

## Sexual harassment perceptions among Puerto Rican female former athletes.

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### **Abstract:**

Sexual harassment is a prominent social issue across cultures and in all segments of society, including sport. However, there is little research on sexual harassment in different cultures. Specifically, the lack of sport research within the Hispanic-Caribbean culture limits the understanding about sexual-based behaviors occurring in sport settings. In this study six female former athletes were interviewed regarding their sexual harassment experiences and coping responses within the Puerto Rican sport culture. The group analysis found that verbal harassment (e.g., jokes, sexual remarks) was more expected and socially tolerable than physical harassment. The narratives also revealed individual differences based on situations and relationships with the harasser. Athletes' harassment coping responses included avoidance, social support, verbal confrontation, resistance, and advocacy seeking. Interestingly, these former athletes consistently connected the incidents of sexual harassment with “the typical Puerto Rican macho culture” as the root of the phenomenon, separating their experiences from other cultures.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment | sports | female former athletes | athletes | Puerto Rican sports | sports psychology | athletics | psychology

### **Article:**

Sexual harassment in sport is a global phenomenon, and similarities among athletes' experiences and behavioral responses are associated with the globalized and uniform sport structure across the world. Studies reveal that sexist behaviors are common and tolerated by athletes because they are perceived as “part of the game” (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting, 2005; Volkwein-Caplan & Sakaran, 2002). The traditional male-dominated environment in sport is associated with sexist and sexual behaviors, particularly toward women. The majority of literature indicates that women are more likely than men to experience sexual harassment, and men are more likely to harass women (Brackenridge, 2001; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997). However, this phenomenon is not exclusively men harassing women. Both women and men can

be perpetrators or victims, and Volkwein-Caplan and Sakaran (2002) report evidence for same sex harassment.

Recently, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recognized that sexual harassment and abuse is a problem in sport settings. The IOC (2007) defines sexual harassment as the “behaviour towards an individual or group that involves sexualized verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour, whether intended or unintended, legal or illegal, that is based upon an abuse of power and trust and that is considered by the victim or a bystander to be unwanted or coerced” (p. 3). This organization stipulates that, regardless of the cultural differences, sexual harassment is a violation of the civil rights. Unfortunately, not every country recognizes sexual harassment as a current issue, leaving athletes unprotected.

International sport studies on sexual harassment have mainly focused on coach-athlete relations (Toftgaard-Nielsen, 2001), harassment experiences (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005), prevalence of the issue (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2004; Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000; Leahy, Pretty, & Tenenbaum, 2002), and perceptions of the phenomenon (Auweele et al., 2008). However, few studies have addressed athletes' harassment experiences and coping responses within their cultural context.

Fasting, Brackenridge, and Walseth (2007) used a semi-structured interview with 25 Norwegian elite female athletes to examine sexual harassment experiences and responses. These high-performance athletes recalled 59 recent sexual harassment incidents involving male authority figures (coaches, sport managers, and masseur) and 27 experiences involving male peer athletes. Athletes' emotional responses to their sexual harassment situations were disgust, fear, irritation, and anger. The authors classified athletes' behavioral responses in four categories: passivity (the acceptance and hope the harassment will stop eventually), avoidance (purposely creates physical distance), direct confrontation (physical or verbal resistance), and confrontation with humor. Also, the study found that the lack of formal complaints seemed to generate an additional concern for athletes' future victimization in the organization. Interestingly, athletes' emotional and psychological bonding with the harasser decreased their willingness to report them. Fasting et al. (2007) state, “they [athletes] do not want to hurt the harasser and that they fear complaining might negatively affect his [coach] job or family” (p. 428). The authors imply that these harassment experiences are common among female athletes. However, it is important to mention that the phenomenon of sexual harassment is influenced by socio-cultural factors (e.g., gender stereotypes and cultural norms) that need to be examined in sport studies, particularly in relation to individual coping responses. Individuals' perceptions are associated with cultural and social norms that may vary in relation to gender, culture, and environment (Fejgin & Hanegby, 2001).

Sexual harassment coping responses are rarely mentioned in sport research. Previous research outside the sport literature indicates that there are some sexual harassment behavioral reactions that transcend cultures regardless of the social institution such as advocacy seeking, denial, social coping, and avoidance (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fisher, 1995; Knapp, Faley, Ekerberg, &

Dubois, 1997). Wasti and Cortina's (2002) cross-cultural study showed that Hispanic and Turkish women engage in more avoidance and denial, but less advocacy seeking in comparison with Anglo-American women. The authors explained that “women may consider gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention to be ‘typical’ of men in their [Hispanic] society, and they may not consider reporting such normative behaviors” (p. 402). According to the psychology literature (in the United States), gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention are classified as two similar but different categories within the sexual harassment concept. Gender harassment refers to the range of insulting and offensive attitudes against women (gender-based hazing), while unwanted sexual attention is the mild unwelcome sexual behaviors toward another individual (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997). Gender harassment appears to be the most common and tolerated, but least reported by women (Barak, 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

Unfortunately, lack of understanding and appreciation of the Hispanic socio-cultural norms have created a gap in the literature for this particular population. There is a need to investigate salient socio-cultural factors that relate to sexual harassment experiences and coping responses in sport.

