



## COACHING

# Male Coaches' Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault as Perceived by Female Athletes in India and Pakistan

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## Abstract

*The #MeToo Movement has brought sexual harassment, abuse, and assault experienced by females to the forefront of society. Within the athletic realm, this falls under the umbrella term “maltreatment of athletes.” While maltreatment has been reported for decades, victims’ voices have been amplified in recent years. For various political and social reasons, the maltreatment of female athletes from around the world is not as well understood. In this study, female athletes from India and Pakistan reported their perceptions of maltreatment by male coaches. Female athletes with male coaches in both countries participated in this study (N = 395). The athletes represented a large variety of sports (> 26). Participants ( $M_{age} = 20.57 \pm 2.59$ ;  $M_{years\ of\ athletic\ experience} = 2.73 \pm 1.49$ ) completed the Sport-Specific Touch and Behaviour Versus Unwanted Intimacy From Coaches questionnaire. Three composite dependent variables were assessed: Unwanted Sexual Behavior, Physical and Verbal Behavior With a Sexual Undertone, and Sexist and Discriminatory Behavior. Main effect differences for the three*

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*composite variables were observed for country ( $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$ ), with no differences observed for type of sport or the interaction effect. The Pakistani athletes reported greater acceptance of male coaches' maltreatment than did the Indian athletes. The observed differences were large (i.e., Hedges'  $g$  values ranging from 1.91 to 3.00). Female athletes from Pakistan were more accepting than were Indian athletes of a wide range of sexual maltreatment experiences by their male coaches. There is an urgent need to eradicate such behaviors from the sports world.*

Sexual misconduct and violence are serious public health and human rights issues that negatively affect women's emotional, physical, mental, reproductive, and social well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011, 2020). Unfortunately, they occur too frequently across a range of social institutions and settings, including many that were historically assumed to be safe (WHO, 2012). One reason some of these institutions and settings were assumed to be safe is that relatively few cases were reported (Taylor & Hardin, 2017). However, this does not mean that occurrences had not happened or were not happening. For example, 77% of sexual assault cases in the United States go unreported (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017). The #MeToo Movement has changed this by bringing sexual harassment, abuse, and assault experienced by females to the forefront of society, particularly in the workplace (Ohlheiser, 2017). This has also extended into the sports realm (Reel & Crouch, 2019), where it falls under the umbrella heading of "maltreatment of athletes" (Kerr et al., 2019).

The impact of the maltreatment of athletes in sports is devastating. There are both short- and long-term consequences, such as decreased confidence, performance, self-esteem, spiritual health, and trust (Riazi et al., 2017). The primary perpetrators of maltreatment are male coaches with their primary victims being female athletes (Fasting et al., 2011). The perpetrators inflict their egregious behavior across a range of sports-related activities and settings such as social events, training, and travel (Brackenridge et al., 2008). In the coach-athlete relationship, the balance of power resides with the coach; the athlete is in their charge. As such, coaches have immense control in shaping their athletes' sporting careers and lives (Holt, 2016; Lerner et al., 2012). For example, they control a variety of direct (e.g., roster selection, lineup, playing time) and indirect (e.g.,

physical, psychological, and social) outcomes. (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Holt, 2016). Given this, they have a duty to create an optimal learning environment that fosters and supports athletic and life success (Jeckell et al., 2018; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Mountjoy et al., 2015; Parent & Fortier, 2018; Yabe et al., 2018). Maltreatment is the antithesis of this.

Pertaining to the maltreatment of female athletes, one specific form is sexual abuse. This includes sexual attention, coercion, and grooming behaviors by the coach. Such behaviors may cascade over time with the athlete increasingly feeling entrapped. Nearly a quarter-century ago, Kirby and Greaves (1996) reported the extent to which this happens. Among their study participants, 20% reported having sexual intercourse with a person in an authority position in their sport. Fasting et al. (2004) reported that 51% of the Norwegian female athletes in their study experienced sexual harassment from their coaches. In a cross-national study (i.e., Czech Republic, Greece, and Norway), 34% of the female athletes across the three countries reported experiencing harassment and unwanted sexual behavior from their male coaches (Fasting et al., 2011). Sand et al.'s (2011) study participants also reported experiencing authoritarian coaching behaviors and sexual harassment from their male coaches. It is unclear how much similar behavior occurs in non-Western societies, though Ahmed et al. (2018) did conduct a factor analytic study of the Sport-Specific Touch and Behavior Versus Unwanted Intimacy From Coaches questionnaire (Vanden Auweele et al., 2008) among female athletes in India. While their work was primarily psychometric in nature, 31% of the female athletes in their study reported experiencing serious and unacceptable maltreatment from their male coaches.

