Published on Sports Management Resources

# A Feminist Analysis of the Pen...

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The exposure of sexual violence and scandal at Penn State University has pushed many university officials to review their sexual harassment prevention policies. Historically, it was the Second Wave feminist movements of the 1970s that raised awareness about sexual harassment in the workplace and pushed for legislation and legal recourse. Feminist theory also helps explain some of the perplexing events at Penn State University.

I keynoted a national gender conference at Lewis & Clark University in Portland, Oregon about a decade ago. Building on the works of feminists like Susan Brownmiller , I laid out a feminist analysis of sexual violence in patriarchal societies, specifically the United States. Feminists had coined the term “sexual harassment” during the early 1970’s, and they argued that sexual violence maintained men’s dominant status over women. They also observed how so much of men's sexual violence is routinely ignored, covered up, or explained as the behavior of perverted individuals rather than an institutional process that propped up the gender hierarchy at large.

In my talk I cited rape and sexual assault statistics and their concomitant cover-ups by the male elites

and leaders in four patriarchal social hierarchies, including the U.S. Air Force Academy, the Catholic Church, jock-fraternities in some universities, and the United States prison system. I noted that these examples illustrate various forms of patriarchal sexual violence--between men and women, men and boys, and men-on-men in the prison setting. One common pattern across these hierarchies was that, when evidence came to the surface that men were sexually abusing women, boys, or one another, there was an attempt to smooth over, deny, or rationalize the events by persons in the upper echelons of power and authority. In short, denial functions in ways that protect the institutional hierarchy, particularly those who benefit the most from the status quo. The distribution of privilege within the existing hierarchy is thus preserved.

Certainly all the evidence is not on the table in relation to the Penn State University incidents. The "story" continues to emerge. Complicity takes many forms but individuals, either knowingly or unknowingly, may have gotten caught up by powerful forces that tend to preserve the hierarchical status quo. From popes to wardens, and generals to athletic administrators, men opt for silence in order to fall into rank.

Fostered by women's movements for gender equality since the 1970's, sexual harassment prevention policies can be seen as a tool to combat sexual violence in sport settings. The "Sample Policy: Ethical and Professional Conduct of Athletic Department Employees" written by Sports Management Resource's Donna Lopiano and Connee Zotos is a sound example of a viable prevention policy. To their credit, many NCAA athletic departments are educating staffs and student-athletes on sexual harassment prevention. The Women's Sports Foundation, among others, has formulated and disseminated sexual harassment prevention policies and educational materials for nearly two decades. Scholars like Celia Brackenridge (UK), Kari Fasting (Norway), and Carole Oglesby (U.S.) have done research and formulated concomitant educational and preventive strategies. The Mentors for Violence Prevention program at Northeastern University and Jackson Katz's educational efforts to fight sexual violence in both athletic and military settings are "good news" stories that can get lost in the midst of institutional scandal. These policy and educational efforts have grown steadily since the mid-1990's, along with girls' and women's participation in sports. So we should not use too broad a "brush" in painting and analyzing the incident at Penn State, but rather, weigh the facts as they come in, endeavor to understand what really occurred there and, most importantly, learn from their mistakes in order to better protect both sexes from sexual harassment.

Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
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