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Sexual Abuse in Sports: Analyzing Challenges Faced by Women and Coping Strategies

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Received 22 February 2025; Accepted 22 March 2025; Published 26 March 2025

Sports have been an integral part of Indian culture and tradition since ancient times. From Kabaddi to cricket, sports have always held a special position in the hearts of Indians. However, historically it had been male-dominated, with women being excluded from participating in sports activities. Women are not considered fit for sports, and their involvement is often limited to household chores and caring for their families. However, the situation has changed significantly, and their participation has increased but as these individuals attempt to break the gender barrier by participating in sports, they not only face criticism and negative feedback from their families and society but, within this esteemed arena lies a darker undercurrent—sexual abuse—a form of exploitation that undermines the very principles sports are meant to uphold. This research paper pokes around the critical issue of sexual abuse in the sports industry in India as a human rights implication. The study identifies key challenges athletes face and analyses the gaps in existing legal and institutional frameworks. Through a comparative analysis, the paper evaluates how other countries have addressed similar issues and offers insights into best practices for India. The paper also provides concrete recommendations. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to creating a safer and more supportive sports environment in India, prioritizing the rights and dignity of athletes over mere achievements. The paper also examines the profound impact of sexual abuse on athletes in India and underscores the urgent need for effective preventive measures.

Keywords: *sexual abuse, sports, human rights, challenges, athletes.*

INTRODUCTION

Sports represent a powerful cultural and social force, embodying ideals such as teamwork, discipline, and national pride. They offer individuals a platform to excel physically, emotionally, and socially. It often serves as a pathway to an individual's personal and professional success. However, within this adulate arena lies a darker undercurrent—sexual abuse—a form of exploitation that undermines the very principles sports are meant to uphold. Sexual abuse, broadly defined as any non-consensual sexual act or behaviour perpetrated through coercion, manipulation, or force, constitutes a severe violation of human rights. When this abuse occurs within the context of sports, it not only devastates individual athletes but also damages the integrity of the entire sporting community.

The world of sports is ruined by the serious issue of sexual abuse, a violation of human rights that contradicts the very values sports are supposed to uphold. When this abuse occurs within the context of sports, it not only devastates individual athletes but also damages the integrity of the entire sporting community.

The problem of sexual abuse in sports is deeply entrenched in the power dynamics that characterize the athlete-coach relationship and the hierarchical structures prevalent in sports organizations. Athletes, particularly young and aspiring ones, are often in positions of vulnerability, heavily reliant on their coaches and mentors for guidance, support, and career advancement. This dependency can create an environment where abusive behaviour is not only possible but can go unchecked for extended periods, as evidenced by numerous high-profile cases around the world one such example is the *Larry Nassar scandal* of the United States, where the former USA Gymnastics doctor was found guilty of sexually abusing more than 150 female athletes under the pretext of medical treatment. This case not only highlighted the systemic nature of the abuse but also exposed the systemic nature of this issue and the failure of institutions to protect athletes.¹

The issue of sexual abuse in sports is not confined to any one country or region; it is a global epidemic that transcends cultural, economic, and geographical boundaries. The IOC's Safeguarding Athletes from Harassment and Abuse program is designed to provide a

¹ Rachael Denhollander, *What Is a Girl Worth? My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth About Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics* (Tyndale House Publishers 2019)

framework for national and international sports organizations to protect athletes from various forms of abuse, including sexual misconduct. Despite these efforts, the implementation of these policies remains inconsistent, and many athletes continue to suffer in silence. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also highlighted the prevalence of sexual abuse in sports, noting that it remains significantly underreported due to fear of retaliation, stigmatization, and the potential impact on an athlete's career².

