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### **Bringing about cultural change: Addressing sexual harassment and abuse in sport**

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How do you solve a problem that has no name? This was the famous challenge posed by Betty Friedan (1963) and other second wave feminists in the 1960s ... they identified a feeling that something was 'not quite right' about women's situation. That feeling summed up the despair and isolation felt by American women about the many social and cultural discriminations that they experienced because of the 1950s ideology that made domestic life their only option. Their plight had been ignored during the hectic, revolutionary turmoil of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam campaigns. Fast forward 40 years and we see that much has changed for the better.

Despite the relatively slow path of reform followed by women's sport, we also see huge improvements in women's representation today, in the quality of our sporting experiences and the scale of our sporting ambitions and aspirations. Like many of you, I have lived through decades of campaigning for a better deal for women in sport – whether through research, education, policy or advocacy work - and have celebrated these improvements. But still something is 'not quite right' in sport ...

Today, I am going to tell you about a small success story: I hope it will encourage you to keep pressing for change in your own countries.

#### **'Discovering' sexual harassment and abuse**

In 1985, just after I had completed four years as first Chair of the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) in the UK, I began to explore the farther reaches of

discrimination to women in sport. My consciousness had been raised by working for the WSF, by more than a decade as an international athlete and coach, and by teaching sport sociology and feminist perspectives in sport. I could see that the liberal feminist project might secure women more places in sport but I could not see how this would enhance the quality of our experiences as athletes. I felt that we needed to move beyond discrimination and to address harassment and abuse before we could really achieve the changes that I wanted for women in sport. But harassment, and even more so abuse, had no name in English sport: because they were not labelled, they were neither recognised or addressed. My view was that the culture of sport (i.e. what it *feels like* to be a women in sport) was at least as important an issue as the structure of sport (i.e. where women are positioned in sport organisations) and that cultural change would be necessary if we were to win the prize of sustainable, positive change.

Once I began examining the issue of sexual abuse in sport I realized that I was, almost literally, alone. There was no research on the issue and nobody involved in sport policy wanted to listen to my pleas for change. Worse, I was not believed, I was branded a trouble maker and accused of ruining the good name of sport. I knew differently. By the mid 1990s I had collected first hand evidence from female athletes of their rapes, sexual assaults and harassment by coaches and other authority figures. Not one of the athletes I interviewed went on to reach their athletic peak: some dropped out and others struggled to regain form. Some of the women had been under the age of 18 when they suffered these assaults, meaning that their experiences were legally defined in England as child sexual abuse.

The more I looked the worse things got and, within a few years, I had gathered a small mountain of qualitative data and case studies of child sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault and harassment. By then, I had been effectively excommunicated by many sport organisations. I was threatened with legal action for allegedly bringing one agency into disrepute, received crank telephone calls from anonymous enemies, was shunned by the sports policy makers, labelled a 'moral

entrepreneur' and called a man-hating loony, by even some of my closest colleagues. It was a lonely time.

### **Creating a change climate**

Fast forward again to 2006: England now has a full-time dedicated unit for child protection in sport, handling hundreds of cases each year and having just launched its second five year plan ([www.thecpsu.org.uk](http://www.thecpsu.org.uk)). All sport organisations must comply with nine national standards to safeguard children in order to win their grants from government; sports coaches must now study and agree to promote child protection and gender equity in order to secure their coaching licences. We also have a flourishing Women's Sports Foundation that celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> birthday last year and that works tirelessly for the rights of women and girls in sport.

What changed things? What made the difference? There is not time here to go through all the steps in the arduous journey (which is written up in my book *Spoilsports*, 2001). What I will do is take you through the process that I followed and through which I have attempted to secure more equitable, harassment-free and abuse-free sport.

First, I researched and collected systematic evidence of harassment and abuse in sport and then I began to publish this in academic journals. Throughout the first 12 years of the work I kept an intermittent diary and a complete chronological archive of correspondence, case notes and ideas.

At the same time, I kept up a steady campaign of letter writing and public speaking *within* sport to publicise the issue and call for someone in government or national sport to do something about it. This pricked some guilty consciences but also provoked a lot of negative responses!

I also conducted vigorous networking *outside* sport, to secure both research and policy allies, and to establish credibility for the issue in the wider scientific and professional communities. (Interestingly, the non-sporting feminists working in sexual violence research did not want to know me!)

It is important for us to 'work smart' when trying to achieve change. I pushed for years at a closed door. Sometimes I was so passionate about the issue that I failed to notice that the door was slammed tight shut: but I kept on pushing, wasting energy and simply increasing my own frustration. There came a time, however, when the door opened and I fell right through it. Of course, I cannot claim to have created the change climate alone but my work, and that of several close collaborators, was probably one factor.

The imprisonment in 1995 of a former British Olympic swimming coach, Paul Hickson, for sex crimes against swimmers over about 20 years was a certainly a 'defining moment' for this issue because it showed the English sports world that sexual abuse *could* and *did* happen. After Hickson went to jail, I was no longer the mad woman, the man hater, the sport wrecker but someone who just might have a point when I said that sport harboured sexual exploitation. It was still several years before English sports policy makers embraced protection for children and women but, eventually, it did happen.

