

**VIOLENCE IN HOCKEY:
WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVES**



January 2010

For information, please contact:

Dr. Graham Pollett, MD, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health
Middlesex-London Health Unit
50 King St.
London, Ontario N6A 5L7
phone: 519-663-5317, ext. 2444
fax: 519-663-9581
e-mail: graham.pollett@mlhu.on.ca

© Copyright 2010
Middlesex-London Health Unit
50 King Street
London, Ontario
N6A 5L7

Cite reference as: Middlesex-London Health Unit (2009). Violence in Hockey – Women’s Perspectives, London, Ontario: Author.

Author:
Stacy Miller, Program Evaluator, Research, Education, Evaluation & Development Services

All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Executive Summary	1
Background	4
Methodology	5
Recruitment.....	5
Participants	5
Data Collection and Analysis	5
Findings	6
Sources of Violence in Hockey.....	6
Key Points	6
Society	6
Individual – Player.....	6
Parents and Spectators	6
Coaching.....	6
Women’s Role.....	7
Effect of Violence in Hockey	8
Key Points	8
Society	8
Players – Emotional, Physical, Psychological Effects.....	8
Participation in the sport.....	9
Parents’ Behaviours	9
How Violence in Hockey Should be Addressed.....	10
Key Points	10
Parents	10
Involvement from Hockey Associations	10
Society – Culture.....	11
Coaching.....	11
Women’s Role.....	11
Grassroots Changes	12
Public Awareness and Education.....	12
Players	12
How do we change the sport?	12
Discussion	13
Limitations	14
Next Steps and Action Statements	15
References	16

Acknowledgements

- Dr. Graham Pollett, Medical Officer of Health, for his leadership in addressing the issue of violence against women through the violence in hockey initiative.
- Ruth Armstrong, President, VISION Management Services for facilitating the two sessions.
- A sincere ‘Thank You’ to the women that participated in the two sessions.
- Louise Fagan, Consultant, Violence in Hockey, for her support in organizing the Women’s Perspectives sessions.
- Nancy Forbes, Administrative Assistant to the Director, REED Services, for her assistance in formatting the report.
- Virginia McFarland, Data Analyst, REED Services, for her review of the draft report.
- Charlene Beynon, Director of Research, Education, Evaluation & Development (REED) Services, her assistance with this report.

Executive Summary

Purpose of this Report

Violence in society—particularly violence against women and children—is a key issue in which the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) has been actively involved. There is research showing that violence in sports could potentially “spillover” and lead to violence in other areas of society (Bloom & Smith, 1996).

As a result of the recommendations presented in the Proceedings from the Violence in Hockey Symposium held on February 24th, 2009 in London Ontario, two sessions were held by MLHU to hear women’s thoughts and perspectives related to the issue of violence in hockey. This report profiles the common themes and thoughts that were shared during the sessions.

Methodology

Women were recruited by a variety of means, including invitations sent to women who attended the Violence in Hockey Symposium, to women’s organizations in the community, to local and provincial hockey associations, and to women from the community who had expressed interest in this issue.

A total of twenty-four women, including primarily mothers with children who play hockey and women who had an interest in the topic both professionally and personally, participated. There were also women who were hockey players, hockey coaches, representatives from local and provincial hockey associations, and women from local women’s abuse and women’s support centres.

The two sessions were led by an external facilitator and were each approximately two hours in length. Participants were provided with an information letter and were asked to sign a consent form that indicated their willingness to participate and to have the discussion audio recorded. Participants were also asked to include contact information if they were willing to be contacted in the future if further input was needed. At the conclusion of the sessions, women were given a gift card to a drug store chain as a token of appreciation.

The discussion was open-ended in nature and focused on three key areas: *sources of violence in hockey*, *effects of violence in hockey*, and *how the issue of violence in hockey should be addressed*.

After sessions, the facilitator, an evaluator, and the producer of the hockey symposium held a debriefing session to share thoughts and review any common themes that occurred throughout the session. Data analysis was conducted by the evaluator who reviewed the audio recordings from the two sessions. An inductive analysis approach was used to analyze and summarize the findings, where common themes and comments were identified related to the three key areas (Patton, 1987).

Findings

Sources of Violence in Hockey

The women expressed that the sources of violence in hockey are multifaceted. Many women felt that society has played a large role in glorifying and promoting violence through music, movies, television, sports, and the media. Aggressive plays and injury related hits are replayed time and time again on the highlight reels and are viewed as entertainment. The women also commented that violence in society and sports stems from and leads to violence in many other areas, such as relationships, in schools, and on the streets.

The women described how hockey players are constantly striving to perform at a higher skill level, where they are emulating the behaviours of professional players. The women shared their experiences as mothers where their own children feel intense amounts of pressure to prove themselves and meet the expectations that are set by parents, coaches, spectators, and their own personal expectations. If the goal of a young player is to play in the National Hockey League (NHL) and there is fighting and violence in that league, then young players will emulate that behaviour to reach their goal.

