

Preventing Sexualised Violence

A position paper of the Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences of
the University of Münster (WWU)

*Adopted by the Executive Committee of the
Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences*

The University of Münster (WWU) strongly rejects all discrimination and sexualised violence and regards such behaviour as an infringement of personal rights. The WWU is committed to maintaining a positive working atmosphere through the enforcement of procedural rules and disciplinary options in response to misconduct in the university context and aims to ensure that everyone can work together in a respectful, non-discriminatory manner (in line with the preamble of the “Agreement on Respectful and Cooperative Behaviour at Münster University”). It is the responsibility of the WWU and its institutes to prevent all forms of institutional discrimination and sexualised violence and ensure equal treatment for all parties through its internal structures, rules, and procedures. This is prerequisite for maintaining and promoting equitable, respectful, and positive interaction.

In view of recent studies that show that sexualised violence occurs in a wide range of social situations, including at universities, schools, childcare facilities and in sports, the Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences (IfS) recognises the necessity to define the terms of agreement more clearly on respectful and cooperative behaviour at the University of Münster. This includes, firstly, taking a clear stand against sexualised violence, and secondly, implementing measures to prevent sexualised violence. In doing so, the IfS wishes to promote a work and study atmosphere based on consideration, tolerance and openness and which is characterised by attentiveness, awareness and active engagement for one another. In adopting this position and implementing corresponding measures, the IfS follows the “fundamental principles” set forth in the preamble of the Olympic Charter (2014) which promotes the practice of sport “without discrimination of any kind”. In accordance with paragraph 4, sport practiced in the Olympic spirit requires “mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play”.

This position paper is intended for all who are employed at or work for the IfS. First and foremost, it applies to the behaviour at the IfS. At the same time, it is hoped that it will raise awareness of this issue in settings outside the Institute (e.g. in schools, sport clubs and other pedagogical and non-pedagogical institutions).

Destigmatisation – Sensitisation – Prevention

Current situation

Sexualised violence is not a new phenomenon. The topic has gained widespread public attention not least of all through the #metoo debate which has spread on social media since 2017, but also in response to cases of sexual abuse of children in various pedagogical institutions. It appears that many areas of life are impacted by sexualised violence, starting within the family, and continuing in educational institutions, churches, clubs and (social) media. For the victims, sexualised violence has far-reaching consequences – not only with respect to their physical, psychological and social well-being, but also with respect to their quality of life and their ability to work and participate in society. Therefore, the IfS is expressly committed to preventing sexualised violence and to doing everything possible to ensure that such acts do not occur and, if they do, that appropriate steps are taken in the interest of protecting the victims.

What is meant by sexualised violence?

Sexualised violence refers to various forms of exercising power over others through sexual actions. This does not primarily extend to the commission of sexual acts against another's will, but rather the exercise of power over another by means of sexual acts. This aligns with the definition of sexualised violence as stated for example by the Deutsche Sportjugend (dsj) in their Action Guidelines to Protect Athletes Against the Violation of Personal Boundaries, Sexual Harassment and Violence (Deutsche Sportjugend, 2020; Rulofs & Palzkill, 2018). According to these guidelines, the term sexualised violence can refer to sexual harassment without physical contact, sexual acts with physical contact, and sexual violation of personal boundaries.

- **Sexual acts without physical contact** (also referred to as “hands-off” acts): These include verbal and gestural acts of sexual harassment (e.g., threats and blackmail), as well as sending messages with sexual content against a person's will.
- **Sexual acts with physical contact** (also referred to as “hands-on” acts): These include unwanted physical touching which makes the recipient feel molested, coercion and rape.
- **Sexual violation of personal boundaries: (are present when individual boundaries are exceeded)** Such acts are generally of a sexual nature and can occur intentionally or unintentionally (e.g., making others experience shame, making obscene gestures etc.; definitions based on Rulofs & Ohlert, 2021).

Special aspects in the context of university and sports

Universities are just as affected by sexualised violence as other areas of society (see e.g., Feltes, List, Schneider & Höfker, 2012). In a university context, however, students and staff are particularly vulnerable with regard to sexualised violence, especially if they are in a relationship of dependency (bukof, 2018). Empirical studies confirm that all sexes are affected by sexualised violence at universities. Studies also show, however, that it is women who are predominantly the victims of sexualised violence (List & Feltes, 2015). As part of the EU-funded project “Gender-Based Violence, Stalking and Fear of Crime” (Feltes et al., 2012), in which data on experiences of sexualised violence in the university context were collected for the first time, the findings revealed that female students encountered sexualised violence more often than women of other ages or status. In a survey of 12,700 female students at 16 German universities, 54.7% of the respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment at some time while they were a student. In about one of every three cases, the offender was a member of the university community. More than one-fifth of all surveyed female students (22.8%) described having been stalked during their time at university. A total of 3.3% even reported having suffered sexual violence (in one out of four cases by someone in the university community). The few publicly reported accounts and interviews hardly represent the actual incidence of cases of sexualised violence against female students, as it seems that many cases go unreported. There are no studies at present which investigate to what extent persons of other status groups and genders are affected.

