

“WE WERE ONLY DEMANDING JUSTICE”

Sexual Abuse in Indian Wrestling Federation



Report by the Sport & Rights Alliance



**Athletes
Network**

FOR SAFER SPORTS

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Published on 23 July 2024
Original language: English
Translated into Hindi by:
Sanchita Aidasani
Printed in Switzerland

Sport & Rights Alliance

The Sport & Rights Alliance
is a coalition hosted and
operated by the World Players
Association sector of UNI Global
Union registered in Switzerland
with an office at 8 – 10 Avenue
Reverdil, 1260 Nyon.

Main Researcher

Dr. Payoshni Mitra (Executive Director, Humans of Sport)

Editor

Sarah Tofte

Sport & Rights Alliance

Reviewed by Andrea Florence (Director),
Joanna Maranhão (Network Coordinator),
Rachel Causey (Communications Coordinator)

Network Advisory Council

Reviewed by Ahmar Maiga (Mali),
Jessica Shuran Yu (Singapore),
Gabriela Garton (Argentina),
Mary Cain (United States),
Kaiya McCullough (United States)

Photography and Videography

Siddhartha Hajra

Graphic Design

Victoria Andreoli



About the Sport & Rights Alliance

The Sport & Rights Alliance's mission is to promote the rights and well-being of those most affected by human rights risks associated with the delivery of sport. Our partners include Amnesty International, The Army of Survivors, Committee to Protect Journalists, Football Supporters Europe, Human Rights Watch, ILGA World (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), the International Trade Union Confederation, Transparency International Germany, and World Players Association, UNI Global Union. As a global coalition of leading NGOs and trade unions, the Sport & Rights Alliance works together to ensure sports bodies, governments and other relevant stakeholders give rise to a world of sport that protects, respects, and fulfills international standards for human rights, labor rights, child rights and wellbeing and safeguarding, and anti-corruption.

About the Athletes Network for Safer Sports

The Athletes Network for Safer Sports is an international network of people and organizations connected by their lived experience of abuse in sport. A program of the Sport & Rights Alliance, the Network brings together athletes, allies, survivors, victims and whistleblowers with a mission to create and strengthen safe spaces for people affected by abuse in sport – promoting healing, amplifying each other's voices, and advocating for systemic change. The Network is guided by an Advisory Council composed of athletes and allies impacted by abuse in sport, who are responsible for providing the Network with overall programmatic guidance and strategic support.

Reporting Methodology

In June 2023, the Sport & Rights Alliance began monitoring and advocating for athletes raising complaints of abuse in Indian wrestling.¹ After receiving reports that the athletes were not satisfied with current reforms and requested more international support, the Sport & Rights Alliance traveled to India in March 2024 to interview over 18 individuals related to the case, including athletes, coaches, parents, witnesses, journalists and supporters. The findings of this report are based on those testimonies as well as news reports, academic expertise and official police reports.

Documenting sexual harassment and abuse requires a great deal of care and consideration – for the victims, for the readers, and for all people who may be impacted by this report in the present and in the future. The athletes interviewed in March 2024 provided our researcher with detailed reports of sexual harassment and abuse, including locations, dates and specific descriptions of the abusive actions. However, in an effort to prioritize the athletes’ healing and privacy, and to mitigate the risks of secondary traumatization for readers, we have chosen to redact these details for the purposes of this public report. Names that are mentioned in this report have been expressly authorized by athletes interviewed by the Sport & Rights Alliance. We stand with the athletes and honor the trust they have placed in us. We will provide additional information as needed to the appropriate stakeholders, with the athletes’ informed consent, to carry out trauma-informed investigations.

Content Warning

This report contains details of incidents of sexual harassment and abuse in the context of sport and police brutality, and mentions the abuser’s name. The raw and honest testimonies from athletes can be hard to read, especially for those who have suffered similar abuses. If you find a section that is challenging or causes any discomfort, we encourage you to not proceed.

Local Support

If you or someone you know has been affected by athlete abuse and are seeking support, please use the map at this link to find the nearest local resource available:
<https://worldplayerscare.co/local-support>.

¹ Sport & Rights Alliance, “Olympics: Act on Sex Abuse Complaints by Indian Athletes,” 7 June 2023. <https://sportandrightsalliance.org/olympics-act-on-sexual-abuse-complaints-by-indian-athletes/>

Definitions and Types of Abuse

For the purpose of this report, the following definitions of types of maltreatment in sports have been adopted:

Abuse

Includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, economic, institutional behaviors, pattern of threats of actions that influence another person. Abuse also includes discrimination and microaggressions.²

**Psychological Abuse/
Violence**

A pattern of deliberate, prolonged, repeated non-contact behaviors within a power-differentiated relationship. This form of abuse is at the core of all forms of violence. Some definitions refer to emotional or psychological abuse in recognition that the psyche consists of more than emotions. It also consists of cognitions, values and beliefs about oneself, and the world. The behaviors that constitute psychological abuse target a person's inner life in all its profound scope.

