

## **Winning at Any Cost? Gender, Sport and Violence**

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### **Abstract:**

Sexual violence on college campuses is not a new issue, however, the current media spotlight has brought greater public attention to this problem. Yet, despite this attention, there continues to be incidences of sexual violence across university campuses, and in university athletics in particular. In more than 100 cases of sexual violence on Canadian university campuses over a ten-year span, 23% involved university athletes as alleged perpetrators (Quinlan et al.). Given that competitive athletes compose between 1-3% of the university student population in Canada, they are over-represented in reported cases of sexual violence (Quinlan et al.), which suggests that sexual violence in university sport is particularly problematic. In this paper, this issue is addressed by asking how ruling relations inform institutional responses to sexual violence. First, to explore this question a literature review of sexual violence in sport is provided. Second, a description of how the ruling relations of organizations as a conceptual framework is outlined. Third, a consideration of the institutional responses to two cases of sexual violence in university athletics reported in the Canadian media are described. Following a discussion concerning these cases, suggestions are offered that address sexual violence in Canadian university sport, which may be translatable to other contexts.

### **Addressing Sexual Violence in Canadian University Sport**

1 Sexual assault in sport is an issue that continues to make headlines. In recent years, there has been increased media attention on sexual assaults committed by amateur and professional athletes, along with some college and Olympic coaches. In 2017, former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar was convicted of molesting more than 100 female athletes during the three decades he worked with USA Gymnastics (Eggert and Householder). One year earlier, in 2016, former National Football League (NFL) star and broadcaster Darren Sharper was sentenced to 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to various charges of drugging and raping nine women in four states (Knoll). England's Football Association launched an internal investigation into allegations after more than 20 players came forward alleging abuse in their youth (Capelouto). Thus, it is evident that sexual violence is an issue felt in all levels of sport, from amateur to professional leagues around the world (Quinlan et al. 140).

2 In Canada, sexual violence on college campuses is not a new issue, however, the current media spotlight has brought greater public attention to this problem. Yet, despite this attention, there continues to be incidences of sexual violence across Canadian university campuses, and in university athletics in particular. In more than 100 cases of sexual violence on Canadian university campuses over a ten-year span, 23% involved university athletes as alleged perpetrators (Quinlan et al. 141). Given that competitive athletes compose between 1-3% of the university student

population in Canada, they are over-represented in reported cases of sexual violence (Quinlan et al. 141), which suggests that sexual violence in university sport is particularly problematic. In this paper, this problem will be addressed by asking how ruling relations inform institutional responses to sexual violence.

3 To explore this problem, we begin by reviewing the literature that addresses the topic of sexual violence in varsity sport. Second, the ruling relations of organizations as a conceptual framework is outlined. The argument is made that ruling relations are informing the responses to sexual violence in Canadian university sport. Ruling relations is a concept developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith, to name the socially organized exercises of power that shape people's actions and their lives. These ruling relations act to "privilege particular experiences, and marginalize others" (Smith 76). Third, the institutional responses to two cases of sexual violence in university athletics reported in the Canadian media are explored. We use case study research, because it allows us to engage with incidents of sexual violence in Canadian university sport and to critically assess how gender influences institutional response. Following a discussion concerning these cases, suggestions to address sexual violence in Canadian university sport are offered.

### **Literature Review**

4 Sexual violence is extremely prevalent in most societies, and this is certainly true of Canada, and particularly post-secondary institutions in Canada. 35% of first year undergraduate females report experiencing one attempted or completed rape (Senn et al. 4). Sexual violence includes "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise direct, against a person's sexuality using coercion" (WHO 149). While all genders can experience and perpetrate sexual violence, males are disproportionately offenders of sexual violence, and females are disproportionately survivors/victims (Brennan and Taylor-Butts).

5 There is extensive evidence linking sports and athletics to violence. A recent review of eleven studies on sports participation and violence found that there is a higher rate of alcohol use and violence in athlete populations compared to non-athlete populations (Sønderlund et al.). This review demonstrated that there are several factors that may mediate the link between sports and violence, including hypermasculinity and violent social identity. Another study done in the UK found similar results showing significant relationships between masculinity, alcohol consumption, and interpersonal violence and aggression for athletes (O'Brien et al.). Further evidence from the

United States links athletic participation and drinking at parties with holding stereotypical definitions of rape and being less likely to recognize as assault as rape or to recognize sexual assault as likely (Boyle and Walker). Thus, masculinity and alcohol consumption are common factors that appear in much of the literature about violence and sports.

