

Why taking a trauma- and violence-informed approach can make sports safer and more equitable

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Spanish football player Jenni Hermoso [accused Spanish football chief Luis Rubiales of sexual assault in September](#) after he kissed her on the

lips without her consent during the FIFA Women's World Cup award ceremony.

Rubiales has since resigned from his job. And the incident has yet again highlighted the pressing need for action to support survivors and prevent sexual and gender-based [violence](#) in sports. It also underlined the sheer outrage of the public and [fueled demands](#) for education, interventions and the dire need to overhaul and reform the sport sector here in Canada.

The [World Health Organization](#) has declared sexual and gender-based violence one of the most ubiquitous and complex global health issues. Canada has been going through its own [safe sport crisis](#). The recent Hockey Canada crisis boldly and publicly illustrated the need for better educational activities in youth sport.

In 2022, Hockey Canada's CEO and entire board of directors [resigned due to their controversial handling of alleged sexual assaults](#). Allegations of abuse in varsity [sports](#) across Canada have been on the rise, [with the most recent allegations](#) put forth in September by the women's hockey team at Western University.

These issues have prompted public discussion around [sexual violence](#), abuse and safeguarding sport. There is a need to develop both innovative interventions and unorthodox approaches at all levels—from the grassroots to the elite level—to truly make sport more equitable, inclusive and safe.

Trauma- and violence-informed approaches

Mainstream sport and physical activity programs rarely tackle social and structural inequities. In response, [a trauma- and violence-informed approach](#) calls for participants, coaches, managers and organizations to

better understand the effects of systemic, structural and interpersonal violence. This approach is guided by [four tenets of trauma- and violence-informed care](#):

- trauma awareness;
- safety and trustworthiness;
- choice and collaboration;
- strengths-based and capacity building.

In Canada, calls for a preventive approach to sexual and gender-based violence are loud and clear. There have been demands by [scholars](#), sport managers, policymakers, [athletes](#) and coaches for sporting bodies and governments to better understand the [widespread abuse in Canadian sports](#). And yet, these issues remain understudied.

Accounting for violence in sport

Through our community-based research, we are working with diverse community organizations in Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver on a multi-level, [pilot project that brings an understanding of trauma and violence](#) into their sport and physical activity programs and organizations more broadly.

Through this work, we aim to address and foreground the intersecting effects of systemic, structural and interpersonal violence in the [development](#) and delivery of sport and physical activity. To do this, we are using [feminist participatory action research](#) to better address the diverse voices, needs and concerns of community members.

This research involves piloting trauma- and violence-informed training modules for coaches/providers, alongside sport and physical activity programs that cater to their specific needs and priorities.

We have also explored what we can learn from sport for [development programs](#) across the globe. [Sport for development](#) positions sport as a [valuable tool](#) to achieve local, domestic and global development objectives, including those encompassed by the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#).

For example, Women Win—an international organization that aims to advance girls' and women's rights through sport and play—supports [sport, gender and development](#) initiatives to safeguard and support survivors while promoting health equity and safe sport. Their programming has been useful for promoting sexual and reproductive health rights and addressing sexual and gender-based violence.

Women Win has [developed toolkits](#) to help youth address sexual and gender-based violence by transforming their attitudes and behaviors.

Other topics encompassed by the toolkits include using sport and play to build [self-confidence](#), assertive communication, positive body image and self-advocacy. While a notable first step, it is important to ensure these tools don't place the burden of preventing sexual and gender-based violence on the shoulders of survivors.

Alternative solutions

While [scholarship is growing in this area](#), further research is needed to better understand how trauma- and violence-informed approaches to sport in Canada—alongside sport for development—may address systemic and institutional violence. Indeed, these approaches can potentially help self-identified women who have—and continue to—experience inequities and [barriers to participation in sport and physical activity](#).

Managers, coaches and policymakers must gain a deeper understanding

of interpersonal, systemic and sexual and gender-based violence, while also providing support to survivors. While Canadian sport for development organizations like [Shape Your Life](#) and global entities like Women Win offer promising strategies, additional resources are required to address these issues adequately.

Scholars and stakeholders have an opportunity to generate new ways of thinking about safe sport practices and policies promoted, for example, through sport for development programming that is survivor-led, trauma-informed and grounded in transformative justice. And while sport for development programs aren't perfect, the sport sector would do well to build on the crucial groundwork organizations like Women Win and Shape Your Life have already laid out.

Trauma- and violence-informed approaches can potentially enhance safety across Canada's abusive, patriarchal sporting culture. Now, more than ever, we need collaborative, evidence-based and novel solutions to address violence in sport and support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Because we can—and must—do better.

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