PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT
The topic of sexual violence in sports, especially amongst children and young athletes, and after the huge scandal related to women's gymnastics in the US in 2016, is very relevant in today's society. This concept of sexual violence is not unknown to the Bulgarian sports society either. The topic is not alien to Bulgarian sports circles either. For this study, in April 2021, an anonymous survey was conducted with 187 students from NSA "Vassil Levski" to determine whether this type of violence was committed in Bulgarian sports clubs and teams. To ensure anonymity, no personal information was required in the questionnaire, except for the gender of the person filling in the questionnaire. It was found that 10.7% identified themselves as victims of violence, and 2.1% of respondents identified themselves as victims of sexual violence by their coach. After a discussion with students (n = 50), it was found that there are differences in the understanding of sexual violence. The study concludes that young people in Bulgaria need to undergo training about sexual violence to protect themselves and know how to react when encountering a sexual abuser.

Keywords*: sexual harassment, violence, coaches, teammates, victim*

INTRODUCTION

Every day, millions of children worldwide are victims of some form of violence at the hands of acquaintances and strangers (parents and relatives, teachers, peers, and strangers). Violence is committed in the home, at school, in the streets, and in the media, and seen as such, and it becomes part of everyday life (Pinhiero, 2006).

Violence is a phenomenon that affects everyone, especially those who are employed in the field of education, including sports and competition. It is a social phenomenon and an act that is often identified with aggression and bullying. In recent years, violence among children and young people has gained prominence in all its forms and dimensions. This also could be seen in research and studies by governmental and non-governmental organizations. In April 2021, the UNICEF-Bulgaria report on the survey on violence against children in Bulgaria (UNICEF-Bulgaria, 2021) came out, which is rather worrying.

Theoretical framework

In the scientific literature, violence is seen as physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual. Depending on the place where the different forms of violence occur, it is classified as domestic, workplace, or community violence.

The subject of this study is sexual violence in the sporting community, and more specifically among athletes when they, themselves, are victims. This issue is addressed in scientific and legal circles and is also of interest to the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF.

According to the World Health Organization, sexual violence is any sexual act or attempted sexual act by coercion, including sexual acts or unwanted comments with sexual overtones by a person, no matter in what relationship with the victim (Fenerova, 2021).

UNICEF adds and specifies the definition that sexual abuse can also be referred to when a child (under 14) is involved in sexual acts that he/she does not understand and, due to his/her young age and immaturity, is not competent and able to refuse (UNICEF-Bulgaria, 2018). According to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): "*a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse*" (Basile et al., 2014).

This type of violence is viewed quite broadly. For example: when a person is forced to perform any kind of sexual act against his or her will; it is any sexual act between an adult and a minor (but also between minors) when one of them asserts his power over the other, i.e., forces them; it is a sexual act between an adult and a minor; coercing and/or persuading a child to engage in

a sexual act is itself also violence; verbal abuse on a sexual topic; the violation of a person's sexuality; non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, pornography, talking sexually in person, on the phone, through emails and/or on social networks with children and young people. Sexual violence is not always associated with an aggressive display of sexuality. This is because sexuality is characterized by the fact that it has no standards of what is normal or not. The mark that characterizes sexual violence is the presence of one party's physical and/or emotional suffering in these acts, including the manifestation of some feelings that one party does not want to feel (Fenerova, 2021). In these actions, there are two parties - the abuser/aggressor and the victim, who, through some form of coercion (threat, force, intimidation, manipulation), carry out the wishes of the abuser. In this case, the victim is forced to perform and/or endure some acts of a sexual nature, and when asked to stop, the abuser does not comply.

Globally, sexual violence is not studied in isolation. The reasons for studying sexual violence are mostly related to the fact that it leads to different types and severity of consequences. For this reason, taking measures for prevention, intervention, and therapy is appropriate when such is detected. Most often, victims of sexual violence experience feelings of embarrassment, and shame, withdraw into themselves, become disillusioned with people, and stop their usual activities and work. Physical, psycho-emotional, health, sexual and reproductive problems are observed in more severe cases. Victims may become depressed, self-blame, and experience increased anxiety and post-traumatic stress, including suicide attempts. It is also widespread to observe the phenomenon that in most cases, the victim of sexual violence knows the abuser, he/she is from her/his close environment.