6 Other scholars examine the relationship between sexual aggression and the participation in athletics or fraternities. Murnen and Kohlman did a meta-analysis of 29 studies and showed that there is a link between male athletics participation and rape myth acceptance, hypermasculinity, and self-reported sexual aggression. In their meta-analysis, they discussed how hypermasculinity may be fostered by participation in athletics, and that sexual aggression may result as spillover from a model of success in male sports teams that “is associated with control, domination, competitiveness, physical strength, and aggressiveness” (Murnen and Kohlman 146). Furthermore, they note that athletes often have special status at universities, which may lead to feelings of entitlement.

7 Although there is evidence in the literature to demonstrate a link between male athletic participation and sexual violence, most discussions concentrate on the impact of sports on attitudes and behaviours of individual male athletes, rather than institutional factors. In the prevention literature, for example, there is an abundance of empirical articles exploring the impact of sexual violence prevention programs with athletes, including bystander intervention (Exner-Cortens and Cummings; McMahon; Moynihan and Banyard) and empathy induction (Foubert and Berry). However, there is a dearth of research on institutional prevention of sexual violence and responses to sexual violence in varsity athletics (Crosset; Quinlan et al.).

8 One study on the role of institutional factors on on-campus reported rape prevalence examined campus-related factors across 524 campuses in the United States. It showed that the type of athletics program and the institution’s alcohol policy were related to reported sexual assaults (Stotzer and MacCartney). Universities with athletics programs in higher divisions report more incidences of sexual violence than universities with athletics programs in lower divisions. Another study evaluates the implications of the guidance document for *Title IX* for athletics administrators (Osborne et al). Barbara Osborne et al. note that administrators have been inconsistent and ineffective in addressing sexual violence, and that the failure of coaches and administrators to discipline athletes has been found to increase the likelihood that athletes will commit sexual violence. The guidelines speak to the obligation to respond to sexual violence, eliminate harassment, prevent recurrence, and address the effects of sexual violence. They specifically state

that “it is unacceptable to try to hide acts of sexual harassment, sexual assault or sexual violence committed by student-athletes by handling things within the athletics department” (Osbourne et al. 16). Although these guidelines are a positive step forward in addressing and shifting institutional responses, there are limited sources pertaining to the Canadian context (Quinlan et al.; Haiven). This may be because there is not a similar national or provincial initiative such as *Title IX* and that it is difficult for researchers to gain access to the processes and structures within organizations that produce the current responses to sexual violence in sports on campuses. To illustrate this gap and to encourage future research and conversations, in the following section, we discuss two Canadian case studies which demonstrate university institutional responses to sexual violence.

### **The Ruling Relations of Sport**

9 To explore the cases in this article, specific attention to what occurs at the micro-level of organizational life must occur. This means considering how organizational privilege shows itself in different ways. For example, some bodies move with ease within some environments, while others do not. Such ease of movement is aided by familiarity with cultural norms and gendered assumptions. Thus, our spatial surroundings are never neutral; they are full of past gestures, assumptions, and ways of doing things.

10 In many organizations, ruling relations privilege some bodies over others. Ruling relations is a concept developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith, to name the socially organized exercises of power that shape people’s actions and their lives. In her work, Smith considers the overarching structures which generate power and influence action within them. Smith argues that we are “ruled by forms or organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally to particular individuals and their personal and familial relations” (Smith 81). Ruling relations are the overarching structures (work, schools, governments) that organize our lives (Smith; DeVault and McCoy). Thus, the ruling relations of an organization have the power to inform experience.

11 For Smith, the ruling relations are always mediated by texts and processes through which the “actual is translated into the institutional” (Smith 47). These ruling relations privilege particular subjectivities and experiences, while erasing others (Smith). Thus, by applying the concept of ruling relations, everyday norms, assumptions, logics, and social interactions that structure people’s everyday lives can be assessed (Smith). Research that acknowledges these ruling relations can seek to uncover what bodies are privileged within organizations, to better support those who are challenged.

12 In our textual analysis, we are concerned with how ruling relations are enforced through the actions of the organizations. By conducting a case study on the media portrayals of two instances of sexual violence within Canadian universities, we critically assess which ruling relations are at play and how these perpetuate silence around instances of sexual violence. We see that the ability for victims/survivors to speak to these instances is severely limited by the manner in which institutions respond to cases of sexual violence. There appears to be a cone of silence that surrounds these cases, which results in minimal support for those who experience violence and obscures accountability at both the individual and institutional level when sexual violence occurs.