Some women noted that when parents and spectators cheer when fights break out, it shows children that aggressive behaviour is acceptable. Parents and spectators are role models and the language they use and actions they make can send the wrong messages to children.

Most women agreed that coaches play a large role in teaching skills to hockey players. The women shared how they felt that their children will listen to the coach more than they will listen to them when it comes to advice related to hockey. However, they did share the feeling that some coaches and even other parents were more interested in competition and a desire to win which sometimes can lead to hitting and even fighting on the ice. This often causes some conflict in the messages that parents, especially mothers are giving their children at home and the messages they are receiving in hockey.

A few women expressed that their inability to share their thoughts and feelings about the sport has also contributed to the tolerance and acceptance of the culture of violence in hockey.

Effects of Violence in Hockey

At the sessions the women discussed how the effects of violence in hockey are widespread. A few women expressed that, as a society, we have put value in the characteristics that describe a violent game as opposed to the qualities of a good, sportsmanlike game.

Some of the women had witnessed first hand the physical effects of violence in hockey related to malicious hits and aggressive behaviours. They also commented on the lasting psychological effects that the players may experience related to abuse from coaches, parents, and spectators.

As players compete at higher levels of hockey, aggressive tactics such as body checking are introduced. While this is a widely accepted part of the game, some players want to compete at higher levels and do not want the violent aspects of the game to be included. Some of the women shared how, as parents, they feel the same way and do not want their children to compete at more competitive levels because the game changes.

The women expressed how parents’ behaviours also have an effect on their children. A few women shared how they have known coaching staff that would choose players taking into consideration the parents’ behaviours as well as the child’s ability. Many of the women who participated had also witnessed inappropriate behaviours from other parents, and some had even discussed these issues with that particular parent. Parents also had their share of struggles when conflicts arose with a coach. Several women felt that if they shared their thoughts with the coach their child would suffer the consequences of their actions.

How Violence in Hockey Should Be Addressed

The women who participated in the two sessions also provided input as to how violence in hockey should be addressed. Several women thought that they had to take responsibility as parents and mothers and teach their children how to behave appropriately. Parents also need to set an example for their children with respect to how they conduct themselves at hockey games and other sporting events.

The women also felt that the hockey associations need to place more emphasis on disciplinary actions, including coach suspensions for excessive penalties within their team, stricter penalties, and consistency among leagues. Women’s hockey can play a large role because they have already created a framework for their organization that focuses on skill, ethics, finesse and sportsmanship.

Violence in hockey should also be addressed in society. Currently, there is a culture that supports violence in hockey. With appropriate education and public awareness campaigns, the women felt that a new culture can be created—one that supports fair play in the game of hockey.

Coaching was also an area that the women felt could have an effect on violence prevention strategies in hockey. Many women felt that the coaches should be provided with adequate training in order to ensure that young players learn the skills of the game and are provided with appropriate messages.

The women also felt that they could become more involved in a number of ways. Sharing their opinions and expressing how they feel related to the issue of violence in hockey was suggested. Furthermore, women need to be given more credibility and respect in hockey.

Changes need to happen at all levels of the sport, including the NHL. Young players model their behaviours after the behaviours of those in the professional leagues. A few women felt that as long as violence was tolerated at the professional level, it would be very difficult to eliminate it from other areas of the game.

Next Steps & Action Statements

Overall, there was a sense that the women felt further action was required. The following list was developed based on women’s comments related to specific activities that could be undertaken by women.

Encourage a working group to address the issue of violence in hockey in our community.

- Obtain support from MLHU to move this initiative forward (e.g., providing meeting space).
- Develop grassroots strategies to address violence in hockey.
- Engage key stakeholders on the issue of violence in hockey.
- Establish partnerships with Ontario hockey associations.
- Collect evidence that supports the need for change.
- Develop specific and achievable strategies to engage the Middlesex-London community, such as:
 - Draft a letter outlining the concerns and reasons for change related to violence in hockey. This letter would be a universal appeal and present a united voice from the women involved and would profile the issue of violence in hockey.
 - Talk about the issues in their own social network to start the momentum.
 - Present information and concerns to the various hockey leagues in the Middlesex-London community (Alliance, Hockey Canada), perhaps using the letter format outlined above, or presenting information in person.
 - Develop a public service announcement to encourage appropriate behaviours from spectators.
 - Encourage women to be included on the coach selection committees.

References

Bloom, G.A., Smith, M. D. (1996). Hockey violence: A test of cultural spillover theory. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 13. 65-77.

Patton, M. (1987). *How to use Qualitative methods in evaluation*. London: Sage.

Background

The Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) has been actively involved with the issue of violence in society, particularly violence against women and children. One of the priorities in public health is to focus on prevention by identifying causal factors related to the issues that need to be addressed.

