

Highlights

Tackling Violence Against
Women and Girls in Sport



Why a Handbook on Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls in Sport?

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive human rights challenges in the world today. One in every three women experiences some form of physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. Such violence is rooted in gender inequality, discrimination and harmful cultural and social norms that emphasize men's superiority over women, normalize violence toward women and allow perpetrators to act with impunity.

Sport, which engages millions of people daily across the globe, plays an important part in this context. Sport has been an environment for some of the most shocking cases of sexism and violence against women and girls. The male-dominant culture of sport, coupled with a lack of transparency and a prioritization of sport's integrity and profit over the individual, has fostered an environment that has been all too accepting of violence. A lack of effective reporting mechanisms, protective measures for survivors and sanctions for offenders leave survivors with no clear route to remedy; in many cases, survivors leave the sport entirely. Yet sport has also demonstrated tremendous potential to foster gender equality and dismantle the root causes of this violence by promoting inclusivity, reshaping attitudes, addressing impunity and championing female athletes as role models.

Violence against women and girls is a complex and multifaceted problem; sport represents a complex ecosystem. Training for coaches and other sports practitioners often leaves out broad-based education on violence against women and girls, leaving them ill-equipped to recognize and address situations when they arise. Moreover, leaders in the sports world have done little to ensure that practitioners can adequately recognize and respond to such violence. At the same time, policy makers wishing to tackle violence against women and girls must understand the complex sports ecosystem, its wide range of stakeholders and variety of rules and mechanisms in order to develop the legislative frameworks and infrastructure critically necessary to prosecute perpetrators and support survivors.

To address violence against women and girls in sport, policy makers and sports practitioners must work together. UN Women, UNESCO and the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative have developed this Handbook to create a shared understanding of the problem, offer practical tools for addressing violence against women and girls in sport and propose areas for effective collaboration.

Manifestations of violence against women and girls in sport

Across sports and continents, women and girl athletes face significant risks of abuse; women engaging with sport in other capacities are also at risk. There are many factors that contribute to violence against women and girls in sport: extreme imbalances of power, the normalization of abusive practices as part of a 'no pain, no gain' approach, normalization of harmful gender stereotypes, male-dominant culture of the sports sector and poor overall governance of sporting structures. Case studies from around the world demonstrate that reporting abuse can be difficult, traumatizing and often precarious. Even when abuse is reported, sports leaders and organizations have often failed to act.

The Prevalence of violence against women and girls in sport¹

21%

of females (compared with 11% of males) experienced one form of sexual abuse at least once as a child in sport.

31.8%

of female respondents (compared with 26% of males) reported being punished with excessive training or exercise.

10.6%

of female respondents (and 6.5% of males) were beaten with an object.



1. World Players Association, Census of Athlete Rights Experiences: 2021 Report. https://files.cargocollective.com/c520687/World-Players_CARE-Report-2021-.pdf

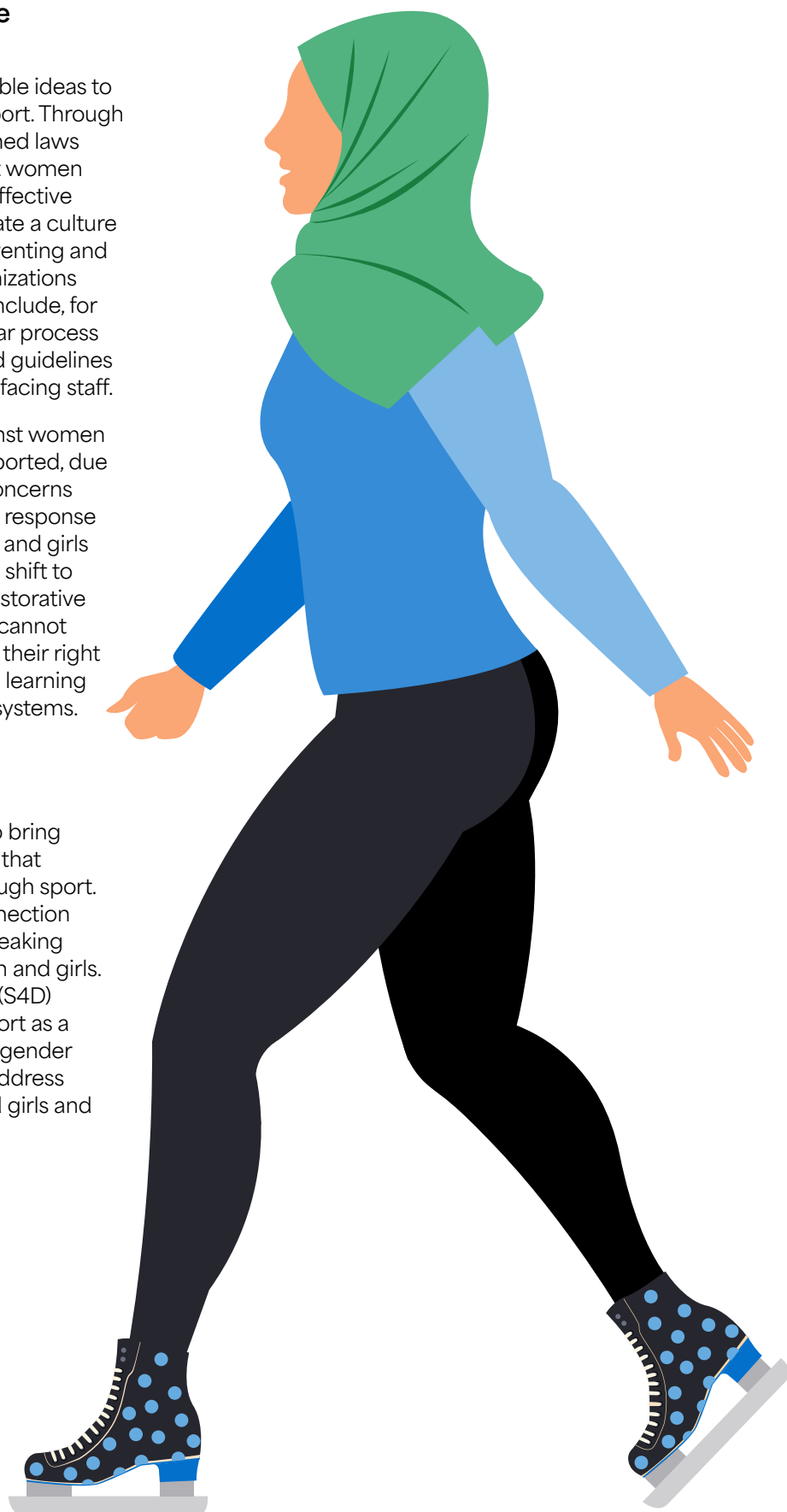
Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in sport