### **Exploring Cases**

13 The primary aim of this research is to see how institutions respond to allegations of sexual violence in their sport organizations. More specifically, uncovering how these responses are informed by ruling relations highlights the actions taken to address sexual violence in sport. We chose case study research as a strategy for the methodological exploration of this issue. Due to case study's exploratory and explanatory nature, an exploration into the how and why questions around the issue of sexual violence in Canadian university sport can be explored (Harrison, Birks, Mills and Mills).

14 In order to uncover how ruling relations inform responses to sexual violence, two cases of sexual violence that involved university athletes are examined. Both cases chosen are specific to the Canadian university context and involve an athlete as the perpetrator of sexual violence. Despite the incidents occurring at different universities (University of Saskatchewan and McGill University), each will be evaluated based on the institutional response following an incident of sexual violence on their campuses. This analysis is limited to two case studies in order to preserve the depth of analysis while allowing us to make some observations about similarities in institutional responses. It is understood that instances of sexual violence are individual, situational, and thus complex. However, a multi-case analysis gives attention to the ways in which these instances of sexual violence in Canadian university sport are similar with one another (Stake).

15 The Canadian university sport context was chosen because of a gap in the current literature concerning sexual violence in sport. A limited amount of research focuses on this context (Quinlan et al.). Furthermore, to keep the focus on institutional responses, the discussion about the actions and responses from other members of the community, athletes, students, and other participants, except for where it is necessary to elucidate the institutional response, is limited.

16 In the following sections of this paper, examples from institutions of higher education in Canada are outlined, in order to evaluate their responses to sexual violence in sport. First, each case will be described. Second, case study analysis will be employed to better understand the decisions and actions associated with each institutional response. Finally, this paper will conclude with a discussion on how the ruling relations of sport inform institutional responses of sexual violence in Canadian university sport.

### **Saskatchewan Men's Volleyball**

17 Matthew Meyer played a season with the University of Saskatchewan Huskies men's volleyball team while out on bail, after he was charged with sexually assaulting a woman and videotaping it (Yard). Allegations that Meyer sexually assaulted a woman at a party surfaced in January 2016, when he was a member of Medicine Hat College's Rattlers volleyball team in Alberta. Meyer left the team and the college voluntarily a short time after allegations were released (Yard).

18 According to court files accessed by the authors, the victim/survivor and a friend attended a house party where Meyer lived. The victim/survivor drank alcohol and neared the point of blacking out, at which time a friend laid her down on the living room couch to sleep (Radford). She woke the next morning with Meyer on top of her, touching her and penetrating her without her consent. She then recognized the sound of pictures being taken on a cell phone, and pretended to be asleep out of fear. Once out of the house, the woman contacted police and went to a local hospital, police responded and Meyer was identified (Radford). After he was taken into custody, Meyer gave a statement to police admitting what happened. Investigators later found 147 images on Meyer's phone of the victim/survivor being assaulted (Radford). He was then charged and released on bail, and soon after left Alberta for the University of Saskatchewan (Yard).

19 The volleyball team's coach Brian Gavlas acknowledged that he knew about these charges when he recruited the volleyball player. Apparently, Gavlas had known Meyer since he was a 16-year-old high school student and indicated that he had coached him previously. When asked about why he would let Meyer play on the team while he was released on bail, Gavlas stated that "it became a choice that it would be best for him to be supported and that nowhere along the lines did he take anything that had happened in the past into account" (Radford 1). Once the season was over, the player pleaded guilty and was sentenced to two years in prison and three years' probation. An internal investigation by Saskatchewan Huskie Athletics also commenced upon the ending of

the season, and Gaylas was fired after he admitted he knew about the sexual assault charge (Diebert).

20 When the university was questioned about the incident, a spokeswoman for University of Saskatchewan athletics stated that “there is currently no policy in place and to our knowledge criminal record checking is not practiced across university sports” (Deibert). At the time of the statement, the code of conduct did not specifically mention sexual assault. However, it did include a passage about student-athletes conducting themselves in a manner in which their behaviour will not be considered a form of harassment, including comments and/or conduct, or which creates an uncomfortable environment for anyone involved in Huskie Athletics, at the University of Saskatchewan or in the general public (Deibert).

