

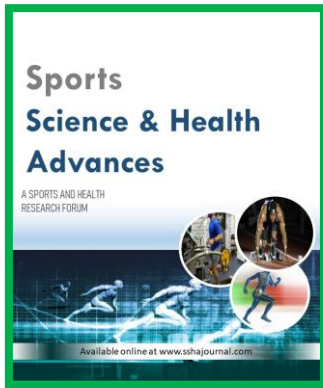
## Review Article

# From Silence to Awareness: Policy Remedies for Harassment of Women in Sports

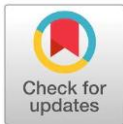
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## Abstract

**Background:** Harassment and abuse of women athletes, including physical, sexual, psychological, gender-based and cyber forms of violence, continue to be a major issue in sports. Despite legal protections and recent safe sport initiatives in India, institutional power imbalances, underreporting, and implementation gaps continue to affect athlete safety and welfare. **Objective:** The study aimed to examine the effectiveness of sports governance policies and safeguarding mechanisms to determine whether the existing legal frameworks are adequate in protecting women athletes from all forms of harassment in sports. It further explored sociocultural and institutional barriers associated with reporting and implementation while proposing an integrated safeguarding framework. **Methodology:** The study employed a scoping review design based on literature that was adopted using electronic databases including Scopus, PubMed, Google Scholar, and SPORT Discus, along with grey literature sources. A total of 133 sources were screened according to predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria, resulting in 68 studies included in the final narrative synthesis. **Results:** The results show that although India has extensive legal and regulatory frameworks, their actual efficacy is nevertheless constrained by uneven enforcement, low knowledge, institutional power structures, and reporting anxiety. Transparent reporting methods, safeguarding education, independent monitoring, and organisational responsibility are all necessary, according to the research. **Conclusion:** Athletes' safety cannot be guaranteed by legal safeguards alone. To develop safe and inclusive athletic conditions for women athletes in India, an integrated safeguarding approach that incorporates legal accountability, educational interventions, organisational transformation, psychological assistance, and cultural change is required.

**Keywords:** Women athletes, Harassment, Struggles, Remedy, Sports Policies.

## Introduction

Evaluating the entire extent of violence against women and girls in sports is challenging. "The absence of globally interoperable and standardized data contributes to this challenge." (UNESCO & UN Women, 2023). Over the past 20 years, there has been a surge in studies on sexual harassment in sports (Nickodem et al., 2023). As sport participation has become an important means of physical activity among young people, its role in promoting healthy development has received growing attention" (Nickodem et al., 2023). However, for the growth of interpersonal relationships in sports performance to be a

possible factor of healthy athlete development, the setting in which such activities occur must be nurturing and protective (Holt et al., 2017). It is also critical to recognize that athletes are vulnerable to harassment and abuse, which can take many different forms, such as physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. For athletes, these problems have significant repercussions that impact their well-being, dignity, self-worth, and physical and mental health. The limited quantitative research in sports is challenging to compare because of differences in definitions and sampling techniques, as well as issues of validity and reliability, among other factors (Bisgaard & Støckel, 2019). Furthermore, extensive-scale quantitative studies investigating the frequency or occurrence of these experiences in the context of sports are scarce. Similar findings have been reported in studies on sexual harassment in the general population (Karami et al., 2021).

In recent years, the analysis of elements that contribute to a hostile atmosphere in the sports environment, such as hostility, violence, abuse, and antisocial behaviour, has also made a distinction between the bullying and harassment behaviours of athletes (Mishna et al., 2019). Both horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical levels of hostility, violence, and abuse in sports have been extensively studied in the scientific literature. Despite growing attention, abuse and harassment are still complex issues for many leaders of sports organizations and are not yet fully understood (Yildiz, 2015). However, studies examining abuse and harassing behaviours in this setting have increased in recent years due to the decreased focus on creating a safe atmosphere for sports (Evans et al., 2016). Although laws, guidelines, and regulations exist for youth sports, the current structure in the sports industry is not particularly successful (Merkel, 2013). Although Punishments are frequently applied, including temporary exclusion from competition or training and dismissal from the sports organization, there is little evidence that they effectively deter misconduct (McMullen, 2014). As a result, sports organisations continue to lack clear and effective anti-harassment policies that can be applied at all organisational levels. The mechanisms for reporting bullying and harassment incidents are not always clearly defined. A 2021 retrospective study conducted (Stefaniuk & Bridel, 2018).

Over the past 20 years, research on SH in the context of sports has been increasingly important. Sports psychology experts, in particular, need to understand this problem because they possess the professional ability to influence how individuals and organizations respond to such events (Mountjoy, 2020). SH can also occur in the relationship between coaches and players, especially when they are of different genders and interact often (Gaedicke et al., 2021). A 2021 retrospective study conducted in six European nations found that 75% of participants had experienced at least one violent incident while participating in sports as children, with psychological violence (PV) being the most commonly reported type (as reported by 65%) of participants (Hartill et al., 2022). The majority of respondents (62%) cited peer athletes as the primary culprits of the PV they encountered (Ohlert et al., 2021). While this type of violence is prevalent in sports, the literature on psychological violence between coaches and athletes remains limited (Koontz et al., 2021). When PV occurs between two or more people, it usually takes the form of verbal or nonverbal acts, including threats, exclusion, isolation, or insults (Cheguvera & Arur, 2024). These actions can harm the targeted person's attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotional wellbeing regarding the world or oneself (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Neo-institutional theory offers useful insight into how cultural and social norms many women and girls encounter to shape the policies and practices of sports organizations. In the present study, this perspective helps explain how institutional structures, informal practices, and organizational culture influence the prevention, reporting, and management of harassment against female athletes (Moon et al., 2022). Many women and girls experience persistent harassment and often do not report it or confront the perpetrators. In sport, female athletes may also be socialized to believe that their athletic ability, strength, and physical conditioning protect them from harm (Madsen & Nielsen, 2023).