Hockey is a sport that many Canadians are very passionate about. For example, Alliance Hockey governs approximately 280 minor teams in London and Middlesex County alone. (Alliance Hockey Association, personal communication, September 30, 2009). Fighting and other aggressive and violent acts have been considered “part of the game” and hockey’s way of policing itself. However, these violent behaviours are often the cause of serious injuries such as concussions, fractures and broken bones and might sometimes spread beyond the ice rink or playing field.

According to Bloom & Smith (1996) the ‘cultural spillover theory’ might provide some indication as to what factors contribute to hockey violence “spilling” over into other areas of society. For example age and level of play might be factors that contribute to those who are more likely to approve of violence in other sports as well as in the family (Bloom & Smith, 1996).

In our society, boys and men are recognized as the principal instigators of violence (Statistics Canada, 2006). When looking particularly at violence against women Melnick (1992) noted that,

Male athletes are frequently beseeched by coaches, teammates, and peers to prove their manhood by being tough, aggressive, and dominating...It is possible that aggression on the playing field, sexist language and attitudes used in the locker room, and an inordinate need to prove one’s maleness can combine in complex ways to predispose some male athletes towards off-the-field hostility. (1992, p. 33)

Therefore, to be successful at eliminating or reducing the incidence of violence in sports and in society, boys and men must be involved in prevention strategies.

A Symposium was held on February 24th, 2009 to address violence in hockey. Nine recommendations were presented in the symposium proceedings. One

of these recommendations related to hearing women’s perspectives on the issue of violence in hockey.

Women are important stakeholders in the game. Many women play hockey. They are mothers of young boys and girls who play hockey. They are coaches, and they are role models. Despite this, women’s perspectives as they relate to this issue are frequently not heard.

The purpose of these sessions was to provide women with an opportunity to share their perspectives and stories with other women and key stakeholders as they relate to violence in hockey.

This report profiles the common themes, thoughts and experiences that were shared during the sessions. This report also presents the suggestions that women presented as to what actions can be taken to work toward the elimination of violence in hockey and in society in general.

Methodology

Recruitment

Women who attended the Violence in Hockey Symposium on February 24th, 2009 were invited to participate in one of two sessions held by the MLHU on May 25th, 2009. Potential participants were asked to share this information with their colleagues, friends and family members. The invitation was also extended to specific women’s organizations: Sexual Assault Centre of London, Women’s Abuse Centre, Brescia University College, and the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women (UWO). Individual women in the community who have voiced interest and concerns on this issue were also contacted and invited. Lastly, invitations were sent to local hockey associations, a Women’s List¹ and also through a media release for the Violence in Hockey Symposium Proceedings.

violence in hockey, and how the issue of violence in hockey should be addressed. Because there was uncertainty as to what women felt were the issues, the open-ended structured allowed the women to share their concerns and provide a better understanding of their point of view. The three areas listed are discussed in the findings section.

After both sessions, the facilitator, an evaluator and the producer of the hockey symposium held a debriefing session to share thoughts and review any common themes that occurred throughout the session. Data analysis was conducted by the evaluator who reviewed the audio recordings from the two sessions. An inductive analysis approach was used to analyze and summarize the findings, where common themes and comments were identified related to the three key areas (Patton, 1987).

Participants

A total of twenty-four women participated. There was considerable diversity among participants including mothers with children who play hockey and who had an interest in the topic, both professionally and personally. There were also women who were hockey players, hockey coaches, representatives from local and provincial hockey associations, and women from local women’s abuse and women’s support centres.

Data Collection and Analysis

The two sessions were led by an external facilitator. Each session was approximately two hours in length. Prior to participating, a brief letter of information was reviewed and women were asked to sign a consent form that indicated their willingness to participate and to have the discussion audio recorded. Participants were also asked to include contact information if they were willing to be contacted in the future if further input was needed. At the conclusion of the sessions, women were given a gift card for a drug store chain as a token of appreciation.

The discussion was open-ended and focused on three key areas: *sources of violence in hockey, effects of*

¹ The Women’s List is a network of women in the community who are actively involved with women’s issues, social responsibility in particular towards women and children, as well as community action.

Findings

Sources of Violence in Hockey

Key Points

Overall the women felt that:

- Society has played a role in reinforcing violence and violent behaviours through music, movies, television, sports and the media.
- Violence in hockey does not contain itself within the sport; it stems from and leads to violence in other areas of society.
- Being violent is seen as a part of being a man, and within hockey being violent has no real consequences.
- If players wish to continue playing and strive for higher levels of competition there is a feeling that they must accept violence as part of the game.
- When parents and spectators cheer when fights break out, it shows children that this behaviour is acceptable.
- Coaches play a role in encouraging violent behaviour, and their verbal behaviours can also have a lasting impact on a child.
- Women often feel unheard when expressing opinions about violence in hockey.

As the women shared their stories related to the ways in which they had experienced sources of violence in hockey it became clear that it is very multifaceted. The women shared personal experiences about violence in the media and society, the expectations put on the players by themselves and by parents, the reactions of spectators and the influences of the coaches. Stories were also shared about women’s inability to express their opinions and having felt as though this might contribute as a source of violence in hockey.

