

# PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN SPORTS: MALAYSIAN ATHLETES EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract** - This article presents data from a cross-sectional study on prevalence of sexual harassment among Malaysian athletes. Main objective of this study is to discover the experience of sexual harassment in sports among Malaysian athletes. There are three sub-objectives in order to achieve the main objective, i) to identify the background of victims, ii) to discuss the sexual harassment experience of victims and iii) to what extent this experience affecting their performance. Four hundred twenty two respondents (male = 259, female=163) who were currently involved in competitive sports either in national and international level responded to a questionnaire. Results indicate 15.9% of respondents experienced sexual harassment in sports. Overall, 46.3% of the victims represented Malaysia in international competitions. There were significant relationships ( $p < 0.05$ ) on gender with effect of emotion and health the sexual harassment. This study discovered that 28% of the respondents experienced impaired performance, psychological and health wellbeing.

**Keywords**- Sexual harassment, Sports, Athletes, Experience and performance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is defined as inappropriate behavior through verbal, non-verbal, visual, physical and psychological, which have little or no threat and likable lead to uncomfortable environment (Ministry of Human Resources, 1999; Sabitha&Rusimah, 2003). It is often a hidden issue or under reported mainly in sporting environment which comprises athletes, coaches and administrators. To ensure health and wellbeing in this population, the respective authority must offer preventative and protective environment against sexual harassment as previous study showed that there were sexual harassment occurrence perceived by sports practitioners in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur (Fathynah&Syahirah, 2015).

The International Olympic Council recommended all sports organization should provide a 'safe sport' environment which is respectful, equitable and non-accidental violence to athletes. Sexual harassment experience in sports has jeopardized physical and psychological wellbeing of athletes. All forms of sexual harassment affects the performance of athletes, opportunity costs, reduced medal chances, associated with doping, choose to change or even quit their sport and other suffer personal consequences for years (Gunduz et al., 2009; International Olympic Committee, 2007, Mountjoy et al., 2016). This situation also could affect the sports development itself such as reputational damage, loss of players and fans, and loss of sponsorship (Mountjoy et al. 2016; Brackendridge et al., 2000). It was also reported that health could impaired such as headache, insomnia and heartburn. In psychological aspect, sexual harassment causes feeling of scared, angry, helplessness and disgust. More serious consequences of sexual harassment in sport is as horrific as self-harm and suicide (International Olympic Committee,

2007). The exposure to this unwanted environment among the talented and growing athletes leads to difficulties and other negative impacts.

Researches on sexual harassment in sports have been done in some developed countries exploring sexual harassment prevalence through quantitative and qualitative investigations. Sexual harassment prevalence rates in sports ranging from 19% to 92% due to different study design, vocabulary and meaning of questionnaire items, measure, statistical analyses, etc (Chroni& Fasting, 2009; Mountjoy et al., 2016). This unwanted form of sexual nature could happened at any athletes regardless ages, sport ability, gender, nationality, race or ethnicity, social class, education level, sexual orientation or disability (Fasting et al., 2004; Hartill, 2014; Rintaugu et al., 2014; Gunduz&Sunay, 2007). Studies indicate that sexual harassment occurs in all types of sports and at all levels with higher prevalence in elite sports such as coaches and athletes (International Olympic Committee, 2007; Gunduz, Sunay&Koz, 2009; Fasting, 2004). Cases involving elite athletes get more attention causing some of the responsible parties tend to deny and take no action. In addition, this could also be related with power relation facilitated by an organizational culture that ignores, denies and fails to settle such problems (Brackendridge, 2001; Hartill, 2013). Most of sports organization is male-dominated and in Malaysia about 90% of the highest authority in sports organization were male. This imbalance gender ratios and masculinity environment may influence sexual harassment prevalent (Fasting et al., 2004).

Sexual harassment in sports is more chronic compared with other environment as sports naturally requires physical contact and it is dominates by male (Fasting et. al, 2010; Fejgin&Hanegby, 2001). Rates of sexual harassment are higher in male dominated

environment such as in military and sports. This male-dominated culture in sports facilitates sexual harassment mainly among female athletes. In sports environment, it is common when coach and/or senior teammates become superior to the victim. This is related with previous studies which showed that the perpetrator is commonly among coach and teammates. The coaches have power on victims causing the victim feeling fear and obey their instructions (Fasting, 2004). However, latest finding concluded that the athletes were more likely to be perpetrators of sexual harassment than coach. Studies also stated that male are often reported as perpetrators although other forms of sexual harassment does exist such as against male by male perpetrators, male by female and female by female (Fejgin&Hanegby, 2001; International Olympic Committee, 2007). As for the non-competitive sport practitioners, the perpetrators were commonly by men outside sports due to less formal and private social relationship (Chroni& Fasting, 2009). Therefore, there was higher risk for sexual harassment occurrence during less supervised or unsupervised environment.