The main purpose of the current study is to explore Puerto Rican female athletes' experiences and coping strategies with sexual harassment situations within the context of sport. This study was guided by the following research questions: (a) how do Puerto Rican female former athletes experience sexual harassment in sport? and (b) how do Puerto Rican female former athletes cope with their sexual harassment experiences in sport? This qualitative study uses an interpretive framework to extend the knowledge of Hispanic sport culture while helping to develop guidelines to prevent and deal with sexual harassment.

### The Puerto Rican culture

Salient characteristics of the population of Puerto Rico (PR) include a strong colonial heritage (Spain and the United States), collectivist perspective, patriarchal beliefs, and strict gender roles. PR has colonial roots similar to most of the Latin countries, but differs in its long-term and ongoing political relationship with the United States (Morris, 1995). Therefore, PR has adopted most of the important US laws, including legislation on sexual harassment conduct in academic and workplace institutions, but there are no ethical codes or policies within the sport settings at the time of this writing. In PR sexual harassment constitutes any type of conduct or unwanted sexual approaches (explicit or implicit) against any student or employee (Puerto Rico Senate, 1998, Law 3).

Studies regarding the PR culture indicate that the population values family unity, respect, and dignity (Acosta-Belén, 1979; Torres, 1998). Torres (1998) reports that individuals attempt to obtain respect and dignity for the self and the family. The concept of *respeto* (respect) dictates the appropriate behavioral approach toward others, particularly on the bases of age, economic status, and authority position (Torres, 1998; Wasti & Cortina, 2002). Meanwhile, the concept of

dignidad (dignity) is commonly promoted by family referring to a person's self-worth (Torres, 1998). Dignity and respect are important factors in women's roles in the country, where violation of these social norms can establish what is unacceptable for this society.

The PR history shows that women have been and are societal leaders. Prior to Spain's invasion, PR was a matriarchal society sharing the main roles with men (Mocada, 1986), but Spain's patriarchal system obstructed women's importance. Women's empowerment began again with the US feminist movement, challenging, stretching, and changing the typical gender role among this population contradicting the patriarchal cultural (macho) norms (Rivera Ramos, 1998). Acosta-Belen (1979) explains "The P.R. woman, who apparently has an advantage over the typical P.R. male, due to differentiated child-rearing patterns and social expectations, often pays for her superiority through increased stress" (p. 59). In a more recent study, De León (1993) found that PR women manifest a contemporary gender attitude not endorsing the stereotypical feminine role as passive and submissive. Literature suggests women in this country are rulers, but what about women participating in sport?

PR sport is considered a contemporary national symbol, an important aspect of the culture because sport is one of the outlets in which the country manifests autonomy (Domenech, 2001; Morris, 1995). The meaning of the sport image in society represents a challenge for female athletes because it is still considered a man's world (Aybar Soltero, 2006). It is possible that female athletes have to deal with persistent unwanted sexist and sexual behaviors in order to maintain their sport participation while camouflaging or tolerating the complexity of the societal gender expectations and cultural values (e.g., respect and dignity).

## Method

Participants were six former female athletes who had competed in PR for several years. Their experience participating in sports ranged from 11 to 28 years ( $M = 18$ ,  $SD = 7$ ). They competed in various sport competitions including: school, collegiate, national, and international levels, with four athletes participating in Olympic Games, Pan American Games, Central American Games and two competing in world championships. All participants were elite athletes and four earned medals in international competitions. Interestingly, five of these former athletes were pioneers or one of the few female athletes participating in their sport.

The ages of the former athletes ranged from 31 to 54 years ( $M = 43$ ,  $SD = 9$ ). Two participants were born in the United States but lived in PR for more than 40 years and the rest lived their entire lives on the island. Two interviewees identified as being single, but living with their partners, two married, one single, and one divorced. Only two of the participants reported children. One self-identified as Black-Hispanic; the rest identify as Hispanic-Puerto Rican. All athletes are still involved within the PR sport context, although not actively competing.