Cases of sexual violence among athletes

According to Brackenridge (2001), sexual violence in sports is a sociological and cultural, but also interpersonal and psychological phenomenon (Brackenridge, 2001).

Several major scandals have erupted in sports recently, with violence against athletes, especially sexual violence, a taboo topic until recently.

In September 2016, however, the biggest sexual assault scandal in sports history broke out in the United States of America. Under the pretext of providing medical services, Larry Nassar, the longtime doctor of the U.S. national gymnastics team, inflicted this kind of violence on young gymnasts. More than 265 women, including former national athletes, have accused Nassar of sexual assault and child pornography. In the history of sports, Larry Nassar will be remembered as a serial sexual abuser, with his victims, at the time of the abuse, being underage girls, even 8-9-year-old children. John Geddert, the head coach of the 2012 U.S. Olympic team, has also been implicated in the scandal, physically, emotionally, and sexually abusing his female athletes. He used force, deception, and coercion on young girls, motivating them with fear and intimidation that often bordered on abuse (BBC News, 2018; Murphy, Barr, 2021). In addition to the Nassar-Gedert "tandem," other coaches have been accused of sexually abusing athletes, mostly underage girls. Sadly, in 2005, a Bulgarian gymnastics coach was convicted in the United States of sexually assaulting and abusing a 13-year-old girl competing in his club.

In the United States, more than 368 women claim to have been sexually assaulted by coaches and staff at sports clubs. The accused include 115 people with varying levels of professional development in sports, from novice coaches to those who prepare national athletes. The youngest disclosed victim of these abuses is 6 years old. Coaches exploit children's Olympic dreams, and victims are embarrassed, ashamed, and silent (Evans, Alesia, Kwiatkowski, 2016).

Cases of sexual abuse of children playing sports have also been reported across Europe. Brackenridge and colleagues (2005) analyzed 132 cases of child sexual abuse in the British Football Association. They found that 92% of abusers were male, with ages ranging from early adolescence to age 60. The majority were coaches/teachers of the victims (35%), 14% of the perpetrators were part of the administration, 21% were referees, and 7% were teammates of the reported sexually abused athletes (Brackenridge, Bringer, Bishopp, 2005). The Dutch National Olympic Committee and the Dutch Sports Confederation have a hotline where sexual abuse and harassment cases can be reported following a high-profile case among child athletes in 1996. Vertommen et al. (2015) examined 323 incidents reported and recorded on this helpline between 2001 and 2010 related to sexual harassment and violence and found that the majority of harassers were male coaches (77%) and 13% re-

ported harassment/violence perpetrated by another athlete or group of athletes (Vertommen et al., 2015). According to Vertommen et al. (2016), sexual abuse is less prevalent than psychological and physical abuse of children playing sports, which, however, receives less attention in some European countries (Vertommen et al., 2016), and according to Mountjoy et al. (2016), sexual abuse is highly prevalent in sport settings. However, they differentiate it into sexual harassment and sexual assault (Mountjoy et al., 2016). In our view, it is also important to make such a distinction. The need for this is supported by two international studies of female athletes conducted in Turkey (n=356) and Kenya (n=339) (Gündüz, Sunay & Koz, 2007); (Rintaugu et al., 2014). Gündüz et al. (2007) found that ¼ of the women studied self-identified as victims of sexual harassment by their coaches, 33% by teammates and others felt victimized by spectators in the stands (Gündüz, Sunay & Koz, 2007). Rintaugu et al. (2014) have reached similar results. According to them, most women are victims of sexual harassment by spectators (according to 32% of the women surveyed), followed by teammates (23%), and in 8% of the cases recorded, a coach or a person from the coaching staff was mentioned (Rintaugu et al., 2014).