Grooming approach is mostly done by perpetrators to trap and make victims to become bewildered. Sometimes victims did not recognize what is happening because the perpetrators groomed them through few processes. The process starts with the perpetrators targeting a potential victim by observe, examine and build closely acquainted relationship and trust. Then the perpetrator starts to develop isolation and control to ensure loyalty. This grooming process could happen in short or long term process. Cyber or social media is also found as one of latest mechanism for sexual harassment. As high usage of online daily, it provides platform for perpetrators to plan and perpetrate sexual harassment to potential victims. There is little research on cyber or social media factor for prevalence of sexual harassment. But there is evidence showed that athletes are increasingly using social media to get in touch with fans and promote their image, and thus become online harassment victims (Kavanagh & Jones, 2014; McLean, 2014; Lebel&Danylchuk, 2012; Pagararo, 2010). Prevalence of sexual harassment is related with culture or environment thus different rate of sexual harassment prevalence between countries were identified. Sports attire did not influenced sexual harassment in sport but it was identified as another risk factor (Gunduz et al., 2009; IOC, 2007; Brackendridge et al., 2000)

## II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

### 2.1 Sample

A total number of 422 athletes (male, n=259, meanage =  $18.8 \pm 5.6$  years; female, n = 163, meanage =  $19.0 \pm 5.7$  years) from various sports participated in this study. About 117 athletes (27.7%) had competed at international level (i.e., Olympic Games,

Commonwealth Games, World Junior Championships, Asian Games etc.), 160 athletes (38%) had competed at national level and the rest had at state level. They had experienced in sports for an average of  $5.4 (\pm 3.0)$  years and their average training day per week were  $4.9 (\pm 1.5)$  days. Most of them (90%) have male coaches and the rest were female coaches.

### 2.2 Procedure

This cross-sectional study was conducted in states throughout Malaysia. The participants were recruited based on convenience sampling and the data collection was carried out between October 2015 and March 2016 following the approval from ISN Research Committee. The athletes were required to fill up a questionnaire that contained details on their demographic characteristics, their perception on sexual harassment and their experience with it.

### 2.3 Ethical Considerations

Prior to this, we asked the coaches to not be present in the same room during the completion of the questionnaire. This was done to ensure complete confidentiality and honest response from the participants. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the description of the questionnaire and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were also informed that their involvement in this study was voluntary and they could withdraw from it at any given time. Participants were given a copy of the informed consent form as a proof of their participation.

### 2.4 Instruments

The questionnaire for this study was adopted and adapted from Fathynah&Syahirah (2015) and Gunduz&Sunay (2009) questionnaires. It consisted of three parts which are described as the following:

#### a) Demographic profile

This part asked the participants the details of their gender, age, education background, sport, gender's coach, number of year sports involvement, number of day training per week and level of sports participation.

Level of measurement for i) gender, sport and coach gender are nominal; ii) education background and level of sports participation are ordinal; iii) age, number of year's sports involvement and number of day training per week are ratio.

#### b) Perception towards sexual harassment

This part concerned with the participants' opinion on what they perceived as sexual harassment. Participants were asked to give their ratings of agreement on a list of behaviors that may or may not be harassment for them. The ratings range from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The behaviors listed were categorized into five themes of

sexual harassment which were Verbal, Non-Verbal/Body Language, Visual, Psychology and Physical.

The example of behaviours pertaining to Verbal sexual harassment is “Inappropriate verbal discourse or conversation”; Non-Verbal/Body Language harassment is “Inappropriate stare”; Visual harassment is “Showing or sending pornographic materials”; Psychology harassment is “Repeated sexual threats”; and Physical harassment is “Unwanted kiss”.

### c) Experience of sexual harassment in sports

A definition of sexual harassment by Gunduz & Sunay (2009) preceded this part, and then the participants were required to indicate whether they have ever encountered any experiences of sexual harassment based on the definition provided.

For those who stated “Yes”, they need to complete the subsequent questions on the occurrence of the harassment, the details of the harasser, and the effects of the harassment on themselves and their sports performance/involvement.

For those who stated that they never had any experience with sexual harassment, they were asked to skip the questions on experience and proceed to the questions about their opinion on the harasser in general.