In their 2018 policy paper on sexualised discrimination and violence at universities (bukof, 2018), the Federal Conference of Women’s and Equal Opportunity Representatives at Universities publicly called for ongoing educational work on this topic as, it is often a taboo, or is stigmatised, trivialised or scandalised. Furthermore, it emphasised the need for measures such as regular training programmes and the establishment of initial contact offices. Especially in subjects like sport sciences, musicology, art studies and medicine, where the nature of the subjects requires specific teaching/learning formats, specific guidelines should be developed.

Illustration 1 outlines several specific characteristics of sports. Sport activities often involve trust, emotionality, physical proximity, as well as touching, observing, and commenting on physical actions. This results from the social closeness which naturally characterises sports to a significant degree and is also desired. However, this desired closeness requires participants to be especially sensitive to the possible crossing of personal boundaries. The threshold of what might be considered disrespectful, hurtful or even violent, is also a matter of individual definition. While one person might regard a specific behaviour in sports as normal, another might experience it as a violation of their personal boundaries. Even forms of address or certain rituals in sports can overstep individual personal boundaries. It is therefore important to be especially aware of others and treat everyone with respect.

The special relationship of closeness and distance

Especially in sports, participants engage in non-hierarchical relationship structures which facilitate a desired social closeness. The familiar “*du*” form of address in German, friendly interaction and sports rituals can, however, lead to a shift in the relationship of closeness and distance and be regarded as transgressing personal boundaries.

Body-centred athletic activities

Engaging in physical contact and exposing one’s body are elemental components of many sports activities. These have many facets, e.g., assistance with movements, observation of and commentary on someone’s body, partner-based exercises, tackling a player in team sports or one-on-one sports contact in wrestling or martial arts, or physical expression in dance. These forms of physical contact and expression are necessary and desired, but they can also create an environment that favours sexualised violence. The boundary separating permitted and desired touching, and physical expression and conduct that transgress personal boundaries or are undesired are different from one person to the next.

Emotional content and closeness

Personal interaction in team sports or sports-related teams can sometimes elicit impulsive emotions, for example, the joy of a shared victory or the elation that comes with a netted goal, but also in consolation after suffering defeat. Emotions in sports are desired and essential, but they can also increase the risk of behaviour that transgresses personal boundaries.

Specific sportswear

Sportswear should be functional. In some types of sports, specific clothing, or lack thereof (e.g., scant and tight-fitting outfits for swimming, gymnastics, equestrian vaulting etc.) can result in already sexualising the appearance of young people (see Deutsche Sportjugend, 2020).

Language and commentary (language models in the media)

In competitive games and sports matches, as well as in training situations, language is often abbreviated, encoded or carelessly used when under stress. Furthermore, language can solidify gender stereotypes (e.g. goals made by girls count double) for reasons that are supposedly pedagogical or method-related. Language in sports can therefore have a discriminatory effect or violate personal boundaries. The same applies to pedagogical or method-related advice that is supposedly well-intended.

Spatial and temporal circumstances (e.g., excursions)

Unobserved situations in the gym, during individual coaching and briefings, but also situations in changing or shower rooms before and after courses, during office hours, or gatherings like excursions, in particular outside of regular hours, can increase the risk of violations of personal boundaries.

III. 1. Factors which increase the risk for violations of personal boundaries in sports.

Preventing sexualised violence at the IfS

The IfS believes it is necessary to destigmatise and detaboo the issue of sexualised violence, to take a clear stand against it, and to emphasise the need for attentive and respectful interaction with one another. Furthermore, additional measures are to be put in place to prevent sexualised violence at the IfS in the best way possible. In view of its task to prepare students for occupations in the field of sports (including educating future sport teachers, employees of sport clubs and associations, and staff at research institutes for sport sciences), the IfS also wishes to sensitise others to the issue of sexualised violence beyond the institute. The prevention measures at the IfS (see Ill. 2) are as follows:

1) The Executive Committee of the IfS and representatives of all status groups shall adopt a clear position against sexualised violence.

In signing their names to this position paper, the members of the Executive Committee of the IfS and the representatives of all status groups at the IfS indicate their clear position against sexualised violence and their intention to cultivate interpersonal relationships that are characterised by attentiveness, vigilant observation, and active intervention for one another.