**Sexual Abuse/
Violence**

Any conduct of a sexual nature, whether non-contact, contact or penetrative, where consent is coerced/manipulated or is not or cannot be given.

**Sexual
Harassment**

Any unwanted and unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal or physical.

Neglect

The failure of parents or care givers to meet a person's physical and emotional needs or failure to protect a child from exposure to danger. This definition equally applies to coaches and athlete entourage.

Safe Sport

An athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes.³

Sextortion

The abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage.⁴

² United Nations, "UN Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (English)," 2017. <https://hr.un.org/materials/un-glossary-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-english>

³ The International Olympic Committee, "The IOC Consensus Statement: harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport," 30 March 2016. https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/What-We-Do/Protecting-Clean-Athletes/Safeguarding/IOC-Consensus-Statement_Harassment-and-abuse-in-sport-2016.pdf

⁴ Transparency International, "Sextortion in Sport," 2022. <https://www.transparency.de/publikationen/detail/article/sextortion-im-sport>

List of Organizations and Abbreviations



IOA

Indian
Olympic
Association

IOC

International
Olympic
Committee

WFI

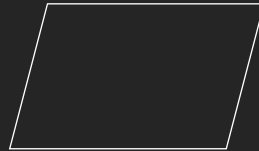
Wrestling
Federation
of India

UWW

United
World
Wrestling

BJP

Bharatiya
Janata
Party



A Note from the Network

A sport environment truly committed to safeguarding must have zero tolerance for harm of any kind. Each and every stakeholder in the sport ecosystem has a responsibility to end violence in sport, in all of its manifestations.

For too long, sport has normalized and overlooked abusers and abusive behaviors as “part of the game” for athletes who want to advance their careers. This must stop.

Any kind of sexual harassment or abuse can have devastating, enduring impact on the victim, especially within a situation of power imbalances. When this impact is underestimated, downplayed or even denied, it often makes the victim’s pathway to healing and justice considerably worse – undermining the call for necessary reforms urgently needed within sport organizations to stop and prevent all kinds of abuse.

To the athletes in India who boldly raised their voices and the families and allies who joined and supported them: We believe and honor you. We are deeply sorry for the harms you have suffered. We thank you for raising your voices and hope that this report and the solidarity work we will take forward will give you comfort and support as you continue your healing journey.

In solidarity,

Sport & Rights Alliance
Athletes Network for Safer Sports

Executive Summary

“Bajrang, Sakshi and I are accomplished players, Olympic-level players, and even then, we’ve had to struggle so much for anyone to hear our story. Imagine how difficult it must be for a young woman in sports to speak up. Their careers can get destroyed.”

Vinesh Phogat, Olympic wrestler and Commonwealth Games Champion⁵



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⁵ The Print, “This Haryana coach accused a minister of sexual assault. Now her career is in shambles,” 24 May 2023. <https://theprint.in/ground-reports/this-haryana-coach-accused-a-minister-of-sexual-assault-now-her-career-is-in-shambles/1590614/>

In April 2024, former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) President Brij Bhushan Singh was ordered to face trial for sexually harassing five female wrestlers.⁶ As head of India's governing body of wrestling, Singh was in charge of the sport for more than a decade before he was removed from his position in 2023. Singh's twelve-year tenure as head of WFI was riddled with allegations of abuse by multiple women and girls.⁷ The news of Singh's trial came after more than a year of protests against Singh by the country's top Olympic wrestlers and their supporters. At the protest's first organized sit-in, Olympic wrestler and Commonwealth Games Champion Vinesh Phogat noted the potential scale of Singh's abuse: "*Women wrestlers have been sexually harassed at national camps by coaches and also the WFI president. I know at least 10-20 girls in the national camp who have come and told me their stories.*"⁸

Even if Singh is convicted at trial, India's female wrestlers are still far away from justice and reconciliation. According to interviews conducted by the Sport & Rights Alliance and news reports, the breadth and extent of Singh's abuse is far greater than those contained in his criminal charges. The complaints against Singh include:

- Soliciting sexual acts from and committing sexual assault against women and girl athletes at national and international junior and women's competitions.
- Forcibly touching intimate areas of women and girl athletes in public, during competition photo opportunities, training sessions, and other occasions.
- Sextortion, including using his position at WFI to demand physical intimacy and retaliate against athletes who refused his demands - withholding access to competition, training opportunities, and injury rehabilitation services.

