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## Prevalence and Patterns of Sexual Harassment among Elite Female Athletes: A Comprehensive Study of Individual and Team Games

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### Abstract

Sexual harassment is a scourge that affects various aspects of society, including the world of sports. In India, where sports are a significant part of the country's culture and identity, sexual harassment can have a profound impact on athletes, coaches, and staff. The purpose of the study was to find out the prevalence and patterns of sexual harassment among elite Indian female athletes of individual and team games. For the purpose of the study, a sample of 150 elite female athletes belonging to different states of India of different games and sports were selected as subjects, by using a purposive sampling technique. For the purpose of measuring sexual harassment of female athletes, the researcher had selected Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) of Fitzgerald et al. being constructed and standardized in 1995. To find out the significance of difference of variances and the significance of mean difference in sexual harassment among female athletes of individual and team games of India, Levene's test was applied by using SPSS software. The level of significance was set at 0.05. It is concluded that incidences of sexual harassment are more among sportswomen of team games in comparison to sportswomen of individual games.

**Keywords:** Sexual harassment, Elite Athlete, Individual sports, Team games, Sexual Experience Questionnaire.

### INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a pervasive and insidious form of violence that affects individuals of all genders, ages, and backgrounds. It can take many forms, from unwanted touching and explicit comments to coerced sex and stalking. Sexual harassment can occur in any setting, including workplaces, schools, public spaces, sports arenas and online platforms. Despite its prevalence, sexual harassment remains a widely underreported and misunderstood issue, with many victims fearing retaliation, shame, or disbelief if they speak out. The impact of sexual harassment can be devastating, leading to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and even physical harm. It is essential to acknowledge the severity of sexual harassment and work towards creating a culture of consent, respect, and accountability, where everyone can feel safe and valued.

Sexual harassment is a scourge that affects various aspects of society, including the world of sports. In India, where sports are a significant part of the country's culture and identity, sexual harassment can have a profound impact on athletes, coaches, and staff. From unwanted advances and inappropriate comments to abuse of power and coercion, sexual harassment can create a toxic environment that undermines the very fabric of sports. In Indian sports, where male dominance and patriarchal attitudes often prevail, female athletes and staff may be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. The power dynamics at play in sports, where coaches and officials often wield significant influence, can further exacerbate the problem.

As per The International Olympic Committee (2007), the sexual harassment may be defined as “the behavior towards an individual or group that involves sexualized verbal, non- verbal or physical behavior whether intended or unintended, legal or illegal that is based upon an abuse of power and trust that is considered by the victim or a bystander to be unwanted or coerced”.

Despite the growing recognition of sexual harassment as a serious issue in Indian society, the sports sector remains largely untouched. It is essential to acknowledge the prevalence of sexual harassment in Indian sports and take concrete steps to prevent it, support victims, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Only then can we create a safe and inclusive environment for all athletes to thrive and reach their full potential.

Till (1980) had classified sexual harassment into five categories, namely: (1) Gender harassment which is generalized sexist remarks and behaviour. Such behaviour is not necessarily designed to elicit sexual cooperation, but rather to convey insulting, degrading, or sexist attitudes about women, (2) seductive behaviour is inappropriate and offensive but essentially sanction-free sexual advances (although such behaviour is unwanted or offensive and there is no penalty attached to the woman's negative response), (3) sexual bribery: the solicitation of sexual activity or other sex-related behaviour by promise or reward, (4) sexual coercion: coercion of sexual activity by threat or punishment, and (5) sexual imposition or assault: sexual crimes and misdemeanors, including rape and sexual assault. Fitzgerald et al. (1995) reorganized Till's five types of sexual harassment into three dimensions i.e., (i) Gender Harassment (ii) Unwanted Sexual Attention (iii) Sexual Coercion.

Sexual harassment and abuse are pervasive issues affecting all sports and levels of competition, with elite sports exhibiting higher prevalence rates. Individuals in positions of power, such as coaches and officials, are often the primary perpetrators, while peer athletes may also be involved. Research indicates that males are more frequently reported as perpetrators than females. Athletes often remain silent due to the intimidating nature of the harassment and abuse process. Vulnerable individuals, particularly younger athletes, face increased risk. Factors contributing to this vulnerability include lack of protection mechanisms, high motivation among perpetrators, athlete susceptibility (linked to age and maturity). Common misconceptions suggest that clothing coverage or sport type influence risk, but research disproves these notions. Instead, high-risk situations include locker rooms, playing fields, team trips, coaches' homes or vehicles, social events involving alcohol, team initiations and end-of-season celebrations.