## **Geopolitical Background**

For the two centuries preceding their independence in 1947, India and Pakistan were united as one nation under British rule. When they were granted their independence and separated into two nations, it was largely on the basis of geopolitical grounds, with India being a secular-democratic nation and Pakistan being an Islamic nation. Irrespective of their geopolitical boundaries, both countries are patriarchal. However, Pakistan is thought to be more conservative than India (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; "Say No," 2018). As a result,

Pakistani women are believed to have less control over their lives (Caldwell, 1986).

Given these circumstances, sexual harassment, abuse, and assault of females may be high in both countries (Ali et al., 2011). This is deduced from Ahmed et al.'s (2018) findings and newspaper articles and governments reports in India (Bhattacharya, 2020; Borpujari, 2020; Venkatanarayanan, 2020) and newspaper accounts in Pakistan (Chauhan, 2014; Hadi, 2017; Saleem, 2019). It is also possible that such occurrences are grossly underreported. For example, during 2011–2019, only 45 women filed sexual harassment cases with the 24 Sports Authority of India's affiliated institutes (Vasavda, 2020). In Pakistan, more than 66% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment and assault in their day-to-day life ("Say No," 2018; Tahir, 2017). Furthermore, although Pakistani women expressed their interest in sports, they also reported sexual harassment and misconduct as impediments to their participation (Laar et al., 2018). Four female cricketers bravely drew attention to this when they reported being told that to make the national team, they had to engage in sexual relationships with those involved in selecting the team (Khan, 2013).

## **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Much of the information about the situation in India and Pakistan comes from anecdotal accounts. This study addresses this more systematically by quantifying female athletes' perceptions of maltreatment experiences—specifically as they pertain to a range of sexist and sexual abuse situations—in India and Pakistan. This information may illuminate the issue within the sports world; give female athletes a safe place to share their experiences without fear of retaliation; and ultimately help to restore an optimal, task-oriented learning environment whereby athletic excellence and sports participation can be freely pursued. With that in mind, this study answers these research questions:

1. Do female athletes from India and Pakistan perceive and experience maltreatment occurrences differently?
2. Do female athletes from India and Pakistan who engage in individual versus team sports perceive and experience maltreatment occurrences differently?

## Method

### Research Design

This was a cross-sectional study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Gomal University, Pakistan (Reference number: 2053/SSPE/GU/PK).

### Participants

A voluntary sample of female athletes being trained by male coaches were recruited to participate in this study ( $N = 395$ ). They were recruited through two public universities, one in India ( $n = 180$ ) and one in Pakistan ( $n = 215$ ). They participated in  $> 26$  different sports. For the purposes of this study, these diverse sports were categorized as being either individual (i.e.,  $n_{\text{India}} = 75$ ,  $n_{\text{Pakistan}} = 202$ ) or team (i.e.,  $n_{\text{India}} = 105$ ,  $n_{\text{Pakistan}} = 13$ ). The study participants from India had a mean age of 22.21 ( $SD = 2.37$ ) years and a mean 3.04 ( $SD = 1.92$ ) years of athletic experience. Those from Pakistan had a mean age of 19.20 ( $SD = 1.86$ ) years and a mean 2.48 ( $SD = 0.92$ ) years of athletic experience.

### Procedure

The principal investigators contacted college principals and other concerned authorities at each institution to discuss the objectives of the study and to obtain their approval to conduct the research. With their approval, participants were approached through various means such as through email, during on- and off-field practice sessions, and at university conferences and workshops. Contact was made by one of two female research assistants. The research assistant in India was studying for a master of physical education degree, whereas the research assistant from Pakistan was studying for a master of philosophy degree in physical education. They were both athletes/former athletes. The research assistants informed the potential study participants of their rights as research participants, including that their study participation was voluntary, they had a right to quit at any time, and their responses would be kept confidential. If they agreed, they were asked to provide their informed consent and they were then given the study questionnaire packet. The questionnaire packet could be completed at their convenience, including during

their sports practice time, and returned in person or through email or post mail in a return envelope that was provided.