21 The victim/survivor provided an impact statement to the *National Post*, where she states that she is still traumatized by the incident. She indicates that she has become severely depressed following what had happened to her, and at one point attempted suicide. She has since become afraid to leave her house, because she cannot bear to see individuals who know what has happened to her (*National Post*; Radford).

### **McGill University Redman Football Team**

22 Three McGill University Redmen football players were charged with sexual assault with a weapon and forcible confinement in April 2012 (*National Post*). Ian Sheriff, Brenden Carrière and Guillaume Tremblay allegedly attacked a Concordia University student in September 2011 (*National Post*). The victim/survivor recounted the events of the night during the trial, stating that she was raped after meeting two of the players at a local bar (Bachelder). She had gone to their apartment and was given an opened beer can, which she believes may have been drugged (Fazioli). She testified that she remembered being on a bed with the three men and telling them to stop. The next morning, she had her clothes thrown at her and was asked to leave because the players had to go to practice (Bachelder).

23 Following these events the athletes were charged. However, they were allowed to continue their studies at McGill University. Furthermore, the three students continued to play on the Redman football team, despite the allegations. They were not removed from the team by the coach or the university, but instead quit the team themselves once the charges went public (*CBC News*). Furthermore, one of the young men also was also hired to work as a sport-leadership counsellor at McGill's Sports Camp, after being accused of sexual assault (*CBC News*).

24 The charges of sexual assault and forcible confinement were dropped during trial. The move was in response to an email sent to the prosecutors from a witness. The testimony was a four-line email, in which the witness claimed that the survivor had agreed to have sex with the men, making it consensual (Bachelder). However, the witness was not able to be contacted to speak during trial and was never cross-examined on her testimony (*National Post*). Instead, the prosecution decided that the survivor did not have enough evidence for the case, and withdrew charges (Fazioli).

25 The victim/survivor says she is still “struggling to come to grips with an alleged assault that has, unfortunately, defined and transformed her life” (*National Post*). She has applied to law school and hopes to use her experience to help other sexual assault victims get their justice. She stated that she realizes her fight is with the system, not with the alleged perpetrators. She recognizes that it goes beyond her story and ultimately started “a big discussion about how terribly victims are treated in the system” (*National Post*).

## **Discussion**

26 The cases, as presented in the media reports, suggest inadequate institutional responses in responding to instances of sexual violence. Although we realize such reporting brings with it bias, nevertheless it seems to us that we can see a pattern emerging that reaffirms the idea that when it comes to sport, ruling relations privilege some bodies over others. Furthermore, the athletic departments in each of these cases sought to uphold their institutional brand over and above an ethical response to sexual violence reports. For example, in the Saskatchewan case the spokeswoman for University of Saskatchewan athletics stated that “there is currently no policy in place” (Deibert). Thus, the responsibility is redirected away from the institution. Therefore, what happens is that a university may be less likely to admit to wrongdoing by its athletes because that can look badly on the university as a whole (Crosset). Although it would be wrong to generalize from these two cases, research suggests that these cases are not anomalies. It seems that what can be seen as an institutional desire for self-protection can adversely affect those who experience sexual violence to feel that their voices have been heard (Quinlan et al.; Gardiner et al.).

27 One common factor in these two cases is that the coaches both hired players who they knew had committed sexual offences at other institutions. Thus, the institution knowingly puts other students at risk of being harmed. US and Canadian research shows, for example, that although athletes may be forced off the team, they may be allowed to finish their term at the university



(Crosset; Quinlan et al). Thus, an athlete can still have all the privileges of being a student. Some coaches allow this so that the athlete can finish up the term, and then in some cases, coaches allow these athletes to go elsewhere, not always telling others of the offences. This is because some coaches feel that everyone deserves a second chance and by not telling of the offense, the athlete can start afresh. However, Crosset argues that “most sexual assaults are committed by a person who has already committed an assault” (75). Thus, not alerting officials to this problem exacerbates it. If there is an “atmosphere where violence is condoned by coaches, then it is more likely that violence will occur” (Crosset 76). These actions maintain a culture of silence in sport, which “serves to advantage the offender over the victim/survivor” (Quinlan et al. 141).