This case exemplifies the negative impact of power imbalances and the systemic normalization of harassment and abuse in sports. Wrestlers have spoken to the Sport & Rights Alliance and the news media about abuse from other WFI officials and federation coaches and staff. Former WFI Secretary Vinod Tomar is also on trial for sexual harassment and assault of female wrestlers. Until there is an official, extensive, and transparent accounting of Singh's tenure as WFI President, many cases of abuse will remain unaccounted for and uninvestigated.⁹ At the time of this report's writing, the 2023 investigation of Singh's abuse by India's Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, has not been made public, or made available to the athletes.

6 NDTV, "'Sufficient Material Against Accused No.1': Court Charges BJP's Brij Bhushan," 10 May 2024. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/frame-charges-against-ex-wrestling-body-chief-brij-bhushan-delhi-court-563322>

7 Al Jazeera, "Indian wrestlers accuse WFI chief, coaches of sexual harassment," 19 January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/19/indian-wrestlers-accuse-sports-body-chief-of-sexual-harassment>

8 Al Jazeera, "Indian wrestlers accuse WFI chief, coaches of sexual harassment," 19 January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/19/indian-wrestlers-accuse-sports-body-chief-of-sexual-harassment>

9 The Times of India, "Delhi court frames charges of sexual harassment against former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Singh," 21 May 2024. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/more-sports/wrestling/delhi-court-charges-former-wfi-chief-brij-bhushan-sharan-singh-with-sexual-harassment-trial-to-proceed/articleshow/110300611.cms>

After speaking out and seeking justice, the athletes protesting for their protection and Singh's accountability have been subjected to harassment, threats, arrest, and detention in retaliation for their demands.¹⁰ This includes being targeted by the Indian police, as well as Singh (who was also an elected Member of Parliament representing the ruling party of India) and his allies. When athletes sought support from other governing sports bodies, like the Indian Olympic Association, they were met with criticism for their approach, and no meaningful response to their demands for accountability and safety.¹¹



“We all put our careers at stake and slept on the streets for many days in the sun and rain... We were not demanding anything, we were only demanding justice.”

Sakshi Malik, Olympic-medal winning wrestler and protestor

10 BBC, “Wrestlers’ protest: Delhi police file rioting case after detention,” 29 May 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65743355>

11 Sportstar, “Wrestler’s streets protest tarnishing India’s image, amounts to indiscipline, says IOA President PT Usha,” 27 April 2023. <https://sportstar.thehindu.com/wrestling/ia-indian-olympic-association-president-pt-usha-wrestlers-street-protest-new-delhi-tarnishing-india-image/article66785047.ece>

India's national sport governing bodies have failed to both protect female athletes from abuse and to respond adequately to reports of abuse. As Malik told the Sport & Rights Alliance, *"I had told one of my seniors and also my parents when I was harassed by him early in my career. My parents felt speaking up will end my career and advised me against complaining. I wish I knew about any independent body where one could complain at the time when this happened. It is so important to make sure that athletes feel safe to report harassment."* As the WFI and the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) have fallen short, it is essential for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ensure a comprehensive, independent and trauma-informed investigation of Singh's abuse during his tenure as president of WFI, other claims of abuse by federation officials, coaches, and staff, and any threats and harassment Singh and his allies directed at the reporting athletes. The IOC must also overhaul its "Integrity and Compliance Hotline" – the main artery for reporting athlete abuse – to make it accessible, trauma-informed, responsive and free of conflicts of interest.¹²

India is bidding to host the 2036 Summer Olympics and Paralympic Games for the first time, with a promise to improve and advance women's sport in the country.¹³ In 2030, India will host the Summer Youth Olympics in Mumbai. The government of India should urgently act to address the full extent of Singh's and other incidents of abuse in sports, while the IOC should ensure that any bid from India is contingent on significant human rights improvements, including reformed governance, women in leadership, and systems to ensure safeguarding, and the freedom to speak out for the country's own athletes. In order to be successful in their bid to host the Summer Olympics of 2036, the Indian Government should first ensure that athletes are safe.

12 International Olympic Committee Integrity and Compliance Hotline. <https://ioc.integrityline.org/>

13 Narendra Modi, "Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) : A New Dawn in Indian Sports," 9 February 2024. <https://www.narendramodi.in/target-olympic-podium-scheme-tops-a-new-dawn-in-indian-sports-579228>

Background

Wrestling is one of India's oldest sports, dating back many centuries, and is particularly popular in the northern Indian states of Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh.¹⁴

After field hockey, wrestling has brought the second highest number of Olympic medals for India, with seven total.¹⁵ In addition, Indian wrestlers have won 23 medals at the World Championships.¹⁶ Though the sport is historically dominated by men, pioneering women wrestlers like Geeta Phogat, a freestyle wrestler who won India's first ever gold medal in wrestling at the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and who was the first Indian female wrestler to qualify for the Olympics,¹⁷ and Sakshi Malik, who in 2016 became the first Indian female wrestler to win a medal at the Olympics,¹⁸ grew the sport's popularity among girls and young women.