Fortunately, there is already a wealth of actionable ideas to address violence against women and girls in sport. Through national legislation, policy makers have sharpened laws and closed loopholes to tackle violence against women and girls on and beyond the playing field. But effective prevention requires leaders within sport to create a culture of safety and champion the importance of preventing and eradicating abuse. In recent years, sports organizations have initiated safeguarding programmes that include, for example, codes of behaviour for coaches, a clear process for reporting abuse, sanctions for offenders and guidelines for the recruitment of coaches and other child-facing staff.

Despite many positive advances, violence against women and girls in sport remains significantly underreported, due largely to a lack of clear reporting processes, concerns of retaliation and an absence of trust in existing response processes. To address violence against women and girls after it has occurred, sports organizations must shift to a survivor-centered approach that prioritizes restorative justice. If affected persons and whistleblowers cannot trust the remedy process, this impacts not only their right to remedy - it also prevents sports bodies from learning from mistakes and improving their prevention systems.

Addressing violence against women and girls through sport

Sports practitioners and policy makers can also bring about positive change by supporting initiatives that address violence against women and girls through sport. For example, due to their prominence and connection with fans, athletes can play a valuable role in speaking out against sexism and violence against women and girls. At the grassroots level, Sport for Development (S4D) programs such as UNESCO's Fit for Life use sport as a platform for teaching life skills and combatting gender stereotypes; in particular, such programs can address the root causes of violence against women and girls and provide positive models for gender equality



Key Recommendations

For sports practitioners

- **Go beyond non-binding suggestions for child protection** and develop binding obligations with clear mechanisms for ensuring compliance and appropriate remedy.
- **Support general legislative action addressing violence against women and girls**, such as laws addressing the reporting process, survivors' rights, and the responsibilities of law enforcement. Recognize that any laws combatting violence against women and girls in society will help address violence against women and girls in sport.
- **Coordinate and cooperate with criminal investigations.** The parallel sports governance system and its interoperability with domestic laws can be complicated for survivors.
- **Hold perpetrators accountable.** Sport organizations and agencies must end the impunity by holding perpetrators to account.
- **Offer regular mandatory trainings and continuing education opportunities** to coaches and other staff.
- **Establish and communicate a straightforward and transparent reporting process** within your organization and, where indicated, to law enforcement.
- **Familiarize yourself and collaborate with local resources for survivors** of violence against women and girls, including services for medical needs, mental health, social services and legal support.
- **Create an inviting and safe environment for girls and women to practice sport.**
- **Promote an equitable culture.** Encourage and reward equitable attitudes, behaviours and practices, and put in place policies to protect athletes from harassment, abuse and discrimination.

For policy makers

- **Implement laws and develop the judicial infrastructure** necessary to hold perpetrators of violence accountable and support survivors of violence against women and girls.
- **Facilitate the process of prosecuting violence against women and girls in sport.** National laws outlawing abuse are an important starting point, but sport-specific statutes are also needed.
- **Develop an independent system for reporting abuse in sport**, which will empower survivors and whistleblowers to come forward.
- **Advocate for financial resources** for ensuring support and services for survivors.
- **Collect and report data** on violence against women and girls in sport.
- **Build timely and targeted relationships with stakeholders in sport**, recognizing that building relationships is an ongoing process.
- At an **international level**, engage with sports organizations to be sure they are aware of existing good practice regarding the essential services that should be provided to survivors of violence against women and girls.
- At a **national and local level**, help sport map existing services for survivors of violence against women and girls and build local partnerships for service provision.

For sports journalists and civil society organizations

- **Be aware of the crucial role that you play in addressing violence against women and girls in sport** by bringing public scrutiny to the problem.
- **Commit to more research and investigative journalism** on root causes of injustice in women's sport.
- **Contribute to a safe working environment for sports journalists**, with a focus on increasing representation of female media workers and addressing the specific threats facing women journalists.
- **Advocate for equal coverage and screentime** of female and male sports.