

NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Minutes of the Open House Discussion on Sports and Human Rights held on 29th October, 2024

Theme: Safeguarding the Rights and Well-being of Sports persons in India

Agenda

1. The Rehabilitation of Sports persons after incidents of abuse (physical, sexual and psychological)
2. Mental Health of Sports persons in India
3. Institutional Frameworks required to safeguard interests of sports persons

Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC welcomed the guests and set out the agenda for the Open House Discussion. He enlisted the focus areas of the discussion which broadly focused on the rehabilitation and mental health of sports persons, and the requirement of an institutional framework for safeguarding the interests of sports persons. He highlighted the fact that sports persons are subject to abuse and violations of their rights, which not only impacts them psychologically but also affects their career in the long run. He underlined the need to create a robust, comprehensive, and effective system that guarantees fairness, transparency and protection and comprehensively addresses all the issues of sports persons.



Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Acting Chairperson, NHRC addressed all participants and highlighted the intersectionality between athlete rights and the role of institutions in safeguarding them. She cited Article 21 of the Indian Constitution that guarantees right to life to all Indian citizens and she linked it to the basic human dignity of sports persons. Her address to the house also touched upon existing vices in sports, be it monopoly over resources, discrimination, contractual disputes, doping scandals, etc. She emphasized on how sports stand beyond mere competitions and that they are platforms for promoting human dignity, inclusion, and societal harmony. She focused on the role of judicial mechanisms in addressing any violations of athlete rights that may occur over time. Her address primarily touched upon three broad themes: (1) The Relevance of Human Rights in Sports, (2) Rehabilitation of Sports persons after events of abuse, (3) Probable measures for addressing the Mental Health of Sport persons. She cited examples of best practices from countries like Australia that have the institutional mechanisms to look into the well-being of their athletes and suggested that India may follow such an example.



Session-I

1. **Shri Anant Kumar, Director, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports:** Emphasized the importance of regulatory framework in sports in order to safeguard the rights and well being of sportspersons in India. He discussed the National Sports Development Code of India, 2011, which consolidates various orders and instructions from the ministry. He

highlighted the Draft National Sports (Development) Bill, 2011, which proposes the establishment of a regulatory body to address issues such as sexual harassment and the mental health of sports persons. He mentioned that the draft is currently available in the public domain to solicit comments and suggestions from the general public and stakeholders.

2. **Ms. Joanna Maranhao, Olympian and Network Coordinator, Sports and Rights Alliance, Switzerland** shared her personal experience of sexual assault as a professional swimmer by her coach during childhood and strongly advocated for effective redressal mechanisms for victims. She discussed the traumas and triggers faced by athletes, highlighting her work with children in Brazil and expressing solidarity with the Wrestlers Protest in India. Emphasizing the dignity of sportspersons, she called for justice and systemic reform, advocating for a trauma-informed approach that involves victims and stakeholders in policy making, while also addressing the prevalent lack of trust in the system among victims. She also went on to add to the sessions of fellow panelists and speakers, making sessions interactive, and provided practical perspectives to the agenda items placed for all sessions.



3. **Prof. Kalpana Sharma, Director (Academics), Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports, Patiala** emphasised the need for policy and programs that focus on safeguarding the interests of sportspersons at the forefront. She underlined the importance of creating a framework to allow athletes to participate in 'safe sport' and mentioned that in this framework, it is essential to define the terms 'harassment' and 'abuse'. She further stated that sportspersons, as well as

relevant stakeholders (coaches, training staff, volunteers, entourage members, administrative staff and even National Federations), need to be sensitized to ensure effective implementation of such a framework. She further emphasized the creation of a Code of Conduct for stakeholders and clear directives for stakeholders to ensure the protection of athletes from violations. These measures would help reduce the risk of athletes suffering from harassment and abuse, and subsequently, the negative effects of these violations on athlete development. Prof. Kalpana further outlined the three phases of the development of an 'Athlete Safeguarding Strategy' namely, development of policies and procedures, creation of prevention mechanisms and management of reports of harassment and abuse. She emphasized taking into perspective the experiences of female athletes in policy formulation. Lastly, she stated that many international organizations already have existing mechanisms for the all-rounded welfare of sportspersons, and these mechanisms can be benchmarked and modified according to the requirements of sportspersons in India.



