

Why do female athletes face harassment and bullying? A mixed-methods study

by Ekowati Ekowati

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Why do female athletes face harassment and bullying? A mixed-methods study

Ekowati^{1abcde*}, Edi Setiawan^{2abcd}, Habibie^{1abcde},
Khairul Hafezad Abdullah^{3acd}, Novri Gazali^{4acd}, Martin Hofmeister^{5acd},
Zsolt Németh^{6ac}

Universitas Islam 45 Bekasi, Indonesia¹

Universitas Suryakencana, Indonesia²

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perlis, Malaysia³

Universitas Islam Riau, Indonesia⁴

Consumer Centre of the German Federal State of Bavaria, Germany⁵

University of Pécs, Hungary⁶

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of escalating harassment and bullying of female athletes in sports demonstrates that there is a gap and urgency for further scrutiny. This study aims to reveal harassment and bullying cases against female athletes in sports. This study applied a mixed method. Participants in this study were athletes in several sports organizations at the University of Islam 45 Bekasi (n = 30). A questionnaire was used as the quantitative research instrument to measure harassment and bullying in athletes, while in-depth interviews were used as the qualitative research instrument. Quantitative statistical analysis used IBM SPSS to find frequency and percentage, and qualitative analysis used thematic analysis. The quantitative research results significantly proved that all participants often experience harassment and bullying, with the highest rate occurring in gymnastics, swimming, volleyball, and soccer. While the results of the qualitative research showed that all participants had experiences or stories about harassment and bullying, the causal factors included the conditions of the training environment, athletes' clothes, attitudes, and the knowledge of coaches and athletes. In addition, participants stated that harassment and bullying negatively impact their health and psychological aspects. As a result, we emphasize that incidents of harassment and bullying occur frequently in female athletes while they are participating in sports. It is expected that this research could provide information and understanding to all sports practitioners in Indonesia and all countries in the world that harassment and bullying are very dangerous and immoral and must be handled as soon as possible by providing strict rules.

Keywords: Harassment; bullying; female athletes; sports; mixed method



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Corresponding Author: Ekowati, Department of Physical Education, Health and Recreation, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Islam 45 Bekasi, Bekasi, Indonesia
Email: ekowati@unismabekasi.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

Sport is an activity that has numerous positive effects on the human body and mind. A likely reason is that continuous exercise, as such, will assist a person in achieving good health and fitness, indirectly improving the quality of their life (Donnelly et al., 2016; Snedden et al., 2018; Malm et al., 2019; Stracciolini et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that exercise frequently could reduce the risk of developing cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and high cholesterol (Quennerstedt et al., 2020). In addition, sport also has a significant impact on the progress of a country through the achievements of athletes from various sporting events (Gassmann et al., 2020; Storm & Jakobsen, 2020; Shibli et al., 2021). However, the current sports phenomenon has been tainted by harassing and bullying behaviour (Vveinhardt et al., 2020; Ríos & Ventura, 2022; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2022). Moreover, the facts show that harassment and bullying often occur at national and international sporting events, which indicates the seriousness of these problems (Burke, 2021). In addition, Vveinhardt et al. (2020) stated that both individual and team sports have the potential to cause harassment and bullying cases. Harassment and bullying are negative behaviors that can cause a person or a team to experience psychological disorders (e.g., anxiety, fear, trauma, depression, stress, and suicide) (Bachand & Road, 2017) and bullying that often occurs in sports contexts such as insulting, bullying (Voorthuizen et al., 2022; Mishna et al., 2019) or verbal racism even until pulling clothes, pushing or beating (Salmon et al., 2018; Ríos & Ventura, 2022). According to Ortiz-Marcos et al. (2022) that the behavior of harassment and bullying in sports has been analyzed since 40 years ago and, in several decades, has increased the interest of researchers in various countries.

A previous study found that around 40% of all cases of harassment and bullying in sports (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019). Notably, past research indicates that sexual harassment, contempt, rape, and attempted rape in sports predominantly affect female athletes (Vertommen et al., 2017; Johansson & Lundqvist, 2017; Marracho et al., 2021; Hardin et al., 2021). In several decades, research on harassment and bullying has continued to increase significantly, but because sports organization leaders issue unstrict rules, this negative behavior keeps repeating itself. Thus, the stated concerns necessitate additional solutions to ensure that harassment and bullying do not negatively affect sports.

