Call for input to the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to the UN General Assembly on violence against women and girls in sport

ISSUED BY

**Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls**

DEADLINE

**08 April 2024**

**Purpose:** The thematic report will be presented to the UN General Assembly at its 79th session in October 2024 and will examine the issue of violence against women and girls in sport.

Gender and Religious Freedom (GRF) is a charity registered in England/Wales that looks at the intersecting human rights of gender equality and FoRB. GRF has expertise on the dynamics surrounding why and how women and men across the world suffer various human rights violations specifically because of their faith. We are a Christian charity and therefore focus our work primarily on Christians, but the dynamics which we describe are not unique to Christians under pressure but, rather, are often experienced by other marginalised religious groups of men and women of all ages.

We noticed that the call for input to the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to the UN General Assembly on violence against women and girls in sport does not include a FoRB angle. We recommend that the Special Rapporteur include a FoRB perspective within the analysis of violence against women and girls in sport and thereby contribute to a more holistic understanding of all forms of violence against women and girls around the world including within the specific area of sports.

GRF has formulated some thoughts based on our expertise reinforced by additional conversations from people in sports with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Is ‘the world of sport’ the same across the world? Countries are not the same and therefore ‘the world of sports’ in many countries is not homogenous. Taking a faith perspective to sports immediately shows that various religions across the world can be bound with nationalistic notions and (religious) rule of law. In many countries where this is the case, FoRB is not respected as a human right.

Vulnerabilities that stem from a lack of FoRB become clear when we ask questions such as:

* What if in those same countries the religious expression is connected to a dress code, most particularly for females?
* What if an athlete’s name reveals that their family is not from the dominant religion, but from a more marginalised minority religion?
* What if the country’s dominant religion teaches females from a very young age absolute submission to all men?

Religion can immediately single out a young person and create a vulnerability for societal participation, including sports. Examples where fewer women and girls compete in sports are Muslim nations. In at least some of these nations, there might not be many cases of violence against women and girls within sports, or even men and boys from a marginalised religious group, because they are barred from playing before even starting.

An Egyptian sports leader shared some reasons with us as to why women in Egypt don’t compete:

1. In Egypt there is a common idea that women who compete in sports will lose their virginity. Societal beliefs are often stronger than scientific evidence, and these cultural ideas will only die slowly. Because of the importance of girls’ virginity, it is guarded by family members. Cultures can still practise honour killings if a girl’s virginity is (perceived to be) violated. Once a woman’s virginity is violated, she becomes a ‘free for all’ in the community, that is to say, a girl or woman who can be abused by anyone without repercussions.
2. Because of the first reason, the family will bar their girls from participating. It’s not only the honour of the girl/women that is at stake, but that of the whole family/tribe.
3. Related to number 1, there is a significant lack of successful precedent of women taking any form of physical/sexual abuse or violence to court in MENA countries. Women and girls have little opportunity for successful legal recourse as their witness statement is valued as less than that of a man under Sharia law.
4. A sports venue is a place where a man would seek a romantic involvement with a woman, convert her and marry her. This demonstrates that there are other dynamics at play. In the light of the above, it’s the woman herself who becomes the economic value to the perpetrator: if a man successfully seduces a Christian girl, he is rewarded, sometimes even financially. It’s quite common knowledge that there is a reward list for girls/women from a particular father: judge/priest etc.

All cultures are, in general terms, somewhere on a power dynamic scale. That means there are people who hold control over others and there is a more or less accepted response of submissiveness by those being controlled. In cultures where submission of women to men is taught from early age, often coming from the religious teachings, there is obviously not only scope for more abuse of women, as it goes unchecked, but also a higher belief among women that that is how life should be or at least that it’s their own fault if something happens that they think is wrong.

The issue of safeguarding in honour and shame cultures is complex. If there is a notion of safeguarding it focuses on safeguarding the honour (familial/tribal) she represents rather than her as a person. In many cultures in MENA even discussing safeguarding issues could be taboo as safeguarding as a concept is related to shame; shame that always lands on the girl or the woman, rarely on the perpetrator.