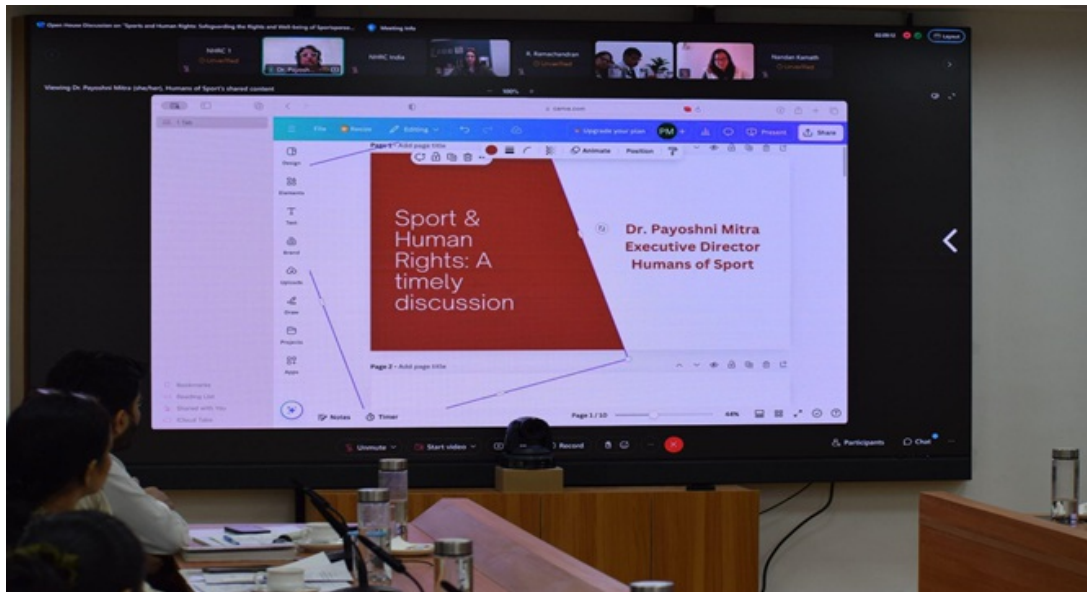
4. **Brig.(Dr.) Bibhu Kalyan Nayak, Director, National Center for Sports Science & Research (NCSSR)** spoke about the multiple initiatives of NCSSR towards comprehensive welfare and rehabilitation of sportspersons. He spoke about the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) curated for the delivery of comprehensive rehabilitation and support services to sportspersons. Elaborating on the requirement of effective, holistic, athlete-centric and customized rehabilitation for sportspersons, he stated that the focus should not be restricted

only to the physical health of athletes, but also their mental health. He stated that educating athletes about mental health would help them identify any unusual behaviour, stressors or mental health concerns in themselves as well as their fellow mates. Reiterating the importance of sensitization of sportspersons and relevant stakeholders, he also mentioned that it is important to educate athletes about psychological distress as a consequence of bullying, to avoid such incidents among athletes. Lastly, he highlighted the need to foster a culture where athletes feel safe to speak up, without worrying about resultant stigma or other consequences on their careers.



Session - II

5. **Ms. Payoshni Mitra, Executive Director, Humans of Sport, UK** began her talk by thanking the NHRC for providing this platform for discussion. She then stressed on the pertinence of “nature of abuse” which was based on the report published by Sports and Rights Alliance. There is a spectrum of abuse and any kind of abuse in this spectrum including even sexism should be addressed. The need to identify and address institutionalized discrimination is important. For this, “athlete-driven approaches” and “athlete-driven initiatives” are vital to undertake. She applauded the efforts of the Indian government in standing by its athletes internationally, especially against institutionalized discrimination. The question of the hour, she stressed, were- (a) Can India initiate a safe sport hub in the country and (b) How to effectively put these conversations on safe sports to actionable use before India prepares to bid/host the 2036 Summer Olympics.



6. **Mr. Nandan Kamath, Lawyer and Managing Trustee, GoSports Foundation** stressed on the “humane” aspect of athletes, which is vital in order to recognize the duty of care that the ecosystem has towards them. This duty of care must be looked at from the lens of positive obligations and systems of rights and duties. He focused on how the ecosystem surrounding the athletes must be safe in all aspects for their welfare, including- opportunities, safety, dignity and self actualization of the athletes. As sports are often viewed in a pyramid structure, therefore the ecosystem of welfare needs to be holistic in approach and this should encompass physical and psychological safety. Institutional frameworks should keep this in mind including regular safety audits in all aspects and for all stakeholders. Engaging athletes in governance is an important aspect for core decision making for safety of athletes.



- Dr. Deepak Joshi, Director, Sports and Injury Centre, Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi** stressed on the importance of having a holistic approach towards athletes' safety, which must include comprehensive and complete care for rehabilitation. This requires a collaborative effort from different verticals of the medical fraternity including mental, physical and rehabilitative. He suggested that to manage the high levels of stress and pressure that athletes and their coaches need to endure; some courses should be introduced for comprehensive rehabilitation. "Sports Medicine" as a branch needs to be the first point of contact for athletes to guide them better towards the cause and course of rehabilitation. The need for advanced treatment and individualized programs for athletes is of prime importance in their rehab journey. Financial assistance plays a crucial role in determining this journey, and must be given more focus. He concluded by saying that counseling services along with expert guidance for athlete care and recovery must be focused at, to be able to tackle issues at the nascent stage itself.