A combination of societal, legal, and cultural issues has contributed to the growing prevalence of harassment in India (Talboys et al., 2017). Although India has made progress in addressing these challenges and increasing awareness, much more needs to be done. More vigorous legal enforcement, improved educational initiatives, a cultural movement

toward gender equality, and respect for individual boundaries are all necessary for the country (Mahmoudi & Moss, 2020a). Compared to other nations, India still faces significant obstacles in the area of public awareness, legal enforcement, and changing deeply ingrained cultural norms, all of which continue to contribute to the rise in harassment cases (Sabri et al., 2022). Although harassment and abuse in sports are well recognized in national and international literature, important gaps remain. Firstly, the literature lacks detailed review-based studies that bring together legal frameworks, sports rules, and organizational safeguards in relation to harassment and abuse of women athletes. Secondly, the literature has given insufficient attention to the accessibility, awareness, and implementation of safe sport policies, while the experiences of women athletes remain underexplored at the grassroots, district, and state levels.

Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by examining harassment and abuse against women athletes, with particular attention to awareness, reporting, and enforcement mechanism in sport. The purpose of this study is to critically examine the effectiveness of current legal frameworks and sport-specific protection measures in preventing and addressing harassment against women athletes in India. It also explores how reporting procedures and organizational culture influence the implementation of these safeguards. By integrating academic literature, legal provisions, and policy frameworks, the study seeks to identify existing gaps and propose measures to strengthen athlete safety in Indian sport. This study examines harassment and abuse of women athletes in Indian sport and evaluates the effectiveness of legal and regulatory frameworks. It specifically assesses protective legal systems, explores sociocultural and institutional factors linked to vulnerability and underreporting, identifies implementation gaps, and proposes an integrated safeguarding framework. The research further asks whether safeguarding policies and legal frameworks are more effective in preventing harassment among women athletes than institutional reforms alone.

### Materials and Methods

This study employed a scoping review methodology to systematically investigate harassment and abuse among women athletes, aligning with specific objectives: (1) legal frameworks, (2) socio-cultural factors, (3) implementation gaps, (4) safeguarding framework. For this literature the authors conducted an extensive search using EBSCO Discovery adopting the strategy used by (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Hodgins et al., 2025) and also reflecting the approach in (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) explained that this method offers a "technique to map "relevant literature in the field of interest" and is especially suitable for conducting a comprehensive evaluation of a field that brings together studies that have used various methodological techniques. The review protocol was registered in (Registration No. 1328728)

### Search Strategy

Electronic databases including Scopus (n=45), PubMed (n=30), Google Scholar (n=35), and SPORT Discus (n=13) were searched. Additional sources from registers and gray literature added 10 records, making a total of 133 records. Search terms combined "women athletes", "harassment", "violence", "bully", "abuse", "hazing", "and "sexual " in the context of "athlete," sport, "coach," "peer", and "player") using Boolean operators AND/OR to target legal policies (Objectives 1), sociocultural elements (objective 2), enforcement issues (Objectives 3), and frameworks (Objectives 4). The methodology, search strategy, outcome variables, and thematic synthesis were structured according to the four study objectives to ensure objective-specific analysis and interpretation.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

English-Language studies, articles, and books that focused on harassment and abuse of women athletes in sports settings were included. Records that were duplicate, non-English, irrelevant, or only mentioned harassment without substantive engagement were excluded.

### Data Extraction and synthesis

Two reviewers independently extracted data according to themes aligned with the

study objectives: 1) legal provisions, 2) vulnerability factors like gender norms, 3) reporting and enforcement gaps and reform proposals. After screening and eligibility assessment, 68 full text studies were included in the final narrative synthesis. Due to the heterogeneity of the included studies, meta-analysis was not performed.

### Outcome Variables

Primary Outcomes included prevalence and types of harassment (psychological, sexual, physical), policy effectiveness (IPC, POSH Act, Sports federation policies), sociocultural barriers to reporting, implementation gaps in awareness and enforcement, and recommendations for integrated safeguarding frameworks. These outcomes directly mapped to the four specific objectives.

### PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

The review process identified 133 records through database, searching and other sources. After removing 54 duplicate records, 79 records remained for title and abstract screening. Following the screening process, 11 records were excluded due to irrelevance or insufficient focus on the study objectives. A total of 68 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility and subsequently included in the final narrative synthesis.