## Measures

The questionnaire packet consisted of two parts. The first part collected biographical information (e.g., age, sport, number of years participating). For the second part, the participants completed the Vanden Auweele et al. (2008) Sport-Specific Touch and Behavior Versus Unwanted Intimacy From Coaches questionnaire. The subscales of the questionnaire, all of which had acceptable internal consistency values (Cronbach, 1951) within the sample, included Unwanted Sexual Behavior (14 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ), Physical and Verbal Behavior With a Sexual Undertone (5 items, Cronbach  $\alpha = .72$ ), and Sexist and Discriminatory Behavior (3 items, Cronbach  $\alpha = .77$ ). Sample items for each subscale included "Coach makes a sexual remark about you" (Unwanted Sexual Behavior), "Coach makes flattering remarks about your appearance that left you feeling uncomfortable" (Physical and Verbal Behavior With a Sexual Undertone), and "Coach is telling dirty jokes or stories" (Sexist and Discriminatory Behavior). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = *the behavior is completely acceptable*; 2 = *the behavior is acceptable, but suspicious*; 3 = *the behavior is unacceptable, but not that serious*; 4 = *the behavior is unacceptable and should be taken seriously*; and 5 = *the behavior is unacceptable and should be taken very seriously*.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (e.g.,  $M$ ,  $SD$ ) were computed first. Data were then analyzed with a 2 (Country)  $\times$  2 (Type of Sport: Individual vs. Team) multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), with the covariate being age. As an adjunct to the MANCOVA results, eta-squared values were computed and interpreted against Cohen's (1988) guidelines, where 0.01 = small, 0.06 = medium, and 0.14 = large differences. Given a significant omnibus test result, descriptive discriminant analysis was implemented as a follow-up procedure (Barton et al., 2016). As a measure of effect size, mean score differences were calculated and compared through Hedges'  $g$ , with values interpreted through Thomas et al.'s (1991) guidelines (i.e.,  $< 0.41$  = small,  $0.41$ – $0.70$  = moderate, and  $> 0.70$  = large).

## Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for each subscale item. A main effect difference for country was observed and the effect was large, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .69$ ,  $F(1, 394) = 56.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$ . No main effect difference was observed for type of sport, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .99$ ,  $F(1, 394) = .839$ ,  $p = .473$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ . Likewise, there was no observed interaction effect, Wilks'  $\Lambda = .99$ ,  $F(1, 394) = 1.21$ ,  $p = .306$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ .

As a follow-up to the observed country difference, the overall descriptive discriminant analysis revealed that the female athletes from India and Pakistan differed significantly on each of the three subscale composite variables,  $\Lambda = .30$ ,  $\chi^2(3, N = 394) = 464.63$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . Specifically, large differences were observed for Unwanted Sexual Behavior (i.e., India:  $M = 13.57$ ,  $SD = 2.26$  vs. Pakistan:  $M = 6.78$ ,  $SD = 3.64$ , Hedges'  $g = 2.20$ ), Physical and Verbal Behavior With a Sexual Undertone (i.e., India:  $M = 20.73$ ,  $SD = 3.99$  vs. Pakistan:  $M = 11.04$ ,  $SD = 5.83$ , Hedges'  $g = 1.91$ ), and Sexist and Discriminatory Behavior (i.e., India:  $M = 64.31$ ,  $SD = 8.10$  vs. Pakistan:  $M = 31.75$ ,  $SD = 12.70$ , Hedges'  $g = 3.00$ ). The female athletes from India perceived the various coaching behaviors to be unacceptable more than the female athletes from Pakistan did.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Sexual Abuse Subscales and Each Item Within the Subscale*

Subscale/item	Perception <sup>1</sup>	
	India <i>M ± SD</i>	Pakistan <i>M ± SD</i>
Unwanted Sexual Behavior		
Coach tells a sexist joke	4.56 ± .879	2.16 ± 1.64
Coach is telling dirty jokes or stories	4.60 ± .836	2.33 ± 1.58
Coach invites you to the movies, dinner, etc.	4.41 ± 1.11	2.29 ± 1.61
Physical and Verbal Behavior With a Sexual Undertone		
Coach makes flattering remarks about your appearance that left you feeling uncomfortable	4.44 ± 1.10	2.17 ± 1.50
Coach compliments or makes a comment about your figure	4.40 ± 1.11	2.14 ± 1.55

