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GLOBAL OBSERVATORY FOR GENDER EQUALITY & SPORT

GENDER AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT (PEPAS) POLICY BRIEF

ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SPORT

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Sensitivity Warning

This document covers the topic of abuse in online spaces, which we understand may include triggering content. We encourage readers to prioritize their well-being while reading this briefing. If you feel overwhelmed or triggered by the content, please consider the following options:

- Take a break from reading.

- Engage in a grounding activity or self-care practice.

- Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional for support.

- If you need immediate assistance, please contact a crisis hotline or emergency services in your area.

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Executive Summary

Online gender-based violence (GBV) can include sexually explicit language, unpleasant remarks or social criticism connected to gender, gendered-microaggressions, sexual allusions, exaggerated rape and murder threats, and stalking. Violent interactions may be text or image-based and can target individuals directly and/or those closest to them. The disproportionate levels of GBV that women and girls experience online is a major societal concern (Kavanagh, Litchfield & Osborne, 2019; Fenton, Ahmed, Hardey, Boardman & Kavanagh, 2024). Online GBV in sport curtails the rights of women and girls, impacts on their liberty, and poses a significant threat to their health, safety and wellbeing.

The aim of this policy briefing is to:

- Share the research perspective on online gender-based violence against women and girls in sport and to make recommendations for global sporting organisations, online platforms, and governments who have a moral obligation to foster safer online communities.

Our research identifies that online violence against women and girls in sport:

- Perpetuates widespread sexism, misogyny, and narratives of hatred of women;
- Disparages, humiliates, threatens, and/or hyper-sexualises women athletes;
- Reinforces and promotes gendered hierarchies and belittles professional skills;
- Explicitly threatens the physical safety of targets and/or those closest to them, radiating beyond the recipient;
- Can result in the silencing and removal of women and girls from online spaces.

Key features of online GBV in sport

1. The high-profile nature of sport and fan-related behaviour increases the risk of women athletes being a recipient of violence and increases tolerance for violent discourse.

2. It is not only elite women who are targets of online violence, the risks extend to women and girls competing across sport and its levels.

3. It can result in embodied harm to recipients.

4. Violent interactions online not only directly impact recipients but also can harm observers or bystanders.

Introduction

Despite their numerous benefits, online environments can be combative and confrontational. They can also support various forms of violence. While terms such as hate speech and online harm have been used to describe abusive online interactions, we position this manifestation of human behaviour more clearly as interpersonal violence facilitated by technology; recognising that language matters. Online violence is a growing global societal concern, which significantly impacts mental and physical health and, as such, should be viewed as a public health crisis. Our research shows that sport is a particular field where violence online is commonly seen and experienced.

Digitising people, relationships, and groups has stretched the boundaries of how and when people can interact, creating a space where darker behaviours can occur, and individuals can feel protected by the sense of anonymity the internet is believed to provide. As Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks (2016) state: "some of the characteristics that make online spaces most attractive such as the freedom of expression, perceived or actual anonymity, reduction of inhibition, and expression of thought also make this environment difficult to regulate and police" (p. 66). Online environments provide a microcosm within which we can observe the enactment of gendered, racialised, and sexualised politics, often at an extreme level.

While all people engaging with online platforms have the potential to experience violence, women and girls are the primary targets of violence and oppression online. GBV is recognised as such because it is "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1992). Defining GBV further, the United Nations stated:

> "Violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (United Nations, 1993, Article 1)

More specifically, GBV in sport is pervasive (Forsdike & Giles, 2024) and forces women and girls disproportionately to adapt their behaviours as "safety work" (Vera-Grey & Kelly, 2020) to continue their participation in both physical and online spaces.