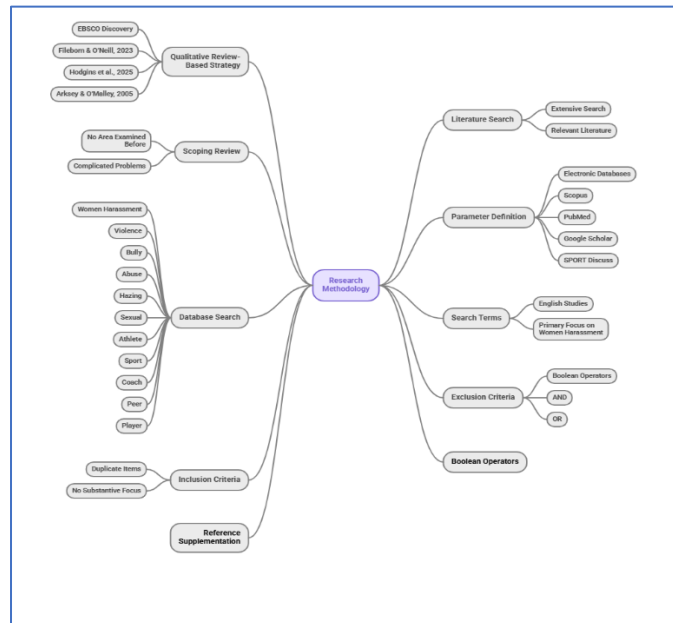
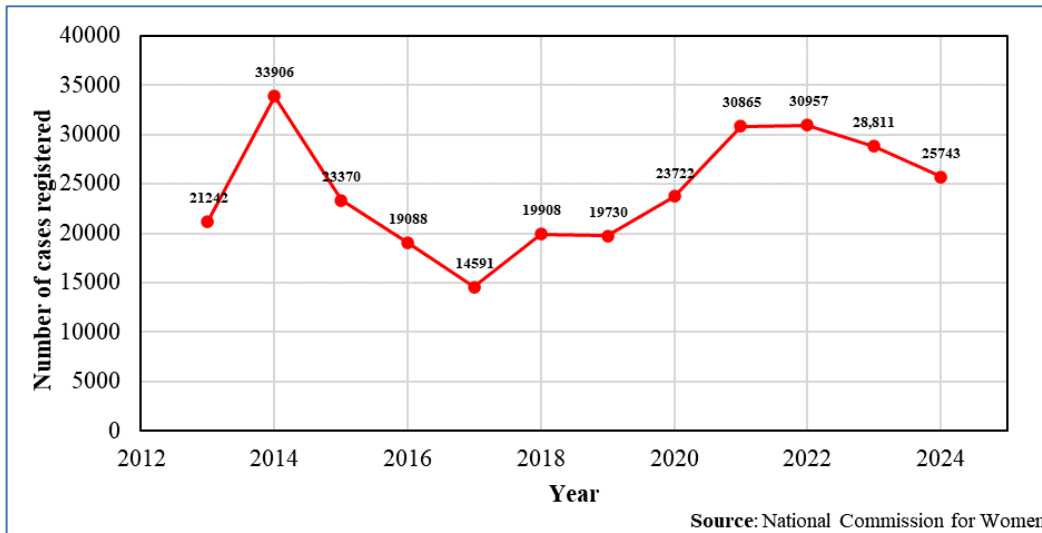


Figure 1 Prisma Flow chart of this study

### Harassment

Brodsky first proposed the idea of harassment in the United States in 1976, emphasizing the employees who were subjected to harassment. Researchers from European countries, particularly those in Scandinavia, began conducting in-depth studies on workplace bullying and harassment in the mid-1990s. In professional sports, sexual harassment (SH) is a common problem that is primarily committed by men and negatively impacts women (Ford & Ivancic, 2020). When analyzing this phenomenon in the context of sports, it is critical to emphasize that bullying and harassment are essentially a result of power disparities between individuals. This suggests that any team or individual participating in organized sports may experience such unfavorable circumstances (Hoffmann et al., 2022). It is also critical to recognize that athletes are vulnerable to harassment and abuse, which can take many different forms, such as physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. For athletes, these problems have significant repercussions that impact their well-being, dignity, self-worth, and physical and mental

health (Shah, 2024). Research indicates that the victim's actions and answers may be able to stop harassing behavior in some situations (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).



**Figure 2:** Annual Distribution of Reported Cases in the National Commission for India.

Figure 2 shows that the number of complaints peaked in 2014 and was used as the benchmark (100%) for the years that followed. Every other year showed a decrease compared to 2014, and the number of complaints reached its lowest point in 2017, accounting for approximately 43% of the 2014 total. It showed a trend towards recovery after 2017. In 2021 and 2022, complaints rebounded to almost 91% of their 2014 level. However, no year was able to approach or match the peak of 2014, with the highest number of complaints during the entire period. Complaints further decreased to approximately 85% to 76% in recent years (2023-2024), respectively, indicating a declining trend that highlights the positive impacts of India's developing sports governance and safety regulations. Since 2014, the number of governments supporting initiatives and sporting organisations, including SAHAS, IOA, and AFI, has increased, with these organizations implementing improved rules and frameworks for the protection of women's and athletes' rights. As a result, the number of complaints gradually decreased from the peak in 2014. The oversight and policy changes contributed to a more effective resolution of the underlying problems.

