Female Coaches’ Experience of Harassment and Bullying

The Journal takes pride in breaking new ground when it comes to discussions of the professional and social environments of women coaches. Over the years we have covered women’s leadership, coach education, coach employment, family issues, coaching and motherhood, communication, coach development, mentoring, system change, support systems, decision training, transition from athlete to coach, homophobia, contracts and contract negotiations, unethical behaviour, women’s value within the profession, political advocacy, under-representation of women, and the working lives of women coaches.

We have told many personal stories, made numerous recommendations, provided challenging analyses, described innovative programs, compared the status of women coaches to other sectors in our society, profiled role models, reported on first-person coaching experiences, focused on sport’s potential as an instrument of positive change, and stressed the importance of a career plan and solid business practices, always striving to paint a vivid picture of the reality of women who are driven by a powerful desire to coach.

But we have not examined the touchy subject of harassment and bullying, one of the sordid underbellies of the sport culture. Until now, that is. As author Gretchen Kerr points out, although much has been recorded about female athletes’ experiences of harassment and bullying, a study she is carrying out at the University of Toronto is the first to explore female coaches’ experiences of the dual transgressions. Writing for the Journal about her findings, Gretchen notes that difficulties in attracting and retaining female coaches have been attributed to such factors as domestic responsibilities, the lack of recruitment and mentoring programs, and an absence of role models. Could harassment and bullying also be contributing causes? It appears so.

Gretchen builds a strong case for dealing openly with this contentious but muzzled issue, not least because, as the study’s participants reveal with candour, generally they have perceived their choices to be speaking out and risking the loss of their hard-fought-for positions or staying silent. Not very palatable options.

Gretchen acknowledges that her sample was small. Nevertheless, the participants’ responses are a powerful indictment of a persistent and ugly culture. She prescribes further research in order to “better understand and enhance women’s experiences in the coaching profession.” Let us hope that publishing this article will encourage decision makers at all levels to, at least, support further investigation and, even better, initiate strong actions to end the harassment and bullying of women coaches. — Sheila Robertson

The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.
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Female Coaches’ Experiences of Harassment and Bullying

by Gretchen Kerr

Although numerous researchers have investigated female athletes’ experiences of harassment and bullying, with findings of disturbing rates of occurrence (Hinkle 2005; Holman 1995; Kirby and Greaves 1996; McGlone 2005; Volkwein 1996), surprisingly little is known about these experiences amongst female coaches. Researchers report that in general workplace settings, 10 to 50 per cent of female employees experience harassment each year (Konik and Cortina 2008; Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper 2002; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, and Vartia 2003). Given the prevalence of sexual harassment of women in other workplace settings, it seems reasonable to expect that female coaches are not immune to these experiences.

Further, one is left to ponder whether experiences of harassment and bullying account, in part, for the existing difficulties in recruiting and retaining women coaches. In spite of the increasing participation rates of girls and women in sport, from grassroots community-based programs to international competition, and the successful performance outcomes of female athletes, the number of women in coaching positions has not increased proportionally, if at all (Coaching Association of Canada 2002; LeDrew and Zimmerman 1994). There are substantially fewer female than male coaches at virtually all levels of sport, but particularly at the elite level. Recent Canadian data indicate that approximately 30 per cent of head and assistant coach positions are held by women (Kerr, Marshall, Sharp, and Stirling 2006). Moreover, the literature indicates that females tend to drop out of the profession within the first five years of coaching. The difficulties in attracting and retaining female coaches have been attributed to conflicts with domestic responsibilities, harassment, and the lack of recruitment programs, mentoring programs and role models (Demers 2004; Hall 1996; Hanson and Kraus 1999; Marshall 2001; McKay 1999; Mercier and Werthner 2001).

In the general workplace literature, harassment and bullying have been linked with attrition, absenteeism, decreased productivity, and negative health outcomes (Hoel and Salin 2003; Keashly and Jagatic 2003. Although some research has explored the effects of recruitment and mentoring programs in attracting and retaining female coaches, no previous literature has explored female coaches’ experiences of harassment and bullying.

