



**Asia Proceedings of Social Sciences
(APSS)**

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CHALLENGES IN DETERRING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE IN SPORTS FROM A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Sharifah Syahirah *

Kolej Universiti Poly-Tech MARA (KUPTM), Cheras,
Malaysia

Syarifah Fathynah SS

Institut Sukan Negara (ISN), Bukit Jalil,
Malaysia

Wan Puspa Melati

SEGI University, Damansara,
Malaysia.

Fadilah P.

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)
Malaysia

Bahiyah H.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi
Malaysia

Habibah I.

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Nilai
Malaysia

**Corresponding author's Email: sharifahsyahirah@gmail.com*

Peer-review under responsibility of 5th Asia International Conference 2019 Scientific Committee

<http://connectingasia.org/scientific-committee/>

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lat 306 Savoy Residencia, Block 3 F11/1, 44000 Islamabad. Pakistan,

editor@readersinsight.net

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A b s t r a c t

This article attempts to discuss the challenges related to the occurrence of sexual harassment in sports. There were many glaring cases of sexual harassment in sports reported in the media. Unfortunately, most of these cases end up without any redress for the victim or punishment against the perpetrator. Hence, the objective of this article is to analyse the challenges faced by sports practitioners and officers in preventing as well as handling a few recent cases of sexual harassment and abuse. A qualitative method has been applied and the primary data is collected through focus group sessions comprised of thirty-five (35) experts from sports institutions, enforcement officers, civil society representatives, athletes and related government agencies. The result depicts there are fifteen challenges involved in handling cases related to sexual harassment and abuse in sports particularly lack code of practice and unclear procedures on the person in charge. Since there is no specific rules related to sexual harassment, previous cases were investigated under penal code and made it impossible for the victims to receive protection and redress.

R e s e a r c h H i g h l i g h t s

Highlight 1:

Fifteen (15) challenges involved in handling cases related to sexual harassment and abuse in sports.

R e s e a r c h O b j e c t i v e s

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the challenges in curbing the pervasiveness of cases of sexual harassment in sport faced by sports practitioners and officers. This paper therefore attempts to answer two main research questions. First, in preventing and dealing with few recent cases of sexual harassment and abuse, what are the risk factors faced by sports practitioners and the community? Second, to what extent do these risk factors impede strict actions against the perpetrator and protect the victims? In order to prevent the incidence of sexual harassment in sports, building and formulating the most successful code of conduct and





framework is really important. This could be achieved by evaluating these challenges from the point of view of sports group experts.

Methodology

Data collection was undertaken in April 2018, through focus group sessions consisting of thirty-five (35) experts. These experts represent the athletes, sports institutions, civil society groups, enforcement institutions, and related government agencies. The experts were split into three different groups with 10 to 13 experts in each team. Each group has one rapporteur who reports the discussion and two facilitators. A set of questions was provided for each team to guide (but not limiting) their discussion.

Results

The discussions of experts from the focus group sessions yielded some important key findings. These are categorized into different dimensions as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges in Eliminating Sexual Harassment in Sports

No	Dimension	Challenges
1.	Standard Operating Procedure and Mechanism	1.1 Lack of clear and necessary safe sports policy. 1.2 Lack of independent platform 1.3 Lack of clear timeline 1.4 Vague organizational structure on person in charge.
2.	Culture, Mindset and Stereotyping	2.1 Preferential treatments for people with power. 2.2 Victim and Whistle-blower blaming. 2.3 Stigmatize as trivial cases 2.4 Distrust and stereotype 2.5 Women underrepresentation in sports management 2.6 The existence of stereotype whereby only women are victims of sexual harassment.
3.	Support and resources	3.1 Lack of manpower 3.2 Lack of cooperation
4.	Awareness and Internalization	4.1 Unaware of existing policy and rules 4.2 Lack of visible promotion and training





5. Data and Statistics 5.1 No data on cases related to sexual harassment and lack of research data.

Source: ISN Consensus Statement (2019)

