

Abstract

Theorising gender and violence in women's artistic gymnastics: A critical interpretative synthesis

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Analyses of women's artistic gymnastics (WAG) have highlighted that gymnasts are vulnerable to and suffer physical, psychological, and sexual violence. The current waves of gymnast disclosures confirm the sport's safeguarding failures and the urgent need for effective prevention.

This presentation focuses on three critical concerns relating to existing WAG literature: Why has half a century of research on WAG culminated in little effective change in the field? Why has gender, despite the over-representation of research on WAG, not men's gymnastics, received little attention in relation to violence? What safeguarding knowledge could we gain if violence is recognised as gendered?

Using critical interpretative synthesis, we reviewed 41 empirical and conceptual WAG research articles, published between 1997 and 2020, on how gender and violence were assumed and theorised. Our findings show that (1) explanations of violence are only rarely explicitly hinged upon gender, making it obsolete; (2) where gender was considered, it was mostly at the level of the coaches and gymnasts and not socio-cultural, institutional, and material structures; (3) where the social construction of gender was made explicit, analysis of its effects on violence was limited. What is particularly worrying is the salience of violence in many of the articles, suggesting a normalisation of violence.

Our conclusion is that violence in WAG necessitates a conceptualisation that explains the comprehensive web of violence facilitators. Safeguarding research must go beyond targeting the level of the individual and focus on transforming gendered ideals, structures, systems, and materials.