Bajrang Punia,
Bronze Medalist
at the 2020
Tokyo Olympics

14 International Olympic Committee, "History of wrestling in India: from an entertainment sport to Olympic glory," 18 October 2021. <https://olympics.com/en/news/indian-wrestling-history-legacy-olympics-medals-world-championships>

15 International Olympic Committee, "India at World Wrestling Championships: History and all medal winners - full list," 21 September 2023. <https://olympics.com/en/news/world-wrestling-championships-india-wrestlers-medal-winners>

16 International Olympic Committee, "India at World Wrestling Championships: History and all medal winners - full list," 21 September 2023. <https://olympics.com/en/news/world-wrestling-championships-india-wrestlers-medal-winners>

17 International Olympic Committee, "'If I stay fit, I can think of a possible return for the Olympics next year' - Geeta Phogat," 05 April 2020. <https://olympics.com/en/news/geeta-phogat-talks-possible-olympic-return>

18 Sakshi Malik was the first Indian woman to win a wrestling medal (bronze) at the 2016 Rio Olympics and also won gold, bronze and silver medals at the 2022, 2018 and 2014 Commonwealth Games. (International Olympic Committee, Sakshi Malik. <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/sakshi-malik>)

Indian wrestling's highest governing body is the Indian wrestling's highest governing body is the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI). In January 2023, Malik and fellow Olympic wrestlers Bajrang Punia¹⁹ and Vinesh Phogat²⁰ publicly accused then-WFI President Brij Bhushan Singh, other federal officials, and several coaches, of sexually harassing multiple female athletes.²¹ Singh, who was appointed to lead WFI in 2011, is also a Member of Parliament representing Uttar Pradesh as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).²² More than 30 top Indian wrestlers, both men and women, and hundreds of supporters joined Malik, Punia, and Phogat in protesting against Singh, including a sit-in near the parliament building in the Indian capital of New Delhi. *"I started thinking about my brother's [9-year-old] daughter who has started wrestling,"* Phogat told *Al Jazeera* at the sit-in. On January 21, 2023, the wrestlers called off the protest after the government promised an independent inquiry and that Singh would step aside until the investigation was completed.²³

These public accusations and wide media coverage of the protests opened the floodgate of information on Singh's legacy of abuse during his tenure at WFI. According to interviews conducted by the Sport & Rights Alliance, as well as police and media reports, Singh's abuse was well known within the elite wrestling community. Wrestlers who wanted to speak up were told to stay quiet or risk retaliation from Singh. As one senior wrestling coach told the Sport & Rights Alliance, *"When I heard that the women wrestlers were protesting, I was reminded of what I had heard several years back. I wasn't able to take any action or support them to speak up. I was fearful that [Singh] would cause harm to me and my family."*²⁴

The following section documents testimonies from athlete survivors, coaches and witnesses about Singh's abuse, and other abuses within the WFI. Identifying details of tournaments in India and other settings have been removed to protect the identities of the athletes who reported abuse.

19 Bajrang Punia won the bronze medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and is the first Indian wrestler to be ranked world No. 1 in any category and the first Indian wrestler to win four World Championship medals. (International Olympic Committee, Bajrang Punia. <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/bajrang-punia>)

20 Vinesh Phogat is a two-time Olympian and holds gold medals from the 2022, 2018 and 2014 Commonwealth Games and bronze medals from the 2022 and 2019 World Championships. (International Olympic Committee, Vinesh Phogat. <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/vinesh-phogat>)

21 Al Jazeera, "Indian wrestlers accuse WFI chief, coaches of sexual harassment," 19 January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/19/indian-wrestlers-accuse-sports-body-chief-of-sexual-harassment>

22 Al Jazeera, "Indian wrestlers accuse WFI chief, coaches of sexual harassment," 19 January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/19/indian-wrestlers-accuse-sports-body-chief-of-sexual-harassment>

23 Al Jazeera, "Indian wrestlers end protest over sexual harassment," 21 January 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/21/indian-wrestlers-end-protest-over-sexual-harassment>

24 Sport & Rights Alliance interview, 12-13 March 2024.

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Singh's Abuses

According to athletes, coaches, and other sources, Brij Bhushan Singh used his twelve-year tenure as President of the WFI to assault, harass, threaten, intimate, and punish female wrestlers. This abuse occurred at the office of the WFI, during competitions in India and around the world, and in training sessions. The abuses were witnessed and known widely by many in sport, including coaches, trainers, and other WFI officials. In March 2024, the Sport & Rights Alliance interviewed athletes about Singh's abuse, including victims, parents of athletes, and witnesses to his abuse. The following testimonies are based on those interviews, as well as official police reports obtained by the Sport & Rights Alliance.