Research on harassment and bullying has been extensively studied internationally (Tofler, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018; Antunovic, 2018; Johansson, 2022). However, according to our knowledge, there are no previous studies that reveal harassment and bullying of women in the context of sports that were analyzed through quantitative and qualitative approaches (mixed methods). In addition, research on harassment and bullying in the context of professional sports is still minimal. This research contributes imperative information for coaches, athletes, and stakeholders regarding the harmful impacts caused by harassment and bullying incidents so that later there will be attention to minimizing harassment and bullying in sports. Therefore, our study aims to uncover harassment and bullying actions towards female athletes in sports.

METHOD

This research adopted quantitative and qualitative research, which is known as the mixed method. The mixed method application in a study was considered more practical for solving a problem and optimizing the results (Gani et al., 2022). Participants in this study were athletes in several sports at the University of Islam 45 Bekasi (Indonesia), and they all agreed to participate in this study. Ethics clearance was granted by the Committee of the University of Islam, 45 Bekasi, before data collection was conducted (approval number: E 301/UNISMA-6/2022). The participants were recruited through an invitation letter sent via email to sports organizations (e.g., volleyball, soccer, swimming, and gymnastics). In the end, only 30 female athletes responded and expressed interest in participating further in this study, while 14 female athletes subsequently withdrew. The recruitment activity took place in June 2022. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Characteristics of the Participants

Variables	n (%)
Age (y)	
19	5 (16.67%)
20	15 (50.00%)
21	10 (33.33%)
Weight (kg)	
50	12 (40.00%)
55	7 (23.33%)
60	11 (36.67%)
High (cm)	
155	6 (20.00%)
160	16 (53.33%)
170	8 (26.67%)
Sport	
Gymnastics	7 (23.33%)
Swimming	11 (36.67%)
Volleyball	9 (30.00%)
Soccer	3 (10.00%)
Atlet Status	
Athlete	21 (70.00%)
Ex-Athlete	9 (30.00%)

Quantitative Instruments

Harassment and Bullying. The survey was conducted employing the scales of the bullying and harassment in sport questionnaire (BHISQ) (Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2021). However, the researchers have developed one item and had it validated by three experts. The result of validity was 0.88, whereas the result of reliability was 0.90. It is indicated that the item was valid and reliable to proceed with another stage. Question 1: I have experienced harassment in the form of being hugged. Question 2: I have experienced harassment in the form of being kissed. Question 3: I have experienced harassment in the form of someone touching my breasts. Question 4: "I have experienced harassment in the form of someone touching my buttocks". Question 5: "I have experienced harassment in the form of sexual jokes". Question 6: "Have you experienced harassment because of rape?". Question 7: "I have experienced bullying in the form of ridicule or racism". Question 8: "I have experienced bullying in the form of pinching". Question 9: "I have experienced bullying in the form of beatings, pushing, and kicking". Question 10: Have I experienced bullying in the form of being intimidated? (Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2021). Meanwhile, to measure the sport that has the most harassment and bullying actions, you can use the following questions: Have you ever experienced harassment and bullying in volleyball? Has your trainer ever done any acts of harassment or bullying in gymnastics? Does swimming allow for harassment and bullying, and does your soccer coach frequently harass and bully you? These questions were answered on a Likert scale, with 1 representing "never experienced", 2 representing "sometimes", 3 representing "has experienced", and 4 representing "often has".

Qualitative Instruments

Instruments for qualitative research through in-depth interviews with participants in 40 minutes per individual. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian (Gani et al., 2022). The questions asked in the interview were (i) Have you ever experienced harassment and bullying while exercising? (ii) According to you, what are the factors that contribute to harassment and bullying actions? and (iii) According to you, what is the impact of harassment and bullying actions? (Fominiene & Vveinhardt, 2021).