All athletes mentioned that they participated in more than one sport throughout their life. Due to confidentiality issues, participants' primary sport was not specified, but the sample involved

collective and individual sports. On average, the majority began participating in competitive sports when they were 13 years old, and the age range varied between nine to 19 years of age. Most participants (n = 4) retired from their specialized sport in their twenties (ages ranged from 20 to 28) and two in their thirties (32 and 38 years old). Two of the six athletes retired from the sport because of the sexual harassment encountered, one due to age discrimination, two from sport injuries, and one as a result of lack of motivation and financial aid.

### Research design

Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher attempted to understand participants' lived experiences and their meaning. According to Dale (1996), the phenomenological method is a dialogue between two people in which individuals unfold their lived experiences and meaning of the phenomenon (p. 310). Sexual harassment is a sensitive topic in which the researchers need to be empathetic and considerate with participants' experiences. The interviewer considers each athlete's standpoint about sexual harassment in sport individually and attempts to understand the phenomenon through their lived experiences.

Moustakas (1994) suggests applying bracketing, which refers to researchers being able to set aside their experiences in order to take a fresh perspective (p. 22). In order to limit the influence of researcher's experiences, feelings, and cultural beliefs toward the issue of sexual harassment, the principal investigator took several actions. The researcher wrote personal biases (prior to beginning the interview) regarding sexual harassment, the PR culture, and previous knowledge about this country's sport structure. She was born in PR and lived there throughout her life. She is a former swimming athlete who competed at national and international levels. Her professional career involved working several years with a sport government agency as well as in college and school settings. Previous personal experiences were employed to become familiar with participants' context of the stories. The researcher chose former athletes in sport disciplines that she never had contact with to remove possible biases about individuals, sport structure or context. Therefore, the researcher must be able to interview and analyze the data without reflecting bias.

### Interview guide

The interview guide was designed to develop an understanding of the factors that could influence the phenomenon of sexual harassment. The interview had four sections (demographic data, sport background, experiences with sexual harassment, and recommendations) in which participants gradually became involved in a more serious conversation. These dynamics enhance the level of trust during the conversation while diminishing the level of anxiety when talking about their past sexual harassment experiences. The core of the interview (experiences) asked open-ended questions based on each woman's experience regarding her sexual harassment encounters. The interviewer asked for specific characteristics of the harasser (e.g., age, gender, and power

position) and the athlete's age at the time of the harassment. In addition, the interview explored the main reason for their sport retirement.

### Procedures

During a national conference in PR the principal researcher articulated the planning of an upcoming sexual harassment study within PR former athletes, and then some participants expressed their interest in sharing their experiences. After the office of research compliance (i.e., Institutional Review Board) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro approved this study, the researcher contacted those participants by email explaining the purpose of the investigation. After the participants agreed to participate in the study, the researcher scheduled a time and a date for a telephone interview. At the beginning of the telephone conversation participants were asked for a verbal informed consent and permission to record their conversation. The informed consent included voluntary participation with a minimum legal age of 18 years for consent, opportunity to leave the study and choose not to answer uncomfortable questions without penalties, and confidentiality procedures. After their verbal agreement, the interviewer explained the four sections of the interview guide and defined the term of sexual harassment as the unwanted sexual behavior that is often persistent against an individual.

As a phenomenological design, the interviewer continuously attempted to probe for more in-depth information to understand their experience and meaning in that particular moment. The researcher asked three consistent questions to all interviewees in relation to their most unforgettable sexual harassment experience including their thoughts, feelings, and coping mechanisms. Some questions were developed during the interview based on participants' unique experiences. Athletes were encouraged to share their overall experiences with the phenomenon, and all former athletes mentioned more than one encounter. The conversations proceeded until no new themes emerged. The time of the interview ranged from 50 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes.

The interviews were held in Spanish. A total of five hours 24 minutes were collected and transcribed into 74 single-spaced pages. In the transcriptions, all the names and institutions were erased and pseudonyms were used to protect athletes' identities. After completing all the transcriptions, the recorded voices were deleted. In order to establish the credibility of the study, the researchers took the following steps: (1) obtained an exhaustive description and overall understanding the essence of the phenomenon and the sport environment, (2) a triangulation method was used, and (3) had participants validate or corroborate the findings by providing their thoughts and comments (see Creswell, 2007). Finally, all former athletes received a thank you note and a summary of the study.

### Data analysis

This study followed the modified Van Kaam method of analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The transcriptions were read several times highlighting significant statements about athletes' lived

experiences (horizontalization). These statements were grouped into clusters (i.e., experiences and coping responses) and labeled within themes to describe the essence of the phenomenon. Using the micro (individuals' experiences) and macro (essence of the group) analysis with the phenomenon provided the textural and structural description in the writing process.