### Types of harassment

**Psychological abuse:** Any undesirable behavior that may compromise a person's sense of identity, dignity, and self, such as isolation, incarceration, verbal abuse, humiliation, intimidation, or other forms of treatment, is considered psychological abuse (Bisgaard & Støckel, 2019). Any pattern of activity that has no justification and is meant to bother, irritate, or frighten the victim is considered stalking. Common stalker behaviors include persistent phone calls, digital stalking, surveillance at home, workplaces, or other places (Miller, 2012).

**Physical abuse:** Any deliberate and unwanted action that causes physical trauma or injury, including biting, kicking, burning, and punching, is referred to by this phrase (Mary P et al., 2025). Coerced alcohol consumption or doping techniques are examples of such behaviours, as are forced or improper physical activities (e.g., training loads that are excessive for one's age or physique or activities conducted while injured or in pain) (WHO, 2023). According to the Indian National Crime Bureau, crimes against women occur in India every 3 minutes (Haobijam & Singh, 2022). 30% of women worldwide have been victims of intimate partner or non-partner violence, including physical or sexual abuse

(Daruwalla et al., 2020).

**Sexual abuse and harassment:** Sexual abuse includes forcing or enticing someone into having intercourse, even if there is any serious violence involved, regardless of whether the victim is aware of the scenario. These behaviours could involve non-penetrative acts like masturbating, kissing, rubbing, and caressing over clothing, or they could involve physical contact like assault by penetration (like rape or oral sex). In response to instances of SH, athletes have shown signs of revulsion, anxiety, annoyance, and a range. Furthermore, rather than communal, externally oriented behaviours, they have primarily shown individual, internally focused responses (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). Both men and women are capable of sexual abuse, which is usually carried out by those in positions of authority and trust, including coaches, athletes, family members, friends, fellow athletes, and sports fans (Kim & Connaughton, 2024). Sexual harassment includes any unpleasant and undesirable sexual behaviour, whether it be physical, verbal, or nonverbal (Mountjoy, 2020).

**Gender harassment:** one of the main causes of violence and harassment against women is gender inequality (Webster et al., 2021). Given that discrimination and gender inequality are at the core of violence against women and girls, services must be both gender-responsive and gender-sensitive. These services should also provide aggressive support for women's decision-making and autonomy (UNESCO & UN Women, 2023). Women are increasingly involved in and employed in a variety of roles within the sports sector, although it is still primarily dominated by men. Women who participate in a variety of sports report having bad experiences and facing gender-specific difficulties as coaches, referees, community members, and professional athletes (Marshall et al., 2025). When someone is consistently and repeatedly treated negatively because of their gender, which is not always sexual, it is referred to as gender harassment (Brown & Stone, 2016).

**Bullying:** Includes acts like threatening someone, distributing misleading details or rumours, verbally or physically assaulting someone, and purposefully excluding someone (Fencing Association of India, 2022). The negative aspects of sports are bullying and harassment, which are off-limits to spectators and frequently disregarded by coaches and administration (Vveinhardt et al., 2020). According to research on the effects of bullying and harassment, being a victim of bullying has been connected to several detrimental mental health, anxiety, and depression symptoms, psychotic symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts (Moore & Woodcock, 2017). This claim has been supported by empirical research, which shows that exposure to harmful behaviours has several detrimental effects on individual athletes and participating sports organizations (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017).

**Cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying has become a widespread problem in the sports sector, having a major negative impact on well-being (Sharma & Johari, 2025). It is a contemporary form of harassment carried out by individuals or groups via electronic devices, primarily targeting those who would find it difficult to defend themselves (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2023). Several important features distinguish cyberbullying, including the possibility of anonymity for the offender, the capacity to reach a large audience, and the speed at which damaging content can be created and shared (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2015). Cyberbullying has been linked to a number of motivations, such as prejudice, intolerance, embarrassment, retaliation and pride (Tanrikulu & Erdur-Baker, 2021). When someone intentionally and persistently targets a child or adolescent through threats or harassment via phones or internet technologies like texting, messaging, Email, etc (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016).

**Neglect:** In India, almost a third of women athletes have been the victims of inappropriate behavior, sexual assault, or harassment by a male coach (UNESCO & UN Women, 2023). As used in this document, this term refers to a situation where a coach or other person with a duty of care to an athlete fails to provide sufficient care. This failure causes harm, allows harm to happen, or raises the possibility of harm happening soon (Fencing Association of India, 2022).

**Hazing:** In sports, Hazing is widespread. It is based on this idea and has been referred to as "deviant over-conformity" (Abell et al., 2024). Hazing is the term for violent

initiation techniques that target newbies in particular and usually involve sexual content (Fencing Association of India, 2022). According to a nationwide survey on Hazing, up to 80% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes have been victims of Hazing during their collegiate athletic careers, and 42% of these athletes also reported being hazed in high school (Diamond et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the practice of Hazing is not limited to university players; it is also common in middle and high school. Hazing occurs in middle schools at rates ranging from 5% to 17%, with sixth-grade students experiencing rates as high as 13.3% (Joseph, 2022).

### Legal Framework in India

Punishment under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Sexual and mental harassment are illegal under many provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC)

*Sexual harassment section (section 354a):* Unwelcome physical contact, sexual advances, sexually colored remarks, demand for sexual favors. Physical contact or demand for sexual favors – up to 3 years of prison, fine, or both. Sexually colored remarks -up to 1 year of prison, fine, or both.