"I thought he
wanted to
congratulate me"

20-year old victim

Singh's abuses as WFI president date back to over ten years ago, during his very first years on the job. At that time, after a 20-year-old victim won a medal at a wrestling competition outside of India, Singh called her to his room. Thinking that Singh wanted to congratulate her in person, she went. There, Singh "called me towards the bed where he was sitting, and then all of a sudden he hugged me forcefully without my consent." Singh told her it was the gesture of a "father-figure." When the athlete returned home to India after the competition, Singh began calling her mother, in order to talk to the 20-year-old. On those calls, Singh would ask personal questions and remind her to tell Singh "what she needs" from him. That same year, Singh offered to buy "nutritional supplements" for the athlete in exchange for "sexual favors." This sextortion caused lasting trauma and poor performance in her sport. Singh called the 20-year-old's home so many times that her mother stopped answering the phone. "Due to the continuous inappropriate acts by [Singh], I was so traumatized and mentally upset that it was difficult for me to focus and deliver to the best of my ability at various competitions.

“His only intention was to touch me inappropriately”

21-year-old victim

The pattern that started in 2012 continued for Singh’s entire tenure as WFI President. The victims were typically young women athletes at the beginning of their competitive careers, and some of the abuse spanned years of their lives. In 2016, a 21-year-old victim traveled outside of India for an Olympic qualifying event. The athlete told the Sport & Rights Alliance that while out at dinner one night, Singh called her over to his dinner table, where he was dining alone, and groped her. As a result, during the Olympic trials, she could not eat or sleep for days. In 2017, the athlete suffered a serious concussion during training for another tournament and was in the hospital. Despite the federation’s knowledge of her concussion, documented in a medical report, Singh called the athlete into the WFI’s office and indicated that she could be punished for missing the tournament, disregarding her documented medical condition. The victim arrived with her boyfriend, who was told by Singh’s secretary, Vinod Tomar, to stay outside while the female athlete met with Singh alone in his office. Singh sat next to the athlete on the sofa, and “*started to touch me inappropriately... without my consent.*” Back at a hotel with her boyfriend, the victim “*started crying uncontrollably... had a fever... and fainted in the hotel lobby.*” She said, “[Singh] made me mentally and physically weak.”

Singh summoned the 21-year-old athlete to the federation offices again, where she was asked to sign an “apology” document for missing the tournament and for public comments about the need to reform the WFI. “*While we were sitting he [Singh] was touching his leg against mine and continued talking and even touched my knees... he [groped me] on the pretext of checking my breathing.*” The victim would come across Singh at various competitions in 2018, 2019, and 2020. In each instance, Singh would approach and hug her very tightly, groping her. In 2020, Singh, expressing disappointment with the victim’s wrestling results that year, called up the athlete’s husband and told him that if his wife “*did not apologize to Singh*” then she would “*face serious consequences.*” During these calls, Singh told the 21-year-old athlete that she “*would be allowed to continue my career in sports only if I came and met the accused [Singh] in person.*” The athlete said the continued pressure and harassment from Singh, which included instrumental violence,²⁵ a common dimension of harm perpetrated by authority figures, “*made it difficult for me to focus and deliver to the best of my ability at various competitions.*”

“I was stunned”

29-year-old victim

Many athletes and victims have claimed that the Wrestling Federation of India was largely under Singh’s control, which is evident in the way coaches responded to Singh’s actions and demands. At a 2022 tournament in India, a 29-year-old athlete and other wrestlers selected

25 Vertommen, T., Decuyper, M., Parent, S., Pankowiak, A., & Woessner, M. N. “Interpersonal violence in Belgian sport today: Young athletes report”. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 2022. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/18/11745>

for the competition trials gathered for a team photo. As one of the taller wrestlers, the athlete stood in the back row of the photo. *"While I was... waiting for the other wrestlers to take their position [for the photo], [Singh] came and stood alongside me... [and] I suddenly felt a hand on my [backside]."* When the 29-year-old turned around, she saw that it was Singh's hand on her. When the athlete tried to move away, Singh held her in place by grabbing her by the shoulders. For the women wrestlers, national competitions are their workplace, and such sexual harassment is also a workplace abuse by Singh.