## Results and discussion

Participants shared a total of 26 past sexual harassment incidents as athletes ( $n = 11$ ), bystanders ( $n = 12$ ), and coaches ( $n = 3$ ). Table 1 presents the synthesis of their most unforgettable sexual harassment experiences in their sport careers. One participant revealed a sexual intercourse when she was underage, but she did not consider it the most uncomfortable situation or sexual harassment. The majority of interviewees' experiences involved male coaches, specifically from the national team, but also included male athletes, female athletes, male administrators, masseur, and spectators. Interestingly, age difference between the victim and the harasser did not seem to be a noticeable factor to experienced harassment. Five of the athletes experienced their most uncomfortable situation in their twenties and only one in her forties. Five of the perpetrators had a similar age range to the victim. It is important to mention that at the time of their experience, all of the athletes had a high status in the sport system, were well-known in the country, and highly educated. Regardless of these outstanding attributes to position themselves in a power position within the sport context, they felt vulnerable for sexual harassment incidents.

**Table 1. Former female athletes' sexual harassment experience in sport.**

### Textural description of the phenomenon

Mari: I could not deal with the situation anymore. There was always a game of touching and grabbing butts, the aggressiveness from the players against the other teammates that were and were not lesbians...you could feel the peer pressure...you had to have a great relationship with them and you had to let them to do anything they wanted to you. It was a very stressful situation.

Ana: One time, I was drinking water and I had a spaghetti strip shirt and my shoulder was exposed. He came from the back and kissed my shoulder. I told him, "man, what's going on? and he responded, "what, are you going to accuse me of sexual harassment?". I responded, "no, it's not that"...I did not want to file a complaint because I feared for what people would say about me. He is a prominent figure in PR and how would I harm him.

Jenny: One day, he was giving me a massage and I realized that he was touching my breasts. It was not a massage! Then, one of the other female athletes looked at me, I stood up and left running. This situation remained quiet.

Laura: It was a long process [of sexual harassment] ...we were in a room watching a training routine. It was not a bedroom, it was an office. Then, he got close, more than usual. Again, I just moved away from him and left the room. I didn't say anything.

Melissa: One day, after giving me a massage, he would tell my male teammates about what he felt while he was giving me the massage. You know that in PR everyone knows everything. Obviously, I did not allow him to give me any more massages. He told everyone every detail of what he was thinking while giving me the message.

Veronica: We were at a party and this person invited me to see a new office in the building ... once in the office, there was no verbal approach, it was direct. He grabbed me and started to kiss me and to rub his genitals against me. He noticed that I resisted and stopped. When he stopped, I opened the door and left the room ... I filed a legal complaint.

Among these PR female former athletes, sexual harassment was exhibited as kisses (mouth and shoulder), sexist comments, sexual remarks, double-standard jokes, physical-sexual proximity, touching breasts, dating insinuations, insults, degrading women, staring at one's body, seductive behavior, and genital contact. The study results are presented in two sections: sexual harassment experiences in sport and coping responses.

### Sexual harassment experiences in sport

During the interviews, former athletes detailed the moment, context, emotions, consequences, and relationship with the harasser when they faced a sexual harassment situation. The conversations grouped into five basic themes in relation to their experiences. In addition, this section discusses how participants continuously connect socio-cultural factors with sexual harassment.

Theme 1: The situational context. According to some participants, sexual harassment occurs only in particular contexts. The approaches are not consistent or daily but come and go without a specific pattern, making it difficult to predict the event. Laura explained: "There was a time during practice that happened [the sexual harassment], but when I would start warm-ups, he would start coaching again and I would not have any problems". During interviews, former athletes clearly differentiated the nature of their sexual harassment situations into expected or unexpected settings.

Expected settings (e.g., competitions) are those places in which sexual harassment sometimes is tolerated. Participants mentioned that sexual approaches were expected particularly from male spectators and individuals that were visibly harassing other female athletes. The expectancy was based on their previous experiences with the harasser and the context, particularly from male spectators. For example, Mari attributed the sexual attitude to the type of uniforms worn, to the spectators being so close to the players, and to the sport setting, which allows the audience to say



more sexual comments – “the spectators are almost touching you and telling you this and that ... butts here, tits there ... everything was direct ... it was very uncomfortable but you learn to deal with it”. Similar statements were captured from the other athletes describing a common feeling “that women are sexual objects” in the eyes of the spectators during competitions. Interestingly, Fasting et al. (2004) found that there are no significant relationships between sport clothing (e.g., athletic uniform) and sexual harassment.

