

# How sporting codes and clubs should respond when their male members perpetrate violence against women

By Dr Michael Flood, April 5, 2012

This document outlines principles and protocols for how sporting codes and clubs should respond when their male members perpetrate violence against women. It has been prompted by the issue of NRL and AFL players using violence against women.<sup>1</sup>

## General principles

- Sporting codes, like other workplaces and institutions, should adopt comprehensive strategies for the prevention and reduction of men's violence against women which are embedded within a broader commitment to gender equity in the workplace. These should include multiple, intersecting strategies including policies, codes of conduct, and educational and training initiatives. Sporting codes should have strong policies against physical and sexual violence, and strong protocols for how to respond when it occurs, whether this involves their members as perpetrators or as victims.
- Sporting codes such as the NRL and AFL should offer a consistent message both internally and externally that violence against women is never okay. This should be enacted through both positive measures (education and training, awards, promotions, and so on) and negative measures (sanctions, including terminations, financial penalties, suspension, and so on).
- Sporting codes should impose sanctions on players who have perpetrated violence against women (including domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence).
  - In instances where players have been found guilty of or have pleaded guilty to domestic or sexual violence, the sporting club or code should impose at least one of the following sanctions: termination; standing down or suspension (for example for a season); and/or a substantial financial penalty.

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<sup>1</sup> This document was produced by Dr Michael Flood, an expert in violence prevention at the University of Wollongong, in consultation with other violence prevention researchers and advocates. It may be quoted, reproduced, and cited. A suggested citation is as follows:

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- The choice of which of these sanctions to use should be determined by the nature of the incident(s) and particularly the extent and seriousness of the violence in question, and any prior or additional misconduct (whether or not criminal charges were filed).<sup>2</sup>
- The use of sanctions should be guided by set rules and consequences. This might include a pre-identified list of punishments that apply to particular criminal activities. (This avoids the problem, documented in the National Football League in the US, where conduct policies are applied erratically and driven more by public relations concerns than by the goal of creating a respectful sporting culture.)
- The use and choice of sanctions or punishments should be applied consistently across players and across clubs. Violent incidents and behaviours which attract penalties in one club should attract similar penalties at another club.
- The sporting club or code also should consider the requirement that the player complete a behaviour change program for perpetrators.
- If the sporting club or code adopts measures which leave it open for the player to continue playing or to return to the game, this should be conditional on the player having taken responsibility for his violent actions.
- The choice and application of sanctions should not be influenced by the player's value to or standing in the team, their seniority, or their standing among fans. Nor should the choice and application of sanctions be influenced by the levels of media or community outrage directed at particular players or incidents.

**Intervention:**

- In instances where a player is alleged to have perpetrated violence against women, the relevant sporting code should also treat this as an opportunity for intensive intervention into his violent behaviour. Whether or not the code terminates, suspends or fines him or does something else, it should also demand

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<sup>2</sup> Among the circumstances in which it will impose sanctions, the sporting code could include: a criminal court finding of guilt for a sexual assault or being placed on a bond without conviction; a civil court finding of liability for a sexual assault; a player or official pleading guilty to a charge of sexual assault; or a player or official being committed for trial by a Magistrate's Court on a charge of sexual assault (AFL 2005: 5).

and support his efforts to change his violent behaviour. This is supported by the acknowledgement that:

- The actions of one player are not a total anomaly. Some locker room cultures are a breeding ground for sexist and violence-supportive attitudes towards women (Flood and Dyson 2007: 39-41). When an incident occurs, this is not only a moment for punishment, but an opportunity for change.
  - This also presents a positive educational opportunity for teammates; that is to create a safe environment for the teammates to have an authentic discussion about their relations with and treatment of women.
  - Awareness among coaches should be developed regarding how they can contribute to creating a different environment and mentality among young players.
- Sporting codes should ensure that their policies and protocols complement the existing criminal law and civil law responses to domestic violence and sexual assault and do not undermine the formal justice system (AFL 2005: 3).

**Public representation:**

- In acknowledgment of the role of individual players as role models, players who are subject to code/club sanctions arising out of violent actions should not be permitted to represent the code or club as a spokesperson or identity in any capacity for the duration of that sanction.
- Further, individuals who have committed acts of violence against women in the recent past (say, the last five years) should not act as public representatives for efforts to address men's violence against women or for other causes associated with women or gender (such as breast cancer).
- Any individual who has committed acts of violence against women in the past should only be able to act as a public representative for efforts to address men's violence against women (or for other issues associated with women or gender) if he has taken full responsibility for his violent behaviour. He must recognise his violent behaviour and the harm it has caused, make and enact a commitment to change, and complete any relevant treatment or course of action related to his violence.

## References and further reading

AFL (Australian Football League). (2005). *Respect & Responsibility: Creating a safe and inclusive environment for women at all levels of Australian Football*. Melbourne: Australian Football League, November.

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