

8. Sexual Abuse in Sport: Hegemonic Masculinity and Institutional Failures

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The #MeToo movement has brought unprecedented attention to sexual victimization in a variety of institutions, including the institutions discussed throughout this book. Many of the most highly publicized cases have been in youth sports, an area that has long been considered a safe space for the healthy development of children. While many aspects of abuse are common across institutions, this chapter focuses on features of the sports environment that support abuse. Specifically, we look at the role of hegemonic masculinity and an accommodating organizational culture. The case studies of Penn State and Michigan State University provide vivid illustrations of how these factors protected and abetted both Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar in their abuse of children and adolescents.

Explanations for sexual assault in institutions often rely on the existence of a “bad apple.” This is a convenient narrative for institutions to adopt; by blaming a corrupt “apple,” the institution itself remains unblemished (Waterhouse-Watson, 2013). Cynthia Enloe (2004), however, has called on us to question this explanation. Her analysis of the U.S. military personnel’s abusive treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib showed how the problem went much deeper than a few bad apples. In fact, Enloe found the whole barrel to be rotten, arguing that the military’s organizational culture supported the abusive actions toward Iraqi prisoners. Her work revealed that institutional sex scandals are not as much about individuals with psychological problems as they are due to “institutional pathologies” and evidence of “institutional decay” (Gamson, 2001, p. 185). Our goal in this chapter is to take this sociological understanding and apply it to sexual abuse in sports.

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Institutional Sexual Abuse in the #MeToo Era

The #MeToo movement brought unprecedented attention to sexual victimization throughout institutions. The most highly publicized cases have been in youth sports—an area that has long been considered a safe space for the healthy development of children. While certain aspects of abuse are common across institutions, this chapter focuses on features of the sports environment that support abuse. Specifically, we look at the role of hegemonic masculinity and an accommodating organizational culture. The case studies of Penn State and Michigan State University provide vivid illustrations of how these factors protected and abetted both Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar in their abuse of children and adolescents.