*Outraging modesty of women (section 354):* The use of force or violence with the intent to offend a woman's modesty (includes verbal abuse, groping, inappropriate touching). 1 to 5 years of prison and a fine.

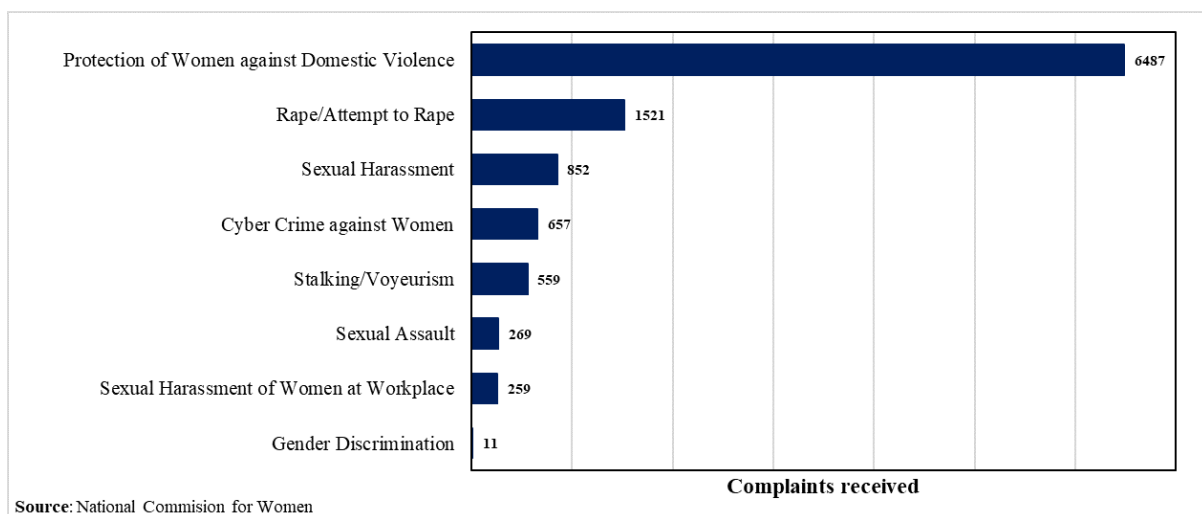
*Voyeurism (section 354c):* Capturing, watching, or distributing images of a woman in a private act without consent. *First offence:* 1 to 3 years of prison and a fine. *Second offence:* 3 to 7 years of prison and a fine.

*Stalking (section 354d):* Repeatedly contacting or following women despite apparent disinterest (including online stalking). *First offence:* up to 3 years of prison and a fine. *Second offence:* up to 5 years of prison and a fine.

*Verbal and mental harassment (section 509):* Words, gestures, or acts intended to insult a woman's modesty (using offensive language, obscene remarks, or passing lewd comments). Up to 3 years of prison, fine, or both.

*Criminal intimidation (section 503 & 506):* Making threats to harm a woman's life, reputation, or property to coerce her into doing something against her will. Up to 2 years of prison, fine, or both if the threat is to cause death or grievous harm - up to 7 years of prison, fine, or both.

*Rape (Section 375 & 376):* Any non-consensual sexual intercourse or penetration. Minimum 10 years' imprisonment (which can be extended to life imprisonment). Death penalty in extreme cases (gang rape of minors, etc.)



**Figure 3:** Category-wise Distribution of Complaints

Figure 3 reveals that domestic abuse is the most common problem facing women in

the 2023-2024 time period, with 6487 complaints registered. Sexual harassment (852) and rape or attempted rape (1521) occur next, indicating major concerns about women's safety and dignity. The prevalence of stalking/voyeurism (559) and cybercrime (657) shows novel threats in the public and digital spheres. Although the relatively low number of recorded incidences of sexual assault (269) and workplace harassment (259), these incidents still indicate persistently unsafe scenarios. Of 11 incidents reported, gender discrimination seems to be the least documented. When all factors are considered, the data emphasise persistent threats to women's rights, safety, and respect in a variety of contexts.

Protection of minors (**POCSO Act 2012**): The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, applies to women athletes under 18 years of age. Any abuse, assault, or harassment of a minor athlete by a coach, official, or another player. Minimum 3 years of prison for SH.

Punishment under the POSH Act (sexual harassment in the Workplace Act 2013): Specifically addresses SH in the workplace, including in sports training centres, stadiums, and federations. Disciplinary action (suspension, termination, or demotion). Financial compensation to the victim. Fine up to 50000.

#### ***Punishment under other laws:***

*Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986*, Distributing, publishing, or exhibiting indecent or degrading images of women. Punishment: up to 2 years of prison and a fine (for a first offence).

*Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000*, for cyberbullying and online harassment. Section 67 & 67a: Punishes obscene messages, threats, or sexually explicit content sent to women, 3 to 7 years of prison, and a fine.

#### ***Punishment under the National Sports Code of India***

The National Sports Federations (NSFs) and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) have the power to (a) permanently ban or suspend officials, coaches, or players found guilty of harassment, (b) Cancel licenses or contracts of accused personnel, (c) Withhold sponsorships and funding for federations failing to act on harassment complaints, (d) BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India), AIFF (All India Football Federation), and Hockey India have introduced strict anti-harassment policies, leading to bans on accused officials.