This includes:

- (1) advocating for respectful and considerate interaction with one another,
- (2) respecting personal boundaries and individual perceptions of closeness and distance,
- (3) taking a stand against every form of sexualised violence,
- (4) refraining from making the issue of sexualised violence taboo, and instead discussing it in appropriate settings.

2) Prevention measures in teaching

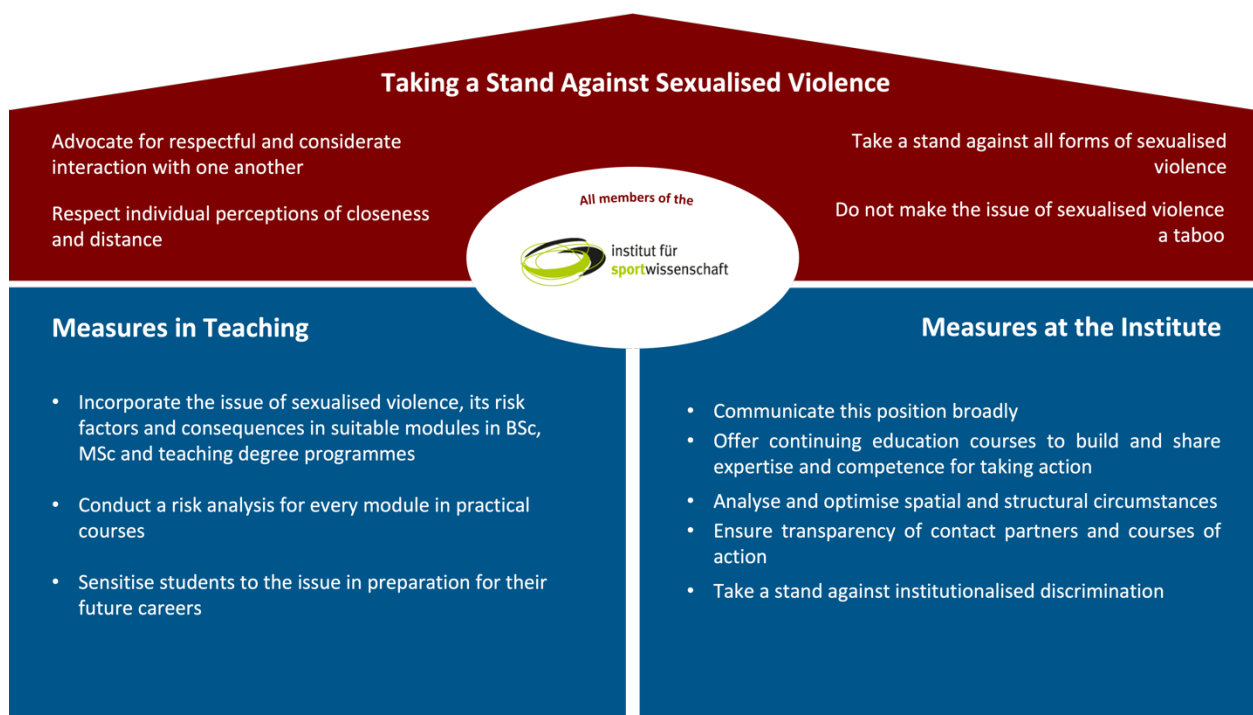
In theoretical and practical-methodical courses in degree programmes in sports and exercise sciences:

- (1) attention shall be drawn to the issue of sexualised violence, as well as to the corresponding risk factors and consequences of sexualised violence. This is to be achieved by incorporating the issue in suitable modules of the BA and MA teaching degree programmes, as well as the BSc and MSc degree programmes.
- (2) students are to be sensitised to the topic in the subject-specific didactic modules in preparation for their future career.
- (3) a risk analysis is to be conducted and discussed in every module in practical courses.

3) Further prevention measures at the Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences

In order to carry out successful prevention measures, it is additionally important that the Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences:

- (1) encourage those who work at and for the Institute not to ignore incidents of sexualised violence and ensure that condemnation of such cases is clear and unequivocal,
- (2) communicate this position broadly and thus draw attention to the issue,
- (3) initiate and promote continuing education measures which serve to build expertise and competence for taking appropriate actions,
- (4) analyse and optimise the spatial and institutional circumstances,
- (5) ensure transparency by clearly indicating contact partners and courses of action on the IfS homepage,
- (6) take a stand against institutionalised discrimination and adjust rules, habits, and processes in such a way that prevents discrimination and sexualised violence from occurring.



III. 2. Prevention measures against sexualised violence at the Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences (elaborated in detail in the text).

Sources

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