**Maat for Peace’ submission on violence against women and girls in sport**

**Submitted to:** Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls

**Submitted by:** Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights.

**Introduction**

The risk of violence against women and girls in sports is disproportionately high, with one in three women who play sports exposed to violence, which prompted Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights to respond to the Special Rapporteur’s call and work on preparing this report to help the Rapporteur submit his report to the General Assembly, Maat attempted in the report to address the issue of violence against women and girls who practice sports in light of the high incidence of these practices, which exposes women and girls in sports to multiple risks. Maat is guided in this report by the questions developed by the Special Rapporteur.

1. **The different forms of violence that women and girls may be exposed to in sport (such as physical, psychological, economic, online violence, coercive control as well as extreme forms of discrimination that amount to violence).**

Women and girl athletes are exposed at various times to sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. These violations are linked to fear of retaliation, which leads to failure to report these violations. This silence reinforces the state of impunity, allowing the perpetrators not to be held accountable. The most important forms and manifestations of violence against women in the sports field can be noted as follows:

* **Sexual assault and practices:** The prevalence of sexual violence in sports is extremely high and includes acts ranging from rape, harassment, and sexual blackmail where power is abused for sexual gain. According to UNESCO, 21% of women and girls globally have been sexually assaulted in a sporting environment during childhood, which is nearly double the rate of their male counterparts. In this context, many reports have documented that International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) is still failing to protect female players from these practices of sexual harassment and other forms of physical and emotional abuse. Maat reviewed reports indicating that sexual assaults against women athletes are widespread in approximately 10% of FIFA member federations. These practices were common during the Women's World Cup held in Australia and New Zealand, where Maat documented allegations that the Zambian national team coach had long-standing accusations of sexual harassment in women's football. Although (FIFA) opened an investigation into the misconduct of the Zambian women’s football coach, called “B.M.”, the result of the investigation was not announced[[1]](#footnote-1). In addition, the Zambian Football Association did not dismiss the coach, but merely returned him to the men’s team. In a related context, Maat observed the kissing of the president of the Spanish Football Federation, called “LR,” a player in the women’s team of the Spanish national team, after the women’s football team in Spain won the World Cup. He resigned after the video went viral, following his suspension by FIFA. The Public Prosecution in Spain also ordered him to be imprisoned for two and a half years, but the sentence has not been implemented yet[[2]](#footnote-2).
* **Physical abuse:** Violence in sports is not limited to sexual violence, and the results indicate that 31.8% of female athletes were subjected to excessive punitive training by those responsible for their training, while 10.6% were subjected to physical beatings.
* **Online violence or digital violence:** The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games highlighted the extent of online abuse that female athletes face, as they endure a significant percentage of 87% of abusive tweets targeting women, and black female athletes are also more vulnerable. Research also revealed that a large portion of online abuse is of a sexual nature[[3]](#footnote-3). Online abuse against female players was prominent in the recent Women’s World Cup, where female players in the World Cup finals in New Zealand and Australia were 29% more likely to be exposed to online abuse compared to their male counterparts in the men’s World Cup in Qatar. A report issued by FIFA also documented that one in five female players in the tournament were targeted by discriminatory messages, with sexual assault posts accounting for nearly half of all messages across various social media platforms. The US women's soccer team also received more than twice the amount of offensive messages on social media than any other country in the Women's World Cup[[4]](#footnote-4).
* **Economic abuse:** Economic exploitation in sports often forces athletes, especially women, into financial dependence. Overall, women's sports and female athletes are often seen as inferior to men's sports. Female athletes are typically paid less, have fewer resources, and receive lower prize money compared to their male counterparts. For example, the prize money for the Women's World Cup was US$30 million, compared to US$400 million for the Men's World Cup in 2018. Likewise, in 2017, the English women's cricket team won US$660,000 out of a prize pool of US$2 million. This compares to $4 million of the $10 million total won by the men's team in 2019. Female athletes are also subject to perceptions that they can generate less revenue through advertising and ticket sales[[5]](#footnote-5).

1. **Responsibilities of state and non-state actors in preventing acts of violence against women and girls in sport, including adopting measures to investigate them, hold those responsible to account, and provide assistance and protection to survivors of violence**

International and regional sports federations, professional associations and national federations have a responsibility to prevent violence against women and girls in sport and many organizations have taken policies to modify organizational culture to prevent violence against women and promote gender equality. Many organizations have guidelines for preventing violence against women in their codes of conduct for players and staff, and have mechanisms for responding to allegations of sexual misconduct and violence. In December 2021, it was announced that FIFA and a United Nations body would launch a global investigative network to address sexual assault in all sports. While some praised this step as a step in the right direction, many reports and organizations ruled out this step occurring[[6]](#footnote-6). In a related context, FIFA tightened its disciplinary procedures in cases of sexual assault and sexual harassment, as in February 2023 it issued amendments to the Ethics Code. A series of sexual assault scandals in recent years, especially in Gabon, Haiti, the United States and Afghanistan, have led FIFA to take disciplinary measures, especially in cases where local federations refused to act or impose sanctions. The amended law abolishes the 10-year statute of limitations for prosecuting sexual crimes. The changes also make potential victims parties to the relevant proceedings and enjoy all procedural rights and the right to appeal. The law requires member associations and confederations to notify FIFA of any decisions issued regarding sexual assault and match-fixing[[7]](#footnote-7).