A major scandal regarding violence in sports, including sexual violence, began in the summer of 2020 in British gymnastics when several victim gymnasts, both girls, and boys, made public statements about athlete abuse in gymnastics (Ingle, 2022; Whyte, 2022).

Prompted by the publicized cases of sexual violence among athletes in the world and by the presented results of UNICEF-Bulgaria on the prevalence of sexual violence among children in our country, conducted in the period 2019-2020, we set ourselves the goal of investigating the level of prevalence of this type of violence among athletes in our country, since they are not a target group in the UNICEF study. Another reason for the research interest is the specificities of sport-competitive activity and the hypothetically higher risk of this type of violence. Athletes and coaches often have to spend long periods of time together, sometimes away from home and parental supervision - during competitions and tournaments, at training and recovery camps. Physical contact between coach and athlete, especially in some sports, is unavoidable, especially in younger age groups.

METHODOLOGY

To ascertain the extent of types of violence among athletes, we conducted an anonymous empirical survey. For the study, we developed an anonymous Google Forms survey that was distributed for completion online and available for one week in May 2022. The dissemination is realized through the distance learning platform of the National Sports Academy „Vasil Levski“ (http://www.virtual.nsa.bg/), by e-mail to coaches with a request to provide it to their athletes, known athletes, and former athletes, including with a request to distribute it. Our preliminary plans and expectations were to include between 500 and 1000 current and former athletes in the study. The online survey was completed by 314 athletes (Table 1). We assume that the sensitivity of the issues proved to be decisive for the reluctance of athletes to participate in the survey.

Table 1. *Participants*

Variables	Groups	Valid Percent (%)	Frequency (n)
Gender	Female	54.1%	170
	Male	45.9%	144
	Total	100%	314
Age	18-20 years	37.6%	118
	21-39 years	51.3%	161
	40+ years	11.1%	35

Of the individuals surveyed, the highest proportion was of club athletes - 36.3% (n=114) and former athletes with club affiliation only - 34.1% (n=107). Representatives of national teams by sport type totaled 72, of which former athletes accounted for 15% of the persons surveyed (n=47). A small proportion of the participants in the study - students at the NSA "Vasil Levski" (n=21) stated that they were not ath-

letes but were involved in sports. Only 20.4% (n=64) of the study participants were female coaches. 63.4% (n=199) of the athletes worked with male coaches and the remaining 16.2% (n=51) conducted sport-competitive activities with both female and male coaches.

In order to guarantee the anonymity of the subjects, due to the sensitivity of the issues, only the gender of the studied athletes and their coaches was indicated in the questionnaire as personal information. In order to minimize concerns, the type of sport, the club, and the location were not mentioned in the questionnaire, as the idea was to use this study to outline the framework and scale of sexual violence among Bulgarian athletes. The questions asked were not specific and clarifying, such as what type of sexual violence and whether it could be treated as sexual harassment, what was the severity, what were the consequences, etc., but were more generally formulated: 'Have you been sexually abused by a coach' and 'Have you been sexually abused by a teammate'. Since, according to the definitions of sexual abuse, it is sometimes accompanied by physical abuse, we included the following questions in the questionnaire: 'Have you ever been a victim of physical abuse by a coach'; 'Have you ever been a victim of physical abuse by your parents'; and 'Have you ever been a victim of physical abuse by a teammate'. The questions were answered on a four-point Likert-type scale, with 1 indicating "no, it has never happened", 2 indicating "yes, it has happened once, twice at most", 3 indicating "it has happened sometimes" and 4 indicating "yes, it has happened quite often". The study also began with a general question - we were interested in whether athletes self-identified as victims of violence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the empirical study, it was found that 11.1% of the studied athletes (n=35) - 19 females and 16 males - self-identified as "victims" of violence (all forms of violence - generalized). Interesting data are observed in the age distribution of responses. Our prediction was that former athletes over the age of 40 would be most likely to self-identify as a victim of abuse. These are the people who, when they were of active competitive age, lived under socialism and post-socialism. At that time in our country, there was still no Child Protection Act adopted, the Convention on the Rights of the Child had not been ratified, and there were no texts included in other legal documents that prohibited physical and mental abuse of children (Vladova, Martinova, 2021), the use of corporal punishment was not prohibited in sports practice, and it was present in educational practice in families, in school and during training. Despite all this, only two former athletes in this age group reported being victims of violence. The most significant number (n=21) who self-identified as a victim of violence were in the 21-39 age group, and in the youngest group of athletes, 12 felt they had been a victim of violence. We attribute this data to the fact that young people today are more informed, they know their rights, and they can define what violence is, so they have given these answers.

