



A culture of sporting inequality

Africa produces many of the world's best athletes and footballers. But think of African sports stars and you think of men. Where are all the women?

»In Africa, sport is still seen as a man's domain. There is a broad belief that sport is not a decent or proper activity for women.«

This comment by Tanzanian-born sociologist Prisca B. Massao serves to underline a major problem that is only now being fully recognised. The vast majority of women in Africa never see a sports field or a training ground, and in most African nations, sport is the exclusive domain of men.

»Occasionally, girls do get to take part in sport,« she tells Play the game. »However, when women get married, their husbands often forbid them from taking an active part in sport - a practice which has destroyed many sports careers.«

As well as traditional gender roles, Prisca B. Massao points out that other conditions exist which prevent African women from gaining the same opportunities as men. Not least, sexual intimidation and abuse. »Female athletes experience sexual harassment and abuse from their male trainers as a matter of course,« she says.

Studies into the subject are rare due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the topic is seen as a taboo area, meaning few are willing to speak out. Secondly, a lack of resources means funding for such research is rarely subsidised. And thirdly, male culture decrees that men often protect each other when faced with allegations of such a nature.

Those subjected to abuse are often young girls who are expected to obey men and assume a submissive role, she continues. Men, therefore, have plenty of opportunity to abuse their power and position, and girls have no proper channels of complaint. Broadly speaking, this leaves female athletes with two choices - to keep quiet or give up on sport altogether.

»It will be a long, hard struggle to improve the lot of African female athletes,« says Prisca B Massao. »There is no specific policy relating to sexual harassment in sport. This needs to change. Such a policy should be implemented over the heads of the coaches. For example, any expectation or requirement of sexual favours from female athletes should be completely outlawed.« bm



Governments and sports organisation cannot wish the problem away, Kari Fasting says

Hidden ordeal of female athletes

Sexual harassment in sport is widespread and under-prioritised, says a Norwegian professor

By Bente Mikkelsen

An unwelcome slap on the backside, an unwanted suggestion or more serious sexual demands are far from unknown in the sports world. Research suggests that between every fifth - and up to every second female athlete has experienced some form of sexual harassment. Research on the subject is rare, and it is often difficult to judge the extent of the problem. However, the fact that sexual harassment creates significant emotional consequences is widely accepted.

»Sexual abuse can extract a high price,« says Kari Fasting, Professor of Sociology at the Norwegian University of Sport and Physical Education. »It can lead to a deterioration in the victim's emotional and physical well being.«

Kari Fasting points out that threats, such as expulsion from a team or the withdrawal of privileges, are one method in which coaches and sports leaders misuse their authority. She adds that many parallels exist between sexual harassment on the sports field



“... A wonderful conference . I really enjoyed it and find myself quoting all the time things I heard while there. For me it was a very special experience, to see researchers/ academics and journalists actually listening to one another and having a genuine dialogue...”

Alina Bernstein, Sportsmedia Researcher, Tel Aviv

and the male-dominated workplace.

Although the bulk of the investigation into sexual abuse focused on young athletes in elite sport, she expresses her belief that the problem is widespread in both professional and amateur circles. »In a situation where masculinity and male values are dominant, there is a major risk that sexual harassment can occur« she states. »We know that sexual intimidation and abuse occur, but we are almost certainly only seeing the tip of the iceberg.«

»Governments and sports organisations cannot just close their eyes and wish the problem away. We are talking about athletes whose lives are being destroyed. Why are millions of dollars being spent on drug tests for top athletes while almost nothing is being spent on the combat of sexual abuse and harassment in sport?«

Kari Fasting is aware that the problem is been discussed – but, she says, this is simply not enough. »It doesn't help at all if directives are not carried out in practice,« she continues. »There is a danger that these discussions will become a type of sleeping pill. For me it looks like there is a lack of will to follow up on resolutions.«

The Chairman of the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations (DGI) Søren Møller points to the difficulties involved in applying research from the workplace or elite sport to local sports associations, adding that the more ambitious an association's goals, the more harassment could be pronounced.

»In normal sports associations, I think that you if you experience a situation of intimidation, you can simply walk away or move to another team« he says. »I have no doubt that sexual harassment occurs in our associations.«

In conclusion, Møller states that awareness of the problem can be strengthened through debate.

»If we ensure that this topic is not seen as taboo, it will be easier to bring cases to light,« he says.

IOC missing the gender target

Contrary to the objectives, less than ten percent of the members are women

By Bente Mikkelsen

The IOC is not achieving its stated aim of attracting women into its national and international committees.

The goal for the year 2000 was a modest 10 %. However, at present, only 6.6 % of the IOC's members are female.

The highest-ranking woman in sports politics, Swedish Gunilla Lindberg from the IOC Executive Committee, expresses her surprise at this lack of progress.

»Sixty-six percent of the national committees have achieved the IOC's stated aim of including at least one woman,« Gunilla Lindberg says.

»But where are these women when these national committees are represented at international meetings? Are women only being included to provide evidence that they are complying with the IOC's request?«

Anita White, an independent consultant working in the field of national and international sport policy and sports development, added:

»It is an embarrassment to IOC that they failed to meet its own 10 percent minimum target for women on the Executive Board.«

A men's club

By tradition the IOC is a men's club. Not until 1981 did it get its first two female members. Before then several women had been turned down at the entrance.

As the only IOC representative at Play the game, Gunilla Lindberg was the subject of much attention. One of the questions she faced concerned the possibility of the IOC operating a quota system to ensure that half its nominees are women.

»That is a suggestion which I would like to consider« she says, »but it is not without its drawbacks. For example, a large proportion of the nominees come from the national Olympic committees and the special associations.«

So, retorted one participant, if they don't comply, why doesn't the IOC just implement sanctions against them?

»Sanctions don't work in a global association like the IOC« she says. »Rome wasn't built in a day. However, I have high hopes that we will get to see some positive changes in the future.«

A more favourable attitude towards quotas was expressed by Berit Skirstad, associate pro-



Are women only being included to provide evidence that the national Olympic Committees are complying with the IOC's request? asked Gunilla Lindberg from the IOC's Executive Committee

IOC has decided that there should be a minimum of 10 % women in decision-making bodies by the end of December 2000 (later extended to 2001) and 20 % by 2005. Less than half of the international sports federations have a 10 percent female representation.

fessor at the Norwegian University for Sport and Physical Education.

In Norway the law requires that both sexes have a minimum representation of at least 40 percent in all public boards, commissions etcetera. This law is generally complied with, whereas the female representation in the corporate companies – where gender representation isn't regulated – is almost non-existent.

It is hardly the threat of sanctions that makes the Norwegian observe the quotas, says Berit Skirstad, but in the IOC sanctions are necessary:

»Generally laws and rules are respected in Norway, but other countries may not have the same culture. That's why I believe sanctions are necessary. And what will the IOC do if the objectives are not met? If the inequality problem shall be resolved it takes a commitment from the very top.«