### **Remedial Strategies**

#### ***Individual remedies***

Individual approaches remain a contentious topic. This discussion will argue that different types of tailored relief are justified and contend that these remedies are warranted. Although 'individual' remedies can take many different forms, they are characterised by a narrow range of goals (**Hennink & Kaiser, 2022**). Individualised orders do not aim to "fix the potential broader failings in a given social system", in contrast to remedies that are referred to as "structural" (**Landau, 2019**). They can be described as strong form, requiring state actors to supply a particular good or service, or they can be 'weak form', giving public officials latitude in choosing the right course of action. These don't examine underlying economic conditions or critique government policies or laws of universal application (**Walsh, 2021**).

#### ***Organizational remedy***

(**Dempsey-Brench & Shantz, 2022**) found that administrators, coaches, volunteers, and legislators face significant obstacles. Strong institutional measures, such as enforcing zero-tolerance standards across all sports federations and requiring background checks for coaches and officials, can help prevent harassment and abuse in sports (**Dempsey-Brench & Shantz, 2022**). The results indicate a significant lack of child safety training in the sports industry. Strategies implemented to stop sexual abuse in athletic organizations, as well as the views of the groups of people impacted by these strategies (parents, athletes, coaches, and administrators). Combating misbehavior and promoting athlete well-being also depend on offering victims psychological counselling and legal help in addition to making sure training facilities are safe and thoroughly supervised (**Johansson, 2022**).

### Parental remedy

In order to protect children, parents must be aware of harassment and related safety concerns. Parents should make sure that their children's social media accounts are safe, that their personal contact information is kept hidden, and that they receive clear instructions on how to use phones and other digital devices. Children can gain confidence, self-belief, and the capacity to report unpleasant situations by being encouraged to lead self-disciplined lives and to have open conversations (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Additionally, educating children about helplines, local police contacts and social welfare services increase their readiness to ask for help when they need it.

### Sports policies

Due to the existence of various levels of sports organizations, it can be not easy to understand the framework and concepts that guide their operations. Major human rights instruments are not actively enforced by the majority of sports regulating bodies, which operate as non-profit organisations (UNESCO & UN Women, 2023). At the same time, sports organizations have established a parallel structure of essentially independent governance and accumulated various levels of wealth and influence in recent years (Tricker, 2019).

### Safe Sport Policy of the Fencing Association of India

The FAI Safe Sports policy aims to increase understanding and clarity around the definitions of harassment and abuse and establish a thorough procedure for reporting and handling abuse and harassment cases. All individuals and participants involved in the FAI are eligible to apply the policy. There are five categories: "(i) Psychological abuse, (ii) Physical abuse, (iii) Sexual harassment, (iv) Sexual abuse, and (v) Neglect". According to the 2008/2016 IOC consensus statements, harassment and abuse are on a continuum and should not be distinguished from one another. It must be demonstrated that the harassment is severe or persistent to be actionable. Abuse and harassment can occur in person, online, or through other channels. *Reporting and Procedures:* Anyone concerned about a potential case of abuse or harassment related to FAI operations should report it. People who have been directly impacted by an incident of harassment or abuse, as well as those who have seen it happen, can report it. Anyone who, in good faith, discloses a potential instance of harassment or abuse will not face retaliation for filing a complaint or Report, and their identity will be kept confidential.

- Incidents of harassment and abuse can be reported to the FAI Safeguarding Officer or the designated staff for safe sport at FAI headquarters.
- Use the form in ANNEXURE 1 or send it by Email to FAI (Fencing Association of India, 2022).

### Sanctions

The chairperson of the Safe Sports Commission will initiate an investigation if the complaint or Report falls under the FAI's purview. Moreover, for the recommendations and conclusion to be final, the Safe Sports Commission chairperson would be provided with the investigation report and findings. The Safe Sports Commission may impose appropriate fines or sanctions in cases where it is found that a policy violation has occurred.

- A formal warning and a fine, Temporary suspension, Termination
- A permanent ban from FAI governance, events, programs, and competitions.
- Any other sanction is considered appropriate in the circumstances (Fencing Association of India, 2022).

### Safeguarding athletes from harassment & abuse in sports (SAHAS)

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) is committed to safeguarding our athletes and implementing policies to prevent harassment and abuse, while promoting a safe and inclusive environment. AFI has created a safeguarding policy to help stakeholders avoid abuse and harassment. The process of protecting individuals and children who are at risk from exploitation, abuse, and harassment is known as safeguarding. Establishing a friendly

and secure atmosphere. The Athletics Federation of India will review the policy once a year. All the participants and individuals involved in AFI-affiliated states and districts, their member associations, officials, coaches, concerned staff at coaching venues, camps, training centers, competition venues, athletes, the AFI office, AFI staff, and any member associated with AFI can apply the policy.

Gender harassment, SH, Abuse, Hazing, Physical abuse, psychological abuse, Sexual abuse, Neglect (Shah, 2024).