## 2.5 Statistical Analysis

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Window version 21. The descriptive analysis are used to present means and frequencies of participants’ answer to each item. Chi-square test were used to examine the correlation between variables with level of significant set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Demographics of participants

About 60% of them were secondary school students aged between 13 to 17 years old. Two-third of the respondents are actively involved in sports for one to six years and 61.2% trained for more than four days per week. Participants were from the following sports: pencak silat ( $n = 55$ , 13.0%), athletics ( $n = 54$ , 12.8%), weightlifting ( $n = 45$ , 10.7%), taekwondo ( $n = 40$ , 9.5%), badminton ( $n = 30$ , 7.1%), football ( $n = 26$ , 6.2%), karate-do ( $n = 22$ , 5.2%), boxing ( $n = 17$ , 4.0%), lawn bowl ( $n = 17$ , 4.0%), sailing ( $n = 16$ , 3.8%), bowling ( $n = 16$ , 3.8%), wushu ( $n = 15$ , 3.6%), archery ( $n = 13$ , 3.1%), petanque ( $n = 13$ , 3.1%), shooting ( $n = 12$ , 2.8%), sepak takraw ( $n = 11$ , 2.6%), squash ( $n = 8$ , 1.9%), cycling ( $n = 5$ , 1.2%), hockey ( $n = 4$ , 0.9%), swimming ( $n = 2$ , 0.5%) and rugby ( $n = 1$ , 0.2%).

### 3.2 Demographics of Sexual Harassment Victims

The main objective of this study is to analyze the

prevalence of sexual harassment in sports among Malaysian athletes. The responding athletes in this study are currently active in competition and results revealed that 19.0% of male athletes, 11.0% of female athletes and as overall, 15.9% of 422 athletes self-reported that they had sexual harassment experiences. The overall prevalence result showed to be lower than other studies as it is a combination result from both genders. While most studies involved only one type of gender mainly female. Gender, age and culture factors may influence perception and experience of sexual harassment (IOC, 2007).



Diagram 1: Distribution of sexual harassment victim by gender

Gender equity rights, law and/or policies in each country differ may influence prevalence of sexual harassment. As current findings showed that lower percentage of sexual harassment prevalence rate, does it mean that Malaysia has better gender rights policies compared with those countries with higher rate of prevalence? Fasting et al. (2011) stated that women’s sexual harassment in a country may be linked to their status in society.

Table 1: List of sexual harassment prevalence rate by country studies

Study	Victim's gender	Prevalence rate
Current study, Malaysia (2016)	Male and female (n=422)	19% (male) 11% (female)
Australia (2002)	Male and female (n=2118)	21% (male) 31% (female)
Norway (2011)	Female (n=572)	24%
Czech Republic (2011)	Female (n=214)	42%
Greece (2011)	Female (n=209)	44%
Turkey (2009)	Female (n=193)	56%
Israel (2001)	Female (n=301)	14%

\*prevalence rate vary due to different measures and study designs (Mountjoy et al., 2016)

Average age of the 49 male and 18 female victims

were 19.3 ( $\pm 5.7$ ) years old and 20.7 ( $\pm 5.8$ ) years old respectively. Data revealed that highest percentage based on age group is 18 to 29 years old as presented in Diagram 2. Among the victims, about 46.3% had represented Malaysia in international competitions. It was reported that the victims had involved in sports for an average of 6.3 ( $\pm 2.8$ ) years and had trained for an average of 5.1 ( $\pm 1.5$ ) days per week.

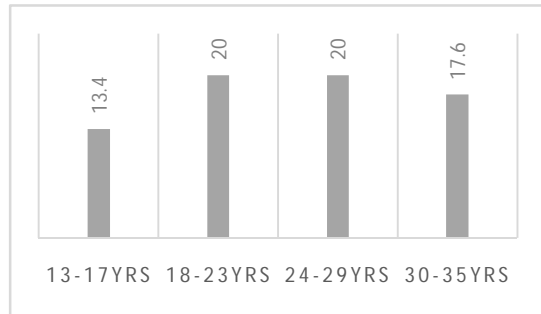


Diagram 2: Percentage of victims based on age groups

### 3.3 Experience of Sexual Harassment

From the total of 67 victims, 68.7% had one to three times sexual harassment experiences and the rest had more than three times throughout their involvement in sports. Most commonly self-reported on type of sexual harassment were “unwelcome jokes, question or sexual utterances” ( $n = 36$ , 53.7%) and “suspicious body contacts” ( $n = 30$ , 44.8%). However, eight out of 18 female victims (44.4%) reported that they had “unpleasant invitation” and two male victims had experienced “tendency towards rape”.

