

Preventing violence against women and girls in the sport context





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This resource is part of Communicating Equality, a project focused on gender-transformative approaches to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls. When we analyzed the evidence on this topic, sport emerged as an important context for advancing violence prevention and gender equality in Canada. This resource provides a summary of promising gender-transformative initiatives for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in sports contexts in Canada and around the world, with a focus on communication and messaging.

[Communicating Equality](#) for Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a Canadian initiative to address the root causes of VAWG by focusing on primary prevention. Worldwide, one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life [1]. In Canada, more than 50% of women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 [2]. This project links expertise in media and communication, gender-transformative thinking and violence prevention to highlight and address the drivers of VAWG and translate them into effective Canada-specific messages and actions for public consumption.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Violence against women and girls	is defined as any act of gender-based violence that causes, or could cause, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life. This definition encompasses all forms of violence that women and girls experience (including physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, spiritual, financial, and others) that are gender-based [3].
Primary prevention	means stopping violence against women and girls from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. This includes changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence; and shifting the power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalize it [3].
Gender-transformative approaches	move beyond simply being aware of gender inequality, or sensitive to gender differences, and instead deliberately challenge harmful gender roles, stereotypes, practices and norms, with the explicit aim of shifting the unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men [3]. Concerning violence, gender-transformative approaches focus on eliminating violence against women and girls and ending gender inequalities at the same time. In order to do this, a whole-of-society approach that engages all segments of society in the promotion of gender equality- including at the individual, household, community, institutional and policy/legal level- is necessary. Overall, employing gender-transformative approaches requires creativity, critical analysis, and novel ways of thinking [3-6].

SPORTS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Violence against women and girls in sport contexts is a pressing issue in Canada. [The most recent investigations into sexual assaults against women involving Canadian hockey players](#) have re-exposed long standing systemic problems in hockey and other Canadian sports. This violence is rooted in a culture of sexism where violence against women at all levels – from sport federations to teams and clubs – is enabled and condoned, and often dismissed as “boys being boys” [7, 8].

Violence against women and girls in sports is not unique to Canada. The International Olympic Committee's three scientific "Consensus Statements" in 2007, 2016 and 2019, warned sports organizations that sexual harassment and abuse happen in all sports and at all levels [9]. Other studies show that this violence is connected to an organizational level tolerance of abuse and a conformity to dominant masculine values in sports across many societies [10, 11].

To address this enduring crisis, Canadian and international experts in sports have called for actions to prevent this violence by transforming the deeply entrenched norms and cultural drivers of these problems, in addition to efforts that support victims and survivors [7, 9].

Similarly, organizations and experts working on the primary prevention of violence against women and girls have identified sport as a key sector. These organizations have stressed that, similar to other social institutions such as schools and workplaces, people learn and reproduce particular attitudes, behaviours and social norms in sport settings. The importance of sport as a social practice and institution is therefore seen as an opportunity to set and reinforce positive community standards about respect and equality [12, 13].

A review of global evidence on primary prevention initiatives in sport settings found significant interest and activity in this area, but few initiatives had been sufficiently evaluated [13]. With this in mind, there are promising primary prevention techniques and examples inclusive of gender-transformative approaches. However, these approaches can be further explored, implemented and/or evaluated in the Canadian context. Gender-transformative approaches and techniques are necessary in all settings, and especially in sports, given the unequal gender dynamics that lead to condoning violence and incidents of violence that are often widely and systemically espoused and promoted in sports settings. Additionally, sports offer a critical opportunity to engage with people of all genders and walks of life.

[Sexual violence and misogyny are deeply rooted problems in men's ice hockey](#)

This letter, dated July 26, 2022, was signed by 28 academics from 21 Canadian universities, and sent to Canada's Sport Minister and a Parliamentary committee investigating sexual violence in junior elite men's ice hockey. The letter highlights that the incidents in hockey are not caused by a few “bad apples” but are rather “systemic problems” and “a symptom of a deeply rooted culture in hockey and other Canadian sports”. The letter called for systemic actions that address the underlying drivers of violence against women and girls in sport contexts, reinforcing the importance of developing primary prevention efforts in sport.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE INITIATIVES FOR THE PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SPORTS

Organizational development, direct participation programs with athletes and staff, and communication and social marketing campaigns are examples of promising approaches to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in sport.

Organizational development

Some sport organizations are working on promoting gender equality and challenging violence, discrimination and stereotyping with a whole-of-organization approach. At its best, this approach includes engaging all groups connected to an organization in order to transform the structures, cultural norms and practices that enable violence.