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Key Focus Issue

Women and girls are the primary targets of violence in online spaces, violence which is often gender-based. The likelihood of being a target is even greater for high-profile or celebrity women such as politicians, news broadcasters, journalists, and athletes. The United Nations and Amnesty International highlight online GBV as a global problem affecting women and girls of all ages and backgrounds (Amnesty International, 2017). In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched a report titled "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: A World-Wide Wake-up Call." This report documented that almost three quarters of women online have been exposed to some form of violence. UNESCO stated:

> Millions of women and girls around the world are subjected to deliberate violence because of their gender. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) knows no boundaries, cutting across borders, race, culture and income groups, profoundly harming victims, people around them, and society as a whole. (2015, p. 1)

The Former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Dubravka Šimonović noted online GBV as:

> any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT [Information Communication Technologies], such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately. (Šimonović, 2018, p. 6)

This sentiment was echoed by The Council of Europe's Expert Group on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO, 2021) who stated that:

> The digital dimension of violence against women encompasses a wide range of acts online or through technology that are part of the continuum of violence that women and girls experience for reasons related to their gender, including in the domestic sphere, in that it is a legitimate and equally harmful manifestation of the gender-based violence experienced by women and girls offline (p. 13).

Violent interactions are becoming a recognised part of the fabric of online communication and the mass publication of vitriol in these spaces is increasingly significant as a social problem. In this briefing we share the research perspective on online GBV against women and girls in sport based on our work in this area. In doing so we highlight the types of online violence women and girls can experience on account of being involved in sport, highlight the intersectional nature of such violence, and consider the impact that violence can have on targets. Finally, we make recommendations for global sporting organisations, online platforms, and governments who have a moral obligation toward fostering safer online communities.

RESEARCH ON ONLINE GBV AND SPORT UNDERPINNING THIS BRIEFING

Our research spans over a decade and has explored the manifestation, impact, and responses to violence against sports persons in online spaces. Included in this policy briefing are:

- Studies that have examined content on a variety of online platforms including X (formally Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok;

- Studies that have primarily adopted a netnographic approach involving extensive immersion in online communities and data scraping to form quantitative and qualitative analysis and insight into interaction on social media platforms;

- Reference to works that have adopted a narrative synthesis of existing literature; and

- Studies that have examined a variety of contexts and sports, as this issue is not restricted to one specific country, sport or competition level.

Results & Analysis

WHAT IS VIOLENCE IN ONLINE SPACES?

Online violence is a growing global societal concern, and our research shows that sport is a particular field where it is commonly seen, making this an important space to observe such behaviours. In many ways, online spaces mirror face-to-face environments; therefore, types of interpersonal violence (IV) that are present in physical spaces can be replicated in and/or augmented by online environments (Kavanagh et al., 2021).

Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks (2016) defined online violence as "direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening, or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional, or psychological upset, distress, alarm, or feelings of inferiority" (p. 788). Four types of violence are common in online spaces: physical; sexual; emotional; and discriminatory content, including (but not limited to) discrimination based on gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality (xenophobia), religion, and/or disability.

Online violence can span one-off hateful comments within general conversations as part of sports consumption to far more targeted, systematic, and pervasive attacks focusing on individuals or groups. Online GBV can include threats of physical violence, sexually degrading, hypersexualised, and demeaning content towards women and girls. Threats can target the individual or extend to people close to them including family members, teammates, and friends. It can also impact those who witness it through their online activities. Content spans the very minor to the extremely violent, threatening, lewd or abusive and may be text-based, image-based (consisting of content such as images, videos, memes, emojis), or both. Violence that occurs in online space can infiltrate real world settings and make targets fear for their physical safety. The breadth of violent interactions makes this a diverse problem to classify and subsequently police (Kavanagh & Parry, 2021).

> **Examples of online gender-based violence**
>
> 'She must have a really long chain to reach a cricket pitch, still don't understand why she is out of the kitchen'
>
> 'When did woman (sic) start playing footy? I was wondering why the ironing was building up'
>
> 'die, what a shame you lost it for your whole team, pig!!!'
>
> 'She is a man #Wimbledon'
>
> 'Can we do a gender test on her while they do drug testing'

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF ONLINE GBV?

Online GBV in sport can lead to a range of psychological, behavioral, and performance-related consequences (Parry, Kavanagh & Jones, 2015) and has a disproportionate impact on the participation of women and girls in online environments. The adoption of violent rhetoric is primarily used to dominate, silence, and control targets. It can lead to the censorship of women's voices, results in their reduced participation in online communities, or silences them completely. Women and girls are forced to engage in a variety of behaviours to minimise the risk of online GBV. At the most extreme level, they may remove themselves from online spaces, rendering them invisible to consumers and impacting their freedom to exist in online communities. This self-removal poses a significant threat to women in sport who rely on online platforms to connect with their audiences and to enhance their career.