Society

The women discussed throughout the sessions how society has glorified violence. There are movies, music, television shows, sports and even the news where violence becomes the headline and an attraction feature. The women shared how the appearance of violence in so many areas of a child’s life can create a sense of acceptance and desensitization to violence that exists not only in sports but in many other areas of society.

...where do we see violence in society and where do we see it at home? So if you have it reinforced on a number of levels, media, music, movies, sports, that’s not saying it causes it alone, but there is definitely a lot of layered effect there.

Many women shared their distaste for the way in which the media portrays violent acts. Aggressive plays and injury related hits are replayed time and time again on the highlight reels and are even a part of how the National Hockey League (NHL) markets the sport. The women described how there is a perception that hockey players, especially boys and men, are expected to conduct themselves in a certain way. Being violent is seen as a part of being a man, and within hockey being violent has no real consequences. One woman commented that the acts committed in hockey are not seen as criminal, although these acts repeated in the community or on the street would be criminal and likely be prosecuted. Several women felt that as long as violent acts are tolerated in sports, they will continue to impact other areas of society and vice versa.

“Personally, I feel that there is a lot of overlap between where violence starts in our society and relationships and then carries on with some level of acceptance into our sports.”

Women also commented how outside of sports there are shows on television and videos on the Internet that present violence and injuries as entertainment and how there is laughter instead of understanding the resulting pain and injury. A few women also shared their experiences that as parents and grandparents they have seen violence in the schools and on the streets. One woman described how bullying seems to be more apparent in the schools than in the past.

Individual – Player

A few women discussed the pressure that players face when they compete and play the sport and imitate players in the professional leagues, their role models. The women shared their experiences as mothers where their own children feel intense amounts of pressure to prove themselves and meet the expectations that are set by parents, coaches, spectators, and their own personal expectations. This pressure increases as they play in more competitive levels.

“If a young boy’s dream is to play in the NHL and NHL fights and they want to make the NHL, at some point they have to learn how to fight.”

The women described that as young players get older the game of hockey begins to change as body checking and more aggressive tactics are introduced into the game. There was a feeling shared among the women that players and parents have to accept violence as part of the game—“deal with it or don’t play at all”. If they do not accept this aspect of the game they risk being ostracized by other players, coaches, parents, and their peers. This attitude seems to perpetuate the cycle of violence as players become tolerant to this aspect of the sport.

You don’t enter into hockey thinking you’re going to be fighting or it’s going to be an aggressive sport, a violent sport. You’re entering it, as parents we are registering our kids for an activity that we think it’s going to be wholesome, good skill building and all those things and we’re not even thinking about that part of it. Because it is a great game, it really is, and it’s when they get to that age of 12 and 13 when the checking starts and that’s when it becomes an issue. There isn’t any other sport except lacrosse where once you get past minor levels of the sport that there is the expectation that you either participate or you accept it that you’re either going to be hurt or it’s part of the game where fighting is permitted.

Parents and Spectators

Many women shared their experiences related to parents and spectators and how they can have considerable influence on the sport—especially on children’s behaviour when playing sports. Some women noted that when parents and spectators cheer when fights break out, it shows children that aggressive behaviour is acceptable. Parents and spectators are role models and the language they use and actions they make can send the wrong messages to children.

“I think it’s not even on the ice so much. I’m seeing it more and more off the ice or on the field.”

“I see it in hockey against the officials The people in the bleachers who are yelling to take them out, take out the ref.”

The fans... we’ve had a few situations this year, there have been police at games and it’s been about spectators; it has not been about the kids on the ice. It’s been about the fans, the supporters and they do what they learn. It impacts the kids.

Although there are many parents who encourage sportsmanlike behaviours and feel as though the sport should bring people together through common goals, some women felt as though some parents and spectators have lost sight of the positive qualities of the

game and replaced them with a greater emphasis on competition and aggressive tactics. The disrespect among players, coaches, coaching staff, referees, parents and spectators also leads to this loss of sportsmanship.

That is why as a parent, I’ve encouraged my son to play hockey is for all those good things. But somewhere along the line you kind of forget about it or you kind of get caught up in the milieu. Maybe we need to start putting up banners that say ‘Hockey is good for...’, maybe something like that to show what hockey is good for.

Coaching

Most women agreed that coaches play a large role in teaching skills to hockey players. The women shared how they felt that their children will listen to the coach more than they will listen to them when it comes to advice related to hockey. One mother shared how after the game off the ice she questioned her child’s behaviours and the child responded that it was “how coach wanted me to do it”. This often causes some conflict in the messages that parents, especially mothers are giving their children at home and the messages children are receiving in hockey.

“Sports have volunteer coaches. You do a police check, it does not ensure their character and understanding of gender stereotypes and buy-in to violence.”

“It puts you in a lot of awkward positions if you don’t have a coach reinforcing fair play...”