The purpose of the study from which this article is drawn, therefore, was to examine whether female coaches experienced harassment and bullying as they moved from entry-level positions to more senior positions within the coaching ranks.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the meanings of the terms “harassment” and “bullying”, particularly in light of the fact that these terms are defined in different ways in the literature.

Harassment refers to unwanted or coerced behaviours that are in violation of an individual’s human rights. They represent an abuse of power, authority, and trust (IOC 2007). The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (1994) defined harassment as any “comment, conduct, or gesture directed toward an individual or a group of individuals which is insulting, intimidating, humiliating, malicious, degrading or offensive”. Harassment occurs when a person in a position of authority, power or trust, engages in these behaviours. Within the sport context,
harassment can occur between a coach and an athlete, an athletic director and a coach, or a head coach and an assistant coach, as some examples. Harassment may take many forms, including but not limited to sexual, ethnic, physical, emotional, gender, religious, socioeconomic, racial, and homophobic harassment.

Bullying refers to repeated physical, verbal, or psychological attacks or intimidations that are intended to cause fear, distress, or harm to the victim (Ferrington, 1993). In the workplace, bullying has been defined as repeated and persistent negative acts toward one or more individuals which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment (Hoel and Cooper 2001; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, and Vartia 2003). Similar to harassment, bullying is based on an imbalance of power. The bully holds power through gender, social status within a group, physical size, or certain personality traits (Salin 2003). In bullying, the perpetrator is a peer; in harassment, the perpetrator is in a position of power or authority. Bullying behaviour in sport may include repeated incidents of a coach spreading rumours about, name-calling, or humiliating a fellow coach. Another example is when an athlete repeatedly isolates a fellow athlete or prevents him or her from participating in social or team-related events. Sexual bullying may occur if a peer repeatedly engages in conduct of a sexual nature or makes comments that are viewed as offensive or degrading by the target.

For the purposes of this article, the distinction between harassment and bullying made by Stirling (2008) will be used; namely, harassment and bullying differ because of the nature of the relationship in which the behaviour occurs. Although both harassment and bullying occur within relationships with power differentials, harassment occurs when instigated by someone in an ascribed position of power or authority over the victim, and bullying occurs when the instigator is a peer.

Methods

Participants
The participants in the study included eight Canadian female coaches between the ages of 42 and 56. Each had worked at the national level of sport for a minimum of 10 years and currently held head coach positions for female teams. One of the inclusion criteria was to be a coach within a traditionally male coach-dominated sport. As a result, coaches from sports such as rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming were excluded, and coaches from sports such as basketball, volleyball, hockey, swimming, and athletics were included.

Measures
A semi-structured interview was designed. The first question was “Please tell me about the process by which you entered coaching and came to hold a head coach position”. This was followed, if needed, by such probes as “What were your experiences with the head coach when you were an assistant?” and “What challenges did you encounter en route to becoming a head coach?”

Procedures
A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants. Each coach was contacted personally by phone or e-mail and told about the purpose of the study and the study requirements. The potential participant was told that this study would seek to explore experiences of harassment and bullying as female coaches moved through the coaching ranks. If the coach indicated interest, a mutually convenient time and place to meet for the interview was established. Before data collection began, the participant was given a letter of information about the study and a consent form to sign and was assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without
penalty. Once consent was obtained, the participant chose a pseudonym and the interview began.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. The data were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively, from the identification of meaning units to the classification of the units into themes. The interview transcripts and findings were sent back to the participants for review and comment. No changes were made based upon the participants’ feedback.

Results

Seven of the eight participants experienced harassment or bullying to one degree or another. Some of these experiences were described as minor; others were serious and pervasive.