There is often an accumulative impact of exposure to violent interactions online that not only directly impacts recipients but also observers or bystanders (Kavanagh & Mountjoy, 2024). Threats or comments extend beyond targets to family members or friends. Violence may originate from a source known or unknown to the recipient and can come from multiple sources.

While perpetrators may be outside of the room, their actions are felt within (Kavanagh & Mountjoy, 2024). Therefore, online violence does not just occur online; it also infiltrates and permeates physical environments. Often online offences are downgraded citing no physical contact, yet those who experience violence online report felt and embodied harm, often long-lasting, which can threaten physical and psychological safety.

Online spaces present a significant threat to individuals, not to be considered separate from the physical world (Kavanagh et al., 2019; Kavanagh & Mountjoy, 2024). The normalisation of, and desensitisation to, violence against women and girls in online spaces also increases the likelihood of violence taking place in physical spaces too – more research into this crossover is needed. Online violence therefore occurs on a continuum: through interaction between online and physical environments.

WHAT FACTORS INCREASE THE RISK OF ONLINE GBV?

There are numerous risk factors associated with online GBV including, but not limited to, intersectional risks, demand to have an online presence, time spent online, and growing tolerance for violent discourse in online spaces. The risk of experiencing violence increases with the intersection of social identities including gender (Kavanagh et al., 2019), race (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne, & Jones, 2018), and sexual orientation (Hansen, Kavanagh, Anderson, Parry, & Cleland, 2022). Kavanagh et al (2019) suggest that,

> women athletes can experience and be exposed to ridicule, threats of physical and sexualised violence and become sexualised and racialised subjects in virtual spaces while in their place of work. Virtual worlds provide a space whereby women (especially high-profile women), can face exploitation and violence, often without consequence. (p. 567)

Due to challenges presented by traditional media gatekeepers, women athletes increasingly rely on social media to connect with their audience, control their narratives, and amplify their voices (Osborne, Kavanagh & Litchfield, 2021). Female athletes use platforms like Instagram, X, and TikTok, to build their own personal brand by sharing their stories, achievements, and challenges; engaging with fans globally and cultivating their own online communities. This practice, while increasing their visibility, also increases the risk of experiencing online violence.

Engagement with social media platforms can be unavoidable for many professional women athletes. While self-representation in online spaces provides an opportunity (for some) to engage in self-expression and personally play a part in constructing an identity away from the sporting field, for others, social and online media does not provide a welcoming platform. Such hostility extends to community level sport whereby young athletes with a social media presence can also receive sexist and misogynistic comments in post interactions. Online platforms are spaces where women and girls are susceptible to GBV.

There is a contagion effect in online spaces whereby online violence spreads, with a corresponding increase in tolerance for such behaviours to be present in online social commentary. In changing the way people communicate and form relationships, we thus increase the pervasiveness and likelihood of experiencing violence online (Kavanagh et al., 2021; Kavanagh, Litchfield & Osborne, 2022).

HOW DOES SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLE ONLINE GBV?

Social media can often be an unregulated space that allows GBV targeting high-profile sport women in their workplace in a way that traditional sport media does not. Moreso, the continued presence of online spaces that allow the presence of vitriolic language creates a greater danger as it suggests a broader tolerance for extreme views and violent rhetoric.

The use of hashtags, free-form comments, social tagging, and other post interactions such as likes, has created greater visibility of antiwomen narratives and general contempt for women. There is often a speed and volume associated with online interactions, alongside the potential for multiple perpetrators which makes the experience even more complex. Without the development of industry standards and clear responses from the clubs or organisations to protect their employees – women athletes and others working in sport – they will continue to be seen as acceptable targets and online gender-based violence will continue (Fenton et al., 2024).

The management of toxic remarks should be undertaken by various parties, including fellow fans, the social media platform, algorithms utilised by the platform, third-party software employed by clubs, and sporting organisations themselves. However, there remains a lack of effective moderation of violent gender-based comments (Fenton et al., 2024). The absence of comment moderation or removal reinforces an environment supportive of GBV; such exchanges therefore become part of the discourse that is deemed acceptable on these accounts. Protecting women and girls from violence online is therefore a moral obligation and an issue that sport cannot ignore (Kavanagh & Parry, 2024).