The women described that the coaches who participate in many hockey programs and associations are volunteers and have taken their own time to teach the children how to play hockey. However, some women felt that the coaches might not always share the same values and beliefs as the parents. Many women shared reasons why they enroll their children in hockey such as learning how to be a part of a team, about sportsmanlike qualities, camaraderie and skill development. However, they did share the feeling that some coaches and even other parents were more interested in competition and a desire to win which sometimes can lead to hitting and even fighting on the ice.

The women felt that coaches sometimes play a role in encouraging violent behaviours, but their verbal behaviours can also have a lasting impact on a child. The feedback, comments, and criticisms coaches give a child can stay with them for many years.

Women’s Role

Hockey is a sport that is dominated by men. There were many stories shared where the women felt unheard when expressing their opinions about violent behaviours on the ice, especially when speaking with men. A few mothers who had spoken out in situations where their child was injured or being encouraged to carry out aggressive behaviours on the ice were faced with negative comments and criticisms, for example being a “picky mother” or “babying” their child. In addition, some women felt that coaches only seem to address other men, which leads to the belief that there is a different role for mothers and fathers when their child is playing hockey.

I’m probably one of the more silent types that would not speak up and perhaps that’s the majority of people and maybe that’s the issue. We as women stand back and talk about what we’re seeing and perhaps the coach about how he’s speaking in the dressing room and maybe that’s part of it, the way our husbands talk about it. But we are hesitant as women to speak up and I guess I was fascinated by the tolerance and acceptance among the parents for the acceptance of the culture. And why is it that we as women don’t feel like we have a voice...I don’t know.

What you’re talking about for me is a women’s equality issue and when you talk about how can women’s voices be heard in this male culture. For me it’s about living in a society where women’s ways of knowing, of being, of leading are not always respected. And that is just cultural and that is so deeply rooted and seeded and in order for us to shift that, it requires a number of different strategies. To me, that feels like it’s one of the roots.

Effect of Violence in Hockey

Key Points

Overall the women felt that:

- Players suffer the most consequences in terms of physical effects of violence in hockey.
- Parents might be hesitant to encourage or allow their children to play because of the violent nature of the sport.
- A child could risk not being selected for a team because the parent’s behaviours are unacceptable.
- Some women felt that young players might demonstrate disrespect toward their teachers, their parents, and members of society because they have learned that they are acceptable behaviours.

The women at the sessions discussed how the effects of violence in hockey are widespread. The behaviours and actions within hockey can have many effects on our society, individuals and in social networks. The women shared how violence in hockey can impact parents’ behaviours and deter players from participating in the sport.

Society

A few women expressed how as a society we have put value in the characteristics that describe a violent game as opposed to the skills that describe a good, sportsmanlike game, such as skill, finesse and technique. These women felt that because violence is viewed as a valuable characteristic in hockey and other sports, it has led to violence in other areas of our society. The women also shared that young players might demonstrate disrespect toward their teachers, their parents, and others because they have learned that they are acceptable behaviours.

I think unfortunately we’ve put a lot of value into the characteristics that describe a violent game instead of a lot of value into the characteristics that describe skill and finesse and technique that are available in all the other sports and in women’s hockey. I think it’s a real disadvantage.

“Now it’s filtered out into the schools where [kids] push their weight around too. They have no respect for their teachers, or their parents, or anyone else, so it’s a big concern.”

Players—Emotional, Physical, Psychological Effects

When violence is introduced in hockey, it is clear the players suffer the most consequences in terms of physical effects. Players are injured and often this is caused by intentional contact. One woman shared an example about an incident in the Ontario Hockey League where a player made a very aggressive hit against a highly skilled player on the opposing team because his head was down. In a television interview, the player discussed how he felt he had to make a move on such a key player in the game because the opposing player had put himself in a vulnerable position. The woman shared how she felt that this demonstrated the un-sportsmanlike nature of some of the hockey leagues today, where players are punished physically because of their higher skill levels. It is not only illegal plays in hockey that the women felt that were causing injury to players but also legal plays as well.

The women also shared that in addition to the physical effects of the game there are also emotional effects of

violence in hockey where verbal abuse from coaches, parents and spectators can have a lasting impact on the player.

“A physical injury heals; one mental statement can live with you forever and take you down forever.”

Participation in the sport

When players move up in leagues they reach levels of hockey where more aggressive tactics such as body checking are introduced along with more competitive play. There are many children who might be content to play without the aggressive and injury-related actions but often feel pressured to compete at higher levels and with higher skill. Some women shared that as parents they are hesitant to encourage or allow their children to play because of the violent nature of the sport. Violence can be a deterrent for children and parents alike to continue or even begin to play the sport.

One of her son’s coaches, he was going out there and saying be tough, go out there and hit the guy, you know, don’t shy away. You know, all those bravado kind of, tough it out. And she didn’t like that coming home and having to address that with the son who just wants to play hockey, why does he have to be a tough guy.