Experiences of harassment and bullying
The participants described coaching environments as, at times, being characterized by offensive, sexual comments. For example, sexist jokes were common occurrences. Two of the women were present when male coaches, both in comparable positions and in positions of authority, discussed the physical appearance of female athletes on their teams. These discussions involved body disparagement and comments of a sexual nature. For example, one participant offered the following: “We were all standing around watching warm-ups—four guys and me. They began commenting on the athleticism and athletic builds of some of the female athletes ... but then this conversation turned to comments about who was ‘hottest’. Before I could figure out what to say, they were rating the athletes on a one-to-ten scale according to how ‘hot’ the athletes were. I was horrified. Some of these guys have daughters the age of the athletes. I was also horrified by my lack of ability to stop their comments.” Thus, although the participants were not the targets of the sexist comments or jokes, they were personally offended by their colleagues’ comments.

Two participants recalled that, in their early days of coaching competitively, the male head coaches at the time had sexual relations with some of the female assistant coaches. According to these participants, the assistant coaches who responded positively to these advances were subsequently chosen for select teams or team trips. Although the sport organizations were aware of certain indiscretions, no interventions occurred. As one participant recalled, “The head coach at the time would routinely sleep with his female assistant coaches. It wouldn’t have been so bad to see two adults having a consensual relationship, but when the particular assistant coach was then selected for important competitions or trips, the rest of us couldn’t help but suspect that the fact they were having sex had something to do with the decision. And when the head coach developed a new interest in someone else, the former lover was dropped like a ‘hot potato’. It was really hard to watch the damage done to these young, aspiring coaches, and it wreaked havoc with the team dynamics.”

Almost all of the participants described repeatedly being socially excluded from activities with their male peers and superiors while they were assistant coaches. Until they became head coaches, they were not informed of coaches’ meetings on several occasions and were not invited to socialize with their male colleagues while travelling. Whether the group of coaches went out for a social drink or played a round of golf, these female coaches were not included. One of the participants recalled a recent travel experience when the male coaches went out to a strip club after the competition, leaving the female coach to ensure that the athletes met their curfew.

Some of the participants reportedly declined to reveal their homosexuality to their male peers and superiors while they were assistant coaches. They felt a clear expectation of
heterosexuality, and sexist comments and homophobic jokes reinforced this expectation. These coaches were concerned, as minority females, about further marginalizing themselves by disclosing their sexuality. As one participant recalled, “It was tough enough being the only female. Trying to be accepted and included by the males who had much more coaching experience than I was tough. And there were all kinds of messages about heterosexuality, from what the group of them talked about to the jokes they told. There was no way I was going to marginalize myself further by letting them know I was a lesbian ... not a chance.”

Once these women became head coaches, they disclosed their sexuality.

The only participant who did not report experiences of harassment and bullying coached in an environment that differed from that of the others. Specifically, this coach had always worked with other female coaches and there had been a longer history in this particular sport of having women on the coaching staff.

Effects of harassment and bullying
Most of the participants initiated a dialogue about the effects of harassment and bullying, eagerly disclosing feelings of isolation, frustration, and anger. As one participant disclosed, “I felt very alone in my days as an assistant coach. I didn’t have other coaches to turn to, or to vent to, or to get some sort of support.” In spite of the recognition that the conduct they were exposed to was demeaning and unfair, they felt a need to remain silent and refrain from expressing objections. They perceived a need to fit in and not “rock the boat” in order to move ahead through the coaching ranks. As one participant said, “I knew what was going on was wrong, but I didn’t think I should make waves or I’d be out of a job. This was really hard for me, because I’ve never been one to keep my mouth shut.”

For the coaches who believed they could not disclose their sexuality, the perceived need to pretend to be someone they were not was extremely distressing and energy-draining. “Watching what I said and did in front of these guys was exhausting.”

Upon reflection, several participants expressed anger at the system. As they moved up the coaching ranks, they perceived a need to accept inappropriate conduct in order to advance, but retrospectively they were angry that a culture of harassment and bullying was accepted. These women alleged that the sport organizations knew of the female-unfriendly environments, but did not intervene, and through their lack of action these organizations were complicit in the harassment and bullying.