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO PROTECT ATHLETES FROM ONLINE GBV?

At an elite level, social media managers can be employed to ensure that online content is suitable and engaging but this mechanism also allows the athletes to stay removed from any negative responses that may be received. When such management is not possible, education is increasingly provided for athletes on the use of social media, yet it has previously been based around understanding how to comply with guidance or policies that have attempted to control the use of social media by athletes.

At the individual level, placing the responsibility for navigating online GBV on the recipient results in them having to undergo daily safety work i.e. taking measures to ensure that they are not the recipients of online GBV (e.g., filtering, blocking users, including privacy features, ignoring comments), creating additional stress and placing disproportionate levels of work on women and girls – increasing the levels of invisible work required of them. These modifications are viewed as the cost of safety for women and girls in online spaces. The burden for keeping safe from online GBV therefore falls on women and girls, as is often the case with other forms of GBV.

Most recently, advances in artificial intelligence (AI) now allow companies to not only delete content that is deemed to be discriminatory but even to block it and to report the user so that athletes do not witness the material and cases can be investigated. This technology has been adopted across a variety of sports and contexts and can be used to protect women and girls from online GBV. Some (but not all) technologies can move the onus for online safety away from the individual (Kavanagh, Litchfield & Osborne, 2023), reducing the safety work burden on women and girls.

It is important to note that many sports organisations do not have the resources to engage with AI platforms. Such technology also would not be available for women and girls engaging in sport, physical activity and physical education outside of elite performance environments. The experience of athletes and measures to ensure their safety therefore will vary significantly between sports, levels and competitions.

X (Formally Twitter) Case Study : GBV against Women Athletes in Tennis

Kavanagh et al. (2019) and Litchfield et al. (2018) offered the first insights into online GBV against women athletes in their exploration of top seeded tennis players during a major championship. They found that women athletes were targets of violence that manifested in a variety of ways including threats of physical violence; sexualisation that focused on the female physical appearance; sexualisation that expressed desire and/or proposed physical or sexual contact; and sexualisation that was vile, explicit, and threateningly violent in a sexual or misogynistic manner. Online GBV includes sexually explicit language, exaggerated rape and murder threats, unpleasant remarks or social criticism connected to gender, sexual allusions, and mocking.

Comments ranged from those that expressed love or longing to hostile and physically and sexually threatening. There was the presence of intersectional risk whereby intersecting identities directly increased the volume of violent comments received and had an impact on the type of language adopted in violent interactions. Study findings demonstrated that the violence women athletes experienced was steeped in gendered inequalities.

Tik Tok Case Study: GBV against Elite Women Footballers

In an analysis of GBV surrounding elite women footballers on the social media platform Tik Tok (Fenton et al., 2024) GBV was deemed widespread in the interactions surrounding professional players. Over 59,000 comments were made in relation to club posted content surrounding women athletes, in total the video content analysed received over 70 million views. Findings from the thematic analysis of data highlighted the presence of:

Sexism: Belittling the players' skills and mocking the fact that women play football professionally.

Misogyny: Aggressive comments showing hatred and animosity towards the women.

Sexualization of women: Lurid comments about their appearance, reducing women to objects of sexual desire.

A demand for a male-only space: A belief that the club should only share posts about their male players.

The dominant discourse when responding to club or brand created content on women athletes was sexist and misogynistic in nature, supportive of anti-women narratives and reinforced hyper-masculine identities. Such content was left unmoderated and unregulated by club media teams.

Conclusion

Online GBV is a global societal problem that demands proactive solutions. It should be recognised as a significant and direct threat to the safety of recipients and those exposed to such violence through online platforms. While violence experienced through social media platforms has gained significant attention, a glaring omission in the current body of work is the reality that online mechanisms of abuse are numerous and include, but are not limited to, cyber-bullying, child sexual grooming, online coercion, coercive control, and online-stalking; all of which require greater attention and research within the sport context.