Parents’ Behaviours

Parents’ behaviours can have both a positive and negative impact on their child’s skill and development in hockey. A couple of women shared that they have known some teams that have openly admitted to selecting players where they have taken into consideration the parent’s behaviours as a spectator. The player could risk not being selected for a team because the parent’s behaviours are unacceptable.

Some children had better skills on the ice, he chose not to put them on select teams because of the parents and I think that’s part of when people are picking teams Unfortunately it’s kind of a punishment for the child who isn’t picked for the select team because they have the capability. I’m wondering if it might be a wake up call to the parents to say there are reasons why your child did not make the team.

“My brother is a coach and he would say that sometimes - ‘I picked the parents I didn’t pick the kids this time’.”

I’ve seen examples of parenting that is just incredible and I’m sure you’ve probably seen them as well...there was a lady I affectionately called

‘the glass slammer’ who slammed herself up against the glass as the game was going on and I thought, how embarrassed her son would be as he got older if her behaviour didn’t change.

There was also discussion among the women about how parents react to violent acts in the stands. There are parents who are encouraging certain behaviours by cheering in the stands comments like “hit em’, hit em’” while there are other parents who take a stand against these actions and confront other parents and the coach for encouraging the behaviours.

“One of our dads got tossed out of the arena in the first 10 minutes of the game because he would not leave the ref alone. Was it appropriate? Absolutely, he should have been tossed out.”

A few women shared that other parents, including themselves, may have a difficult time trying to deal with some of the differing opinions and beliefs of the coach, especially if the coach is well liked by many of the other parents. Some of the effects the women feared they might encounter as a result of expressing their opinions are that their child will be ostracized by the coach or other players. For example, the coach might bench that player, reduce their playing time, they might not give them the attention that other players receive, and the player might be called names by other players for having a vocal parent.

In terms of why do we tolerate all these, I think because our children are held hostage. And I know that sounds really strong but that is the way I feel sometimes, that our kids our being held hostage because if we make stands as a parent it’s our kids that are going to end up suffering for it. If we say too much to the coach, it’s our kid that’s going to get benched; it’s our kid that’s going to end up with the problem. If I get really annoyed and feel like I really have a statement to make and I pull my kid off the team, it’s my kid that suffers. So it is a woman’s issue as well. There are many times that I have felt controlled, by the coaches and what am I going to do as a mother, make my child suffer for it? It’s very, very difficult, and I don’t think that’s just at the [representative] level, that’s at every level and it’s in every sport.

I think we’ve made parents a bad word in hockey. It’s hard to speak up, and if you don’t speak up you teach your child that those behaviours are acceptable, and if he wants to go on in life, that he’s going to have to take some type of ‘abuse’ from somebody.

How Violence in Hockey Should Be Addressed

Key Points

- Overall the women felt that:
- Parents need to set an example for children and to communicate with one another as to what are acceptable behaviours, as well as to discuss issues when unacceptable behaviours are observed.
- By involving the higher levels of organizations and hockey associations, women can advocate for more disciplinary actions including coach suspensions for excessive penalties on a team, stricter penalties, and consistency with the type and length of penalties and suspensions among leagues.
- Women’s hockey provides an excellent role model as to what hockey can be.
- Society needs to place emphasis on the importance of respect in sports for players, parents, coaches, coaching staff, and referees.
- Coaches have a large influence over the players in hockey. They need to ensure that they are giving the players the appropriate training and messages.
- Encourage women to be included on the coach selection committees because they bring a different perspective.
- Players need to demonstrate respect in many areas: self respect, respect for coaches, referees, teammates, and opponents.

Many women provided suggestions and comments related to changes that are needed to work toward the elimination of violence in hockey. These suggestions included how parents, players, coaches and hockey organizations can play a part. There were also suggestions about how behaviours can change.

Parents

Several women felt that, as parents, some changes are needed in how children are raised. Parents need to set an example for children and to communicate with one another as to what are acceptable behaviours, as well as discuss issues when unacceptable behaviours are observed.

It’s the impression that as adults we are supposed to be setting examples. I find it very difficult in the stands and it’s happening all around you, and there I am trying to tell my son it’s the game of

hockey and it’s how they play, and it’s a team, sportsmanship We have to look at ourselves as parents and as fans of the sport. There has to be a sense of when to draw the line and to know what our actions are showing.

There also needs to be a change of attitude from parents in the stands to be aware that the players are not invincible and that the parent’s actions affect each player individually. Cheering in the stands when a fight occurs is reinforcing those types of behaviours and it must be stopped.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if they would flash ‘hush’ or something [on the jumbotron] during a fight. If they flashed ‘hush’ instead of everyone doing this whole Roman Coliseum thing, the players wouldn’t get this positive feedback.”

Parents also need to express themselves to the coaches when they feel that the coach’s actions are not appropriate. Coaches are volunteers in the sport yet there is also a certain standard that must be expected, especially when they have such a powerful influence over the players’ behaviours.