In India, the issue of sexual abuse in sports is particularly complex, influenced by cultural, social, and institutional factors. Indian society, with its deep-seated patriarchal norms and stigmatization of victims, often makes it difficult for athletes, especially women, to come forward with allegations of abuse. Cases like that of a renowned Indian coach accused of molesting female athletes under his tutelage have occasionally brought attention to the issue, but these instances are often met with denial, victim-blaming, or inadequate responses from sports authorities.³

The issue of sexual abuse in sports, both globally and in India, represents a complex interplay of power, gender, and institutional dynamics. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes legal reforms, education and training programs, and a cultural shift towards greater transparency and accountability within sports organizations. It also demands an ongoing commitment to supporting victims and ensuring that their voices are heard and respected.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The following are the main objectives of the research:

This paper analyzes sexual abuse in sports in India as 1/3rd of female athletes in India faced sexual abuse or sexual harassment by male coaches according to the report of UN Women, UNESCO Report 2023. Also, as per the Article of Hindustan Times dated 18th of January,

² Margo Mountjoy, 'International Olympic Committee consensus statement: harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport' (2016) 50(17) British Journal of Sports Medicine
<<https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2016-096121>> accessed 10 February 2025

³ Marriyam Siddique and Syed Sibtain Hussain Shah, 'Violence against Women: An Analysis of the Infirm Legal Framework in Pakistan' (2023) 2(2) Journal of Public Policy Practitioners
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.32350/jppp.22.06>> accessed 10 February 2025

2023, 30 wrestlers including Olympians, protested against the WFI President and coaches for sexual harassment.

The paper also explores the severe impact of sexual abuse on athletes in India, highlighting the critical need for robust preventive measures. Sexual abuse or harassment not only breaches Fundamental Human Rights but also destroys the core values of athletes such as integrity, respect, and sportsmanship.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following are the main research objectives of this paper:

1. To scrutinize the prevalence and nature of sexual abuse in Indian sports.
2. To investigate the impact of sexual abuse in India.
3. To recommend strategies for preventing sexual abuse and improving support for survivors in the Indian sports context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach is suitable for this topic as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex issues and provides rich, contextualized data. Therefore, this study will exert qualitative research based on secondary sources to explore the phenomenon of sexual abuse in sports in India.

Secondary Data Sources

1. Government Reports including reports and statistics published by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), and other relevant government agencies will be analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and the extent of the problem.
2. Media Reports such as news articles, documentaries, and investigative reports from both print and electronic media will be examined to lift the veil from the instances of sexual abuse, the responses of sports authorities, and public discourse on the issue.

3. Academic Literature including articles, books, and dissertations on sexual abuse in sports are reviewed to identify research gaps.

LIMITATIONS

While the proposed methodology provides a solid foundation for exploring sexual abuse in sports in India, it's essential to acknowledge and address potential limitations.

Sexual abuse in sports is often underreported due to fear, stigma, and lack of trust in authorities, leading to an underestimated prevalence. Secondly, the secondary data, especially from media reports, may be biased or incomplete, affecting the accuracy of findings.

By addressing these limitations, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of sexual abuse in Indian sports and inform the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEMPORARY INCIDENTS

Sexual harassment in Indian sports is not a new issue, but it has gained significant attention in past years. In 2023, the head of the Wrestling Federation of India, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, also a Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) Member of Parliament (MP) against whom female wrestlers along with some Olympic medalists, protested sexual harassment. They struggled to file a case with the police until they sought intervention from the Supreme Court. Male team members supported the wrestlers, and their actions were successful, drawing significant media coverage, which resulted in the removal of Brij Bhushan Singh from the party, and the trial against him commenced in July 2024. He pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.⁴ This high-profile case has highlighted the prevalence of this issue.

