

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND APPLIED EXERCISE SCIENCE**BEYOND THE FIELD: PROTECTING PEDIATRIC RIGHTS IN SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE**Shubhdip Kaur¹¹ Assistant Professor, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, Sri Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab.Email: shubh.phd@gmail.com

Abstract: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2010) establishes global benchmarks for youth protection, which are further reinforced by Indian constitutional provisions. Nevertheless, institutional breaches persist, particularly within competitive youth athletics—a domain frequently overlooked by oversight bodies. This inquiry investigates the structural and psychological vulnerabilities of adolescent athletes across Punjab, focusing on three core areas: (1) systemic human rights lapses in athletic facilities, (2) gender-specific risks encountered by female competitors, and (3) systemic drivers of athletic attrition.

Keywords: Youth athletics, child protection, sport withdrawal, psychological well-being.

INTRODUCTION

India shelters roughly 430 million minors, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the global pediatric population (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2007). Although early legislative mandates like the National Policy for Children (1974) designated youth as vital national assets, legal adulthood remains strictly fixed at age 18 under both the Juvenile Justice Act (2000) and the Indian Majority Act (1875) (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Every developing individual represents a distinct, unrepeatable perspective capable of driving societal advancement (Hart et al., 2011; Thoreau, 2011). The UNCRC (2010) lays out 34 fundamental protections that sovereign nations are legally obligated to enforce to mitigate developmental harm (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006). Complementing international standards, the Constitution of India codifies specific guarantees (MWCD, 2006): Article 21a: Universal basic education for ages 6–14. Article 24: Prohibition of hazardous youth labor under age 14. Article 39(e): Safeguards against economic coercion into unsuitable vocations. Article 39(f): Assured environments of dignity, freedom, and protection against exploitation.

Despite these formal guarantees, effective protection remains incomplete. While primary school enrollment rose from 64% in 1991 to 88% in 2011 and child mortality trends have improved, India ranks 120th out of 182 nations on the Kids Rights Index with a score of 0.64. Moreover, while youth advocate for autonomy in educational and career choices, parental understanding of gender equality in rights enforcement remains low nationwide. An estimated 170 million Indian children require heightened protection, including those in athletic training programs). Sports organizations operate as social structures susceptible to power imbalances akin to educational or religious institutions (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Department of Education, 2013). Global research across North America, Europe, and Australia confirms that athletic environments frequently host interpersonal harm across all competitive tiers (Starr, 2014). European data reveals sexual harassment rates between 14% and 73%, and explicit sexual abuse between 2% and 22% (Fasting, 2012). Overall, young participants report experiencing emotional trauma (75%), harassment (29%), physical injury/punishment (24%), self-harming behavior (10%), and sexual harm (3%) (Fasting, 2012). The UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) highlights frequent infringements upon rights regarding health (Art. 24), adequate rest (Art. 31.1), freedom from maltreatment (Art. 19), trafficking prevention (Art. 11), and continuous education (Art. 23) (Paulo, 2005). These violations—ranging from intense psychological coercion to physical neglect—often trigger long-term psychological distress, clinical anxiety, PTSD, diminished self-concept, or early retirement from sport (Paulo, 2005). Vulnerabilities are exacerbated by power disparities between coaches and athletes, unchecked authority dynamics, missing global safety criteria, and a lack of specialized child-pedagogy training (Sport and Development, 2014). In India, while the Sports Authority of India (SAI, est. 1984) manages physical infrastructure and technical coaching, it lacks standardized, legally binding frameworks dedicated to safeguarding child athletes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which baseline pediatric rights are most routinely compromised within regional sports training centers in Punjab?
2. What distinct systemic and interpersonal challenges face female youth within athletic residential facilities?
3. What psychological and environmental factors induce premature athletic burnout and drop-out?

FIELD METHODOLOGY

This qualitative examination conducted 17 semi-structured Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) gathering empirical data from 171 junior athletes (aged 10–15) across 6 urban schools and 6 female sports dormitories in Punjab. Sampling combined randomized selection, participant self-nomination, and targeted snowball techniques, relying on academic staff to identify subjects displaying high-risk behavioral patterns. Formal parental consent was secured prior to interviewing, with all guardians holding university-level qualifications. Sessions were facilitated by a primary interviewer and an independent recorder, running 100–120 minutes with a short mid-session pause. Group sizes were capped between 7 and 11 participants to optimize group dynamics (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). Protocols explored initial motivations, factors diminishing competitive interest, personal encounters with mistreatment, grievance reporting outcomes, psychological impacts, and general legal awareness of minor rights.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Systematic thematic analysis of the transcript data revealed several core patterns regarding the institutional fulfilment of pediatric rights within regional sports infrastructure.