Although experiences of harassment and bullying lessened as the coaches moved into head coach positions, they still faced sexist and homophobic environments. At this point in their careers, however, they were more likely to intervene, as recalled by one of the participants: “Once I felt more secure in the head coach position, I felt it was my responsibility to educate others about how to create a sport environment that is friendly for females—both athletes and coaches. So I started to call people on their sexist and homophobic jokes and the disparaging comments made about bodies. I think unless you’ve been a young woman, you can’t fully appreciate the impact of negative comments about your body. I needed to tell my male peers this.”

Survival tips
When asked why she continued coaching in the face of harassment and bullying, one participant said, “I was competitive as an athlete, and this stayed with me as a coach. ... I wasn’t going to let them get the best of me.” All of the coaches referred to an element of competitiveness; they wanted head coaching positions and, to get there, they had to “put up with” some maltreatment and keep silent about it.
Many of the participants referred to their desire to make sport a better place for girls and women, for the athletes and young coaches who were following behind them. As one participant remarked, “I was convinced that more female coaches were needed, that with the growing numbers of girls and young women participating in sport, we needed more female coaches as role models and leaders. I wanted to make sport a better place for other women, and I just kept my focus on doing that.

“There were many times I thought of giving it all up. But I loved working with the athletes and I kept thinking that if I could just hang in there long enough to become a head coach, things would improve, things would get better. And I was determined to make things better for other women coming up through the system as coaches.”

**Discussion**

The results indicate that within this small sample, harassment and bullying are experienced by some women in the coaching profession. All but one of these women reportedly experienced being harassed or bullied by their male counterparts who either were in more senior positions or had longer tenures as highly competitive coaches than they did. The power imbalance based upon sex and experience on the job that characterizes harassment has been well-supported in the general workplace literature (Acker 1990; Welsh 1999).

The most common types of harassment and bullying reportedly experienced by the participants were gender- and sexuality-based harassment and bullying as well as social bullying. Gender harassment refers to disparaging conduct—verbal, physical, or symbolic behaviours that convey offensive attitudes about women but are not intended to elicit sexual cooperation (Konik and Cortina 2008). This finding supports those of others (McKay 1999) who report that virtually all women in coaching and sport administration positions have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, a plethora of existing literature highlights the homophobic nature of the sport culture and incidents of harassment based upon sexual orientation (Demers 2004; Pronger 2005). In the general workplace, 25 to 66 per cent of sexual minorities have encountered workplace discrimination because of their sexual orientation (Konik and Cortina 2008). The current study highlights the experience of social bullying or exclusion faced by these women, an experience not previously reported in the sport literature.

Previous literature consistently indicates that females who work in traditional male work environments often experience more harassment and bullying than those who work in female-dominated environments (Gutek, Cohen, and Konrad 1990). Coaching has traditionally been, and continues to be, dominated by males. As several authors have noted (Berdahl 2007; Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope, and Hodson 2008; Welsh 1999), females in such contexts may be perceived as threats to men’s sense of masculinity, solidarity, and pride. In fact, harassing behaviours based on either gender or sexual orientation have common roots in maintaining traditional patriarchal gender roles (Berdahl 2007).

Furthermore, the general workplace literature suggests that minority employees may be more vulnerable to harassment because these employees already face a certain degree of social isolation and exclusion (Salin 2003; Tsui and Gutek 1999). The coaches in the study were in minority positions as females and expressed isolation and a lack of social support; these feelings were particularly profound for lesbian coaches. Interestingly, the one coach who did not report experiences of bullying or harassment had female colleagues in the coaching environment as she progressed through the ranks. Together, these findings
suggest that perceived social isolation is a risk factor for the experience of harassment and bullying.

Previous literature suggests that "powerlessness and low relative status are core determinants" of insults to one's dignity at work (Jacoby 2004). One of the most important causes of powerlessness in the workplace is job insecurity, possibly because employees are fighting against others to keep their positions (Hearn and Parkin 2001). In competitive sport, particularly at the assistant coach level, positions are often tenuous. In many instances, assistant coaches are hired on part-time, term contracts; moreover, there are often several assistant coaches vying for power and full-time positions. Even for full-time head coaches, employment can be affected by the performance of the team, and therefore these coaches are not necessarily in secure positions.

