

## Path to Prevention: tackling the root causes of GBV in sport

Good morning. I'm honoured to be here today and to be taking part in discussions that will hopefully play a part in shaping the future of sport for tomorrow's women and girls. However, I am also saddened. Saddened that I *have* to be here, that we are *all* here, discussing again how violence against women and girls is permeating yet another sector of our lives, and trying to grapple with how we tackle this cultural, and societal, problem.

My name is Mhairi MacLennan, I'm an athlete, I'm an activist, and I run an athlete-led not for profit organisation, Kyniska Advocacy, that campaign, educate and create resources with the aim of stamping out gender-based violence in sport. I am also a survivor of sexual violence perpetrated by my former coach of 6 years.

Over the next 8 minutes, I hope to explain with real-life examples how gender-based violence manifests in sport and give you all some actionable takeaways that would be a small step forward in pushing sport towards a better, less fragmented environment.

We know that sports environments create unique risks regarding the safety and welfare of participants. The three most prevalent forms of abuse that occur in sports settings are: physical, psychological and sexual abuse; and while distinctly different, they are often perpetrated simultaneously.

So, what does this look like in sport?

With the significant power imbalances between coach-athlete and official-athlete, combined with a "success at all and any cost" mindset, we often see extreme and abusive coaching techniques being tolerated or even praised if and when they lead to medals. What's classed as abusive coaching? Well, this would include deliberately overtraining athletes to assert control or as a form of punishment; forcing athletes to train through injury; failing to address disordered eating behaviours or explicitly creating unhealthy cultures around body perception and eating within sports teams and groups. This is physical abuse.

There is a characteristic vulnerability that comes with being an athlete. In pursuing a passion so wholeheartedly, you take your hopes and dreams and place them in the hands of your coach and pray that they lead you to where you want to go. In the wrong hands, that leaves you open to coercive control and manipulation. Too often, we see toxic training environments where athletes are pitted against one another, vying for the coveted attention and praise of the coach. We see athletes being ignored or dropped when they don't perform well or get injured, leaving them feeling dejected and deserted. Athletes are taught from a young age to be grateful for the support they receive and to be seen to be friendly and positive in order to fit the mould of the idealised athlete. This is emotional and psychological abuse.

As if this wasn't enough, sport is inherently physical, meaning that contact between coaches, sports personnel and athletes is normal, and this has far too often been used as a pretext for sexual violence. In fact, many people with lived experience have reported that the sexual violence they experienced followed, or happened during, legitimate physical contact such as sports massages or medical examinations.

So, what is the reality here? On what scale are we dealing with this problem?

We know that 44% of adults report experiencing some form of physical violence in sport as a child; a much higher rate of 65% report psychological abuse. Frighteningly, 1 in 7 athletes will experience sexual violence in sport before the age of 18, and in elite sport, that increases to 1 in 3.

But *why* is this happening?

Earlier I mentioned the ever-present “success at all and any cost” attitude that dominates sport. Time and time again we see that inappropriate behaviour or rumours about coaches or management are brushed aside when their work is viewed as pivotal to success. A coach will be banned from one club, but permitted in another, or given a slap on the wrist behind closed doors.

This culture runs deep. In most cases, the funding that sports governing bodies receive is directly correlated to their medal count at major competitions - the Olympics, world championships etc. If a coach is accused of athlete abuse, but their two Olympic standard athletes don't speak up, then you can guarantee that that coach is at no risk of being reprimanded. Sports across the board are seeking to have smaller teams at championships, only taking athletes who are considered 'medal potential'. We're telling athletes that their welfare, wellbeing and longevity in the sport is of no consequence, and we're running the risk of sport becoming irrelevant.

To add fuel to the fire, sport is largely self-regulatory. This means that there is no cross-sport, never mind cross-nation or cross-continent consistency of standards, policy or practice. As it stands, in the UK for example, your welfare and safety are entirely dependent on your postcode and the sport you choose to participate in.

So, what on earth do we do?

I'll start with the large-scale overhauls, the big policy changes and the structures that we, and many other thought leaders in this space, believe *need* to be implemented as a matter of urgency.

1. There should be an independent, regulatory body to manage complaints, process reports, conduct investigations, and issue sanctions for abuse in sport. We've done it for anti-doping (because it directly and visibly impacts performance), so why not for abuse? It's been done in Australia, and we should have the same across Europe. Sports cannot mark their own homework, not now, not ever.
2. We must implement a national coaching licence register in every country. As it stands, coaching bans are little more than a soft warning. They're difficult to regulate and impossible to enforce. Just last month, ex-coach Toni Minichello, banned for life, was permitted entry to an athletics meet in the UK. We have to do better.
3. Mandatory reporting. Currently, there is no requirement for individuals working in sports organisations to report known or suspected sexual or physical abuse to the local authority, or the police. This is the case in far too many countries. Statistics show that well-designed, mandatory reporting protects good staff and those in their care.

4. Money. It always comes down to money. National governing bodies are underfunded and overworked. We have to ensure that funding bodies are ring-fencing an appropriate percentage of their funding for safeguarding policies, training and procedures.
5. Lifetime bans? An unjustly controversial suggestion. But change the title 'coach' to teacher, nurse or doctor, and a lifetime ban suddenly seems more accepted. Coaches who have been found guilty of physical, psychological or sexual abuse should not be coaching.

None of these are overnight fixes. Bold policy, and legislative change is needed to better protect everyone, everywhere in sport.

However, there are some 'smaller wins' that we can start action on *today*.

1. Create and install toolkits and posters to raise awareness of expected and intolerable behaviour from coaches to have on display in sports facilities across the country.
2. Sports organisations should have their reporting processes clearly explained and displayed on their websites.
3. Transparency is key - currently across sports and across the world, there is a deep distrust between sporting communities and their organisations. Communicating through all available channels about coaching bans, policy updates and organisation change can help build back that trust.
4. *All* coaches *and* athletes where possible should be required to pass courses on boundaries, consent, how to have challenging conversations on delicate topics (like periods and eating disorders) and undergo child protection training.
5. And finally, integrating the athlete voice. Safeguarding advisory panels should be commonplace, and they should be populated with *both* experts *and* most importantly, athletes with lived experience. Athletes are your biggest allies in shaping this cultural change. Remember, athletes *are* sport, and without them, we have no sport.

For too long, governments have failed to act and national governing bodies have moved too slowly when it comes to protecting athletes from gender-based violence in sport. Current policies and resources are patchy and inconsistent, and there is a lack of faith in the system.

But there is hope, and I hope today gives you plenty of food for thought.