Two participants (from two different sports) stated the same description, “I felt like a piece of meat,” every time they heard the sexual remarks about their sexualized bodies in the sport arena. These athletes perceived that the media propaganda about female athletes in their sport is the main source of male sexual approach in the audience. Indeed, Volkwein-Caplan and Sankaran (2002) reported that the media has hyped the erotic image of female athletes creating an additional challenge in tackling this issue.

Furthermore, these former athletes' narratives revealed that in sports there are some unexpected sexual approaches that are morally unacceptable, particularly when coming from a known person. Athletes' stories implied that when the harasser approached them suddenly and directly (physical), they did not know how to react or behave. Veronica remembered – “people would ask me, if you know ... [self-defense], why didn't you defend yourself? That's something that you do not expect. He is a person that you appreciate and you would never think that he would be capable of something like that”. The unprecedented event created a sense of doubt, “what is happening?” or “I can't believe this is happening”. Previous studies also reported that when an athlete experiences unanticipated sexual approach, this situation seems to generate a sense of uncertainty and doubts of what is happening (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Fasting et al., 2007).

In this study all female athletes were reluctant to accept or tolerate any type of physical harassment or approach from the harasser. Athletes agreed that even though they got used to hearing the sexist comments and sexual approaches, they never felt comfortable within the environment. It is important to note that every athlete developed a boundary that determines how much harassment they accept, and that boundary is rooted within their socio-cultural norms (i.e., self-respect and dignity). The reported tolerated sexual behaviors were staring at the body, sexual comments, sexual remarks, sexist/sexual jokes, and talk about sexual relations in group conversations. The athletes suggested that they tolerated sexist atmospheres because it was a normal behavior in sport. Studies continuously suggest that the different sexual harassment approaches against athletes are camouflaged within the sport culture – “it is part of the game” (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting, 2005). Researchers in this area explain that athletes gradually learn to accept some forms of harassment behaviors (enculturation with the sport context) (Brackenridge, 2001; Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Fejgin & Hanegby, 2001). Furthermore, athletes in this study recognized that the frequent sexist and sexualized atmosphere is unethical, but that it also appears to be typical behavior within the PR sport context.

Theme 2: Love and hate relationship. Interviews revealed that all participants experienced a twofold relationship with the harasser, specifically with individuals with some emotional connection (i.e., coaches and teammates, but not spectators). Participants remembered experiencing a “love” or affectionate connection based on the harasser's coaching knowledge or athletic skills (in the case of teammates). The positive attributes take into account the appreciation for the harasser's expertise, competence, and respect for authority.

In contrast, participants mentioned feelings of “hate” or dislike whenever a harassment situation flourished. The negative feelings include mistrust, disbelief, and betrayal. Laura explained the love-hate relationship with her national coach: “He was a person with a split personality. The part of him related to his knowledge was the part that I needed to reach my goals. That was the part that I wanted! But, there was the other part that comes along with the other one, and that part is the one that I had to battle with”. See the work of Leahy and Tenenbaum (2004) for perpetrators' methodology that is associated with athletes' vulnerability.

A majority of the conversations revealed similar views: athletes want to achieve higher athletic skills, international sport status, and competitive experiences (as part of the love sentiment portion). Along these lines, previous researcher theorized that elite athletes might be more vulnerable in developing an emotional dependency with the coach (cost-benefit) because they have invested time, money, and physical/emotional energy to achieve higher athletic performance (Brackenridge, 1997; Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; Fasting et al., 2007). In 1997, Brackenridge and Kirby developed a proposition about athletes' vulnerability for sexual abuse called Stage of Imminent Achievement. This model suggests that athletes are at higher risk when they are almost at the elite level than novice athletes. Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) explained “for these athletes, the personal costs of dropping out of their sport might be deemed to be higher than for others”, while elite athletes that have established athletic recognition “may be less dependent upon his or her coach for continued achievement at that level” (p. 413).

Even though the athletes in this study were adults and have proven international recognition by the time of the harassment, their narratives exposed the continuous battle against sexist behaviors rooted within the socio-cultural norms. Jenny recalled:

Listen, [my sport] was the first combat sport that the [main] sport agency included in international competitions. It was a male space, but then women began to look better than men, we started to get all the attention ... [at that time] we were not little girls, we confronted them and they didn't like it. I remember that I was always fighting in and outside sport.

Interestingly, five of these athletes were more successful than their male counterparts. Based on athletes' narratives we could imply that sexist behaviors within the sport culture may be a way to undervalue and underestimate women participation in sport. According to Aybar Soltero (2006), PR women participating in sport are not perceived with the same value, respect, and admiration

as male athletes. Sport literature continuously imply that women participation in sport are seen as intruders and treated in a hostile environment (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting et al., 2004; Fasting, 2005).