The consequences of sexual harassment and abuse in sports are severe and long-lasting, impacting athletes' physical and mental well-being. This can lead to impaired performance, athlete drop-out, psychosomatic illnesses, anxiety and depression, substance abuse, self-harm, suicidal tendencies. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on sexual harassment by exploring its prevalence, nature, and consequences in sports contexts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of the study was to find out "Prevalence and patterns of sexual harassment among elite female athletes of individual and team sports of India".

### **Hypothesis of the Study**

It was hypothesized that there will be no significant differences in the prevalence of sexual harassment among female athletes in individual and team games.

### **Significance**

This research contributes to the understanding of sexual harassment in sports, providing critical insights for promoting safer and more inclusive environments. The findings will inform policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, ultimately supporting the well-being and success of athletes.

### **METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of testing of the hypothesis of the study, a sample of 150 elite female athletes belonging to different states of India were selected as subjects, by using a purposive sampling technique. The subjects selected for the study were players from team games namely volleyball, handball, football, hockey, kabaddi, and cricket and players from individual games i.e. wrestling, boxing, judo, taekwondo, athletics, badminton and table-tennis. In total, there were 75 female athletes from individual sports and 75 from team games. The level of participation of these athletes ranged from inter-university to international level. The average age of subjects ranges between 18 to 34 years. The sample selected for the study belonged to different socio-economic status and varied educational standards.

**Selection of Criterion Measures**

For the purpose of measuring sexual harassment of female athletes, the researcher had selected Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) of Fitzgerald et al. being constructed and standardized in 1995. The confirmatory analysis across cultures and settings of SEQ was done by Gelfand et al. (1995). The subjects were taken into confidence that their information regarding sexual harassment experiences will not be disclosed to anyone and the results of the study will only show the average percentage of incidences of sexual harassment. They were also told that the study aims to compare the sexual harassment among female athletes of individual and team games of India and does not aim at a case study. The trust between the subjects and the research scholar was developed prior to the administration of the questionnaire.

**Scoring of Sexual Experience Questionnaire and Collection of Data**

The scoring of completed sexual experience questionnaire (SEQ) was done as per the instructions provided in the booklet of the questionnaire. The scoring was done by awarding the points ranging from 0 to 4.

**Statistical Tools and Techniques**

The data obtained on 150 subjects i.e. 75 female athletes of individual games and 75 from team games was analyzed by using descriptive statistics i.e. percentage. To find out the significance of difference of variances and the significance of mean difference in sexual harassment among female athletes of individual and team games of India, Levene's test was applied by using SPSS software. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

**ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

The test of significance for mean difference of scores on responses of elite female athletes of India between team and individual sports on sexual harassment is given in the table-1.

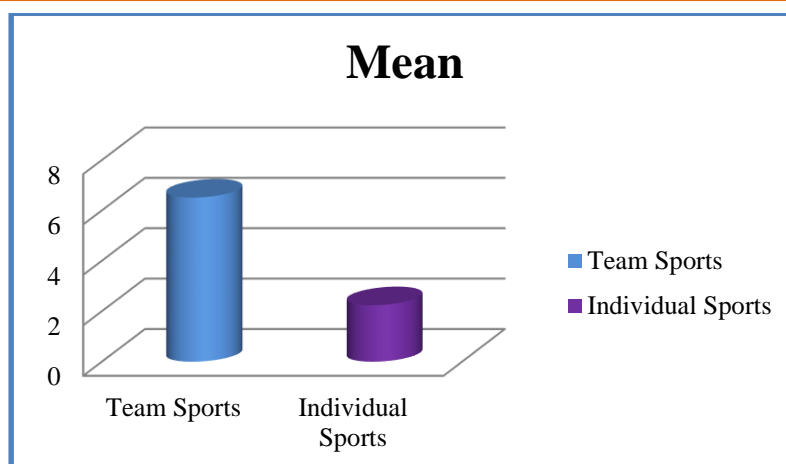
**Table-1  
SIGNIFICANCE OF MEAN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES OF INDIA IN TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL SPORTS ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