Involvement from Hockey Associations

Some women felt that the hockey associations and leagues could play a large role in making changes to the way the sport is played. By involving the higher levels of the organizations and hockey associations, there can be more emphasis on disciplinary actions including coach suspensions for excessive penalties on a team, stricter penalties, and consistency with the type and length of penalties and suspensions among leagues. Generally, participants felt that great strides have been made to date and the rule changes need to be continuously enforced by the referees on the ice to have a lasting impact.

There was also discussion regarding existing organizations and how they can influence this issue. The framework that currently exists for women’s hockey provides an excellent model of what hockey can be. Women’s leagues have made many changes to set their sport apart from men’s hockey by focusing on ethics, finesse and sportsmanship. Part of these changes included removing some of the intimidation tactics, as well as removing body checking. Women’s hockey promotes a safe and positive image of the game. Teams that have accumulated more penalties within a season are required to attend a fair play evening and this has had a very positive effect on the teams that have participated. Participants felt that if more hockey associations model the actions taken by women’s hockey, this will only have a positive effect on how the

game is played as well as on the players, coaching staff, and parents involved.

Society—Culture

Many women felt that the culture that supports violence in hockey needs to be changed. Society and women especially need to demand that violence in hockey and in other sports not be tolerated. Certain actions are not tolerated in society and therefore should not be tolerated on the ice. Society needs to place emphasis on the importance of respect in sports for players, parents, coaching staff and referees. A few women discussed how similar action has been taken for campaigns such as smoking by-laws. When they were first introduced there was hesitation, yet significant changes have been made which society has welcomed. There was a belief that violence in hockey can be eliminated and achieve the same success as other initiatives.

Coaching

As mentioned earlier, most women felt that coaches have a large influence over the players in hockey. In order to ensure that the players are given the appropriate training and messages, many women felt that the coaches should have adequate training and promote the right messages to the players. Several women also felt that coaches need to demonstrate leadership and set expectations for the players with respect to their conduct during the game. Coaches also need to be able to recognize when they themselves are acting inappropriately. A story was shared about how a scrum broke out at the end of the game with several players on a hockey team. The coach decided that he would remove himself from the following game as a suspension to himself because he wanted to demonstrate that this is not what he had taught the players on the team, and felt some responsibility for their actions. It was a very powerful message to send to the players on the team and likely had a lasting impact.

“We’ve seen players that can be goons, but if they have the right leadership and the right expectations from the coaching staff and their teammates, they’re not going to be goons.”

Coaches need to place emphasis on teaching and supporting players especially at the early age levels in learning the skills of the game. Young players need to have proper instruction when it comes to needed skills such as body checking to fully understand the purpose it plays within the game to ensure that it is carried out appropriately.

Where I see it is at the minor levels, in teaching the skills of the game. And there isn’t enough emphasis to me, on teaching the skills of the game at the early age levels. We go right into competitive hockey and you need teaching coaches there, that will teach the skills so that they can compete at the older levels and they properly know how to give and take a check.

No matter when you teach [the skills], you better have qualified coaches who are interested in development and development of team and individual skills, and you better have qualified referees in there . . . you have to reinforce what the purpose is and teach it properly and make sure your coaches are agreeing to teaching and not interested in winning the NHL . . . when they finish the season they should be a better hockey player then when they started and if you teach properly, they will develop properly and you’ll win your fair share of games.

I think if we have mentorships of good coaches, of people who have demonstrated proper sportsmanship of an attitude that you can win, you can go for it without dropping your gloves then that’s an attribute as opposed to there’s a sissy team that’s not going to retaliate.

Coaches can also change the perceptions in society by having their teams lead by example. By setting a standard that reinforces positive behaviors and one that does not promote retaliation, “get them where it really hurts, on the scoreboard.” Parents and players also need to buy in to this philosophy.

Women’s Role

Stereotypes and Western gender roles that show women’s emotion and sensitivity to be a weakness are widespread. This view needs to be changed and these attributes viewed as strengths. One woman expressed that being emotionally aware and vocalizing your feelings can lead to a healthy relationship and can affect how someone plays the game of hockey. Women have different ways of knowing and being leaders, and as a society and culture these traits need to be respected.

There were various examples that were shared related to how women have not been given much credibility in hockey. For this reason, women do not feel as if they can express themselves and share their opinions with coaches and other men involved in the sport. The women indicated that there are many females who know the game well and should stand up and say, “I can coach. I don’t have to be a trainer or the team mom. I can actually take a leadership role on this team.” Having that voice is not always easy for many

women. Women voiced the need to gain a sense of strength and empowerment to be more vocal.

Grassroots Changes

Several women felt that for change to happen it needs to start at the grassroots level. Some women felt that by starting with a small group of dedicated women and taking a political stance changes can be advocated on a number of levels along with stakeholders on the issue of violence in hockey.

“A small group of dedicated people is capable of making great change.”