Athletes' stories suggest that if the “love” sentiment portion (e.g., “love sport”, “he can help me to achieve my goal”, and “it is a great experience”) prevails over the “hate” sentiment portion, athletes will tolerate the sexualized atmosphere longer. Meanwhile, those athletes that experience greater dislike for the harasser were determined to drop out of the team or end their sport career. Three of the six athletes made drastic decisions in response to their sexual harassment encounters. Two athletes dropped out of their sport and one withdrew from the team without returning in future years. Only one of them returned to the same sport after four years of absence, but she maintained a defensive stance toward the sport structure. Similar findings are documented by Fasting et al. (2007) and Fasting, Brackenridge, and Walseth (2002).

Theme 3: Emotions when facing sexual harassment. The most common emotional responses among participants when facing a sexual harassment situation were: disgust, guilt, shame, intimidation, fear, blame, and anger. Other athletes added feeling dirty, betrayed, invasion of privacy, and hopelessness. Veronica described that she went through an emotional rollercoaster at the moment she experienced the unwanted sexual advance from her national coach. She stated – “First, I felt fear and at the same time I couldn't believe what was happening. All this went through my mind very fast. I was thinking, if I scream, what would happen? I asked myself, why this is happening to me, if I had never encouraged him ... I wanted to defend myself, but at the same time I felt fear and frustrated”. Fasting et al. (2007) study showed similar emotional responses among female athletes.

Theme 4: Inescapable consequences. Repeatedly, athletes poured out their feelings regarding how the sport agencies failed to assist female athletes in sexual harassment cases. Other studies report similar findings in relation to possible consequences if athletes act against the harasser (Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting et al., 2007). The pessimistic and hopeless feelings among these athletes were persistent. In this study athletes explained that if they complained about sexual harassment, then there would be negative consequences toward them and their athletic career. All participants' acknowledged the possible outcomes that they would face based on their previous personal or bystander experiences. Statements like “I went from being the victim to being the victimizer”, “they make you look like the bad guy in the situation”, “it won't change, whether you report it or not”, and “an athlete will never win a case” were likely during the conversations. Since 1971, psychology literature has continuously identified related feelings regarding victim blame as a common reaction by sex-abuse victims (Davis, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Keen, 1991).

In this study, former athletes were aware of the lack of confidentiality in the PR sport structure. Athletes indicated that the apparent reason for the poor confidentiality is the absence of formal procedures to file sexual harassment complaints and that “everyone knows everyone” in the sport

setting. The common phrase “everyone will know” presents a major dilemma for this small island. The apparent administrative negligence in dealing with the complaints has provoked pessimistic feelings among these former athletes. Mari held, “athletes will always end up against the wall ... one way or in another”. Brackenridge (2001) and Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, and Fitzgerald (2002) also suggested that formal complaint will not solve the problem since there is a certain level of tolerance toward harassment in these organizations.

Finally, five of the female athletes' indicated that authority figures (mainly coaches) have a “magnified” power in the system. In PR, some authority figures are involved in various power positions simultaneously creating an additional difficulty in confronting the harasser or developing policy. For example, Veronica explained that when she filed a formal complaint against her national coach, “It got even worse [after the complaint] because from being the national coach, he became the [sport organization] president”. Afterward, “I ended up being kicked out of the national team and he stayed as a coach”. She disapproved the sport government's decision because they avoided taking an objective stand in the process and she believed that the consequences were the result of his power position in her sport. Veronica's lawsuit took four years to end and she suffered gender discrimination and other forms of psychological stress from peer athletes and other authority figures after the formal complaint. Years have passed since her harassment incident and she compares the complexity in solving a harassment case with “the mafia”. Another athlete affirmed this perspective, explaining that when a harasser has an untouchable power position, the formal accusations vanished leaving the victims without formal evidence.

Negative consequences to themselves and their athletic career are what the athletes attempted to avoid when they were athletes. They were aware of the consequences, but athletes in non-traditional female sports (e.g., judo) appeared to encounter more severe gender harassment and violence by male authority figures than those in traditional sports (e.g., volleyball). Indeed, Fasting, Brackenridge, and Sungot-Borgen's (2004) study found that female athletes in non-traditional sport experienced more sexual harassment than female in traditional sport; but did not find significant differences within the sport settings.

Theme 5: Socio-cultural context. Repeatedly, athletes connected the macho culture with their recurrent incidents of sexual harassment behaviors. Some participants labeled it as “the typical Puerto Rican machismo”. Ana described it as:

It's like part of our culture, be the man, the macho. I think that it is part of our macho culture. In front of a group [sexist] jokes are made, and the audience must laugh to be part of that macho group. If a male does not laugh, he is gay, a homosexual. His sexuality is questioned if he does not harass someone.