Research Procedure

This research was conducted in June 2022 at the University of Islam, Bekasi, Indonesia. This study followed the guidelines of the World Medical Association Code of Ethics (Helsinki Declaration for Humans), which is intended for research with human subjects. In a quantitative study, the meeting was held on June 4,

2022, and all participants filled out the harassment and bullying questionnaire through the Google Form. The qualitative research was then conducted on June 11, 2022, and all participants were interviewed about their experiences with harassment and bullying in sports.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

In order to analyze quantitative data using IBM SPSS 25.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.). Descriptive statistical results (frequency and percentage) (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019).

Qualitative Analysis

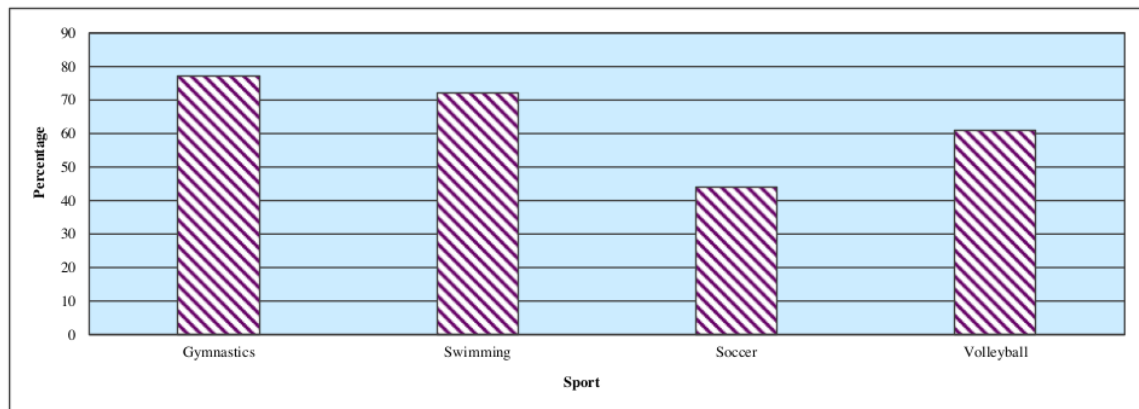
Raw data from qualitative research was analyzed using qualitative thematics. First, the results of in-depth interviews were analyzed and discussed between researchers and three experts on the scope of harassment and bullying in sports. Then, the results were coded and categorized into three main themes (Gani et al., 2022), namely, theme 1 about the experience of harassment and bullying; theme 2 about the factors that cause harassment and bullying; and theme 3 about the impact of harassment and bullying.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative study results showed that 123 participants answered that they often experienced it, 85 participants responded that they had experienced it, 53 answered that they sometimes experienced it, and 39 participants answered that they had never experienced harassment or bullying in sports (see Table 2).

Table 2. Athletes' Perceptions of Harassment and Bullying

Item	Often experienced	Ever experienced	Sometimes	Never
Question 1: I have experienced harassment in the form of being hugged.	6 (20%)	8 (27%)	15 (50%)	1 (3%)
Question 2: I have experienced harassment in the form of being kissed.	4 (13%)	8 (27%)	12 (40%)	6 (20%)
Question 3: I have experienced harassment in the form of touching my hands.	15 (51%)	10 (33%)	4 (13%)	1 (3%)
Question 4: I have experienced harassment in the form of touching my body.	17 (57%)	10 (33%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)
Question 5: I have experienced harassment in the form of sexual jokes.	19 (64%)	10 (33%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Question 6: I have experienced harassment of rape.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Question 7: I have experienced bullying in the form of ridicule/racism.	20 (66%)	5 (17%)	5 (17%)	0 (0%)
Question 8: I have experienced bullying in the form of pinching.	20 (66%)	9 (31%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Question 9: I have experienced bullying in the form of beatings, pushing and kicking.	15 (50%)	10 (33%)	5 (17%)	0 (0%)
Question 10: I have experienced bullying in the form of being intimidated.	7 (23%)	15 (51%)	7 (23%)	1 (3%)



Graph 1. Shows the Percentage of Sports Where Harassment and Bullying are Common

Graph 1. Shows that the highest percentage of harassment and bullying has happened in gymnastics (77%), swimming (72%), volleyball (61%), and soccer (44%). The results of qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with thirty athletes found that:

Theme 1: Experiences of harassment and bullying in athletes

Experiences or stories about harassment and bullying that often occur among female athletes are crucial issues that must be continuously evaluated (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Reel & Crouch, 2019). This will be evidence and information for all sports practitioners that harassment and bullying often happen in modern sports today. Regarding harassment and bullying, several participants revealed stories that:

I was experiencing harassment and bullying, which was a disgrace to us. But to prevent these cases from happening again in the context of sports in the future, we want to share our experiences in this study. Our coach carried out the harassment and bullying that happened to us. He was a young coach, a 28-year-old with firm characteristics and high emotions. The first case occurred in the afternoon during training activities. When we made a mistake in movement or formation, the coach often pinched the arms and waist, and at that moment, we felt it was still normal. However, in the second case, this coach started to pinch and spank us; we felt something was wrong with his attitude. In the end, we reported this to the head coach, and finally, the coach who carried out the harassment and bullying was fired (interviews and results with participants).

Unfortunately, a coach who should be a role model and a substitute for parents for athletes when exercising has turned into a person hated and feared by us (results of interviews with participants). Some participants shared their experiences, saying:

Harassment and bullying often happen in sports activities. This is our experience, or story, while doing the exercises. On that day, as usual, we did swimming exercises, which we perform regularly on Saturdays. At that time, we were classified as an amateur (unprofessional) level, so we still needed help from our coaches to master the basic techniques of freestyle swimming. Long story short, we started to go down into the pool and learn freestyle swimming movements, then the coach instructed us to practice using a float board. But after 15 minutes passed, the coach instructed us not to use the float board, and he started to go down into the pool. The coach started to help us by holding our legs and stomach. Nothing strange happened in the first 5 minutes, but after that, the coach's right hand began to touch our thighs. At that time, we were shocked and couldn't believe what the coach was doing. After that incident, we refused to be trained by that coach and chose another coach to learn swimming movements. Several athletes experienced this case, and we did not dare report it to the

parents or the team manager because we were afraid of the coach (interviews and results with participants).

In the current phenomenon, trainers often carry out harassment and bullying actions, such as hugging, making sexual jokes, and even seducing and promising gifts so that they can touch our private parts (interviews and results with participants). Some participants argued that:

Coaches often bully athletes, for example, by scolding and yelling and even taking physical actions such as hitting or kicking. Indeed, the coach stated that it was an action to make us more motivated in training. However, we disagree because hitting, pushing, and kicking are not methods to motivate but to bully us (interview results with participants).

We did not accept when the coach started to kiss us. They even intimidated us by threatening to remove our names from the athlete list that could follow the competition. This action was to prevent us from reporting these incidents to other people (based on the results of interviews with participants). Indeed, not all coaches engaged in harassment and bullying in sports activities; therefore, we expect coaches who engaged in harassment and bullying to change their attitudes so that athletes can carry out training activities optimally (interviews and results with participants).

Theme 2: Causative factors

The harassment and bullying carried out by some coaches happened because there were triggers or causative factors. In this regard, several participants argued that:

In our opinion, the contributing factor was that female athletes were afraid to fight and tell their stories, so these actions occurred repeatedly. The second factor was that the trainers felt that the training environment was supportive of carrying out harassment and bullying actions (based on interviews with participants).

Correctly!! The situation in the practice place was the main factor in the trainer's daring to engage in harassment and bullying. For example, we practiced in the afternoon between 15 a.m. and 18 a.m. with indoor field conditions and a lack of lighting. In addition, no one was allowed to enter the place other than coaches and athletes (results of interviews with participants). Other participants argued that:

In our opinion, the causative factor was the attitude or character of the coaches themselves, which triggered them to engage in harassment and bullying. Their flirtatious character: when they saw us wearing a tiny swimsuit, the coach immediately looked at us with lustful eyes. It made us uncomfortable and annoyed (results of interviews with participants).

Indeed, when we practice swimming, gymnastics, or volleyball, our clothes look tight, which also causes the coach to perform harassment and bullying actions on us (interviews with participants). Some participants explained that:

In our opinion, the religious observance factor also influences because, if a trainer has a high spiritual level, he will not engage in harassing and bullying behavior (results of interviews with participants).