8. **Dr. Deepa Malik, Paralympian and Executive Board Member, Asian Paralympic Committee** focused her discussion on rehabilitation of athletes. Particularly highlighting the concerns of para-athletes, she stated that the social taboo around disability and the psychological impact of this taboo results in compromised mental health of sportspersons. She stated that disability is not an injury, but a lifestyle with continuous challenges, and early intervention in collaboration with schools, NGOs, schools, and sports organizations is essential to assist and equip children with disabilities for the 'home to playground' transition. Dr. Malik elaborated on the need for increased disability-friendly infrastructure and support. She further underlined the importance of top-quality prosthetics for sportspersons, which greatly boosts the morale and mental health of sportspersons. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of appointing adequate support staff and personal attendants with para-athletes. She particularly emphasised the fact that the personal attendant for para-athletes should not be appointed randomly, as the para-athlete needs to be comfortable with the attendant. Dr. Malik highlighted the fact that since para-athletes are physically dependent on other people, there is a lot of physical touch involved in even the most basic activities. She stated that it is important to create a safe environment where para-athletes are comfortable and do not feel violated. She also brought up the point that she stated that inappropriately addressing a person with disabilities also violates their human rights, impacts their mental health and belittles their achievements. She further suggested that

converting existing material, information and programs built for the well-being of sportspersons from English to Hindi and other languages would help boost the accessibility and reach of such material.



9. **Dr. N. Debala Chanu, Assistant Professor, Department of Sports Psychology, National Sports University, Imphal:** discussed various research and education initiatives aimed at addressing the mental health challenges faced by athletes, including the impacts of physical, psychological, sexual, and mental abuse. She emphasized the importance of rehabilitation post-abuse, highlighting issues such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and the stigma surrounding mental health. Dr. Chanu called for a dedicated mental health framework for athletes, the necessity of qualified sports psychologists, and systemic research to better understand these challenges. She stressed the need for professional counseling to rebuild trust between coaches and athletes and advocated for skill development to support athletes' well-being, particularly regarding life after sports.



Session-III

10. **Mr. Prem Chand Lochab, Secretary General, Wrestling Federation of India** emphasised the need for those in positions of authority within sports bodies to be sensitive to the well-being of athletes, especially in their formative stages. He highlighted the importance of establishing an effective redressal mechanism within larger sports federations, which should include a structured SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for handling complaints. He advocated for intensive involvement of office bearers in this mechanism to ensure timely and effective resolution.



11. **Shri Ajay Bhatnagar, Director-General (I), NHRC India** addressed the prevalent issues of harassment and abuse faced by young and vulnerable sportspersons, stressing the need for zero tolerance for sexual abuse within sports organizations. He highlighted that trusted figures, such as coaches and office bearers, must face accountability if they misuse their authority. Drawing parallels to the Indian Penal Code (IPC), he proposed that similar provisions be implemented in sports federations to penalize those who abuse their position. He stressed the importance of creating a level playing field for all athletes, ensuring selection is based solely on merit rather than family background or regional affiliations. He further noted that ignoring this responsibility can cause significant stress and emotional burden on young athletes.



12. **Dr. Sunil Dabas, Coach, Indian National Women's Kabaddi Team** shared insights into the mental health challenges faced by athletes, noting that many endure verbal abuse during training, leading to high levels of stress. When left unaddressed, this stress often develops into anxiety and later, depression. Dr. Dabas emphasized that while physical training is prioritized, mental conditioning and resilience training need a similar focus. She suggested that short-term associations with sports psychologists are insufficient, and instead, sustained mental training should be planned and integrated into athletes' routines, similar to physical training. She also noted that while organizational support for athletes has improved, there are still areas needing attention. Athletes frequently find themselves caught between the demands of federations and governmental regulations, leading to feelings of isolation and disillusionment. Dr. Dabas pointed out that

athletes perform better when a family member is closely involved in their journey, as it strengthens their mental fortitude. Dr. Dabas also raised the issue of the inadequate rehabilitation systems for injured athletes. She stressed the need for a supportive ecosystem that allows injured athletes a pathway back into competitive sports. She proposed that athletes' rights be prominently displayed in training academies and hostels to ensure that athletes are informed and aware of their rights. She recommended that the government maintain checks and balances on sports organizations to safeguard athletes' interests.



After the conclusion of all three sessions, the floor was open to discussion and questions from special invitees.