Statements like these were continuously repeated by all female former athletes. Laura attributed male socio-cultural behavior as “I think it is a male attitude when you define yourself as a Puerto

Rican man ... is the way they need to behave” to be accepted. Participants believe that sexual harassment behaviors are grounded within the PR culture. Ramírez's (1999) book, *What it means to be a man*, reflects similar perspectives regarding the masculinity interaction among Puerto Ricans.

Participants agreed that people in PR excuse male sexual behaviors as “part of the culture”. Ana explained that coaches usually defended themselves saying, “that is just what everybody does, so nobody can point at me” or “that's the way it is”. These apparent excuses clearly reflect the lack of policies that give the harasser an advantage over the victim. It is vital to point out that this study does not attempt to generalize all male and coaches as harassers. Also the narratives in this study are limited to experiences of more than a decade ago. Therefore, the findings on this issue can only be applied to this time frame. It is possible that current coaches' educational level and public awareness regarding harassment have changed. Further studies with current female athletes are needed in order to explore the present PR sport context and men's perspectives regarding sexual harassment.

### Coping responses

The group analysis revealed that participants deal with the issue of sexual harassment mainly through avoidance, social support, resistance, confrontation, and advocacy seeking. These results are related to literature which suggests that most of these classifications can be considered direct coping responses (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Furthermore, Magley (2002) reviewed Fitzgerald's coping responses survey, and reported that 74.3% of female participants use avoidance, 69.9% social support, 57.3% confrontation, and 36.2% seeking institutional advocacy. The data in this study were grouped and presented in order of frequency into the following themes.

**Theme 1: Avoidance.** The responses of avoidance referred to when the victim ignores the perpetrator's comments or the harassing context (Wasti & Cortina, 2002). In this study, athletes' coping responses against mild sexual harassment (e.g., sexual comment, insinuation, or sexual jokes) involved ignoring the inappropriate behaviors, particularly when the sexual remarks were part of group conversations. Participants ignored the sexual approaches through consistent body language such as walking away and continuously discouraging the harasser. Fasting et al. (2007) classify this behavioral response as passivity explaining athletes' tolerance for mild harassment.

**Theme 2: Social support.** According to some scholars in this area, the social support system helps the victim to validate the harassment perceptions (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). This theme was the most common strategy to deal with physical sexual harassment situations or severe cases, not surprising for a collectivist society. Moos and Schaefer (1993) mention that people who enjoy more family and friendship resources seem to rely more heavily on this coping approach. In this study, participants mentioned that having immediate emotional support from family or friends helped them to vent and address the issue. One participant (Melissa) explained that she was the youngest of the three female athletes in her sport and they created a strong emotional bonding

influencing her to cope better with the issue. “In my case, my teammates were older than me ... they advised me and whenever they protested [against the harasser], I followed their lead and protested also. I had the advantage to count on someone older than me and with more experience”. A similar comment was presented by Jenny, “we had each other for support”.

In other cases, athletes relied emotionally on their family network. In Ana's case, family provided physical and emotional support, “my dad was always in the [X] court with me, he was always watching” and provided an emotional support. In the case of Veronica, her family provided financial support to deal with the lawsuit expenses. Veronica mentioned that the unconditional social support was vital in the process of confronting the harasser.

Only one participant tried to hide the harassment incident from her family and friends, but she was driven to deal with the issue in order to avoid family tension. Laura mentioned that she was “terrified” and “embarrassed” at the possibility that her “dad and mom knew something about it”. Laura confronted the harassment process alone, but she used family pride to deal cognitively with her sexual harassment situation.

Theme 3: Physical and emotional resistance. Participants purposefully increased the emotional and physical distance between the harasser and themselves after the incident. During the conversations it was noticed that when athletes ( $n = 3$ ) received a physical approach, they physically resisted or refused (e.g., not kissing back) the sexual advance. When Veronica described the scenario of the incident, she said “thank God he desisted [the kisses and touching] ... I cannot tell you how I would have had reacted if it would have ended up worse”. Among these participants, the physical resistance included avoiding massages, avoiding exposing their body, and resisting kisses and the responses of “stand-up and run” and “walk away without saying anything”. Similar behavioral responses were reported by Fasting et al. (2007). The emotional and physical resistance was used to protect themselves from other possible unwanted sexual situations.