During a subsequent training camp, wrestlers who needed to be away from the camp were required to request their leave through the designated coach. When the 29-year-old athlete approached the designated coach with a leave request, she was told she would need to ask Singh for permission, which was not typical procedure. During the training camp, Singh would request to meet with her. When the 29-year-old explained to the training camp staff why she did not want to meet with Singh, including his inappropriate behavior towards her, she was told by a coach that *"I would be cut or struck from the camp... and won't be allowed to play"* if she didn't agree to meet with Singh when asked.

"We never left
our rooms alone"

19-year-old victim

Singh's abuses were so widespread that female wrestlers knew to steer clear of him whenever possible. One 19-year-old athlete had been a competitive wrestler for six years when she attended an international tournament in 2022. While she was training in the championship city prior to the competition, the athlete said she was aware of Singh's reputation for sexual harassment and abuse. *"I refused [to see him separately] since the accused [Singh] was touching other girls also inappropriately."* When Singh approached the 19-year-old again, *"he pulled up my t-shirt and slid his hand down my stomach and put his hand on my navel with the pretext of checking my breath."* While staying at the competition hotel in Sofia, the athlete observed that Singh booked a room on the same floor as the female athletes and walked around the hallway wearing a "lungi" (a type of sarong). The 19-year-old noticed that *"all the female athletes used to travel in groups whenever they left their respective rooms in order to avoid meeting the accused [Singh] alone."*

At the competition, the 19-year-old athlete was injured during a match, though she still won a silver medal. Upon her return to India, *"I was called into the office of the federation... where I met [Singh] who told me that the federation is willing to bear the expenses for my treatment provided if I give in to his sexual advances."* The 19-year-old athlete refused Singh's demands.

“My body froze
out of shock”

20-year-old victim

Singh’s abuses occurred not only at national and international competitions, but within the federation offices as well. During a 2018 tournament outside of India, a 20-year-old athlete was stretching on a mat when Singh *“came near me and suddenly, to my shock and surprise, leaned in on me and... pulled up my t-shirt and [groped me] on the pretext of... checking my breathing.”* Later, in 2019, the athlete attended a meeting at the federation, to which she brought along her brother. When the 20-year-old athlete was called into Singh’s office, Vinod Tomar, Singh’s secretary, told the athlete’s brother to stay behind. *“As soon as I entered [Singh’s] office... some other persons who were present in the office... were directed to leave the office... immediately... upon the departure of the other persons, [Singh] closed the door... pulled me towards himself and tried making forceful physical contact with me. I ran away from the office.”*

“I was just
a young girl”

20-year-old victim

Refusing Singh often led to punishment and retaliation, including when Singh using his role as WFI’s highest authority to withhold competition opportunities from certain athletes. When a 20-year-old won a bronze medal at a national tournament in 2021 in India, she was part of the medal ceremony. During the ceremony, Singh came up to the athlete and asked for a photograph and then grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her tightly to him. When the 20-year-old moved away from him, Singh said, *“Do you not want to participate in future competitions?”*. The athlete said that in order to *“save my dignity,”* she ran away from the medal ceremony.

In 2022, the victim, now a 21-year-old, needed her age certified as part of her selection for a national championship competition. The federation was in charge of verifying her documentation. What is typically a straightforward process was made more complicated. Federation officials were asking her for more documents than what was required and what was asked of other athletes. After producing the requested documents, the athlete was then told by the federation that her name was no longer on the selection list of the national championship competition. When she asked Singh why her name was no longer on the selection list, he replied *“I warned you that I would not let you play any competition,”* which the victim took to be a reference to what he told her after she refused to engage with Singh at the medal ceremony. *“At [a]...tender age...when I was at the very initial stage of my wrestling profession...I was being pulled back by such tactics.”* The victim describes the ongoing discord between her and Singh. *“Even now [in 2023], when [Singh] is near me, he looks at me with distasteful eyes.”*

India's Institutional Responses



“Indian society normalizes abuse and harassment. They will only take it seriously when the assault is gruesome. But it is like how we fight a wrestling bout. Whether we lose by one point or by ten, we lose. Whether the assault is big or small, it is an assault. An act against our will.”

Vinesh Phogat, Olympic wrestler and Commonwealth Games Champion²⁶

As wrestlers in India began to speak publicly about Singh’s abuses, they elevated their complaints to the government through public protests in late 2022 and early 2023. Under pressure from such protests, India’s Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports appointed a five-member committee to investigate the claims against Singh.²⁷ The government also noted that it had “received information from the prominent athletes, which prima facie warrants certain action(s), and the Ministry is of the considered view that the Wrestling Federation of India has not discharged its duties with respect to redressal of players’ grievances and conduct of the business of the Federation in a professional manner.” The government ordered the WFI to immediately “abstain” from “administering and managing the day-to-day activities of the Federation.”²⁸

²⁶ Sport & Rights Alliance interview, 12-13 March 2024.