### Reporting and procedures

The SAHAS committee, which works to protect athletes from harassment and abuse in sports, can be reached by email: [safeguard@indianathletics.in](mailto:safeguard@indianathletics.in) or by contacting the committee members themselves. According to the policy, all stakeholders are encouraged to report harassment or abuse to the SAHAS committee, which will look into the situation and take the necessary action within 3 months of the incident date or in the event of a string of incidents, from the date of the most recent incident. Any individual who feels that they have been the victim of harassment, abuse, or exploitation may submit a written complaint to the SAHAS Chair (along with supporting documentation) or send an email to [safeguard@indianathletics.in](mailto:safeguard@indianathletics.in). The offended party or complainant shall notify the SAHAS Committee immediately while the investigation is in progress so that the committee can take the necessary disciplinary measures. The AFI ensures victim confidentiality and has a policy to shield victims from repercussions. The AFI plans to provide counselling and therapy, as well as other support services, to athletes who have been the victims of harassment or abuse.

### Penalties

Issuing a letter of warning, transfer or suspension without pay, and withholding of promotion or increments. The fine is deducted from the salary of the alleged person for payment as compensation to the aggrieved person. Dismissal of the alleged person or removal from the team.

### IOA safe sport policy

The IOA Safe Sport Policy encourages best practices and provides athletes of all ages with proper safety and protection. At the same time, they participate in Indian Olympic activities, enabling participants to respond confidently and intelligently to specific safeguarding and athlete/child protection issues. According to the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), everyone who is involved in sports, including players, staff, officials, and volunteers, has the right to play in a welcoming and safe environment free from all types of violence, abuse, discrimination, neglect, and exploitation. The IOA general body approved this policy on 30 December 2019 (Indian Olympic Association, 2019).

### Reporting and procedure

Following the procedure, everyone is encouraged to file a report using the appropriate channels. Anyone who, in good faith, reports a potential instance of harassment or abuse will not face retaliation for coming forward. Their identity will be kept private. Those directly impacted and others who have been a potential instance of harassment or abuse can report it. Allegations of harassment and abuse can be reported to the *IOA Safeguarding Officer, the Chief of Mission of the Games, the IOA Executive Director, or the Director on Duty for the Games, Events, or Program Meeting*. \*Use the form in ANNEXURE 1 or send it by email to [ioa@olympic.ind.in](mailto:ioa@olympic.ind.in).

### For sanctions

The safeguarding officer (SGO) may impose appropriate fines or penalties in cases where it is determined that a breach of the policy has occurred. The penalties are: A formal warning and fine, temporary suspension, termination, and a permanent ban from IOA events, programs, and games (Indian Olympic Association, 2019).

### Government support initiatives for women's safety in India

She Box: an online portal for SH complaints at the workplace. The program, which was initiated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, is available to all women,

regardless of their profession. When a complaint is filed in the 'she-box', it is immediately forwarded to the proper authority for resolution. In the event of workplace harassment, this approach guarantees accountability and a timely resolution (Ministry Of Women And Child Development, 2025).

**Nirbhaya fund:** for women's safety projects like panic buttons in buses, CCTVs, and police support. Women's safety and security globally is essential in the Ministry of Women, Children, and Development. The ministry has established a special fund called the Nirbhaya Fund to finance safety projects nationwide in response to the dramatic increase in crimes against women (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2025).

**Mahila police volunteers (MPVs):** women volunteers assisting victims of domestic violence and harassment. The purpose of the initiative, which is being carried out in collaboration with the MHA, is to develop and strengthen mahila police volunteers who act as a connection between the community and the police, supporting women in need and combating crimes against women (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2019).

**One-stop centers (OSC):** provide shelter and support to distressed women. Moreover, it provides medical, legal, and counselling. Which were set up under the Nirbhaya fund, provide comprehensive support to women who have been victims of violence. These centres enable a coordinated response to different types of violence against women by offering support all in one location (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2025).

**Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BP):** campaign to stop violence against girls and gender discrimination. The government launched the program on January 22, 2015. The Ministries of Education, Health and Family Welfare, and Women and Child Development collaborated to run it. This initiatives main goals were to support education for girls and address the issue of the falling child sex ratio (CSR) at the national level (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2025).

<https://www.ncw.gov.in/> : Helpline numbers for women's safety in India. The government launched the women helpline (WHL) program to make share that women who are victims of violence, whether at home or in public, can obtain a variety of support services by using information and referrals from an integrated organization. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) has developed a women's helpline, reachable at the state-level toll-free num18such as 181, to provide swift emergency assistance to victims of violence.

**Women's helpline (All India):** 181, police emergency number:112, National Commission for Women (NCW) helpline: 7827- 170- 170, Women's helpline (Delhi):1091, cybercrime helpline: 1930, domestic violence helpline:181, child helpline (for girls below 18 years):1098, legal aid for women (NLSA):15100 (National Commission for Women, 2025).

## Results

The review demonstrates how sporting culture, along with established power dynamics, creates an environment that enables ongoing harassment of women athletes. Unmonitored power held by to senior athletes, their coaches, and administrators' results in systems that allow abuse to continue unchecked. Neo-institutional theory states that athletes are discouraged from using statutory protection mechanisms by athletic institutions frequent reliance on unofficial norms, silence, and internal practices (Moon et al., 2022). Zero-tolerance frameworks, which serve as symbolic policies, fail when used as standalone solutions because they need preventive and restorative measures to enable reporting.

