**Online Abuse and Women in Sport: Foul, Own Goal, or Touchdown?**

Dr Kim Barker (The Open University, UK)

kim.barker@open.ac.uk

Dr Olga Jurasz (The Open University, UK)

olga.jurasz@open.ac.uk

Online violence against women (OVAW) (and online gender-based abuse more broadly) have been acknowledged at an international level as an obstacle to gender equality as well as women’s freedom of expression, positioning these phenomena as a concern from a human rights perspective. In particular, the scale, seriousness and the impact of social media abuse has raised the question about the appropriate legal protections for individuals from such forms of abuse and its harms. That has led to proposals for law reform in several countries, including the UK, where Draft Online Safety Bill was proposed in 2021 aiming to position to position the UK as a world leader in ensuring safe Internet use for all. These developments coincided with a number of high-profile public figures – including politicians, journalists and footballers – speaking out about the harrowing impact of social media abuse received by them, for simply doing their jobs.

The world of sport has not been immune to the devasting impact of social media abuse, especially online hate, leading to social media boycott within the British sport community in May 2021 as a protest against online hostility and discrimination. That said, little action has been taken to address gender-based abuse and online misogyny directed at women in sport. Moreover, the intersectional nature of such abuse highlighted by the case of British footballer, Rinsola Babajide, is not adequately addressed nor remedied beyond taking down the abusive content by the platforms. Left unchecked and unaccounted for, instances of such online abuse reinforce the already existing structures and gender stereotypes which fuel gender-based hostility and violence against women. What is more, by being unchallenged and allowed to play out in a very public context of professional sports, these behaviours are normalised, contributing to the continuum of violence against women, but doing so on a global and high-profile stage.

While there have been campaigns – not without controversy – that include taking the knee, there are few campaigns of any significant from the sporting world that address OVAW, nor online abuse. Limited protections exist for human rights, but little added value has been added by sporting bodies, sporting associations, nor unions. This paper questions the role of sport in supporting the #16days of activism, while also assessing the broader response to problems posed by online abuse, online harassment, and its gendered aspects. Do human rights protections go far enough? Is this an issue for sporting bodies, or is it an ‘athlete-only’ problem?

**Bios**

***Dr Kim Barker*** is a Senior Lecturer in Law at the Open University (UK). Dr Barker’s research focuses on internet and intellectual property law. Her research explores the regulation and control of online multi-user platforms including online environments (particularly online games and social media sites); and the intersection between user responsibility, platform provider responsibility and legal regulations. Her research (with Dr Olga Jurasz) explores the issues of online misogyny, including online violence against women, and assess the legal responses to such societal problems.

***Dr Olga Jurasz*** is a Senior Lecturer in Law at the Open University (UK). Dr Jurasz’s research focuses on international law, human rights and legal responses to violence against women (including online violence), specialising in feminist perspectives on law in these areas. Her research (with Dr Kim Barker) also explores a number of aspects of online, text-based abuse, including consideration of online misogyny and online violence against women as a hate crime, as well as legal regulation of online abuse.

**Writing plan**

* for Lausanne presentation: short draft 5K + refs
* focus on UK examples – easier law-wise to link, but other examples OK to illustrate the problem (but keep it to Europe on sport)
1. Introduction
	* #MeToo and sport? [check for examples?]
	* Everyday sexism in sport?
	* Set parameters of discussion: trans athletes and whether they should be allowed to compete not the focus of this chapter --> where they do compete in women’s sport, we consider abuse directed at them
2. What is the problem
	* examples to illustrate
	* show difference women’s vs men’s sport --> tie in visibility of women in sports and generally
	* OVAW
3. Responses to the problem
	* kick it out
	* sport regulation / bodies
	* sports people – bans
	* Scotland – VAW position --> comment
4. Current legal/ regulatory status
	* deficiencies of OSB and new harm provisions – esp. from the gender perspective
	* rugby / cricket / football --> see individual codes/ regs for responses to online abuse
5. Conclusion
	* behavioural culture – male dominated (build a narrative around it)