Findings

As can be seen in Table 1 above, there are five key dimensions which outline the different types of obstacles which impedes efforts to eradicate sexual harassment in sport. In the first category namely standard operating procedure (SOP), four (4) challenges or obstacles are described. These include the visible lack of independent platform to regulate and handle cases which is free of unnecessary organizational pressure. Additionally, unclear SOP timeline and policy which include the standard reporting procedures for victims and whistle blowers, the standardised code of practice and legislation, are also making it even worse for respondents. Culture, attitude and stereotyping are all part of the second category of challenges. Central to this issue is power play that comes in light when people like coaches are deemed powerful and trustworthy, thus treated differently and are more prone to accusation. Especially when those accusations are related to sexual harassment. Another factor which was mentioned by the experts, is the reality of fewer women in the decision-making positions in sport institutions that makes it even harder to help the victims who are mostly females, which is the result of organisational stereotype. Different factors might come in which deter a person from filing a case: When the victim or whistle blowers, have enough courage to file a case against the perpetrator, their efforts are being trivialised which discourage them from seriously proceed with the case. While at other times, having worked closely with teammates, coaches or sports officers might result in complicated feelings such as guilt and shame, thus impeding them from filing a case against these people. When the case do get reported and filed, no clear direction to where those reports should be channelled to and who should be processing and investigating the case. This boils down to problem of lack of manpower or support which bring us to the next category which is the effective prevention and elimination of sexual harassment in sport through support and resources.

When we talk about support and resources in the third dimension, we cannot run away from talking about manpower. Because of the lack of manpower who has the right expertise and attitude to manage such case the process is delayed as mentioned by one of the experts: “due to lack of manpower, they are passing the buck”. Similar problem is found within enforcement





institutions which involves police and security officers. One of the experts noted that: “the front liners and officers taking up the report should be sensitive, emphatic and supportive”. Missing such important qualities, officers in the front lines are in danger of making the victims feel worst rather than helping them. These comments from the experts enlighten us about the seriousness of the issue when the experts share that the “person in charge of receiving the report, handle the cases are not well-trained”, and also added that “the disciplinary committee is not gender sensitive”. These experts argue that: “attitude of committee members and police officer showed that they are uninterested and perceived this as an isolated issue thus paid less attention on this matter”. Such comments are in line with the observation of Yeoh (2019) who stated that the current Act does not cover all aspects and that include those related to sexual harassment e.g. Employment Act, Occupational Safety and Health Act. Even if the case is brought to court, there is a high chance of the perpetrator to be freed due to the burden of bringing in proof ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. High profile case that is processed in court might put even more burden to the victim rather than perpetrator because there is also the fear of victimization felt by the person who lodged the report which is due to the societal stigma on sexual harassment. Thus, emotional and psychological support for victims should be considered vital and provided in a form of an officer/s who needs to be with the victim throughout the process but even this type of support is either absent or insufficient. All of which contributes to the increasingly difficult problems that we need to address and overcome in our effort to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in sport. Without the right, responsible and well-trained people who are aware of the sensitivity of this issue posted in appropriate power positions, these experts feel that it will be hard to make sure that cases are being properly reported, handled and even far from being resolved.

To continue our discussion about support and resources, we need to revisit and relate to our point about culture, attitude and stereotype. It is still a culture in sports institutions where males dominate the field and females are usually underrepresented which causes the imbalance in power preferring masculinity and conventional male-centric values over others (Fasting et al. 2010). If this imbalance continues to be in sport, a lot of tension and challenges will be faced by the minority groups such as women. Patriarchal power influences the kind of support and resources provided in the institutions which inevitably institutionalised to favour the majority group rather than the minority (Fasting et al. 2010). In educating the sports community that lack sensitivity to gender issues, the experts suggest that coaches and athletes “need to be





familiar with the basic dos and don'ts between and among" them. They should also be made aware of the "sensitive topics that should not be discussed openly". Engaging them in such awareness programme should prevent them from crossing the sensitive boundaries.