Violence can come from those unknown to targets but also originate through interactions with peers, or those in authority positions such as coaches or others in the entourage and/or through communication from organisations. Types of violence can occur in isolation and/or co-occur adding to the complexity of the experience. While the research presented in this briefing focuses on sport, the same risks are present across physical education and physical activity settings. These varying forms of online GBV contribute to an emerging form of anxiety for women and girls that requires specific attention. Online GBV is, thus, a global health crisis.

While acknowledging the intricate global dynamics of online violence, which transcend geographical boundaries and are influenced by diverse cultural norms, policies, and legal frameworks, it is imperative to address the issue of safeguarding in online spaces due to their increasing significance in society. Therefore, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

All state, civil society, academic, and individual parties must:

- Recognise that online GBV is a public health crisis that affects women and girls in sport.

- Recognise that online GBV can impact on the freedom of women and girls to engage in online spaces, violating their human rights.

- Adopt the terminology of online GBV to prevent the normalisation of and desensitisation to violence against women and girls in online spaces.

- Agree that recipients of GBV in sport must not be held responsible for their own protection.

- Support a multi-level and multi-agency response in tackling the global societal issue of interpersonal violence online more broadly and specifically online GBV.

- Acknowledge and highlight online GBV as a specific form of online violence in recognition of the fact that women and girls are disproportionately targeted in online environments or through technology.

- Work to increase reporting mechanisms and support mechanisms for women and girls in sport affected by online violence.

- Embrace opportunities for increasing safeguards and responses to online safety, by encompassing a range of approaches including technological, cultural, educational, and policy interventions.

- Undertake further research to understand GBV against women and girls in context of grassroot sports, physical activity and fitness across life stages in different cultures and digital settings.

- Share learning, tools, and good practice resources in prevention and response to online GBV against women and girls in a variety of sports and levels.

Sports Organisations must:

- Acknowledge the issue of violence targeting women and girls in online sporting spaces as a workplace health and safety issue.

- Listen to women and girls in physical education, physical activity, and sport to understand their experiences and the impact that online GBV has on all aspects of their lives.

- View online GBV as a collective concern and the remit of all those involved in physical education, physical activity, and sport so that the burden of safety work does not fall solely on individual women and girls.

- Recognise that online violence against women and girls in sport is experienced not only by the targets but also by their wider networks and those who witness it.

- Include online environments in their conversations surrounding the creation of inviting and safe sport, physical education and physical activity environments.

- Collaborate with online platforms to tackle the issue, recognising that solely relying on artificial intelligence for content moderation cannot ensure universal protection.

- Provide education to athletes and individuals within the physical education, physical activity and sport community to identify gender-based violence and strategies for protection online that extend beyond an emphasis on the individual.

- Ensure that a range of reporting mechanisms are available and supported at all levels of sports, not just with an emphasis on the elite level.

- Ensure that mental health support personnel working with women and girls in sport comprehend the complexities of online violence and are equipped to assist recipients.

Online Platforms must:

- Create safer, more trustworthy environments for their users, fostering positive online experiences.

- Recognise GBV for its harm and impact on users and ensure that it is given primacy in the policing of online platforms.

- Consider the impact of online platforms on the physical and mental health of users and put in place measures to safeguard users from negative effects.

- Place a primacy on the safeguarding of minors navigating their platforms in order to increase safety and reduce exposure to harmful online content.

- Ensure platforms have in place and enforce robust policies to prevent and address online GBV.

- Be proactive in their approach to eliminating online GBV to ensure that the burden of safety work does not fall solely on individual women and girls.

- Create accessible and effective reporting mechanisms for those who are recipients of or exposed to online GBV.

- Put in place clearer sanctions for those who perpetrate GBV in online platforms.

- Use online spaces as tools of education and empowerment, for example as positive tools for the education, prevention and support for people on the topic of GBV and thus become part of the solution to growing societal concerns such as GBV.

Governments must:

- Recognise online violence as a global public health concern.

- Continue to work with online and social media platforms to develop and implement safeguarding strategies specifically tailored to combat violence online.

- View online violence against women in sport as a collective concern and responsibility and encourage state departments and social institutions to address the issue more broadly.

- Be responsible and accountable for the safeguarding of women and girls in sport online through legislation and policy enhancements alongside increased reporting and monitoring of online content.

- Support collection and analysis of national GBV data by ensuring disaggregation that accounts for online GBV incidences and prevalence tracking.

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