

# With another case of abuse in elite sports, why are we still waiting to protect NZ's sportswomen from harm?

July 7 2023, by Holly Thorpe and Kirsty Forsdike

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The ten-year coaching ban handed down this week by Athletics New Zealand to national pole vault coach Jeremy McColl is merely the latest in a long line of investigations to reveal the failure of sports organizations to protect sportswomen.

The [independent investigation](#) into McColl found "serious misconduct" over a "number of years" with women athletes under his supervision. This included harassment, "inappropriate sexual references" (including through social media and texting) and poor response to injuries.

The case is both unique and sadly familiar. At least 12 New Zealand sports bodies have come under scrutiny in recent times for cultures where sportswomen experienced abuse. These include [Cycling New Zealand](#), [Rugby New Zealand](#), [Gymnastics New Zealand](#), [Canoe Racing New Zealand](#), [NZ Football](#) and [Hockey New Zealand](#).

This surely suggests there has been—and likely still is—systemic gendered abuse across New Zealand's sport system. Urgent action is clearly needed.

## **High rates of abuse**

[Maltreatment](#) and [interpersonal violence](#)—including neglect and physical, psychological and [sexual violence](#)—are common at all levels of sport for women, men and [children](#).

[One study](#) of 1,665 [elite athletes](#) in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium found extremely [high rates](#) of reported [physical violence](#) (25%), sexual violence (31%) and psychological or emotional violence (72%).

Sportswomen were found to experience abuse more than men, particularly sexual violence. An [Australian study](#) found 82% of 886 people surveyed had experienced some form of [interpersonal violence](#) in

sport as a child. Rates were higher among girls and gender-diverse individuals.

Over the past three decades, researchers have examined various forms of [gender-based](#) and [sexual violence in sport](#), usually perpetrated by [male coaches](#), but [also by others](#) in the wider "support" teams.

The [coach-athlete relationship](#) inevitably involves an uneven balance of power. Abuse of that imbalance leads to significant harm and [negative health impacts](#), with women athletes often [reluctant to report the abuse](#). Some simply [withdraw from sport](#) altogether.

## A global problem

These abusive relationships tend to [exist within](#) hierarchical, patriarchal and "win at all costs" sporting cultures. Organizational structures and systems often work to [enable harmful practices](#).

But [research shows](#) gender-based violence is also increasingly happening online. And it is not only women athletes who experience it, but also [women in other roles](#), such as officials, administrators and volunteers.

None of this is specific to New Zealand. Investigations have revealed gender-based violence across a [range of sports internationally](#), where systems consistently fail to protect and support women.

Furthermore, it remains a [significant blind spot](#) for many sports organizations and professionals. Legal liability and protecting the sport rather than the athlete become priorities. Change can be sluggish, often [lacking transparency and accountability](#).

## Slow progress

The better news is that some governments and international sports organizations are developing safeguarding policies, procedures and toolkits.

An EU-led initiative has produced a [good practice guide](#) for sports bodies wanting to support athletes affected by sexual violence. And earlier this week, UNESCO published a [handbook](#) offering practical ways to address [violence](#) against women and girls in sport.

The International Olympic Committee also offers a "[toolkit](#)" to help national Olympic committees and international sports federations develop better policies and procedures. Various [other organizations](#) are working towards the same goals.

Despite such initiatives, many sports organizations still [struggle to respond appropriately](#). In particular, it is vital that [athletes themselves are involved](#) in developing safeguarding policies.

[Researchers](#) and health professionals are increasingly calling for initiatives that center the athlete and integrate holistic knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices. We also cannot ignore the ways race, ethnicity, disability, gender identities and sexuality may [amplify](#) the risks and harms of abuse in sport.

## **Change has to be urgent**

Meaningful change will require [education](#) for all those working in sport, athlete-centered policy and practice, and safe reporting pathways. Redress has to prioritize the needs of the abused.

Because women can be so reluctant to report abuse in the first place, it has been suggested a "[carrot not stick](#)" approach might work best. Teams and organizations that can show evidence of a positive, safe and healthy

culture might be rewarded in future funding cycles, for example.

To that end, High Performance Sport New Zealand has launched a [NZ\\$273 million strategy](#) that includes prioritizing athlete well-being. Yet it still doesn't address the gender dynamics at play here.

Education programs aimed at coaches and support staff working with women should be mandatory. Sportswomen must be able to report any concerns without fear for their careers or well-being. And anyone who observes questionable behavior must have appropriate channels to report their concerns.

Minister of Sport Grant Robertson announced an independent [Sport Integrity Working Group](#) last year. So far, though, we've seen no actions or stated commitment to safeguarding women.

Everyone deserves access to a safe sporting environment, and safeguarding women in sport is an urgent issue. We can't sit back and wait for the next headline about another national sports organization or another male coach under investigation. The time for change is now.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: With another case of abuse in elite sports, why are we still waiting to protect NZ's sportswomen from harm? (2023, July 7) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-case-abuse-elite-sports-nz.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.