**Table 1 (cont.)**

Subscale/item	Perception <sup>1</sup>	
	India <i>M ± SD</i>	Pakistan <i>M ± SD</i>
Coach gives more attention (not instruction related) to you than to your other teammates	3.83 ± 1.49	2.20 ± 1.66
Coach gives massage on the back side of your body	3.53 ± 1.59	2.27 ± 1.63
Coach gives massage on the front side of your body	4.54 ± 8.67	2.26 ± 1.54
<b>Sexist and Discriminatory Behavior</b>		
Coach is staring at you during showering	4.34 ± 1.07	2.24 ± 1.52
Coach gives you a (romantic) present	4.44 ± 1.03	2.06 ± 1.40
Coach proposes a sexual encounter and issues a threat for rejection	4.47 ± 1.11	2.37 ± 1.47
Coach is flirting with you and/or others on your team	4.33 ± 1.11	2.16 ± 1.54
Coach proposes sexual encounter, promising a reward in turn	4.54 ± 9.41	2.27 ± 1.41
Coach makes a sexual remark about you	4.69 ± 7.57	2.36 ± 1.55
Coach shows you his private parts	4.77 ± 6.61	2.43 ± 1.54
Coach kisses you or embraces you with a sexual undertone	4.73 ± 7.61	2.33 ± 1.68
Coach makes sexual remarks about you	4.62 ± 8.53	2.33 ± 1.67
Coach touches your private parts or forces you to do so to someone else	4.60 ± 8.63	2.26 ± 1.54
Coach kisses you on your mouth	4.66 ± 8.20	2.29 ± 1.61
Coach touches you unnecessarily, deliberately (not instructional related)	4.66 ± 8.07	2.13 ± 1.51
Coach has an intimate relationship with an athlete under the legal age of consent	4.74 ± 6.72	2.33 ± 1.49

*Note.* Athletes' general perception about the sexual abuse and harassment items derived from a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = *the behavior is completely acceptable*; 2 = *the behavior is acceptable, but suspicious*; 3 = *the behavior is unacceptable, but not that serious*; 4 = *the behavior is unacceptable and should be taken seriously*; and 5 = *the behavior is unacceptable and should be taken very seriously*.

## Discussion

The results show significant and large differences between female athletes in India and Pakistan in terms of their acceptance of and experience with unwanted sexual behavior, physical and verbal behavior with a sexual undertone, and sexist and discriminatory behavior from their coaches. Whereas the Indian athletes view every statement on Vanden Auweele et al.'s (2008) questionnaire as being unacceptable to one degree or another, the Pakistani athletes view the same statements as acceptable to one degree or another. This includes a wide variety of behaviors that are abhorrent, lewd, and even illegal (e.g., "Coach shows you his private parts"; "Coach touches your private parts or forces you to do so to someone else"; "Coach has an intimate relationship with an athlete under the legal age of consent"). The differences are irrespective of type of sport (i.e., individual or team). While not specifically examined in this study, different cultural ethos may have affected the results, at least in part.

Anti-sexual harassment laws are highly influenced by a country's patriarchal power structure (Fasting et al., 2011). While both India and Pakistan are patriarchal countries, India is a secular-democratic culture, whereas Pakistan is a conservative Islamic culture. Sexual harassment and assault are highly prevalent in the daily lives of women in Pakistan (Nation, 2018). Perhaps this has desensitized the Pakistani athletes to advances from their coaches.

Though the differences in this study are profound, caution to avoid "othering" the Pakistani athletes, coaches, and society is necessary (Powell & Menendian, 2017). That is, the maltreatment of athletes, including sexist language and sexual abuse, is occurring in a wide range of countries (e.g., Czech Republic, Greece, India, Norway, United States). As such, although the personal, organizational, and societal level factors may vary across countries, the emphasis needs to be on preventing and stopping such behaviors from occurring across countries, reforming perpetrators, and supporting victims.

Some evidence also suggests that athletes and the sports culture are more tolerant of such behaviors. For example, athletes are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual victimization in comparison to nonathletes (Navarro & Tewksbury, 2017) and at least certain sports have masculine and violent tendencies (McMahon, 2007). Having been an athlete also increases the odds that a person will enter

the coaching profession (Cunningham & Singer, 2010; Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998), and males are more likely to be interested in pursuing coaching careers than are females (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008). If sport settings are a potential breeding ground for sex offenders, the entire sporting enterprise is in serious jeopardy. Governing bodies in the United States and elsewhere are taking actions to prevent this from happening (e.g., Mountjoy et al., 2015; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017; Solstad & Strandbu, 2019; Vertommen et al., 2016).