Athletes, coaches, officials, parents, and administrators must participate in awareness-based education programs about boundaries, consent, reporting procedures, and the psychological effects of abusive behavior to implement effective preventive measures. By implementing safeguarding training programs and offering access to psychological counselling services during elite and international contests, sports groups may foster an environment that prevents harassment. Nirbhaya funds, women's helplines, and external support systems are essential resources. However, their absence in sports governance systems makes it difficult for women athletes to obtain justice and receive comprehensive

support. Sports federations, legal authorities, and welfare agencies need to work together more effectively to achieve this goal.

The governance framework of "safe sport" needs to incorporate this principle as a fundamental governing element. Younger athletes can be favorably influenced, and a culture of safety can be promoted by coaches, referees, and senior athletes who set an example of good behavior. The responsibilities of athletes who serve as community role models require them to maintain high safety standards. Sports organizations should mandate safeguarding training for athletes, coaches, and officials to avoid harassment and foster a safe sporting culture. Athletes' competing in top and international events should also have access to psychological support services. Indian athletes face cultural and social pressures that act as obstacles that prevent them from reporting incidents, thus establishing a need for extensive systematic changes to existing policies. To create a secure sports environment where women athletes can compete without fear of harassment, long-term structural changes are required.

### Discussion

In addition to emphasizing the necessity of integrated preventative tactics and safe sport programs in India at the individual, organizational, and parental levels, this study sought to provide an overview of the current knowledge surrounding harassment and abuse of female athletes in sports.

The fact that verbal bullying and psychological harassment are the most common but least recognized types of abuse in sports is one of the primary insights drawn from this analysis. In competitive sporting situations, negative communication, isolation and reputational damage are often normalized, although sexual harassment attracts relatively more legal and public attention. According to existing studies, harassment can have significant and enduring negative consequences on athletes personal and professional lives, underscoring the significance of protecting athlete welfare (Mountjoy, 2020).

The study further investigated the existence of legal safeguards and their effective implementation. The IPC, POSH Act, IT Act and National sports code provide India with a strong legal framework; yet, awareness, availability and implementation are still inefficient. Many women athletes are either not aware of their rights or lack the institutional support necessary to report infractions in a safe manner, especially those who compete at the grassroots, district, and rural levels. This disconnect reinforces earlier observations that legal remedies when not accompanied by awareness-building and institutional accountability, fail to provide meaningful protection (Mahmoudi & Moss, 2020b). Furthermore, among athletes, verbal bullying was found to be one of the most common types of harassment. Findings from the Australian Sports Commission Report, similarly identified verbal bullying as the most common type of bullying in sports (Mattey et al., 2014). Many victims choose not to come forward.

Since the 2014 peak, the number of complaints has been falling, which could be a sign of the favourable effect of new safe sport programs and governance changes implemented by organisations like the IOA, AFI, and FAI. A decrease in complaints may not always turn into fewer incidences; it could also be the result of ongoing underreporting motivated by mistrust of complaints procedures, fear of reprisals, stigma, and career consequences. High profile incidents', such as the allegations made by Olympic wrestler Sakshi malik against Brij Bhushan Singh said in her recently published book "Witness" that Singh attempted to harass her sexually in 2012 (Selvaraj & Malik, 2024).shows that even well-known athletes encounter institutional opposition and a protracted legal process. This supports the claim that athletes are much more susceptible to systemic silence since they lack social capital and media attention.

While this review offers valuable insights into the harassment that women athletes face in sports, it is crucial to consider several limitations when evaluating the results. In particular, the review focuses on studies related to athletes' perceptions of SH.

Future safeguarding regulations and preventative tactics may benefit from the synthesis of recurrent themes found in many investigations. The review primarily examined studies involving women athletes experiencing harassment by male perpetrators

in sports settings. It is crucial to understand the diverse combinations of gender and sexuality. The experiences and reactions to harassment may differ depending on the gender and sexual orientations combinations of both victims and offenders. As a result, more investigation is required to examine the various combinations of gender, sexual orientation, and status among SH victims and offenders. Although the study acknowledges that cultural perspectives on SH can differ, it focuses solely on athletes' perspectives in one province, which may limit the broad applicability of the results (Luthar & Luthar, 2007).

### Conclusion

This scoping review demonstrates that harassment and abuse against women athletes remain significant concerns in sports despite the presence of legal protections and safeguarding policies in India. Although frameworks such as the IPC, POSH Act, POCSO Act, and Safe Sport policies provide procedural mechanisms for protection, their effectiveness is limited by underreporting, fear of retaliation, institutional power imbalances, inadequate awareness, and inconsistent enforcement practices. The reports indicate that without the support of open reporting systems, partial monitoring systems, safeguarding education, and organizational responsibility, legal and policy measures alone are insufficient to guarantee athlete safety. The study also emphasizes how informal institutional practices and sociocultural hurdles continue to deter reporting and undermine the application of athlete protection laws, especially at local and regional levels.

As a result, the study backs the necessity if an integrated safeguarding framework that incorporates organizational transformation, psychological assistance, educational interventions, legal accountability, and cultural change within sports organizations. Increasing cooperation between welfare organizations, sports federations, and law enforcement may help create more secure and welcoming sports settings for female athletes. Thus, safeguarding must to be acknowledged as an essential part of athlete welfare and sport governance in India.

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