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UC San Diego Think Tank Addresses Sexual Violence Prevention In and Through Sport

On the day U.S.A. National Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nasser was sentenced to up to 175 years in prison for the sexual assault of minors, researchers at the University of California San Diego were gathered for the recent Sports and Sexual Violence Researcher Think Tank—a timely and wide-ranging discussion of sexual violence prevention in and through sport.

Sexual assault is pervasive in the United States—an estimated 1 in 5 women and 1 in 59 men in the U.S. have been raped. According to the UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH), sports culture can promote or perpetuate beliefs related to male entitlement, value in dominance and lack of empathy – all factors that support rape culture. Sports and athletes, in other words, influence the standards and expectations around acceptable sexual behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. Sport systems are also uniquely positioned to reach youth and transmit values and behaviors to prevent sexual violence in America.

GEH, in partnership with the national organization Raliance, hosted the Jan. 24 Think Tank, which brought together some of the nation’s leading experts on sexual and gender based violence, sexual assault, health and sport sciences, adolescent development, and sport culture to explore key research questions. These experts included GEH Founding Director and UC San Diego Tata Chancellor Prof. of Medicine Anita Raj (an affiliate of the UC San Diego Qualcomm Institute), GEH Director of Research and UCSD Prof. of Medicine Dr. Jay Silverman, and GEH Associate Director and UCSD Asst Prof of Medicine Dr. Jennifer Wagman; Dr. Kathleen Basile from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Children’s Hospital of Pittsburg’s Dr. Elizabeth Miller; Dr. Sandy Martin from University North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Dr. Beth Richie, Director of the Institute of Research on Race and Public Policy, Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Senior Adviser to the National Football League’s policy group, Dr. Keith Kaufman from Portland State University, David Lee Director of Prevention Services at the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, (CALCASA), and Wendy Taylor, UCSD Deputy Director of Athletics.

Said UC San Diego's Anita Raj: "The opportunity to bring together experts from the fields of sport and violence prevention—to review current research and prevention efforts, identify gaps in research and discuss the opportunity for crossover collaboration—will lead to building an evidence base that will impact sexual violence prevention efforts by informing policy and program development, broadly."

The Think Tank explored key research questions that aim to expand the body of evidence for sexual and domestic violence prevention in and through sport, with the goal of developing recommendations to advance these efforts. This follows the 2018 Raliance release of the Sport + Prevention Center, an online resource on how sport can be part of the solution to prevent sexual and domestic violence. GEH contributed to the development of the materials in that resource.

"This report and resources demonstrate how sport can be part of the solution to prevent sexual and domestic violence," said meeting co-host entity Raliance's David Lee.

The Think Tank began with a session of short presentations on gender equity in sports, sexual assault and rape culture in athletics, the effectiveness of bystander programs, safety in youth sports and links between sexual assault and substance use. These addresses served as a framework for discussions on the state of current research into sexual violence in sports, as well as goals for continued efforts to address and mitigate it.

Meeting participants were broken into smaller groups to consider issues surrounding existing gaps in research and sexual violence prevention efforts, the effects of various interventions, structural barriers to implementing and evaluating these interventions and the overlap between sexual violence in sport and similar violence seen in different contexts. The larger group then continued the conversation, identifying further gaps in research such as an inconsistent understanding of ideology, limited understanding of the structure of sports across their various fields and stages of advancement, concerns about how to engage communities and the need to identify best practices.

From this discussion the group clarified goals for cultivating and sustaining collaborative research efforts, systematically clarifying the vast groups and organizations involved in sports and sports systems, developing systems to engage parents and young athletes and encouraging interdisciplinary engagement.

At its close, this Think Tank solidified a path for its participants to move forward in their individual efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence in their own fields, and generated new collaborative efforts to help see an end to violence in sports. Said Dr. Anita Raj,

“This meeting comes at a time when we are all called to recognize the tremendous violence taking place in sports and athletics in our nation and our global community; we are proud that UC San Diego acted as a space to sound one of many calls to end violence.”

About Raliance: Raliance is a collaborative initiative dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation. As the go-to resource for policymakers, advocates, service providers, prevention practitioners and the media, Raliance boldly and innovatively advances the field nationally. Raliance is comprised of three national sexual violence prevention organizations – the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA)-PreventConnect and the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence (NAESV) – with over 70 years of anti sexual violence activism. Raliance – be the generation that ends sexual violence.

About the Center on Gender Equity and Health: The mission of the Center on Gender Equity and Health is to improve population health and development by improving the status, opportunities and safety of women and girls, globally. The Center focuses on conducting innovative global public health research, medical and academic training, and development and evaluation of evidence-based policies and practices related to: gender inequities (girl child marriage, son preference and daughter aversion) and gender-based violence (partner violence, sexual assault & exploitation, sex trafficking). The overarching goal of the Center is reducing gender inequities and gender-based violence, as such reductions are key to improving sexual, reproductive, and maternal and child health. To achieve this mission of creating sustainable and large-scale change, the Center seeks and maintains partnerships with governmental and non-governmental agencies around the globe. A social justice framework is utilized by the Center across these efforts, and innovative technologies are employed to facilitate and accelerate change at individual, community and national levels.

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