However, in our opinion, another contributing factor is the knowledge level of the trainers; of course, a brilliant and intellectual coach will not want to engage in harassment and bullying. This is because he knows it will get him into criminal trouble or negatively impact his reputation (results of interviews with participants).

Theme 3: The impact of harassment and bullying

The harassment and bullying actions by some coaches negatively impact athletes. Some participants argued that:

Harassment and bullying actions by coaches induced us to feel shame and not have self-respect anymore. We felt anxious, stressed, and depressed (results of interviews with participants).

Harassment and bullying are vile, evil, and immoral actions. We felt emotionally down and sad when we remembered what had happened to us. We lost our mood for a while and didn't want to do sports anymore (results of interviews with participants). Some participants explained that:

The actual impact is that we are mentally or psychologically disturbed and don't feel like leaving the house (results of interviews with participants). Some female athletes have even tried to commit suicide due to harassment by our coaches (results of interviews with participants).

This study aims to uncover the behavior of harassment and bullying among female athletes in sports through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The first quantitative research findings revealed that the majority of participants or athletes experienced various types of harassment and bullying when participating in sports activities (Ubago-Jiménez et al., 2018). Basically, harassment and bullying are evil, irresponsible, and immoral acts that often occur in the context of sports for female athletes (Donnelly et al., 2016; Reel & Crouch, 2019). Previous studies reported that harassment and bullying first occurred in sports in the 1990s (Voorthuizen et al., 2022) until now (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019) and the common behaviour that was often carried out included sexual seduction, invited sex by promising a reward, so that they can kiss and touch the sensitive parts of female athletes (Ahmed et al., 2018). A data showed that the phenomenon of harassment and bullying is a serious issue that must be addressed as soon as possible (Vega-Gea et al., 2016), because it has a negative impact on the health and psychological development of female athletes for the long term and can even last for their lifetime (Nery et al., 2019; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019). In addition, the second finding in quantitative research showed that the most dominant sport and the one with the highest percentage of harassment and bullying was gymnastics; this is in line with previous studies, which reported that the highest percentage of sexual harassment occurred in group sports (Mishna et al., 2019) and the second position in individual sports (Evans et al., 2016; Nery et al., 2019). While the qualitative findings in our study showed that almost all participants or athletes often experienced harassment and bullying by their own coaches. They mentioned several factors that triggered the coach to do this: (i) a supportive training environment; (ii) a lack of courage in female athletes; (iii) tight clothing worn by athletes; and (iv) the low level of knowledge and religion possessed by the coach. This finding is in line with data from previous studies, which reported that a lack of education about sexual harassment was a factor that caused a coach to commit this action (Fasting et al., 2014). While data from a study reported that female athletes who lack knowledge and awareness about harassment were often became victims (Hardin et al., 2021), and in the end these cause health and physiological of the athletes who became victims were significantly impaired (Schoenefeld et al., 2021; Johansson, 2022).

Finally, the issue of harassment and bullying keeps repeating itself from year to year. Therefore, rules must be imposed by an organization's highest leader. The rules or policies that can be implemented are: conducting strict supervision of training sessions; giving consequences to perpetrators in the form of punishment or being fired; providing an understanding of the norms of the relationship between coaches and athletes; and promoting a culture of rejecting harassment and bullying in sports (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study draws the conclusion from the data and the preceding discussion that female athletes in Indonesia who are affiliated with many sports organizations are frequently subjected to a wide range of forms of harassment and bullying. Therefore, it is expected that the results of this study can contribute vital

information for athletes, coaches, and all sports practitioners about the frequent occurrence of harassment and bullying in the context of sports. Thus, the stakeholders can decide on a solution or establish a regulation that minimizes harassment and bullying cases among female athletes. Similar to other studies, this one still has limitations. It only involved four sports organizations located at the University of Islam 45 Bekasi as participants, so it did not include all female athletes in Indonesia. Therefore, future research is recommended to add participants from several sports organizations from other universities so that it covers a national scale. In addition, future research can conduct surveys and compare levels of harassment and bullying in different countries, for example, Indonesia and Malaysia or other countries.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that there is no conflict of interest whatsoever in this study.

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