

Breaking the Silence: Addressing Sexual Harassment and Assault in the Skydiving Community

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Skydiving is a sport built on trust, vulnerability, and shared risk. From first jumps to advanced coaching, participants rely on each other for safety, mentorship, and emotional support. Unfortunately, within this high-trust environment, there exists a painful reality: sexual harassment and assault can, and do, occur. When these violations go unaddressed, they fracture not only individual lives but the integrity of the entire community. The Canadian Sport Parachuting Association (CSPA) is reinforcing its commitment to addressing sexual harassment and assault within the skydiving community by focusing not only on existing policies, but also on building a culture of safety rooted in respect, accountability, and inclusion.

Understanding the Issue

Sexual harassment and sexual assault are serious violations of personal dignity, safety, and trust that undermine the respectful environment every skydiving community depends on. Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome sexual advances, comments, gestures, or coercive behavior, while sexual assault, including rape, is any non-consensual sexual act. Victims may be anyone in or around the dropzone, whether they are recreational skydivers, students, coaches, staff, volunteers, or visitors. Perpetrators can be anyone regardless of status, experience, or popularity.

Examples of Inappropriate Conduct:

- **Sexual Advances**
 - Repeated requests for dates or sexual activity after clear refusal
 - Unwanted attempts to initiate physical intimacy, such as kissing or touching
 - Suggesting that personal or sexual involvement will lead to better opportunities, coaching, or inclusion
- **Comments**
 - Sexual jokes or remarks made during training, debriefs, or end of day gatherings
 - Comments about someone's body, clothing, or appearance that cause discomfort
- **Gestures**
 - Lewd hand signals, suggestive winks, or unwanted physical gestures
 - Deliberate invasion of personal space or lingering touches without consent
- **Coercive Behavior**
 - Implied promises of jump opportunities, coaching, or scheduling in exchange for personal favors
 - Pressuring someone to accept drinks, social invitations, or physical contact despite clear refusal
- **Sexual Assault**
 - Any non-consensual sexual act, including rape
 - Forcing or attempting sexual activity when consent is absent, withdrawn, or impossible (e.g., due to intoxication)
 - Using intimidation, threats, or physical force to override another person's boundaries

Sexual Harassment and Assault in Adult Sport

While youth-focused data often dominates public discourse, research shows that adults in sport are also at significant risk, especially in environments with informal power structures, close physical proximity, and social overlap.

Key Findings

- A 2022 Canadian study found that 1 in 5 adults involved in community sport reported experiencing or witnessing harassment, threats, or abuse.
- Women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and racialized participants were disproportionately affected:
 - 42% of lesbian and gay adults reported experiencing harassment in sport settings.
 - 30% of adults aged 25–34 were more likely to report incidents than older age groups.
- In a 2021 survey of coaches and officials:
 - 15% of adult participants reported experiencing sexual harassment from someone in a position of authority.
 - 8% reported unwanted sexual contact or coercion during sport-related activities.

Psychological Abuse, Gatekeeping, and Power Imbalance

(Source: Institut National du Sport du Québec – Psychological Violence in Adult Sport, 2021)

- **Psychological Abuse** - including manipulation, favoritism, and exclusion - is common in adult sports. In the Quebec study, nearly 80% of adult athletes reported experiencing psychological violence, often from coaches or senior peers.

- **Gatekeeping** - Defined as the act of controlling access to opportunities, information, or inclusion in ways that are subjective, exclusionary, or rooted in personal bias rather than merit or safety. Gatekeeping is especially prevalent in adult recreational and competitive environments, where access to coaching, ratings, or team selection is often informal and subjective.
- **Power Imbalance** - A situation where one person or group holds disproportionate authority, influence, or control, creating an unequal dynamic that can undermine decision-making, consent, and safety. Power imbalances are particularly concerning in coaching or instructional relationships, where authority over training or progression can be misused.

Implications for Skydiving

These statistics are highly relevant to skydiving, where:

- Coaching and instruction often involve close physical and emotional proximity
- Progression and inclusion are controlled by a small number of influential individuals
- Social events and alcohol use can blur boundaries and increase risk
- Reporting mechanisms may be unclear or underused

Why It's Often Hidden

Many survivors in the skydiving community remain silent due to:

- **Fear of retaliation or exclusion** – concern that speaking out may lead to lost opportunities, damaged reputation, or being pushed out of the community.
- **Loyalty to the community or dropzone** – hesitation to report misconduct because of strong ties, friendships, or a desire to protect the organization's image.
- **Lack of clear reporting channels** – uncertainty about where or how to report, or doubt that complaints will be taken seriously or acted upon.
- **Minimization or disbelief from peers** – worry that others will dismiss their experience as “not serious” or refuse to believe them, leading to further isolation.
- **Trauma, shame, or confusion** – emotional distress that makes it difficult to process the experience, articulate what happened, or feel confident in seeking help.
- **Victim guilt** – the misplaced belief that they somehow contributed to or failed to prevent the abuse, deepening silence and self-blame.

Prevention and Culture Change

Creating a safer skydiving environment is something we build together. Change comes when each of us takes small, consistent steps that reinforce respect, inclusion, and accountability.

- **Learn and Share Respect:** Ongoing education around consent, boundaries, and communication helps everyone feel more confident and supported. Workshops, conversations, and training can make respect part of everyday practice.
- **Live by Clear Standards:** Codes of conduct provide a common understanding of what safe, respectful behavior looks like. When policies are visible, accessible, and easy to understand, they guide the community toward fairness and accountability.
- **Shape Welcoming Social Spaces:** Events and gatherings thrive when they are inclusive and balanced. Paying attention to alcohol use, encouraging open interactions, and avoiding cliques or gatekeeping helps everyone feel they belong.
- **Encourage Safe Reporting:** Survivors need channels that feel safe, anonymous, and compassionate. When disclosures are met with care and support, it strengthens trust and shows that voices will be heard.
- **Model Accountability Together** - Believing survivors, addressing misconduct transparently, and celebrating leaders who embody respect and allyship all reinforce a culture where safety and dignity are shared values.

Integrating CSPA Standards of Integrity and UCCMS

The [CSPA PIM 5: Standards of Integrity](#) and Sport Canada's [Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport \(UCCMS\)](#) provide a strong foundation for accountability and safe sport in skydiving. Both frameworks emphasize respect, fairness, and the responsibility of every participant - athletes, coaches, dropzone operators, and leaders - to uphold ethical conduct and protect community wellbeing. PIM 5 highlights values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility, while the UCCMS sets national standards for preventing harassment, abuse, and discrimination. Together, they reinforce that misconduct is never tolerated and that transparent processes, survivor-centered reporting, and community accountability are essential.

By embedding these principles into everyday practice, whether through coaching, event organization, or peer interactions, the skydiving community can ensure that integrity and safety are not just policies but lived commitments. These standards remind us that

culture change depends on shared responsibility, where every member plays a role in creating an environment rooted in trust, respect, and inclusion.

What to Do If You Experience or Witness Harm

- **Document** what happened (dates, context, witnesses)
- **Reach out** to a trusted peer, ethics officer, or support organization
- **Report** through official channels (CSPA, DZ management, or local authorities)
- **Seek support** from professionals, friends, or survivor networks
- **Speak up** if you witness harassment

Let's make it clear: everyone deserves to feel safe, respected, and free from harm. The foundation of our community must be built on trust, not silence.

Written on behalf of CSPA Women's Initiative Committee (WIC) & the CSPA Technical & Safety Committee (T&SC)

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