Anecdotal, from Egypt: *Christian women face a lot of pressure in Egypt. If you are a Christian sports woman in Egypt, those pressures are compounded because of your sports achievements. It’s not always easy to determine the cause of the pressure or violence being because of your femininity, your sports success, or your adherence to the minority Christian faith. If the mindset about women losing their virginity when practicing sports changes, many more girls and women will be able to play sports. But if you become successful at sports your vulnerability increases and you will be ‘hunted’. This hunting will happen in real life and online. Many women will stop playing sports when the ‘hunting’ starts. Particularly sports clubs are places where women are ‘hunted’.*

From a former male, Christian athlete: *In Egypt, and some other countries in the Middle East, a Christian is known by their surname. Christian surnames are different from Muslim surnames. It’s when we sign up our kids at the major leagues that the problems start. It’s all very friendly until the names are put on paper, then the excuses start “we’re full”, “come back another time”, “try signing up at another club” etc. I signed up at a private academy, but found there is constant persecution in the clubs. It looks like this:*

* *Come with us to the mosque to pray!*
* *(during Ramadan) Are you fasting?*
* *You have to put out all of our prayer mats so we can pray on time!*

*The bullying is daily, constant and ongoing. It makes you feel like you never really belong. It happens to boys from a young age. When you are young you can lose hope and you stop playing. Because of this many Christian athletes stop competing at a young age. We compete in other fields like education and business.*

These examples illustrate the necessity of examining religious dynamics within violence against women and girls in sport.

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| 1. What are the different forms of violence that women and girls in sports may experience (e.g. physical, psychological, economic, online violence, coercive control, as well as extreme form of discrimination that amounts to violence)?
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| 1. What human rights of women and girls in sports are violated as a result of the exposure of women and girls in sports to violence or the risk of violence?
 | FoRB is violated if women and girls are discriminated against or violated for their faith during or because of competing in sports.  |
| 1. Which actors are responsible for committing acts of violence against women and girls and increasing the risks of violence against women and girls in sports?
 | Anyone could commit acts of violence - inside and outside of the world of sports, because of power/submission dynamics, the tarnished honour of the girls and women, them being second class citizens, easy targets away from parental view, etc. |
| 1. What are the principal causes of the violence that women and girls experience in sports, including the structural causes of such violence?
 | Compound vulnerabilities are built into the structure of national culture in a multifaceted manner. With over 80% of the world’s population holding a religious belief, religion is a key factor that shapes structural violence within many diverse contexts. |
| 1. Which groups of women and girls in sports are more exposed to violence and on what grounds?
 | Women and girls who belong to religious minorities can be more exposed to violence depending on the pre-existing prevalence of discrimination and persecution on religious grounds. their vulnerabilities can compound along gendered and religious lines in a sporting context.  |
| 1. What are the responsibilities of State and non-State actors in preventing acts of violence against women and girls in sport, including in adopting measures to investigate it, and to hold those responsible for it accountable, and to provide assistance and protection to survivors of violence?
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| 1. What measures do State and non-State actors have in place to ensure that incidents of violence against women and girls in sports can be effectively reported, and that they are thoroughly investigated and sanctioned?
 | In many nations violations against women and girls are very hard to report because of lack of equal opportunity to legal recourse and the ensuing negative consequences if they do report.  |
| 1. To what extent are women and girls in sport, as well as the associations that represent them being effectively involved and consulted in the design and implementation of policies that are meant to end severe discrimination and violence against women and girls in sport at the national, regional, and international level?
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| 1. Please provide examples of good practice that have been adopted by State and non-State actors with regards to ending violence against women and girls in sports?
 | Internationally, cricket has a framework that requires full member teams of the ICC to have a professional women’s cricket team. With the Taliban takeover in 2021, Afghanistan’s female cricketers have fled, reporting death threats. Cricket Australia is the only nation that has upheld the ICC framework and cancelled games with the men’s team on the grounds that the women’s team has been disbanded. An example framework is in place, but it requires enforcement and political will on behalf of national governing bodies. |
| 1. What are the lessons learned from policies and legislations that have been adopted and implemented with regards to women and girls in sports and their implications on the safety, security, dignity, equality and participation of women and girls in sports?
 | Sport is not a bubble, but is part of a larger context. The laws and skills of sports may be consistent across countries but the context including the history, culture and belief system within which the sports are practised vary widely. To understand the success of policy and legislation in sports look at the contextual reality of the lives of women and girls in the nation.  |
| 1. Please provide recommendations as to how violence against women and girls in sport can be prevented and what needs to be done to better respond to the needs of survivors of such violence?
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More information is available upon request from evanderdeijl@genderandreligiousfreedom.org