The data in terms of physical violence is not concerning and is presented in Table 2. Notably, the highest values were reported physical abuse by parents (M=1.49; SD=0.812), which in turn did not have high values. Teammates were least likely to report physical violence towards each other (M=1.27; SD=0.629).

Table 2. *Results of the analysis of variance in physical violence*

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Have you been a victim of physical abuse by a coach?	314	1	4	1.38	0.775
Have you been physically abused by your parents?	314	1	4	1.49	0.812
Have you been a victim of physical abuse by a teammate?	314	1	4	1.27	0.629

Regarding the occurrence of physical violence, a comparative analysis was implemented using the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis hypothesis testing methods. Statistically significant differences were found for the coach's reporting of physical violence on the factor "coach's gender" (Kruskal-Wallis H) (Table 3).

Table 3. *Results of the comparative analysis on the factor "gender of the coach"*

	Have you been a victim of physical abuse by a coach?
Kruskal-Wallis H	4.876
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.027

Pairwise comparative analysis (Mann-Whitney) showed that significant differences were between female coaches and male coaches (U=5495.000, p=.027) and between female coaches and mixed coaching groups (U=1332.000, p=.028). From the analysis of variance, we found that female coaches were more likely to engage in physical violence (M=1.66; SD=1.04) than male coaches (M=1.34; SD=.705) and mixed coaching staff (M=1.22; SD=.541). No statistically significant differences were observed on the factor of the gender of the subjects, but it was observed on the factor of age and sport affiliation (Table 4).

Table 4. *Results of the comparative analysis by the age and sports affiliation factor*

Have you been a victim of physical abuse by a coach	**Age group**	**Club affiliation**
Kruskal-Wallis H	6.590	20.817
df	2	4
Asymp. Sig.	.037	.000

Pairwise comparative analysis (Mann-Whitney) showed statistically significant differences for coach-reported physical abuse between club athletes and student-athletes who do not have a club affiliation (non-athletes) and former club-level athletes (U=5145. 000, p=.004), between club athletes and national team athletes (U=1201.500, p=.053), and between club athletes and former national team athletes (U=1911.000, p=.000). Data from the analysis of variance showed that students who were not actively involved in competitive sport were the least likely to be victims of physical abuse by a coach (M=1.14; SD=.655), which is also logical for athletes who had a club affiliation (M=1.18; SD=0.508). Former national team athletes were most likely to indicate that they experienced physical abuse from their coaches (M=1.72; SD=1.015), whereas former club athletes (M=1.47; SD=.828) and current national team members (M=1.48; SD=.872) had similar perceptions of physical abuse.

The data presented is not disturbing, nor are the results regarding sexual violence. The data from our study do not confirm the data presented by UNICEF-Bulgaria that one in five girls and one in ten boys in Bulgaria is a victim of sexual violence (UNICEF-Bulgaria, 2018). Also, this study's results confirm our previous study of student-athletes only, in which 97.9% of the subjects did not self-identify as a "victim" of sexual abuse by their coach, with only two girls and two boys stating that it happened to them frequently. Regarding the gender of the coach - in one case, the abuser was a woman who often resorted to this vicious practice. No cases of sexual violence have been reported with mixed coaching staff (Vladova, Kuleva, 2022).

