and the resources that these men provide that encourage and legitimate woman abuse (DeKeseredy, 1988). There is also evidence strongly suggesting that male athletes’ physical violence against women is a means of

what Messerschmidt (1993) coins as *doing masculinity* and what Sutton (2002) views as male athletes performing gender for their peers (e.g., showing that they are in control of their intimate partners). DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013) would likely label such performing as a type of male peer support.

Though not without limitations, the general literature on femicide is empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated. However, social scientific research on the link between sport and this crime is negligible, with virtually all the published material on femicide in SportsWorld is found in nonscientific mass media outlets (Young, 2019).⁴ Among the data and information that is sorely needed are accurate national and global tallies of femicide deaths in the worlds of elite amateur and professional sport. The rationale for such statistics is simple: We need them to better prevent these murders (Walklate et al., 2020).

Psychological/Emotional Abuse

Of all types of woman abuse covered in this article sexual abuse receives the most attention, but research consistently shows that it is the psychological or emotional abuse of athletes that is the most frequently reported by victims (Kerr et al., 2020), and female athletes reveal many more such experiences than their male counterparts (Kerr et al., 2019). Stirling and Kerr (2008) define emotional abuse in sports as “a pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviors by a person within a critical relationship that has the potential to be harmful” (p. 178). Kerr et al. (2020) organize emotionally abusive behaviors into three categories: (1) verbal behaviors such as demeaning, humiliating, insulting, or belittling comments), (2) physical behaviors such as throwing objects in anger or frustration), and (3) actively ignoring an athlete, whether it is for poor performance or not responding properly to the abuse).

A recent study of the prevalence of maltreatment in Canadian sport shows that 59% of national-level athletes and 62% of retired athletes (retired within the past 10 years) reported at least one type of emotionally abusive behavior, and emotional abuse was the most common harm experienced by these athletes. Also, 17% of current athletes and 23% of retired athletes reported experiencing emotional abuse on a repeated basis (Kerr et al., 2019). These findings are consistent with those uncovered in in the U.K. (Alexander et al., 2011), Belgium, and The Netherlands (Vertommen et al., 2018).

Here is a short list of the many unanswered questions that could be answered in future scholarship on psychological/emotional abuse:

- Why it is that female national level athletes, who are obviously the country's elite, have maltreatment levels that are so high?
- Do coaches believe that damaging athletes and pushing many others into retirement promotes winning teams?
- Are many coaches suffering from such self-esteem problems that they find it essential to maintain extreme control and obedience, even at the risk of losing competent team members?

Athletes most frequently report that coaches are the primary perpetrators of emotional abuse. Many athletes also report such abuse coming from other authority figures, such as sports administrators (Kerr et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2017). Plus, many parents of elite athletes view emotional abuse as “an expected and necessary part of developing athletic talent” (Kerr et al., 2020, p. 82).⁵ Further, the emotional abuse of female athletes increases the likelihood of low self-esteem, eating disorder, suicide, depression, and psychiatric treatment (Kerr et al., 2020; Mullen et al., 1996).

Crimes of the Powerful

In his 1964 book *Whiz Mob*, which is still designated by many contemporary criminologists as a classic study of the lives of pickpockets, David Maurer states that much of criminological work done 70 years ago told us “a little (a very little) about the criminal, a good deal about the investigator and his methods, and almost nothing about crime” (p. 12). Fast forwarding to 1973, heavily influenced by Maurer’s research, Peter Letkemann (1973) asserts that “information about what criminals do, their methods of operation, careers, lifestyles and relationships with each other is limited and fragmented” (p. 1). He then goes on to state that “The work of other writers and journalists who have dealt in more popular styles with the subject, and whose material has been used frequently for supplementing academic research, has been helpful” (p. 3). The points raised by Maurer and Letkemann are still relevant. While there is a large social scientific literature on crimes committed by corporations/organizations (especially written materials generated by critical criminologists⁶), criminologists continue to neglect women’s experiences of crimes of the powerful in SportsWorld, and this is why the few researchers who study this problem primarily draw from the work of investigative sports journalists. Despite not meeting traditional academic standards, investigative journalism reveals that many women in sports-related contexts are victims of deliberate corporate organizational decisions that harm them to increase profits, maintain patriarchal dominance and control, and for other reasons.

