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EMMA 'READY' HAMILTON
Breaker

Protection of Olympic breakers from sexual harassment and assault

ABSTRACT

In this article, Emma 'Ready' Hamilton explores the critical issue of sexual harassment and abuse within the realm of Olympic sports, with a particular focus on the emerging discipline of breaking. Drawing on the context of the upcoming debut of breaking at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, Hamilton delves into the policies and procedures necessary to address these pervasive issues and draws lessons from other Olympic categories.

KEYWORDS

breaking
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bgirl
bboy

In this short piece I discuss the issues of sexual abuse and harassment in Olympic sports, the policies and procedures required to combat these issues and what lessons breaking can learn from other Olympic categories. Breaking has long been a male-dominated art-form with the contributions and experience of women routinely erased (Arahamian 2022; Gunn 2021). The gendered politics of breaking are but one major challenge that leads to contentious handlings of sexual harassment and abuse within the scene. With breaking set to debut at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games consideration needs to be given to how this critical area of safeguarding athletes will be managed. This piece offers an important framework for dancers and governing bodies to consider how they might manage issues around inclusivity, safety and reporting, as breaking enters into the 'elite sport' arena.

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Before I continue, it's first important to understand how sexual harassment and abuse is defined and understood. The United Nations (UN) defines sexual abuse as '[a]ctual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions', and sexual harassment as, 'any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment' (United Nations 2017: 5, 11). Further, Roberts et al. state that abuse is: 'a pervasive and protracted issue affecting athletes of all types, though children, elite athletes and those from stigmatised groups (e.g. women, LGBTQ, and athletes with disabilities) are more vulnerable' (2020: 24).

A fundamental principle of Olympism is that participation in sport is a human right which applies 'without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (IOC 2021: 8). However, when sexual abuse and harassment occur, both Olympic principles and human rights are debased as it 'violates the notion of fair play and the equal treatment of athletes inherent in Olympism and the Olympic Movement' (Burke 2021: 61).

Issues of sexual harassment are regrettably not a new phenomenon in the elite sporting domain. The Olympics is no exception and has become increasingly associated with the risk of abuse and misconduct. Perpetrators have often focused on 'aspiring Olympic athletes as prime targets of sexual harassment and abuse' (Burke 2021: 72). Burke explains that women are particularly vulnerable in the Olympics given that it is a male dominated industry:

Having a grossly disproportionate number of men in power positions within the Olympic Movement creates a two-fold problem for female athletes. First, a female athlete is at risk from predatory males in positions of authority over them. Second, an athlete's allegation against a male perpetrator is likely to be heard by a male official, who is often unsympathetic to a sexual harassment and abuse claim from a female.

(2021: 73)

Gaedicke et al. (2021) also discuss how heteronormative constructs in the sporting world can render same-sex relationships invisible. This results in difficulties identifying sexual assault and harassment in athletes who experience same-sex abuse, rendering it difficult for athletes to report incidents. As breaking is similarly a male-dominated activity, concerns around misconduct are paramount. With breaking now making its way into this already problematic structure concerns about sexual abuse as it pertains to gender minorities, whose voices are often peripherised, should be at the forefront of policy regarding safeguarding athletes. This is particularly complex given hip hop has also seen a broad range of victim-survivors come forward about a number of historical abuses recently. Fundamentally, this tension between silence and justice comes down to relations of power.

Power imbalances affect all athletes and exist when one person has control over resources that another person depends on. Coaches are therefore considered a 'legitimate authority' based usually on 'expertise and previous successes', and most notably their 'ability to control access to the

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athletes' (Stirling and Kerr cited in Gaedicke et al. 2021: 8). This fosters an environment where coaches can 'use intimidating, coercive, and manipulative tactics to exert control with fewer consequences for the instigator and less resistance from the target' (Roberts et al. 2020: 11). Outside of breaking's formalization there have been allegations of abuse that similarly have seen power exploited in this way. Hip hop culture more broadly has seen a culture of silence become normalized around topics like sexual abuse. In many ways this silence can enable authority figures to be seen as untouchable, to the point where victim-survivors do not come forward or are not believed.

Pathways for this power relation to emerge are also connected to how athletes are also expected to conform to the dominant norms of the elite performance environment. Conforming to the dominant norm means success in performance is often prioritized over the well-being and safety of athletes. This can create an environment where sexual harassment and abuse can thrive. Former Olympic gymnast, Dominique Moceanu explains:

Wanting that Olympic dream, wanting to be the best in the world. You go and you train so hard, day in and day out. No matter how bad people are treating you, you go back for more. You know? You go back for more because you want that dream. It's burning inside of you.

(Carr 2019)

This prioritization of career ambition over personal well-being is troubling given that there is an expectation at higher levels of athleticism that more intense performance value is produced. This not only puts athletes in positions where they are expected to sustain this performance at any cost but also may be pressured by coaches – exploiting athlete vulnerabilities in this process. High performance values are described as enduring pain, training while injured and making sacrifices as 'athletes learn to accept discomfort, which in the most extreme case included sexually abusive behaviour by a coach' (Owton and Sparks cited in Roberts et al. 2020: 21).