In response to the question, “When did you experience sexual harassment?”, 46.3% of the victims responded that most sexual harassment occurred after training session but in other study found that sexual harassment most occurred after games (Gunduz et al., 2009). While, it is identified that the location of this unwelcome form happened mainly at training area ( $n = 34$ , 50.7%), followed by changing room ( $n = 12$ , 17.9%) and equipment room ( $n = 7$ , 10.4%) which is similar to other study in Turkey. Some studies added sexual harassment occurred at coach’s home or car, and social events where alcohol involved (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Cense & Brackendridge, 2001; Crosset, 1999). With regards to perpetrator’s gender, male victims reported higher percentage on both genders (49.0%) while female victims reported higher percentage on male (72.2%). Detailed findings of perpetrator’s gender is described in Diagram 3. Additionally, the victims claimed that perpetrators were team mates ( $n = 47$ , 70%) followed by spectators ( $n = 16$ , 23.9%), trainer ( $n = 10$ , 14.9%) and officials ( $n = 7$ , 10.4%). Other studies showed that most victims claimed that main perpetrators were male and among team mates, spectators and trainers (Gunduz et al., 2009; Fathynah & Syahirah, 2012;). Since this study involved both genders, male victims claimed that the perpetrators were from both gender and there is about 16% of the male victims claimed

that female is sexual harassment perpetrators. It was also mentioned that sexual harassment is an expression of perpetrator’s social superiority even the perpetrator does not have high authority (Chroni & Fasting, 2009). Thus, the perpetrator’s position can be considered as

As for their reaction towards harassment were female victims refrained themselves from the perpetrators ( $n = 11$ , 61.1%) and reported to their team-mates, trainer and/or manager ( $n = 10$ , 55.6%) whilst 27 out of 49 male victims (55.1%) considered it as a joke. This finding is similar with other study where most common responses were ignoring the sexual harassment behaviour and/or tell a closed person (Gunduz et al., 2009; Cammaert, 1985). In contrary with study of sexual harassment in an educational institution (Sabitha & Rusimah, 2003), most sexual harassment victims acted dealing with the problem.

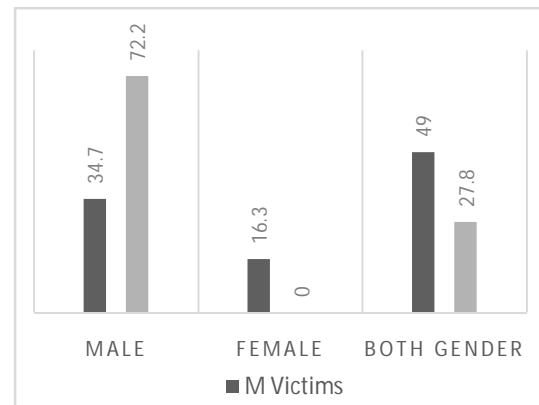


Diagram 3: Percentage of perpetrators’ gender reported by male and female victims

### 3.4 Effect of Sexual Harassment

Results confirmed that there is no significant correlation between gender and self-perceived effect on sports performance ( $p > 0.05$ ). In particular, more than 50% of the victims claimed that their performance were not affected but there were 12 male victims and six female victims claimed that their sports performance declined. Most of the victims who claimed declined in sports performance stated that they took less than one week to recover which is similar with a study in Turkey. Whereas, there is significant correlation between gender and effect on emotion ( $p < 0.05$ ). Major effects on emotion were anger (44.8%) and depression (26.9%). These two identified major effects on emotion were parallel to other study which anger is the most common effect (Gunduz et al., 2009). It has to be acknowledge that all victims in this study were national and international levels of sports participation. Therefore, it can be said that most of the victims had high tolerance to masculine environment, adequate physical, mental and social condition.

The results also revealed that there is also a significant correlation between gender and effect on

health( $p<0.05$ ). There were 16 male victims (32.7%) self-perceived that they had sleep difficulties whilst six female victims (33.3%) experienced headaches. About 25.4% of the victims self-claimed that they did not experience health problem. In order to overcome health problem caused by sexual harassment, 40.3% of the victims attended psychological counseling session or therapy. Out of 49 male victims, seven victims did change their eating habit and two victims perform self-relaxation. Meanwhile, one female victim had changed her eating habit and performed self-relaxation. Only five victims resort to tranquilizers to overcome the effect of sexual harassment on health. Responding to question "with whom do you discuss the sexual harassment incident?", about 64.2% of the victims answered friends and 23.9% answered family. In addition, the victims were also asked whether they know any other victims of sexual harassment and 41.8% of the victims answered yes while 34.3% answered not sure. This resulted more than 70% of the victims aware that there were more sexual harassment victims. Based on gender, about nine female victims (50%) and 19 male victims (38.8%) answered they know other sexual harassment victims.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article confirms the prevalence of sexual harassment in sports among Malaysian athletes. Parallel to earlier studies conducted in advanced countries, majority of the victims were female. These victims have experienced unwelcome jokes, question or sexual utterances, suspicious body contacts and unpleasant invitation. The victims claimed that perpetrators were team mates, trainers and officials. There are two main effects identified anger and depression. These effects have directly affect their sports performance. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the Malaysian government to introduce policy and rules to eliminate sexual harassment in sports.

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