1. **Which categories of women and girls in sports are most vulnerable to violence and on what basis?**

Maat reviewed reports indicating that women of color, women from marginalized groups, women with disabilities, and women from minorities are at a higher risk of experiencing violence in the sports industry. These women face increased vulnerability and often have limited access to reporting mechanisms. It seems that no sport is immune to these attacks on women in the sporting field, as hockey and football had the largest number of coaches accused and convicted of sexual crimes, and basketball, swimming, baseball, volleyball, gymnastics, ice skating, and equestrian are also among the sports in which several women have been convicted. Reports revealed that at least 222 coaches in Canada were accused of committing sexual crimes in the previous two decades. These convictions include more than 600 victims under the age of 18. The courts are currently examining the cases of 34 accused coaches[[8]](#footnote-8). In addition, the Women's World Cup highlighted the number of people in charge of women's football who have been accused of sexual acts. They mistreat players and pressure them to have sex to play for the women's national team[[9]](#footnote-9). In 2020, several Haitian female soccer players came out to accuse the president of the Haitian Football Federation of sexual assault and misconduct against a number of female soccer players, including minors. One of the victims claimed that she had an abortion after she was raped[[10]](#footnote-10). Which led to FIFA issuing a life-long ban for the president of the Haitian Football Federation on charges of sexual harassment against female players[[11]](#footnote-11)[[12]](#footnote-12). It can be said that the basis on which cases of violence against women in the field of sports continue is the fear among female athletes that reporting gender-based abuse may negatively impact their opportunities to join teams, national squads, or participate in championships, ultimately jeopardizing their athletic careers. Therefore, because sexual assault is a crime that victims do not sufficiently report, there may be thousands of cases that come forward, as many reports in 2020 revealed that female athletes avoid reporting and prefer to remain silent about sexual harassment practices to which they are exposed[[13]](#footnote-13). Reporting violations is often risky for survivors and whistleblowers. Even when abuse is reported, sports leaders and sporting organizations usually fail to act, resulting in abuse continuing. In many countries globally, the sports sector poses a significant challenge in combatting violence against women and girls, due to the lack of accountability, transparency, and defensive mentality. Many sports federations prioritized the safety of the sport's image and economic profit over the individual, leaving survivors without a clear path to treatment.

1. **Good practices adopted by governmental and non-governmental actors regarding ending violence against women and girls in sport.**

Advocates, activists, and organizations working to end violence against women have acknowledged the potential of sports as a significant means to raise awareness and advocate for women's rights. Maat highlighted positive initiatives such as Tackle Africa's collaboration with 30 schools in Tanzania to develop a sports program integrating education on child marriage and female genital mutilation. Reclaim Childhood in Jordan also uses sports to empower refugee girls by motivating them to develop their leadership skills and help them grow healthy in places free of violence, the Horn of Africa Development Initiative also uses football to educate local communities about gender equality while providing a safe space for women’s empowerment[[14]](#footnote-14). In a related context, in February 2022, a group of female athletes and feminist activists in Germany launched a campaign entitled #Captain\_Don’t\_TouchMe in protest against the sexual violence faced by German female athletes. The campaign began by announcing the provision of psychological and legal support to a number of female boxing players after they were raped by individuals within the sports system, some of whom practice sports training. The #Captain\_Don't\_TouchMe campaign is still ongoing, in addition to similar campaigns in other countries such as India and the United States to raise awareness of the dangers of sexual violence against women and girls in sports.

Finally, it can be said that Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights emphasizes that violence against women and girls in sports is a multifaceted issue that requires the active participation of policy makers, heads of national, international, and regional sports federations and coaches to promote a culture of respect, equality and safety for the benefit of these female athletes. **Maat also recommends the following:**

* Addressing this critical issue to leverage sport as an area to promote gender equality and empowering women and girls everywhere.
* Ensuring access to remedies when these rights are violated in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
* Supporting girls in the sports field by promoting equal opportunities and ensuring a sports environment free of violence and harassment.
* Pressuring FIFA to take the required steps to fulfill its responsibility to respect the human rights of female players.
* Urging FIFA to promptly disclose transparent and detailed information regarding its efforts to establish an independent global Safe Sport entity aimed at combating sexual assault and violence against women and girls in sports, while offering treatment and support for victim-survivors.
* Ensuring that sports entities adopt comprehensive policies and procedures to effectively prevent and address violence against women and girls
* Establishing independent mechanisms that allow women and girls in sports to report sexual violence on stadiums
* Working to implement political and legal reforms that guarantee accountability and preventive measures for reporting violence while preserving the confidentiality and safety of survivors.

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