Mr. Deoraj Chaturvedi, Consultant, Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India broke down his feedback in phases- first being “myths v/s science” wherein **he** shared the importance of coaches understanding and being trained in clinical psychology in order to prepare athletes better. Secondly, He addressed taboos existing in the sports spectrum and how institutions may make environments more inclusive in order to accommodate the needs of every athlete. Lastly, he cited examples of players like Naomi Osaka, role-models in sports who chose to share their issues with mental well-being as athletes. Hence, he called upon institutions like NSNIS to develop specialized courses like that on Sports Psychology. Prof. Kalpana Sharma in response to that, pointed out that NSNIS, Patiala has diploma courses on the same.



Mr. Saurabh Kumar Chomal, General Manager, WAKO India Kickboxing Federation pointed out that sportspeople have difficulties in receiving health insurance benefits because their injuries are categorised as “sports injuries”, and not covered, which results in financial burden upon players. He requested a check on health policies in the country and requested if the NHRC could intervene in the same.



Ms. Sheila Kanungo, Joint Secretary General, National Rifle Association of India pointed out the lack of practical applicability of existing rules regarding action on Sexual Abuse cases of athletes, since there are taboos regarding reporting these cases and also a lack of effective redressal mechanisms regarding that.

She agreed with the words of Ms. Joanna in terms of addressing sexual abuse but also pointed out the on-ground difficulties in doing so. Moreover, she pointed out the difficulty of the actual and effective implementation of sports policies that the country has.



The meeting concluded with an acknowledgment by the **Acting Chairperson, NHRC India** of the critical role that structured policies, accountability mechanisms, and mental health support play in enhancing the welfare and performance of athletes. This was followed by a vote of thanks by **Lt. Col. Virender Singh, Director, NHRC India**.



List of Participants

NHRC Officials

1. Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Acting Chairperson, NHRC India (Chair)
2. Shri Ajay Bhatnagar, Director-General (I), NHRC India
3. Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC India
4. Smt. Anita Sinha, Joint Secretary, NHRC India
5. Lt. Col. Virender Singh, Director, NHRC India
6. Smt. Nisha Kumari B, Joint Registrar, NHRC India
7. Dr. Kanaklata Yadav, Consultant (Research), NHRC India
8. Ms. Sharna Chakraborty, JRC, NHRC India
9. Ms. Ahana Ray, JRC, NHRC India
10. Ms. Jessica Swamy, JRC, NHRC India
11. Ms. Saptaparni Majumdar, JRC, NHRC India
12. Mr. Abhishek Sharma, JRC, NHRC India
13. Ms. Arpita Sinha, JRC, NHRC India
14. Mr. Raghwendra Singh, JRC, NHRC India

Participants / Special Invitees of Open House Discussion in attendance (in-person):

1. **Prof. Kalpana Sharma**, Director (Academics), Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports, Patiala
2. **Brig.(Dr.) Bibhu Kalyan Nayak**, Director, National Center for Sports Science & Research(NCSSR)
3. **Dr. Deepak Joshi**, Director, Sports Injury Centre, Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi
4. **Dr. Sunil Dabas**, Coach, Indian National Women's Kabaddi Team
5. **Mr. Deoraj Chaturvedi**, Consultant, Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India
6. **Mr. Saurabh Kumar Chomal**, General Manager, WAKO India Kickboxing Federation

7. **Mr. Dinesh Saree**, Secretary General, Cycle Polo Federation of India
8. **Mr. Sanjay Tijare**, Member, Cycle Polo Federation of India
9. **Mr. Uday Kalaan**, Honorary Treasurer, Indian Polo Association

Participants/ Special Invitees of Open House Discussion in attendance (virtual):

1. **Shri Anant Kumar**, Director, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports
2. **Ms. Joanna Maranhao**, Olympian and Network Coordinator, Sport & Rights Alliance, Switzerland
3. **Ms. Payoshni Mitra**, Executive Director, Humans of Sport, UK
4. **Mr. Nandan Kamath**, Managing Trustee, Go Sports Foundation
5. **Dr. Deepak Joshi**, Director, Sports Injury Centre, Safdarjung Hospital
6. **Dr. Deepa Malik**, Paralympian and Executive Board Member, Asian Paralympic Committee
7. **Dr. N. Debala Chanu**, Assistant professor, Dept. of Sports Psychology, National Sports University, Imphal
8. **Mr. Prem Chand Lochab**, Secretary General, Wrestling Federation of India
9. **Ms. Sheila Kanungo**, Joint Secretary General, National Rifle Association of India
10. Representatives of various National Sports Federations:
 - i.) Mallakhamb Federation of India
 - ii.) Hockey India
 - iii.) Indian Pancak Silat Federation
 - iv.) Kudo International Federation of India, etc.