Given that coaches are considered experts and occupy a position of authority sexual abuse often involves exploiting their power in a process of grooming. One recurring pattern of this type of behaviour in the elite sporting world appears when the relationships established between coaches and athletes begin to blur the professional–personal distinction. In this way, coaches can inappropriately establish friendships with their athletes, which impedes the athletes' recognition of when coaches overstep their boundaries. This can begin in a number of ways usually including, 'compliments and presents from coaches, phone calls, invitations to coaches' homes, isolation of athletes, and having secrets with coaches' (Gaedicke et al. 2021: 2). Spending time together outside of training creates opportunities for these boundaries to slowly be eroded by the person in power. This is particularly concerning in breaking given the large amount of time athletes spend with their coaches outside of these formal settings – where the lines between leisure and training for elite sport may become blurred given this contact in breaking's pre-existing community networks.

One prominent example of abuse within the elite sporting world that was only recently discovered was perpetuated by Larry Nassar, a convicted sex offender and former USA Gymnastics doctor. Nassar was able to sexually abuse US Olympic gymnasts and: 'acted within an ecosystem that facilitated

his abuse. He was enabled by individuals and institutions that failed to recognise textbook grooming behaviours and dismissed calls for help from athletes who were being abused by him' (McPhee and Dowden 2018: 2).

In Nassar's case his grooming was made possible by the failure of the institutions that are supposed to support athletes. Nassar's abuse extended outward from the victim to create a web of control that permeated through their communities. Gaedicke et al. (2021: 10) highlight how abusers typically expand their grooming in elite sport cases to 'athletes' parents, other coaches and team members', thereby strengthening their 'status within the community'. This helps abusers to 'build a shield of immunity against accusations' (Gaedicke et al. 2021: 10).

This is particularly worrying as breaking attracts an increasing amount of highly talented dancers under the age of 18 excelling in adult competitions and who already are participating at an Olympic level – take for example at the Buenos Aires Youth Olympic Games in 2018.

As sport organizations are now being held accountable and are expected to play a role in developing an environment that provides a duty of care for athletes, 'there is [still] a danger that such duties of care are treated as symbolic requirements that are overshadowed by performance expectations' (Kavanagh et al. 2020: 2). Policies need to become principles of behaviour and a living part of the culture in order to be effective. Some researchers have already called for better systematic change. Burke for example argued that: 'It is paramount to develop a system that provides supreme authority for processing sexual harassment and abuse violations in the Olympic Movement and one that will force accountability on organizations and not simply on individuals within organizations' (2021: 71).

This same point could be applied to the WDSF, as it has some authority over breaking's future in the Olympics and has a duty of care over its athletes. The WDSF Code of Ethics does mention sexual harassment under its fundamental ethical principle of Respectfulness noting that any: 'Physical, mental, emotional, professional, sexual, and all other forms of harassment or injury of or by any person in DanceSport, are prohibited' (WDSF 2017: 3).

The WDSF however could develop specific policies, resources and procedures to create a culture that openly discusses and tackles sexual abuse and harassment. In order to be effective, this information must be relayed to all stakeholders in the sport through education and training, and the principles of behaviour set out within them must become part of the culture they foster. Any ambiguity in policies or the enforcement of such policies with action can lead to an environment where abuse is again made invisible – further perpetuating a culture of silence.

In place of silence, a culture of intolerance to abuse needs to be fostered and everyone must feel free to talk about the issues in order to protect Olympic breakers from sexual abuse and harassment to avoid this. Johansson argued that:

A fundamental barrier is the culture of silence, which hampers the development of protective measures and may enable and camouflage sexual abuse. Sexual abuse, more so than any other matter according to the results, is perceived to be so sensitive that it sparks a fundamental conflict between breaking and maintaining the culture of silence through socialisation in sport.

(2022: 10)

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When the #MeToo social media campaign went viral in 2017, it brought public attention to victims' accounts of sexual harassment and abuse. The #MeToo movement helped prompt a full investigation into Nassar (Burke 2021: 76) and broke the culture of silence surrounding the taboo topic. #MeToo was also embraced by the hip hop dance community in 2020, with female victims taking to social media to disclose allegations of sexual abuse and harassment by men with power in the scene.

For the common good of the breaking community, the culture of silence around sexual abuse and harassment needs to continue to be broken.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

During her 26 years of breaking, Emma 'Ready' Hamilton has established an international reputation as an inspirational, empathetic motivator who is both approachable and accessible. Her students describe her as a 'treasure trove of information' and she is known for her clear, helpful and insightful approach to sharing knowledge. Emma's leadership style has been described as inspirational and elevating. She is renowned for her creativity and has been dubbed '10,000 Moves Master'. Her recent choreographic work looks at the issue of coercive control and has been described as 'utterly awfully wonderful' and 'hauntingly beautiful'.

E-mail: emma@emmaready.one

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