Successful coaches also work with their athletes and their teams to communicate effectively, build trust, and mutually support one another (LaVoi, 2007). This occurs over time, with coaches, individual athletes, and teammates sometimes developing feelings of “love” for their team, one another, and/or their teammates, all of which can result in genuine ethical dilemmas if the feelings become sensual (Johansson et al., 2016). Organizational structures can discourage such escalation, and the topic needs to be earnestly addressed in coaching education (Fasting et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2017).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (2020) **S**ocial norms, **T**each, **O**pportunities, **P**rotective, and **S**upport **V**ictims—or STOP SV—framework offers guidance in this area. In brief, the framework emphasizes the promotion of social norms that protect people from experiencing violence. Skills in the prevention of sexual violence should be taught. Opportunities that empower and support girls and women should be provided. Environments that are protective and safe should be created. Finally, victims/survivors of sexual violence should be provided supports that lessen the harms inflicted upon them.

Toward this end, the Futures Without Violence (<https://www.coachescorner.org/>) nonprofit organization disseminates free resource materials specific to sports, including the Coaching Boys Into Men program. This is an evidence-based violence prevention program aimed at coaches, who in turn teach the young male athletes in their charge about respecting themselves and others, especially girls and women. Randomized studies support the efficacy of this program (Miller et al., 2020), including a study conducted in India (Miller et al., 2014). Moreover, and with full awareness that coaches typically devote very little of their annual time to formal

coach education (Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2006), coaches are receptive to learning about and implementing the Coaching Boys Into Men program (Jaime et al., 2015). This suggests that coaches' recognize the problems the program seeks to address and that change is needed.

Further, sport settings serve as a platform for advancing social movements, draw attention to social injustices, and support conditions that result in social change (Klavora, 2012). As but a few examples, they have helped refugees resettle in Australia; promoted migrant inclusion in the European Union; challenged racial and human rights violations in the former Nazi Germany; helped bring an end to apartheid in South Africa; and drawn attention to civil rights, gender-equity, and police violence in the United States. In a recent landmark study, they have been used in Iraq as part of the post-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) era to foster social cohesion and mitigate prejudice between Christians and Muslims (Mousa, 2020). In other words, sports sometimes transcend participation and performance. Perhaps programs such as Coaching Boys Into Men can be culturally adapted, implemented, and used to rid sexist language, lewd behavior, and sexual abuse and violence from sports on a global scale?

Other possible steps include development of positions papers and/or becoming signatories or adopters of existing ones that pertain to upholding an ethos of nondiscriminatory language and zero tolerance for sexual abuse, assault, and/or misconduct. From this, organizations and institutions need to establish policies, develop reporting mechanisms that are nonretaliatory, and have clear punishments in place for perpetrators (e.g., zero-tolerance policy with violators banned from coaching; Donnelly et al., 2016). Educational programs and workshops for athletes, coaches, parents, and the media are all necessary.

Like all studies, this one is not without limitations. First, the study participants were all volunteers, which limits generalizability. Second, the study participants completed the questionnaire at the time and place most convenient to them. While this is believed to be the most respectful approach to take, it may have inadvertently introduced a source of error. Third, self-report data are open to various sources of error, such as item interpretation, recall, and social

desirability. Fourth, the study assesses participants' perceptions about highly sensitive topics. Personal experience, which was not assessed, may have impacted responses in an indeterminate manner.

Two research questions were addressed in this study. First, do female athletes from India and Pakistan perceive and experience maltreatment occurrences differently? Yes—Pakistani female athletes were more tolerant of their coaches unwanted sexual behavior, physical and verbal behavior with a sexual undertone, and sexist and discriminatory behavior than were Indian female athletes. Second, do female athletes from India and Pakistan who engage in individual versus team sports perceive and experience maltreatment occurrences differently? No—although the athletes in this study came from an array of sports, including both individual and team, type of sport was unrelated to maltreatment.

For continued facilitation of understanding in this area, additional research is warranted. For example, what mechanisms support male coaches engaging in sexist, predatory, and illegal behaviors? Why are Pakistani female athletes more accepting of these behaviors than are Indian female athletes? Are athletes groomed to become increasingly tolerant of more severe types of behaviors? And, most importantly, how can such behaviors be prevented and stopped? Although this study compares the situation in India and Pakistan, the extant literature suggests that abusive, discriminatory, lewd, and sexist behaviors toward female athletes are being perpetrated by male coaches around the globe. This situation is in urgent need of attention. Toward that end, multiple recommendations have been advanced.

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