⁴ 'I don't dream like Mungerilal: Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh says BJP will not give him a chance now' *The Times of India* (30 July 2024) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/i-dont-dream-like-mungerilal-brij-bhushan-sharan-singh-says-bjp-will-not-give-him-a-chance-now/articleshow/112126914.cms>> accessed 07 February 2025

On July 22, the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports in its submissions to the Parliament informed that since 2017, the Sports Authority of India (SAI) has received 30 complaints of sexual harassment against coaches and staff, including two anonymous complaints.⁵

The government has asserted that it has taken necessary action in all 30 cases, but has not provided specifics.⁶ Between 2010 and 2020, SAI received 45 sexual harassment complaints, 29 of which were against the coaches.⁷ Disciplinary actions taken against coaches include pay reductions for five, contract termination for two, suspension for one, acquittal for five, and one coach tragically died by suicide. However, the real number is believed to be much higher, as many cases go unreported due to fear of retaliation, stigma, and lack of trust in the legal system.

According to official reports and right of information (RTI) requests, 24 government-run sports institutes in India have received 45 allegations of sexual harassment between 2010 and 2020⁸.

Legal frameworks like The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012⁹, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act)¹⁰, are enforced children and young adults are also becoming victims of this issue of sexual harassment. Children as young as 12 or 13, often removed from their familiar environments, are thrust into rigorous and unfamiliar training regimes. The pressure to perform and achieve Olympic glory can make them hesitant to speak out, fearing retribution or the end of their careers.¹¹ There is often a lack of awareness among young athletes and their families about their rights under the POCSO Act. This lack of knowledge further exacerbates their vulnerability.

⁵ Dolly Chingakham, 'Actions Taken in Sportspersons' Sexual Harassment Allegations in India' *India Today* (20 January 2023) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/actions-taken-in-sexual-harassment-allegations-by-sportspersons-in-india-2324194-2023-01-20>> accessed 07 February 2025

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Mihir Vasavda, '10-year record at SAI: 45 complaints of sexual harassment, 29 against coaches' *The Indian Express* (16 January 2020) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/10-year-record-at-sai-45-complaints-of-sexual-harassment-29-against-coaches/>> accessed 10 February 2025

⁹ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012

¹⁰ The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013

¹¹ Padma Prakash, 'Abuse with impunity in sports: Some reflections' (2023) 8(2) *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* <<https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2022.072>> accessed 14 February 2025

IS SPORTS INSTITUTES A WORKPLACE?

One of the major questions that arise is whether sports institutions and sports events fall under the legal definition of a workplace. The definition of workplace is defined under section 2(o) of The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act)¹². From the definition itself, it is understood that the workplace includes a sports institution, stadium, sports complex, or competition or games venue, whether residential or not used for training, sports, or other activities relating thereto; and also includes transportation.¹³

So, from the definition, it is clear that the workplace includes a sports institution, now another question is whether every sports institution has Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs). An Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) is a committee that addresses complaints of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. ICCs are required by law in many organizations, including higher education institutions and businesses. The main purpose of this committee is to prevent and prohibit sexual harassment along with providing a safe and respectful environment for employees and students. The committee also ensures that complaints are addressed and followed up on and additionally, it raises awareness about sexual harassment.

The provision of establishment of ICC is usually mandated by law in most jurisdictions, particularly in India under the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013. However, the application of the POSH Act in sports has been inconsistent because the Act mandates that every employer with 10 or more employees, must establish an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) at the workplace to address sexual harassment-related complaints.

Many sports organizations do not have Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in place, as mandated by the Act, leaving athletes vulnerable to abuse without proper channels for redressal. As of May 2023, there were as many as 15 of the 30 National Sports Federations who did not meet this mandatory requirement regarding the establishment of ICC.¹⁴ This

¹² The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013

¹³ The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013, s 2(o)

¹⁴ 'NHRC notices to the Union Youth Affairs and Sports Ministry, SAI, BCCI, WFI, and 15 National Sports Federations for reportedly not having Internal Complaints Committee as per the law to address the complaints of sexual harassment' (*National Human Rights Commission*, 11 May 2023)

lack of implementation highlights the need for clearer guidelines and stricter enforcement within the sports industry. A separate concern arises due to the ineffectiveness of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in many sports federations. Several of these federations operate under ad-hoc bodies without permanent management, making it difficult for victims of sexual harassment to seek recourse due to a lack of trust in these structures.¹⁵