Conclusion

The coverage of the social scientific work on woman abuse in SportsWorld featured here is not exhaustive. Many readers, for example, are likely to detect that theoretical offerings are not examined. This is not to say that the study of violence against women in sports-related contexts is atheoretical, but theoretical developments have not kept pace with recent empirical work in the

field. What is more, as Forsdike and O’Sullivan (2022) remark, it is “somewhat surprising that feminist theories have not been drawn upon in developing or analyzing this phenomenon” (p. 15). There are, though, some recently published theories that prioritize the concepts of patriarchy and gender, one of which is male peer support theory (MPST). In fact, since 2021, four peer-reviewed journal articles and one book have been published that explain the connection between male high-profiles sports participation and violence against women using some variation of MPST (DeKeseredy et al., 2023a, 2023b; Goodson et al., 2021; Nickodem et al., 2023; Schwartz, 2021). Even so, there is much more theoretical work that needs to be done, especially that which focuses on women’s experiences of crimes of the powerful in SportsWorld.

Where else do we go from here? Put simply, in the words of feminist scholar Robert Jensen (2007), “We have a lot of work to do” (p. 184). This is because woman abuse in SportsWorld and other types of sports-related violence “are hidden in plain sight” and have “been largely exscribed from criminological inquiry” (Young, 2022, p. 67). Key examples of new empirical approaches that are sorely needed are victimization and self-report surveys of adults that are specifically crafted to test hypotheses derived from theories. Necessary, too, are surveys of perpetrators and victims affiliated with sports that are more popular outside of North America (e.g., Australian rules football and cross-country skiing) and those that are not organized institutional activities, such as eSports, video games, etc. (Groombridge, 2017).

It is easy to recommend a litany of other new research directions, but regardless of which approach is selected, it must be informed by a theoretical framework. There is, as documented in Forsdike and O’Sullivan’s scoping review of the literature on what they refer to as *interpersonal gendered violence against adult women participating in sport*, “a paucity of theoretical underpinning” in the bulk of the articles they examined (p. 15). Regardless of their degree of

sophistication, theories are not, as many people argue, “Irrelevant antonyms of fact” or “just fanciful ideas that have little to do with what truly motivates people” (Akers & Sellers, 2009, p. 1). On the contrary, in the words of Kurt Lewin (1951), the founder of modern social psychology, “There is nothing so practical as good theory” (p. 169). Surely, to both prevent and control violence against women in SportsWorld and throughout society, more than accurate data are required. We need to explain this problem.

Notes

¹ This is the title of Frank Pearce's (1976) path-breaking Marxist analysis of corporate and organized crime.

² See, for example, DeKeseredy et al. (2023b), Groombridge (2017), Millward et al. (2023), and Young (2019).

³ Eaker was a member of the U.S. gold-medal teams at the 2018 and 2019 world championships. She was also named an alternate at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and was a member of the University of Utah teams that finished third at the 2022 and 2023 NCAA championships (Zillgitt, 2023).

⁴ Consider that none of the 50 chapters in Dawson and Vega's (2023) *Routledge International Handbook on Femicide and Feminicide* focuses on the killing of female athletes, or male athletes who murder their current or former female partners.

⁵ Note, too, that many young athletes' parents engage in violence and harassment as recently uncovered by Sailofsky and Fogel's (2023) study of parental aggression in Quebec minor hockey and former NHL player Patrick O'Sullivan's (2015) disturbing account of the ten years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his father.

⁶ Critical criminology is a perspective that views the major sources of crime and social control as the unequal class, race/ethnic, and gender relations that control our society (DeKeseredy, 2022; Young, 1988).

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