Public Awareness and Education

A few women noted that there is a need to increase public awareness and education on this topic in order to gain more support for change. By engaging in creative strategies, theatre for example, public education campaigns can be developed. Another idea that was shared was to develop public service announcements regarding how people should conduct themselves at sporting events.

Players

There was general agreement that players in addition to coaches need to be educated about fair play and sportsmanship. Players need to develop a sense of empathy to eliminate some of the glorification of violence. Players need to demonstrate respect in many areas; self respect, respect for coaches, referees, teammates and their opponent.

That’s where it’s so important to develop in our kids a sense of empathy. How would you feel if? . . . If as parents we make a conscious decision that we are trying to raise empathetic kids, then I think that goes a long way in eliminating some of that.

How do we change the sport?

In other sports, the standards and expectations are set right from the beginning; this needs to be the case in hockey as well. Some women shared how the standards and expectations need to be changed at all levels of hockey. There was a feeling that as long as violence in hockey is accepted in the NHL and other professional leagues, it will be a difficult task to remove it from all other levels of hockey.

Coaching selection is an area where changes can be made. Developing a better process for receiving

feedback from parents, coaches, staff and anyone in the community would be an opportunity to expand on the current process. The people that are currently included on the coach’s selection committee may need to be changed. One participant recommended that more women and mothers be included on the selection committees. Once coaches are selected, women can sit down and openly share their thoughts and concerns with them related to violence in hockey.

There were also some suggested changes in terms of how the skills of the game are taught. Introducing skills like body checking later allow children to learn more about the game and the purpose of body checking so it does not become a novelty. When learning the sport, children also need good officiating so proper penalties are given and the players understand the rules correctly. Also, the positive aspects of the game need to be promoted more, such as skill development, teamwork and camaraderie.

Discussion

This group of women came together to show their support against violence in hockey. Some women came to share their stories and experiences of how they have confronted the situation with coaches or other parents. Others came to show concern for their children and the future of the sport.

The women shared their stories about how they felt as though they could not speak out on this issue. They felt as though their opinions were not respected because in many cases hockey is considered a “boys club”. These sessions were an opportunity for those women to openly share their thoughts and feelings and to voice their opinions in an environment where they were respected.

Many women realized that there have been several positive changes related to violence in hockey and it is something that is being challenged more and more with rule modifications and other changes in the leagues. However, there are still many changes that can be made especially within the culture of hockey. The women shared how hockey can be about camaraderie and team spirit and work towards changing the mentality that “fighting is part of the game”. A few women expressed how women’s hockey has been an excellent example of what hockey should represent.

The other key message that was discovered and shared among the women throughout the sessions is that it is not just violence in hockey it is violence in other sports, in the locker rooms, in the stands and in practices as well. However, the women felt that moving forward one step at a time and by using a grassroots strategy, changes can be accomplished.

At the conclusion of the sessions many women felt empowered and eager to work towards change through the suggestions that were made. To have a group of women go forward and promote change in a game that for many years has been dominated by men would certainly help other women to find their voice and share their thoughts as well.

Limitations

There are certain limitations that must be considered when conducting a small number of sessions.

Because only two sessions were held, these results might not be generalizable to all women, yet they do provide a better understanding of some of the thoughts and perspectives related to this particular issue. There were also several employees from MLHU who expressed opinions that may have been influenced through their association with the organization. However, these sessions have enriched the Health Unit’s understanding of women’s perspectives and provided some baseline information and considerations for future directions related to planning and implementing activities to address violence in hockey.

Next Steps & Action Statements

Overall, there was a sense that participants felt further action was required. The following list was developed based on women’s comments related to specific activities that could be undertaken by a group of women.

Encourage a working group to address the issue of violence in hockey in our community.

- Obtain support from MLHU to move this initiative forward (e.g., providing meeting space).
- Develop grassroots strategies to address violence in hockey.
- Engage key stakeholders on the issue of violence in hockey.
- Establish partnerships with Ontario hockey associations.
- Collect evidence that supports the need for change.
- Develop specific and achievable strategies to engage the Middlesex-London community, such as:
 - Draft a letter with consistent key messages that outline the concerns and reasons for such a change related to violence in hockey. This letter would be a universal appeal and present a united voice from the women involved and would profile the issue of violence in hockey.
 - Talk about the issues in personal social networks to start the momentum.
 - Present information and concerns to the various hockey leagues in the Middlesex-London community (Alliance, Hockey Canada), perhaps using the letter format outlined above, or present information in person.
 - Develop a public service announcement to encourage appropriate behaviours from spectators.
 - Encourage women to be included on coach selection committees.

References

Bloom, G.A., Smith, M. D. (1996). Hockey violence: A test of cultural spillover theory. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 13. 65-77.

Melnick, M.A. (1992). Male athletes and sexual assault. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*. 63. 32-35.

Patton, M. (1987). *How to use Qualitative methods in evaluation*. London: Sage.

Statistics Canada. (2006). *Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006*. Catalogue no. 85-570. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.