Theme 4: Verbal confrontation. This classification referred to when athletes verbally challenge the verbal harassment, not physical harassment. Some participants ( $n = 2$ ) verbally confronted the sexual remarks, particularly when they expected the situation from a known person. One participant, Ana, mentioned that sexual comments directed at her were common because she was the only female in a group of 14. She explained that the group was planning a trip and she approached “those [she] knew were harassers” saying “I do not want any type of sexual harassment in this trip, please! You know, [I told them] like a warning”. She did not have any sexual approaches during the trip, but she had previous harassment encounters in similar situations. The group analysis showed that participants verbally confronted the harasser only in expected situations (these had happened on other occasions) or if the harasser had the same power status (e.g., athlete to athlete or from coach to coach conversations). Athletes' defensive reactions were manifested when the harassment was persistent and prevailed for a period of time.

This also held true with the athletes who participated in the studies of Fasting et al.'s (2007) and Brackenridge's (2005).

**Theme 5: Seeking institutional advocacy.** This term refers to when athletes seek legal assistance or report the harassment incidents to the sport organization. In this study, only one interviewed athlete (Veronica) mentioned that she reported her incident to the sport agency, even though the agency did not have a policy against sexual harassment situations. In Veronica's situation, she was sexually harassed two times consecutively (physical and verbal, respectively) by her coach. After the second harassment encounter she realized that the harassment would continue to escalate if she did not report it. Thus, she decided to take legal steps against the harasser. Her underlying principle was, "every time this man wants something [sexually], he will do as he pleases".

Even though advocacy seeking was not a common response among the former athletes, we include it because some athletes ( $n = 3$ ) contemplated it as an alternative. In the case of these athletes, they decided against this alternative because it could jeopardize their sport career. Mari explained that the sport system is not arranged to help athletes in these situations and the coaches are the ones in control: "that is why the alternative is to find [on my own] how I can turn the [sexual harassment] situation around, without me getting screwed". A majority of these former athletes ( $n = 5$ ) do not perceive advocacy seeking as a viable alternative. For instance, a study by Berman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, and Fitzgerald (2002) found that reporting sexual harassment often triggers retaliation against the victim. Therefore, harassed women find that the more reasonable action is to avoid the incident than report the incident.

Previous data in and outside the sport arena support that advocacy seeking is the rarest coping response to deal with harassment circumstances, regardless the cultural group (Fasting et al., 2007; Wasti & Cortina, 2002). For example, Wasti and Cortina (2002) found cultural difference in coping responses between Hispanic working-class women and Anglo-Americans. The authors suggest that "Hispanic [cultural] norms discourage formal complaining" because they may consider harassment a normative behavior (Wasti & Cortina, 2002, p. 402). The unwillingness to seek and report the incident was evident among these female former athletes. Laura had been retired as an athlete for more than 25 years, and reflected – "I put myself in the place when I was an athlete ... and I don't know if I would act differently now living as an athlete and knowing the current law". This statement suggests that athletes might still (today) hesitate to pursue the alternative of advocacy seeking from sport organizations, even though public awareness of the phenomenon has increased. This study supports previous studies suggesting that the lack of organizational support, tolerance of sexual harassment, and poor confidentiality mitigates assertive reactions among victims (Brackenridge, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

Limitations of the study

This study reflects the common experiences of six high-performance former female athletes within the PR sport structure. The perceptions of these former athletes might reflect their high educational level and awareness of sexual harassment. These findings may not be generalized to the current PR female athletes, and do not present a complete picture of the complex issue of the phenomenon. The use of a telephone interview in a phenomenological study is a weakness that might influence the connection with the interviewees. Despite the limitations, this is the first study to investigate sexual harassment in PR sport. The findings provide an initial view of harassment within PR sport culture, and suggest several directions for continued research, as well as implications for policies and professional practice.

## Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to explore female former athletes' sexual harassment experiences and coping strategies using a phenomenological approach. The narratives revealed rude sexist and sexual behaviors manifested against these six former athletes. The findings suggest that athletes seem to tolerate sexual harassment, particularly from spectators, but they seem to create boundaries that determine the level of harassment tolerance. Athletes manifest a rollercoaster of emotions regarding the harasser (coaches, peer athletes, or masseur) influencing their reactions. The narratives uncover a pessimistic perspective in solving the issue suggesting that negligence by sport agencies generates negative consequences. The athletes' coping responses were avoidance, social support, confrontation, and advocacy seeking. All these findings resemble those of studies in the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway and the United States. However, the findings also reflect the unique PR socio-cultural context in which athletes continuously associate unwanted sexual offensive behaviors with the “typical Puerto Rican macho culture”. For these PR former elite athletes, sexual harassment demonstrates that the sport context still does not accept, respect, and value women as athletes. Three of six interviewees withdrew from their sport or team because of sexual harassment situations.

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