Parental Pressure vs. Autonomous Interest

The initial probe investigated motives driving entry into competitive athletics. Data revealed that 16% of participants were coerced into professional training regimes primarily by parental expectations. Under the guise of "holistic growth," guardians frequently enroll children in intensive, multi-disciplinary schedules that induce physical, psychological, and social exhaustion. This practice directly breaches international pediatric standards on multiple fronts. It subverts UNCRC Article 3 (Best Interests of the Child) by prioritizing parental ambition over child preference. It compromises UNCRC Article 6 (Optimal Survival and Development) through sustained physical and emotional burnout. Furthermore, it undermines UNCRC Article 12 (Right to be Heard) and Article 13 (Freedom of Expression) when children are prevented from declining professional athletic paths. Finally, it violates UNCRC Article 18 regarding parental responsibility for well-being when care-giving decisions cause systemic stress. While unstructured play is vital for physical health, forced professionalization distorts recreational movement into high-stakes performance, accelerating premature drop-out.

Structural Disparities and Training Attrition

Probing shifts in participant engagement over time revealed that 43% of young athletes experienced a marked decline in motivation after initial enrollment. Despite sharing identical training spaces and coaches, individual experiences diverged sharply due to two institutional practices. First, coaches display resource allocation bias by disproportionately focusing advanced instruction and motivational support on high-performing athletes, widening the gap between strong and struggling competitors. This violates UNCRC Article 2 against discrimination. Second, trainers routinely show a neglect of biomechanical and developmental readiness by ignoring anthropometric profiling and individual maturation rates, forcing ill-fitted training models onto developing bodies. This violates UNCRC Article 5 regarding evolving capacities.

Institutional Stressors and Rights Infringements

When asked to identify primary distress factors within their sporting environments, participants cited systemic abuses across multiple operational dimensions:

Bullying and Peer Exploitation (48%): Representing the single largest stressor, recorded behaviors included social ostracization, physical intimidation, hazing of recruits, targeting top performers to reduce competition, and forcing junior athletes to perform menial tasks (such as laundering gear, room cleaning, foot massages, and theft of supplements), directly violating UNCRC Article 19.

Corporal Punishment (27%): Physical strikes and harsh physical discipline remain widely normalized as routine conditioning, causing physical injury and emotional trauma while violating UNCRC Article 19.

Gender Stereotyping (24%): Gender-segregated expectations label heavier sports as "masculine" and lighter pursuits as "feminine." Athletes defying these norms encounter severe peer harassment, homophobic slurs, and reduced structural encouragement, violating UNCRC Article 2 and Indian Constitution Article 15.

Socioeconomic Barriers (23%): Prohibitive costs for specialized equipment, custom apparel, and nutritional regimes restrict low-income athletes, violating Indian Constitution Article 39f guaranteeing equal opportunity.

Age-Based Favouritism (11%): Trainers prioritize older, competition-ready athletes who offer immediate trophy prospects over younger trainees, violating UNCRC Article 2.

Exploitative Maintenance Tasks (6%): Facilities compel youth to perform heavy labor, such as manual field maintenance and handling chemical line-marking compounds, under the pretense of training, violating UNCRC Article 19.

Institutional Silence and Inadequate Grievance Mechanisms

Only 18% of affected athletes had formally reported misconduct to facility administrators. The remaining 82% refrained due to fear of retaliation, heightened bullying, or administrative indifference. When complaints were filed, institutional responses rarely progressed beyond informal verbal warnings. This lack of rigorous oversight fosters an entrenched culture of impunity, violating UNCRC Article 4 regarding state enforcement obligations.

Psychological Outcomes and Rights Literacy

Approximately 23% of participants displayed overt psychological distress linked directly to rights violations. Documented clinical indicators included severe performance anxiety, fear of failure, reduced self-esteem, diminished self-concept, social withdrawal within academic and domestic environments, and an inability to form stable peer relationships, resulting in elevated sports abandonment. This violates UNCRC Article 27 ensuring adequate standards for mental and physical growth. Regarding rights literacy, while 73% of youth recognized the phrase "child rights" from school curricula, a mere 2% understood their legal enforceability, and 0% were aware of UNCRC framework protections. This information deficit restricts self-advocacy, violating UNCRC Article 17 regarding access to vital rights-based information.

Gender-Specific Vulnerabilities in Residential Wings

Female athletes residing in specialized sports hostels reported distinct challenges. They face identity threats when defying traditional feminine presentation, often targeted with "tomboy" labeling that undermines self-identity, violating UNCRC Article 8. Hostellers also experience relentless peer exposure, facing continuous bullying without respite during non-training hours, causing acute social isolation and violating UNCRC Article 15 regarding free association. Furthermore, the absence of female coaches creates severe barriers when navigating pubertal changes and reproductive health needs, driving high attrition rates post-puberty due to societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

While resilience enables some athletes to succeed internationally, a vulnerable segment suffers severe psychological and physical detriment due to systemic rights failures. Although India has ratified international conventions (UNCRC, ILO Standards) and enacted progressive legislative measures (PCPNDT Act, NCPCR frameworks), sports institutions remain largely unregulated regarding pediatric safety. To honour the national commitment to "Leave No One Behind," oversight bodies must move beyond building physical infrastructure. Establishing legally binding safeguarding frameworks, mandatory rights literacy programs, independent grievance channels, and pediatric-certified coaching certifications are essential steps to protect the psychological and physical integrity of young athletes.

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