Heide and Miner (1992) report that when an expectation for future employment exists, there is also potential for future rewards and sanctions, thus contributing to greater cooperation amongst employees. On the other hand, the limited associations that people have in insecure or temporary positions, with little chance of future rewards and sanctions, may lead to more experiences of harassment and bullying. Related to job insecurity, previous literature indicates that individuals who lack financial security report more experiences with sexual harassment (Uggen and Blackstone 2004). Coaching positions do not typically provide much in the way of job or financial security, thus potentially contributing to an environment ripe for harassment and bullying. Future research may advance our understanding of the relationship between job security, harassment, and bullying by comparing contexts in which both head and assistant coaches are employed on a full-time, long-term basis to contexts where they are not.

The general harassment and bullying literature recognizes the crucial role that third parties (Skarlicki and Kulik 2005) or bystanders play in preventing or intervening in such behaviours. Within the workplace, co-workers in similar positions have the potential to provide "guardianship" against harassment and bullying. Working closely together over time may accentuate the interpersonal costs of harassment and bullying (Chamberlain et al. 2008). In the case of all but one of the coaches in this study, similar third parties, namely female coaches at the same rank, were virtually absent.

Existing literature indicates that harassment is more common in work environments that involve physically demanding work or that emphasize physical prowess and the body (Lopez, Hodson, and Roscigno 2009; Ragins and Scandura 1995). Although the work of coaches is not necessarily physically demanding in the sense of hard physical labour, it does exist in a culture that focuses on the body and physicality. The nature of coaching involves a focus on the body, how it works, how it appears, and how well it functions to produce athletic performance. Coaches are constantly surrounded by finely tuned, young, athletic bodies. One wonders whether this focus on the body makes the profession of coaching more vulnerable to experiences of sexual harassment and sexual bullying in particular.

As Chamberlain and colleagues (2008) and others have emphasized, the organizational context is a crucial determinant of the occurrence of harassment as well as the specific forms it takes. Within sport, Brackenridge (2001) highlights the importance of viewing victims and perpetrators within domain-specific contexts, as the legitimacy and acceptance of behaviours such as harassment and bullying are influenced by the social environment. Sport has a long tradition of being characterized by an ideology of masculinity, specifically an idealized form of masculinity that is associated with toughness, power, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and domination over others (Coakley and Donnelly 2003). Furthermore, sport has been characterized by a "heterosexual imperative", the need for and expectation
of heterosexuality in order to participate and excel in sport (Shogan 1999). This ideology is narrow, monolithic, and resistant to the progress of many groups.

Taken together, the findings of the study suggest that the unique aspects of the coaching profession make it susceptible to abuses of power. More specifically, job and financial insecurity, minority status, social isolation, a focus on the body and physicality, and a culture of masculinity may make female coaches particularly vulnerable to experiences of harassment and bullying. The most commonly reported abuses of power experienced by these women were gender abuses, homophobia, and social harassment and bullying.

The study is limited by the small number of female participants and the retrospective nature of the data. Future research would benefit from exploring the experiences of harassment and bullying of other traditionally marginalized groups in coaching. Ideally, the data would be collected prospectively as coaches move into and through the coaching ranks. Future studies should attempt to elucidate the different forms of harassment and bullying experienced as well as the intersection of these experiences. It is unclear whether sexual harassment, homophobia, and social exclusion are similar or fundamentally different forms of oppression. Furthermore, these data were obtained from coaches who “endured” the system to become head coaches. The results of this study beg the question of whether experiences of harassment and bullying contribute to attrition of women from coaching or their reluctance to enter the profession entirely. There is significant work yet to be undertaken to better understand and enhance women’s experiences in the coaching profession.

About the author

Gretchen Kerr, PhD, is an associate professor and the associate dean in the Faculty of Physical Education and Health at the University of Toronto. Her research addresses the experiences of women coaches and the psycho-social health of young people in sport. Her specific interests in harassment, abuse, and bullying within sport have led to numerous publications as well as leadership positions and advocacy work within the gymnastics community as a harassment and ethics officer.

References