In the fourth dimension, the challenges are related to awareness and internalization. These experts discussed that many are unaware and did not understand the regulations, procedures and policies related to sexual harassments in their sports organisations or institutions, and what is even worst is that these people do not even know their rights. The experts added that what is also absent is the education programmes for witness and victims, which includes the mechanism to promote awareness related to sexual harassment. According to Cense and Brackenridge (2001), an open culture of communication especially about rules of conduct is important to help manage and eliminate sexual harassment in sport, or at least it would prevent these cases from getting worse. Based on a study conducted by Fasting et al. (2003), rather than people in education or workplace, sports people experience more exposure to sexual harassment, but by continuously equipping them with information about deviant behaviour in sport, experiences related to sexual harassments are getting fewer. Thus, this prove the importance of education and awareness for preventing sexual harassment cases.

Finally, the last challenge relates to the limited data and statistics about sexual harassment and database of its offenders. In Malaysia, there is no systematic record keeping and no way of getting the information or reports made about cases of sexual harassment. Experts in the focus groups claim that fear prevented victims and whistle blowers to report and thus "it is hardly to have the data or statistics to prove that this is a serious phenomenon occurring in sport". Ultimately, the absent of reports leads to inexistence of statistics about sexual harassment cases and thus makes it incredibly challenging to claim the significance of any preventative actions and efforts (Fasting et al. 2010).

In conclusion, all five key dimensions of challenges related to the prevention of sexual harassment in Malaysia need to be addressed and resolved. This is in order to properly manage and handle these cases justly and to give the right support to the victims and whistle blowers. Without proper actions to overcome these challenges taken by all parties and institutions, any efforts to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in Malaysia will most likely be an uphill battle.

Acknowledgement





This Research is funded by National Sports Institute of Malaysia (ISN) under Grant No. ISNRP005/2018. Thank you for the continuous support on research related to gender equality in sports.

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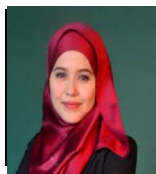
Author's Biography





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Sharifah Syahirah Bt Syed Sheikh (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at Kolej Universiti Poly-Tech MARA and a passionate scholar specialized in gender studies, politics, governance and policy. She holds a Bachelor of Human Science (Hons) in Political Science (2001), and MHSc in Political Science (2004) from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and PhD in Political Science (2011) from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). She is actively involved in various NGOs and academic organizations such as the National Council for Women's Organization (NCWO, 2016) and the Malaysian Social Science Association (PSSM). She has headed and conducted numerous research projects eg. National Young Women Survey (2016).



Syarifah Fathynah Syed Sheikh is a sports conditioning officer at the National Sports Institution (ISN). Currently, she is in the research management department and managed to conduct as well as headed several types of research including sexual harassment in sports. She attained a degree in Sports Science from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and a master's degree in Sports Science from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).



Wan Puspa Melati is a Senior Lecturer at SEGi University. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and Anthropology from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), M.Sc. in Sociology from the University of Oxford, UK (Oxford) and BA in Sociology and Psychology from the University of San Francisco, US (USF). Identifies herself as a Clinical Sociologist, Melati has worked with both local and international NGOs as well as managed grassroots empowerment programmes for various target groups. Her area of research interests includes people with different abilities, social media and youth.



Fadilah Puteh currently works at the Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies (FSPPP), Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia. Fadilah researches in Human Resource Management, Human Resource Development, Adult Education, Social Policy and Qualitative Social Research. She has completed the





'National Young Women Survey 2016.' She is now working on several Fundamental Research Grant Schemes (FRGS)



Bahiyah Abdul Hamid (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Literacy and Sociocultural Transformation, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Her research interests are on language and gender, gender issues, identity construction, code alternation and code choice, and discourse and semiotic analysis. Bahiyah has headed an international research study funded by Qatar Foundation on linguistic sexism and gender role stereotyping and has headed numerous research projects nationally and at university level.



Habibah Ismail (PhD) is a lecturer at the Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Her research interests include corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and gender studies. She has a bachelor's degree in TESL (UKM), a master's degree in ELS (UKM) and a doctoral degree in Linguistics (University of Sydney). Her previous research involves examination of gender representations in educational texts focusing on Qatari English language textbooks. Her current research into media texts combines corpus linguistics with other methodologies mainly critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis to explore the language of sports news.