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BARRIERS IN REPORTING THE ISSUE

Athletes from socio-economic backward backgrounds are often the most vulnerable to abuse in sports. Lacking the financial resources, education, and social support to stand up against powerful figures in the sports industry, these athletes are frequently silenced. For many, the fear of losing their only opportunity for upward mobility is overwhelming, leading them to endure abuse rather than risk their careers by speaking out. The lack of representation and support systems for these athletes further compounds the problem. Many do not have access to legal assistance or advocacy groups that can help them navigate the complex process of reporting abuse and seeking justice. This lack of voice in the system is one of the most significant barriers to addressing sexual abuse in Indian sports. Even though athletes after all these barriers try to report the complaint, sometimes they struggle to file a case as happened with female wrestlers against Brij Bhushan, in 2023.

IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse in sports can be profound, wide-reaching, and multifaceted, affecting athlete's physical, emotional, and mental well-being of individuals and the sports community, spanning across gender, age groups, and levels of competition. The effect is frequently compounded by the progressive and patriarchal structure predominant within the sports industry, which can worsen the challenges faced by victims. The following are some key impacts:

1. Psychological Impact – Trauma and PTSD are among the common ones in which Victims frequently encounter post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), flashbacks, bad dreams, and increased uneasiness. Other than these victims also suffer from Feelings of sadness,

<<https://nhrc.nic.in/media/press-release/nhrc-notice-union-youth-affairs-and-sports-ministry-sai-bcci-wfi-and-15>> accessed 10 February 2025

¹⁵ *Ibid*

uselessness, or misery that can develop over time. Also, Victims may blame themselves for the abuse, leading to intense feelings of shame.

2. Emotional Impact – Emotional impact includes trust issues, emotional Confinement, Outrage, Fear, etc. in which survivors may have trouble trusting coaches, colleagues, and specialist figures in general. Also, their sentiments of estrangement or detachment from teammates and adored ones can happen. Often their outrage toward the culprit or fear of countering are common reactions.

3. Social and Relational Impact includes the withdrawal of victims means Victims may isolate themselves from companions, family, and social circles. Additionally, Interpersonal Conflict arises when relationships can end up strained due to trouble in communicating or expressing emotions. The environment inside the team may be ended, tense, or divided, particularly in case the abuse isn't addressed.

4. Impact on Athletic Performance – **The performance of athletes gets affected and** Numerous victims lose their love for the sport or decide to stop altogether. Concentration, inspiration, and vitality levels may drop due to injury and emotional trouble. Moreover, they often maintain a strategic distance from training, competitions, or particular people related to the abuse is common.

5. Physical Health Issues like Sleep deprivation or disturbed sleep patterns can emerge due to anxiety and fear. A few survivors may also develop chronic physical pain connected to stress and trauma. Sexual Abuse survivors may turn to cluttered eating as a coping component.

6. Long-term consequences of sexual abuse include Substance Abuse where Survivors may resort to drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism. Further Sentiments of sadness can lead to self-destructive thoughts or activities in severe cases. Sexual abuse may influence their future in sports, connections with coaches, and even work opportunities if an uncertain trauma endures.

7. Impact on Sports Culture – sexual abuse also impacts the sports culture as victims along with other individuals lose trust in Institutions. Scandals can erode public trust in sports organizations if abuse cases are mishandled. Many institutions have been forced to

implement stricter safeguarding measures and training to prevent future abuse. Ongoing discussions about abuse in sports are helping create safer, more accountable environments for athletes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The cases of sexual abuse of athletes are not limited to any one country, India is witness of it. On one side citizens hold a special position for sports in their hearts and on the other side athletes are being sexually abused. Sexual abuse and its allegations defeat the confidence of aspiring athletes. To create a healthy environment for athletes and to attract new talents it is important to prevent sexual abuse in sports, the following measures can be taken to avoid sexual abuse in sports:

1. Awareness - Athletes, especially young ones, are mostly unaware of what is happening to them and of their rights, as happened in the case of **Dr. Larry Nassar** in 2016. Therefore, it is necessary to make them aware of all kinds of abuses, along with their rights and, how and to whom they can approach if such issues arise. This will help in creating a trustful and healthy environment in sports.