²⁸ The Wire, “Mary Kom to Head Oversight Committee That Will Probe Wrestlers’ Harassment Allegations,” 23 January 2023. <https://thewire.in/sport/mary-kom-oversight-committee-wfi-harassmen>

²⁷ The Wire, “Mary Kom to Head Oversight Committee That Will Probe Wrestlers’ Harassment Allegations,” 23 January 2023. <https://thewire.in/sport/mary-kom-oversight-committee-wfi-harassment>

Athletes spoke to the Sport & Rights Alliance about the experience of testifying before the special committee. Eight complainants – all female wrestlers – testified before the committee. There were concerns about the confidentiality and safety of the athletes.²⁹

Those testifying told the Sport & Rights Alliance that supporters of Singh, including the media with cameramen, were waiting outside the venue on the days of their testimony. Athletes also told the Sport & Rights Alliance of their impressions of the committee's response to their testimony against Singh. In interviews, they described the "skeptical" approach of the committee towards the allegations against Singh. For example, athletes told the Sport & Rights Alliance that the committee wanted to see video and audio "proof" of Singh's abuse, not just testimony. One wrestler Sangeeta Phogat said *"the committees were created with people who themselves did not know what sexual harassment is."* Another wrestler described her testimony of abuse as *"not being heard...misunderstood and misinterpreted."*

These victim-blaming attitudes, which hold the victim rather than the perpetrator responsible, go against an ethic of care. When athletes sense that the system meant to protect them is set up first and foremost to blame victims and believe perpetrators, it not only harms the healing process for those athletes, but makes moving forward with an investigation nearly impossible, and dissuades other survivors from reporting. This then makes justice, accountability, and preventing the abuse from happening again even more challenging.

Athletes also noted that the nature of the committee's comments to them during their testimony implied that they did not think that Singh's actions rose to the level of abuse. As **Vinesh Phogat** explained to the Sport & Rights Alliance: *"Indian society normalizes abuse and harassment. They will only take it seriously when the assault is gruesome. But it is like how we fight a wrestling bout. Whether we lose by one point or by ten, we lose. Whether the assault is big or small, it is an assault. An act against our will."*

Sangeeta Phogat,
2022 National
Champion



²⁹ The Wire, "Wrestlers' Protest | Govt-Appointed Panel Was Biased Towards BJP MP Singh: Complainants", 10 May 2023. <https://thewire.in/rights/wrestlers-protest-brij-bhushan-singh-mary-kom-oversight-committee>

In April 2023, the committee issued its report to the Indian government, but did not make public.³⁰ The committee did not recommend any action to be taken against Singh, though it did find the WFI in violation of India's 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act for WFI's failure to establish an internal complaints committee.³¹ Popularly known as the PoSH Act, this act provides protection to all employees in the public and private sectors including health, sports, education, or government institutions.³² The wrestlers expressed "utter shock" that the committee members seemed to "justify the actions of [Singh]."³³

Following the government's failure to take action against Singh, the public protests against Singh resumed.³⁴ The India Olympic Association, which has previously said that the protesting wrestlers were "tarnishing the image of India," reversed course and issued public statements in support of the athletes.³⁵

In May 2023, the Delhi Police cracked down on the protest site, restraining, arresting and detaining protestors in jail for several hours before releasing them.³⁶ Among those injured by the Delhi police was the Chairperson of the Delhi Commission for Women, Swati Maliwal.³⁷ Two days later, some of the protesting wrestlers threatened to throw their medals in the river Ganges and begin a hunger strike. In a public statement, the athletes said, "For us, our medals are sacred, and so is the river Ganges. This holy river is the perfect custodian of our medals, not the system that shields the offender."³⁸

In June 2023, India's Supreme Court finally ordered the New Delhi police to investigate the charges against Singh, which were brought by six women complainants.³⁹ During the investigation, Vinesh Phogat reported that police leaked the identities of the complainants and WFI officials threatened complainants, protestors, and their families.⁴⁰ Following its investigation, the New Delhi police charged Singh with assault, stalking, and sexual harassment.⁴¹ In April 2024, a New Delhi court ordered the trial against Singh to begin.⁴²

30 The Wire, "Wrestlers' Protest | Govt-Appointed Panel Was Biased Towards BJP MP Singh: Complainants," 10 May 2023. <https://thewire.in/rights/wrestlers-protest-brij-bhushan-singh-mary-kom-oversight-committee>

