# Input for SR VAWG’s report on violence against women and girls in sports

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Every society assigns value to several physical, socioeconomic, spiritual, and ethical standards, which evolve and are incorporated into the culture. Individuals not fulfilling these standards are at risk of prejudicial treatment. Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American advocate, used the word "intersectionality" to describe the phenomenon of the additive nature of the socially disadvantaged characteristics to produce higher chances of social ostracism. [1] Some common areas of division are derived from race, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, disability, skin color, and immigration status, with any number of these attributes leading to disparities between individuals. [2] Individuals within the intersections of less favorable sets of attributes are socially and economically excluded.

Social exclusion lends itself to manifest and insidious discrimination. This selective treatment may lead to internalization or externalization of distress in individuals who experience bias. Externalizing behaviors result in fractured relationships due to impulsive, hyperactive, and irritable behaviors. Internalizing behaviors lead to mood and social anxiety symptoms, which narrows the victims' world further, holding them beholden to their social isolation [3]. These individuals also become unfortunate targets for other forms of discrimination and violence. These include- financial and social deprivation, inappropriate balancing of resources, lack of healthcare and safety resources, vicarious trauma, cyberbullying, hazing, interpersonal and intimate partner violence, and neglect. [2] If these cycles repeat over the years, they lead to intergenerational trauma.

Trauma is the end product of multiple forms of violence that impact a person's psychological composition. The various forms of violence may be amorphous and obscure to onlookers, but the consequences of these experiences are long-lasting and deleterious. The adverse childhood event study (ACES) is used to gauge a multitude of traumatic events in a person's life. The adverse events include neglect, abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual), witnessing a parent being abused, and living with a family member who experiences alcohol misuse/mental health diagnosis. Research has shown that higher scores on the ACE questionnaire are associated with not only mental health but also medical illnesses. [4] The scope of the ACE study has been expanded to include other forms of experiences. [5]

Trauma in formative years (childhood and adolescence) has been researched directly or indirectly in psychological and mental health spheres. Children are more susceptible to abuse due to the underdevelopment of language and semantic structures to describe their experiences. These factors lead to an increased burden of undisclosed psychological distress. Conversely, trauma and neglect are implicated in delaying language formation and development. [6] When affected children and adolescents undergo these experiences and develop the ability to describe them, the healing process may be delayed. On occasion, the healing experience does not occur due to a lack of awareness and cultural acceptability, as well as access-related and community-related factors.

Athletic programs typically begin from childhood as athletic mastery develops with biological development and involutes in late adulthood. The evolving focus on sports programs offers adolescents and young children a way to excel in careers in sports; however, it yields a rigorous routine outside of their home lives with the inclusion of additional mentoring figures in the form of coaches and support staff in the form of sports medicine doctors and media representatives. In general, a power dynamic exists in such dyads. With this dynamic comes a susceptibility towards ill-intentioned individuals to abuse their power. In addition, the competitive culture of sports yields an unrelenting and unsupportive environment for individuals suffering from abuse. [2]

A questionnaire-based survey found that coaches were found to be implicated in 8 to 25% of athletics-based abuse cases.[7] In addition, individuals of Asian descent were at a higher risk of victimization than other races.[7]

This creates a need to focus on preventative measures and treatment strategies for individuals in such programs. Interventions occur on several levels- 1) Administrative/ Government level, 2) Community/ Law Enforcement level, 3) Environmental level, and 4) Family/Individual level.

State and Government bodies can help ensure an infrastructure is in place for safety and prompt investigation of allegations. State stakeholders can also ensure safeguards against retaliation and intimidation of vulnerable individuals. Legislative bodies and judicial figures can develop legislation to ascribe punitive strategies for perpetrators. Law Enforcement can help ensure quick mobilization in case of incidents. The Government can also use the media to promote awareness.

Social media corporations can collaborate with Government or non-government figures to ensure the online security of users and curtail the dissemination of compromising material. Spiritual leaders can act as liaisons to law enforcement when abuse and exploitation is suspected. Mental health counselors and experts can help identify individuals with undisclosed trauma, help victims find the language to formally report their experience, and help with treatment and support strategies.

One challenge is that large organizations undermine and censure whistleblowers and victims due to the bureaucratic process and exhaustive chain of command, inadvertently favoring the perpetrators. This delay promotes silence and worsens the power dynamic, further disenfranchising the victim.

Non-Government advocates can help oversee these programs. They can also help identify victims through the interface of mental health education and advocacy programs. Initiatives like SafeSport have been introduced to highlight the importance of raising awareness and providing venues to find help in cases of harassment and abuse. [8] However, surveyors found that several athletes did not know what the initiative's true purpose was, highlighting the importance of awareness and building language to describe abuse.[9]

Therefore, Government and Non-Government organizations can collaborate to ensure the safety of their athletes, particularly those at risk of victimization.

Implementing a model for mental health services to adolescents exists by embedding mental health clinicians in schools. This model can also be reimagined in an athletic setting with clinicians' co-located and regular interface with athletes for mentorship and educational sessions, which may form an environment of trust and recognition of trauma. Mandating reporting from counselors, healthcare providers, and coaches can also be another venue for reducing incidents of abuse.

Therefore, the environment must be conducive to awareness, open dialogue, and a focus on early identification and preventative measures.

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