28 It was also apparent in these cases that the victim’s best interests were not prioritized. Both coaches overlooked the charges in order to have the player(s) on their team. What is evident here is that there are institutional practices that support male privilege, normalize interpersonal violence, and ultimately fail to hold athletes or the administration accountable for their behavior (Crosset 76). This perpetuates a silence around instances of sexual violence. For example, in the McGill case, in order for the victim/survivor to be heard, she needed to provide an impact statement to the *National Post*—that is, provide a statement about a traumatic experience to the public because the institution itself did so little to support her and tried to silence her.

29 What also emerges from these cases is a contradictory dynamic that reveals tensions between ethical decision making and institutional practices. This contradictory dynamic reveals the extent to which the privileging of athletes and athletic abilities inform university responses to these incidents. More specifically, hegemonic masculinity acts as a ruling relation that impacts university responses to these incidents. Hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which guarantees the dominant position of men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 77). Sport constructs, maintains, and reproduces dominant ideologies around hegemonic masculinity (Anderson). These ideologies are so prominent in sport, that they are rarely questioned because they become common sense and natural (Messner). What matters to many of those involved in sport is winning; sometimes, at any cost. In an environment where competition is king (Ball), the chance of addressing issues that negatively affect the team, such as sexual violence complaints, may be less than robust. When this ruling relation comes to light and influences decisions, star athletes’ violent behaviour(s) may end up being overlooked or even condoned.

## Conclusion

30 These highly publicized media cases reveal how ruling relations maintain an institutional culture that privileges the physical acumen of male athletes over the safety and bodily autonomy of female students. In the University of Saskatchewan case and the McGill case, the coach's decision privileged the athlete(s) and not the victim/survivor. The athlete(s) was allowed to return to play, which makes it harder for the rest of the team, the victim/survivor, and community members to see that their behavior was inappropriate. Furthermore, this creates barriers for victims/survivors to report varsity athlete perpetrators of sexual violence because there appears to be no repercussions. If university sport continues to not recognize how ruling relations privilege athletic performance and the impact this has on sexual violence responses, victims/survivors of sexual violence will continue to be silenced in this organization. As we have shown through our two case studies, there is a contradictory dynamic that reveals tensions between ethical decision making and institutional practices. Hegemonic masculinity acts as a ruling relation that impacts university responses to incidents of sexual violence by male athletes, and the need to win overshadows the need for ethical responses to sexual violence in sport.

31 What is unique about our research findings is the ways in which we use Smith's ruling relations as a framework that reveals how gender operates in higher education institutions to privilege some bodies over others. Using this framework highlights how the need to win can overshadow the need for ethical responses to sexual violence in sport. This is a major problem that serves to silence sexual violence in varsity sport. Although there is limited research on institutional responses to sexual violence and the ruling relations that underpin these responses, the two cases we examine demonstrate that there is much room for improvement in dealing with sexual violence in sport. Masculinity and varsity sports participation have been shown to be associated with sexual violence (Murnen and Kohlman). Understanding this association through the lens of ruling relations allows us to create solutions and address sexual violence in ways that can meaningfully shift sports culture.

32 The limitations of this study are that it is based on two cases; yet we would argue that these cases are emblematic of the kind of ruling relations that Smith argues "informs experiences and serves to privilege some bodies over others" (75). One fruitful approach to ending the silence of sexual violence in Canadian university sport may be to create a system of allies within teams. This could include discussions around appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, responses to sexual violence, and supports for victims/survivors that foster a sense of community. Thus, instead of

focusing on an individual leader, conversations amongst teams may foster not only greater leadership among university athletes, but also a change in institutional culture and individual behavior. While this may be a good response at the player level, suggestions at the institutional level are also required.

33 Institutions have to be willing to make ethical decisions by putting the safety and body autonomy of students above the reputation of athletic programs. One way to facilitate this shift in Canadian institutions is to adopt guidelines, following the example of *Title IX* in the United States. This would require athletic departments to be transparent in their handling of sexual assault and make explicit that sexual assault is not tolerated within athletics. Accountability has to be built into the policies, as well as prevention measures, so that institutions only response is not limited to simply firing a coach and removing athletes.

34 After review of these cases, it is evident that work needs to be done to ensure that athletic departments improve the way they deal with the issues of sexual violence in sport. Prevention programs designed specifically for athletes is one strategy, creating a bystander program is another, but cultural change needs to change at a deeper level. In many varsity programs, winning at all costs can create a toxic culture that fails to address sexual violence. Thus, athletes, coaches, and athletic departments need to step up to ensure this ruling relation is recognized, and work to effect cultural change by way of policies, personal practices, and institutional responses to sexual violence.

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