Our Watch has [partnered with four national sport federations](#) – the National Rugby League, Rugby Australia, the Australian Football League and Golf Australia – to “eliminate violence against women and their children by promoting women’s participation and opportunities, challenging gender stereotypes and roles, challenging violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours and encouraging respectful, healthy and equal relationships on and off the field” [14]. As part of this, the four national federations have been involved in reviewing and redeveloping policies and integrating the prevention of violence against women and their children, and training staff about gender equality. Some organizations have worked at creating direct participation programs with staff and athletes and rolling them out to other levels of their organization (for example, state and local levels). They have also developed initiatives to encourage increased participation and representation of women and girls at all levels of their sport.



“We all have a role to play in creating clubs, teams, workplaces, venues and communities where all women are safe, equal and valued. Your sport can play a part in influencing the attitudes, behaviours, practices and structures that allow violence to occur.” - Our Watch, 2020

Direct participation programs with athletes and staff

Gender-transformative approaches in sports programs focus on engaging young men and boys in bystander intervention and transforming harmful masculinities which lead to violence against women and girls.

The [Mentors in Violence Prevention](#) is a popular and well evaluated bystander intervention program [14]. Created in 1993 in the United States, MVP provides a framework and tools for effective bystander intervention and peer-based learning with the aim of preventing gender violence, sexual harassment and bullying.

In Canada, Ending Violence Association of British Columbia (EVA BC) partnered with the BC Lions Football Club to develop the [Be More Than a Bystander](#) based on the MVP framework. As part of this program, BC Lion players and coaches received training on violence against women and girls and prevention approaches, including bystander intervention. Players were then involved in facilitating workshops with high-school students that promoted the importance of respectful relationships and helped youth learn what to say and do when other people are abusing or disrespecting women or girls. Players also facilitated training for coaches of amateur teams to help them learn how to talk to their young athletes about violence against women and girls and respectful relationships. The success of the Be More Than a Bystander model has led to the creation of workplace programming and adaptations in other Canadian provinces [15].

Other gender-transformative programs based on direct participation have focused on equipping coaches to engage with their high school and college-age athletes in conversations about transforming harmful masculinities into gender equitable and positive non-violent masculinities [16-18]. The [Coaching Boys into Men](#) program, developed by Futures Without Violence in the United States, provides a series of useful toolkits for coaches and institutions regarding how to promote values of respect and nonviolence in young men, challenging harmful masculinities which lead to VAWG. The sessions are designed for young athletes to reflect and learn about respect as a personal responsibility, the harms of disrespectful behaviours toward women and girls, consent, managing conflict through communication, how to stand against relationship abuse and the importance of mental health care, among other topics. These toolkits have been adapted for countries across the globe and for sports such as cricket in India and soccer for 200 FIFA national football associations [12].

Communication and social marketing campaigns

Communications and social marketing campaigns by sports organizations or featuring sports people are a popular and frequent primary prevention technique in Canada and internationally. While not always gender transformative, campaigns developed with a gender transformative purpose have broadly aimed to challenge the tolerance of this violence in sports and the larger community and encourage actions that help prevent it.

The partnerships between Our Watch and national sport organizations in Australia included a social media campaign where elite players and coaches of all four national codes promoted the message that there is “No Excuse 4 Violence”, which addressed the systemic tolerance of violence against women and girls [14].

As part of the Be More Than a Bystander program in Canada, the BC Lions football players were featured in [a series of public service announcements](#) that aimed to raise awareness on the issue of men’s violence against women and encourage bystander intervention. The key message of this campaign – “Be More than a Bystander: Break the Silence on Violence Against Women” – was reinforced through various supporting messages, see examples in the speech bubbles on the right [15].

“Men need to speak up.”

“Violence against women and girls is not OK.”

“Men need to encourage other men to act and speak up.”

“You do not have to be a BC Lion to be more than a bystander!”

“There are simple ways to interrupt the abusive behaviour.”

Campaigns and programs that have focused on sport as a primary communication mechanism for preventing violence against women have certain advantages. One is the opportunity for promoting alternative constructions of masculinity that displace cultural associations between sport, violence and masculinity. Sport can also provide a 'common language' across many socio-cultural groups and has the potential for reaching a wide, receptive audience for a campaign message. Finally, prevention campaigns that use sport as a theme or entry point present opportunities for targeted placements of campaign materials at sporting venues, sponsorships and support by sporting clubs and associations, and sources of high-profile spokespeople to deliver the campaign message [19, 20].

CONCLUSION

These resources are examples of promising techniques that can be integrated into sports organizations as comprehensive and holistic approaches to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls. This whole-of-sport approach should ideally extend from the executive and leadership levels to players, staff, fans, sponsors and volunteers. It is important that prevention work becomes ongoing core business – not only a special project – to ensure long-lasting cultural change that will prevent violence against women and girls.

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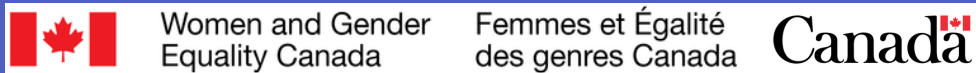


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