The results of this study indicate that athletes generally do not self-identify as victims of sexual abuse by coaches (M=1.04; SD=0.292) and teammates (M=1.04; SD=0.307). In this study, the majority of athletes surveyed stated that they had never been sexually harassed by their coaches - 98.4% of them stated this, and 98.1% had never been sexually harassed by their teammates. A total of three women and two men were victims of sexual abuse by their coaches, with only one woman and one man stating that it happened quite frequently. Three women were victims of sexual harassment by their teammates, with one of them stating that it happened quite often, and three men, two of whom suffered from this behavior quite often. The results of the previous study were similar - then 3 victims (two men and one woman) of sexual assault by a teammate were recorded, and two of them reported that these incidents occurred frequently.

The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated the presence of a statistically significant difference in the factor "sports affiliation" when reporting the presence of sexual violence by a teammate (p=.002). Pairwise

comparative analysis (Mann-Whitney) showed that there were differences between the groups of club athletes and those of the national teams (U=1254.000, p=.000), which was also true for sexual abuse by coaches (U=1368. 000, p=.033) as well as between the groups of club athletes and former club athletes, where there were differences on both questions: victim of coach (U=1140.000, p=.020) and victim of teammate (U=1140.000, p=.020). Statistically significant differences by gender of athletes and gender of the coach were not recorded.

- As we found in our previous research, very often, sexual violence takes place among acquaintances in the community. Also, the empirical data from the previous study was supported by the results of an online talk and discussion with second-year students on "Sexual violence - what is it?" discussing the following questions:
- Is it sexual violence to make sexist jokes; the hissing and whistling with a sexist flavor; to make a comment with a sexual connotation (incl. a comment about clothing, body, or appearance); to look intrusively; to violate personal space - to get too close to someone; to be physically contacted and touched, incl. during practice by a coach or teammate; to have a massage initiated by a coach or teammate; to insist on being left alone, e.g., In the locker room; receiving calls, emails, messages, photos, videos with sexual context; receiving calls, emails, messages, photos, videos of you in a compromising or sexual position; forced kissing; forced undressing and/or taking a sexual position; performing sexual acts with or without a camera; sexual touching without your consent; attempted sexual contact without your consent.

All these allegations/questions can be defined as different types of sexual violence. According to the students involved in the discussion, most of the students' responses and comments regarding sexist jokes, comments, and hissing could not be defined as sexual violence and very often could not even be categorized as sexual harassment. Moreover, here is the place to address the cultural context and interpretation. According to some young women, it is a matter of honor and even a compliment if a man uses sexist jokes in communication with them. Out of all the learners who participated in the discussion (n=50), only two students, one male, and one female, expressed the opinion that this kind of jokes are definitely sexual violence. What impressed them was their knowledge of the subject, and when asked by the presenter what had provoked them to be interested in this topic, they mentioned that they had participated in projects that dealt with this issue (independently of each other).

In conclusion, it is important to clarify that yes - the Bulgarian mentality, and understanding in general, does not treat these actions as sexual violence. However, when it causes embarrassment, discomfort and shame, we should already think about whether this is sexual violence or sexual harassment, whether unwanted sexual attention should not be categorized as violence.

According to the majority of student-athletes, sexual violence is primarily associated with unwanted sexual contact or performing sexual acts against one's wishes. For this reason, they believed that the measures to be taken when such type of violence is found should be mainly legal and medical. Again, the students involved in the projects added that the measures should also be psychological because often, many victims of sexual violence experience overwhelming shame, guilt, post-traumatic stress, and depression, including isolation, alcohol and drug abuse, self-harm, and suicide attempts.

The British Gymnastics scandal found 67% of emotional abuse of gymnasts, 49% of physical abuse, and 9% of sexual abuse. Some athletes have said that more than one type of violence was carried out on them (Whyte, 2022).

It is important that sports and sporting activities are safe and bring only positive experiences, regardless of the age and skill of the athletes. Practices that cause physical, emotional and sexual harm should not be implemented (Whyte, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the survey, we can conclude that young people in Bulgaria need training on sexual violence. This is necessary to protect themselves from such violence and know how to react when they meet a sexual abuser. It is also important that they themselves are able to recognize 'victims' of sexual violence and are competent in providing assistance, being able to assist. It is important to provide good protection for young people, and better protection for athletes.

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