2. Operation of laws – Proper implementation of laws is required. Various laws are made to control sexual abuse in India such as Constitutional and legal frameworks like Articles 14, 15, 19 & 21 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) (POSH) Act, 2013, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) Act, 2012, exist, their effectiveness is hampered by inadequate enforcement and societal pressures.¹⁶ Stricter investigation of cases and strict punishment should be provided to the perpetrator.

3. Report Center - The sports offices might have an in-house cell or committee for the convenient reporting of sexual abuse. The offices should not be working to expel the concerns of athletes inside and out, but rather to encourage a secure place for the competitors to open. They ought to take up autonomous examinations of the allegations and arrange the complaints. They might take suitable remedial measures and forward complaints to

¹⁶ Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, *Annual Report 2021-22* (2022)

legitimate authorities. The authorities can moreover take up anonymous reporting frameworks to decrease the risks to athletes.

4. Behaviour – There is a need for specialized training for coaches, administrators, and athletes on recognizing and preventing abuse. Defining certain kinds of behaviour that are permissible and need to be followed between athletes, coaches, supporting staff, and other members along with certain types of behaviour that are not permissible during and outside the training premises.

5. Scrutiny – For inspection cameras can be installed in the training centres and no private interaction should be allowed between the athlete and coach or other staff member. It should also be inspected by the higher authority and proper investigation should take place on each complaint.

Addressing sexual abuse in sports requires comprehensive legal reforms, education, and a cultural shift towards greater transparency and accountability. The global and Indian contexts reveal that while progress has been made, much work remains to be done to protect dignity. Authorities should not only be there for the athletes in times of failure or to celebrate success but also support them in times of trouble and work to enhance the safety and well-being of athletes.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations include strengthening grievance redressal mechanisms, increasing awareness and education, and ensuring stricter enforcement of existing laws. By addressing these issues, India can better protect its athletes and foster a sports culture that prioritizes their safety and dignity over mere achievements.

For these individuals, sports are often seen as a way out of poverty, and the fear of losing this opportunity keeps them from reporting abuse. Female athletes, in particular, are more vulnerable as they are often discouraged from pursuing sports careers and face additional societal pressures.¹⁷

¹⁷ Tanya Arora, 'Sports industry of India: A structure built on patriarchy & the silenced cries of women' (*Citizens for Justice and Peace*, 02 June 2023) <<https://cjp.org.in/sports-industry-of-india-a-structure-build-on-patriarchy-the-silenced-cries-of-women/>> accessed 15 February 2025

The international community, led by organizations like the IOC and supported by national governments, must continue to collaborate and innovate to ensure that sports remain a safe and empowering environment for all athletes.

Despite existing policies and legal provisions on protecting and investigating sexual harassment and abuse complaints in sports, implementation and enforcement remain a challenge. In addition, many incidents of sexual harassment in sports are unreported which may be due lack of transparency and power dynamics. Further, the redressal and grievance provisions that have so far been instituted to take up the complaints of sexual abuse in sports have been ineffective and have instilled zero confidence in especially women to come out and report their abuse.¹⁸

“The courage to speak out is how we start to change the culture.”

Rachael Denhollander

¹⁸ Jagmati Sangwan, ‘Sports Women and the Issue of Sexual Harassment’ (*Peoples Democracy*, 05 February 2023) <https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2023/0205_pd/sports-women-and-issue-sexual-harassment> accessed 15 February 2025