Type of Sports	N	Mean	Mean difference	SE of Mean Difference	t value	p value	F value	p value
<b>Team Sports</b>	75	6.51	4.267	0.989	4.31*	0.000	15.08	0.000
<b>Individual Sports</b>	75	2.24						

\*Level of significance=0.05; for two tailed test, tab. t-value (148) =1.976

The analysis of above table clearly reveals that F value i.e. 15.08 is significant as the p value 0.000 is less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis of equality of variances has been rejected and hence, it can be inferred that the variances of the two groups are not equal. It is also evident from the above table that there are significant differences in the mean scores of sexual harassment between elite female athletes of India in team and individual games as the obtained t value of 4.313 is significantly higher than the tabulated value of 1.976 at 0.05 level of significance with 148 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis of equality of means may be rejected and it can be concluded that number of cases of sexual harassment on elite female athletes of India in team games are significantly higher than the individual sports.

The graphical representation of the mean of data on sexual harassment between elite female athletes of India in team and individual games is presented in figure 1.



**Figure 1-Graphical representation of mean of data on sexual harassment between elite female athletes of India participating in team and individual games.**

The test of significance for mean difference of scores on responses of female elite athletes of India in team and individual games on gender harassment is presented in the table-2.

**Table-2**

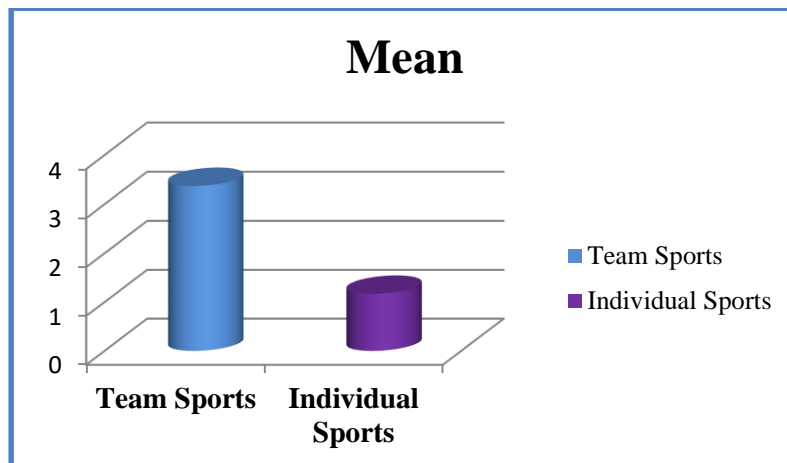
**SIGNIFICANCE OF MEAN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES OF INDIA IN TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL SPORTSON GENDER HARASSMENT**

Type of Sports	N	Mean	Mean difference	SE of Mean Difference	t value	p value	F value	p value
Team Sports	75	3.37	2.20	0.525	4.190*	0.000	10.3	0.002
Individual Sports	75	1.17						

\*Level of significance=0.05; for two tailed test, tab. t-value (148) =1.976

It is clear from the above table that F value i.e. 10.3 is significant as the p value 0.002 is lesser than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis of equality of variances has been rejected and hence, it can be concluded that the variances of the two groups are not equal. The analysis of above table also clearly reveals that there are significant differences in the mean scores on gender harassment between female elite athletes of India in team and individual sports, as the calculated t value of 4.190 is significantly higher than the tabulated value of 1.976 at 0.05 level of significance with 148 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis of equality of means may be rejected and it can be inferred that the number of cases of gender harassment on female elite athletes of India are significantly higher in team games than the individual sports.

The graphical representation of mean of data of gender harassment among elite female athletes of India in team and individual sports is shown in figure-2.



**Figure 2-Graphical representation of mean of data on gender harassment among elite female athletes of India in team and individual sports.**

The test of significance for mean difference of scores on responses of female elite athletes of India in team and individual sports on unwanted sexual harassment is given in the table-3.