It is not easy to understand at the time exactly how or why you operate as a change agent. It is often only with hindsight that the process is clarified and rationalised. Looking back, I now realise that I adopted a kind of formula for cultural change in sport in order to bring an end to the exploitation of women and children.

### **A formula for cultural change**

In the past three years I have adopted the term 'Activation States' to describe the different profiles that individuals and organisations demonstrate in their response

to the issue of sexual exploitation in sport (see Figure 1) (Brackenridge *et al.* 2005). Activation states apply to groups of individuals or stakeholders and comprise a mix of knowledge, feelings, actions and, importantly, discourses.

**Knowledge** = intellectual content or what we know, study, read and investigate about sexual exploitation in sport

**Feelings** = emotional content or what we feel about the issue

**Action** = behavioural content or what we do about it

**Discourse** = meaning content or what we say about the issue

**Figure 1      Activation states**

Elements of Change	Activation States				
	OPPOSED	INACTIVE	REACTIVE	ACTIVE	PROACTIVE
<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>	Myth-based	Ignorant	Minimal	Informed	Evidence-based
<b>FEELINGS</b>	Negative	Neutral	Sceptical	Accepting	Positive
<b>ACTION</b>	Anti	Passive	Reluctant	Engaged	Pro
<b>DISCOURSE</b>	Dismissive	Exclusionary	Tolerant	Aware	Advocating

Every psychology student knows that ‘attitude’ comprises the first three of these basic elements, described as cognitive, affective, and behavioural, and that, in order for an attitude to change, these need to be positively synchronised. Men know at a cognitive level that women have a right to play sport, for example, but some still resist because of their oppositional feelings. For example:

*“Women should be in the kitchen, not on the football field!”* This is easily identified as ‘Opposed’.

*“Of course women should have equal rights ... but it will take time.”* This is less easily identified: the voice of this person appears to be proactive and they seem well informed but they are doing nothing to change women’s situation

Adding discourse into the mix is vital: it allows us to look beyond individual responses to include those social and cultural interpretations of an issue that often drive or impede change. I wanted to consider not just how individuals and stakeholder groups resist child protection and anti-harassment work but also organisational and cultural resistance. I therefore used the Activation States to depict governing bodies’ responses to the issue (Brackenridge 2004), broadly classified as:

- Leaders = mainly proactive and active
- Followers = a mix of active and reactive
- Sceptics = a mix of reactive and opposed
- Resisters = mainly opposed

Here are two examples:

Leader: *“... the work currently being carried out is invaluable and has gone a long way to promote an understanding of child protection issues and to kick start the long slow education process that is so long overdue in so many sports.”*

Resister: Q: Do you want child protection standards?

*“ Absolute pants! Rubbish! This is all the ethics and everything and forcing sports down that line. I don’t agree with it at all.”*

To create a change climate I have had to work on all fronts, to address knowledge, feelings, actions *and* discourses. I was very fortunate in that I witnessed change in my lifetime. Many advocates never live to see the fruits of their labours.

My formula for anyone attempting to bring about cultural change is therefore:

**KNOWLEDGE:** Build knowledge – collect systematic evidence and spread the information about it to all the main stakeholders including, policy makers, sport organisations, the media, professional groups and, of course, to women in sport themselves.

**FEELINGS:** Work *with* rather than *against* the emotional politics of your situation. Recognise the fears, anxieties and concerns of your adversaries and accept that there is usually a right and a wrong moment to press for change. If they are not ready they will never change but you can help to increase their readiness by also working on knowledge, actions and discourse.

**ACTION:** Keep the issue alive by listening to those involved, advocating, lobbying, writing, networking, educating and training others.

And, in my view, the most important element of the equation ...

**DISCOURSE:** If something is 'not quite right' then name it. Tell it like it is (for me this meant upsetting people by talking about sexual assault and rape in sport). Talk up the issue, sound like a crowd even if you feel alone; use every publicity medium you can to celebrate success; challenge those who block change; use the language, images and impression of change to create the momentum that will lead to change. By anticipating and creating an impression of change it will eventually happen.

## **Conclusions**

Things have changed a lot in England since 1995 when Paul Hickson went to prison. We have in place policies, procedures, education and training and much more positive political will to bring about an end to the sexual exploitation of both child and women athletes. Our research base is growing very slowly and perhaps we are past the tipping point now. But regression is always possible, of course: I

hope, for example, that the London 2012 Olympics will not scare English sport back into its former myopic obsession with 'performance' at the expense of athlete welfare. For now I am happy to acknowledge the incredible journey that we have travelled over the past 20 years.

The international picture is very different. Australia, Canada and one or two European countries have brought in prevention and anti-harassment work but far too many countries are still stuck in the opposed state, failing to become activated towards welfare and equal rights for women and children in sport. In some countries it is still simply too dangerous for researchers or advocates to raise the question of sexual abuse or harassment and in far too many countries women athletes still endure sexual exploitation as the price of team selection.

If you come from such a place, my advice is to work smarter rather than harder. Begin to open the locked door by working on the knowledge base, recruiting key allies on the inside and boosting the cultural change discourse. Good luck!

## References

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