**Table-3**

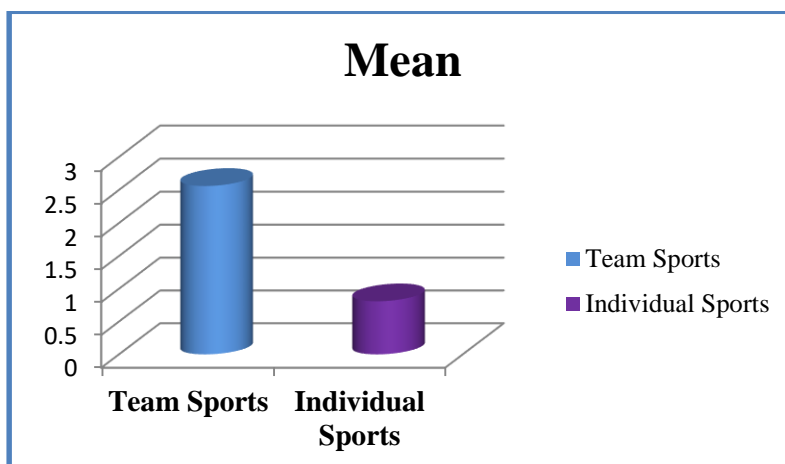
**SIGNIFICANCE OF MEAN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES OF INDIA IN TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL SPORTS ON UNWANTED SEXUAL ATTENTION**

Type of Sports	N	Mean	Mean difference	SE of Mean Difference	t value	p value	F value	p value
Team Sports	75	2.56						
			1.75	0.422	4.140*	0.000	24	0.000
Individual Sports	75	0.81						

\*Level of significance=0.05; for two tailed test, tab. t-value (148) =1.976

It can be seen from above table that F value i.e. 24 is significant as the p value 0.000 is lesser than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis of equality of variances has been rejected and hence, it can be concluded that the variances of the two groups are not equal. It is also clear from the above table that there are significant differences in the mean scores of unwanted sexual attention between female elite athletes of India in team and individual games as the obtained t value of 4.140 is significantly higher than the critical value of 1.976 at 0.05 level of significance with 148 degrees of freedom. Hence, the null hypothesis for equality of means can be rejected and hence, it may be inferred that the number of incidences of unwanted sexual attention on female elite athletes of India in team games are significantly higher than the individual sports.

The graphical representation of mean of data of unwanted sexual attention between elite female athletes of India in team and individual sports is presented in figure-3.



**Figure 3-Graphical representation of mean of data of unwanted sexual attention between female elite athletes of India participating in team and individual sports.**

The test of significance for mean difference of scores on responses of female elite athletes of India in team and individual sports on sexual coercion is presented in the table-4.

**Table-4**

**SIGNIFICANCE OF MEAN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES OF INDIA IN TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL SPORTS ON SEXUAL COERCION**

Type of Sports	N	Mean	Mean difference	SE of Mean Difference	t value	p value	F value	p value
Team Sports	75	0.57						
			0.32	0.176	1.815	0.072	9.103	0.003
Individual Sports	75	0.25						

\*Level of significance=0.05; for two tailed test, tab. t-value (148) =1.976

It is clear from above table that F value i.e. 9.103 is significant as the p value 0.003 is less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis of equality of variances has been rejected and hence, it can be concluded that the variances of the two groups are not equal. The above table also clearly reveals that there are no significant differences in mean scores of sexual coercion between female elite athletes of India in team and individual sports as the calculated t value of 1.815 is significantly lesser than the tabulated value of 1.976 at 0.05 level of significance with 148 degrees of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis of equality of means may be accepted and hence, it can be concluded that the number of cases of sexual coercion are not significantly different on the both groups of female elite athletes of India i.e. team games and individual sports.

**Discussion of Hypothesis**

The null hypothesis that there will be no significant differences in sexual harassment among elite female athletes of India participating in individual and team sports, had been rejected at 0.05 level of confidence because significant differences have been found in the number of cases of sexual harassment between the elite female athletes participating in team and individual sports.

**Discussion of the Findings**

A similar kind of trend was found when sum total all parameters of sexual harassment i.e. gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion, was compared among the female athletes

of individual sports and team games. This may be attributed to the fact that team players are more social and are more dependent on each other while the individual sportsperson are less social and are independent in their personality traits. This might be one of the reasons that female athletes participating in team games might have greater chance to exchange their experiences on their sexual matters in comparison to female athletes participating in individual sports.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

It is concluded that frequency of gender harassment is more in sportswomen of team games in comparison to sportswomen of individual sports. It may further be concluded that sportswomen of team games are more prone to unwanted sexual attention in comparison to sportswomen of individual sports. It may be concluded that the number of cases of sexual coercion are more or less same in team as well as in individual sports. It may be further concluded that incidences of sexual harassment are more among sportswomen of team games in comparison to sportswomen of individual games.

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