31 The PoSH Act defines workplace as including any sports institute, stadium, sports complex or competition or games venue, whether residential or not used for training, sports or other activities relating thereto. (India, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace – Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013. <https://iddashboard.legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A2013-14.pdf>)

32 Athletes are included here as the PoSH Act defines "employee" as a person employed at a workplace for any work on regular, temporary, ad hoc or daily wage basis, either directly or through an agent, including a contractor, with or, without the knowledge of the principal employer, whether for remuneration or not, or working on a voluntary basis or otherwise, whether the terms of employment are express or implied and includes a co-worker, a contract worker, probationer, trainee, apprentice or called by any other such name.

33 The Wire, "Wrestlers' Protest | Govt-Appointed Panel Was Biased Towards BJP MP Singh: Complainants," 10 May 2023. <https://thewire.in/rights/wrestlers-protest-brij-bhushan-singh-mary-kom-oversight-committee>

34 NDTV, "'PT Usha Said Comments Misinterpreted': Wrestler On 'Indiscipline' Remark," 03 May 2023. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/wrestlers-protest-metoo-brij-bhushan-sharan-singh-pt-usha-meets-wrestlers-days-after-indiscipline-remark-4000490>

35 Sportstar, "Wrestler's streets protest tarnishing India's image, amounts to indiscipline, says IOA President PT Usha," 27 April 2023. <https://sportstar.thehindu.com/wrestling/ioa-indian-olympic-association-president-pt-usha-wrestlers-street-protest-new-delhi-tarnishing-india-image/article66785047.ece>

36 BBC, "Wrestlers' protest: Delhi police file rioting case after detention," 29 May 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65743355>

37 India Today, "Swati Maliwal undergoes medical check-up, has internal injuries on face: Sources," 17 May 2024. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/swati-maliwal-assault-case-medical-check-up-aiims-injuries-arvind-kejriwal-bibhav-kumar-2540187-2024-05-17>

38 Al Jazeera, "India's protesting wrestlers postpone tossing medals into Ganges," 30 May 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/30/indias-protesting-wrestlers-say-will-toss-medals-into-ganges>

39 AP, "Police file charges of sexual harassment against president of Indian wrestling federation," 15 June 2013. <https://apnews.com/article/indian-wrestling-sexual-harassment-7f332fabd1aa789b41fbc262545de4ba>

40 India Today, "Wrestlers vs WFI: Identity of complainants of sexual harassment has been leaked by police, says Vinesh Phogat," 26 April 2023. <https://www.indiatoday.in/sports/other-sports/story/identity-of-complainants-of-sexual-harassment-has-been-leaked-by-police-vinesh-phogat-2364589-2023-04-25>

41 CNN, "India's wrestling chief charged in sexual harassment case," 15 June 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/15/india/india-brij-bhushan-singh-charged-wrestlers-intl-hnk/index.html>

42 NDTV, "'Sufficient Material Against Accused No.1': Court Charges BJP's Brij Bhushan," 10 May 2024. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/frame-charges-against-ex-wrestling-body-chief-brij-bhushan-delhi-court-5633227>

The response from global sport governing bodies



In May 2023, the United World Wrestling (UWW) issued a statement in support of the athletes and met with those protesting Singh's abuse and the WFI.⁴³

The UWW also threatened to suspend the WFI and move the planned location of the 2024 Asian Championship which was to take place in New Delhi if the Indian Olympic Association did not hold new elections for the leadership of WFI.⁴⁴ The UWW later allowed the Asian Championship to be held in New Delhi, following the election of a newly formed executive council of the WFI, despite the fact that the new president of the WFI is Sanjay Singh, a close ally of Brij Bhushan Singh.⁴⁵ The close association was made clear when Sanjay Singh celebrated his election as WFI president at Brij Bhushan Singh's house with posters saying "*dab daba to hai, dab daba to rahenge*" meaning "*We dominate, our domination will continue*".⁴⁶

In interviews with the Sport & Rights Alliance, the athletes said that they felt "betrayed" by the UWW, expecting them to investigate the matter themselves and hold the WFI accountable.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) also issued a statement in May 2023 support of the wrestlers, condemning the police attack and detention of protesting athletes.⁴⁷ In June 2023, the Sport & Rights Alliance publicly called on the IOC to ensure a truly independent investigation into the sexual abuse complaints is conducted.⁴⁸ At the time of this report's writing, the IOC has not done so.

43 United World Wrestling, "UWW issues statement on Wrestling Federation of India," 30 May 2023. <https://uww.org/article/uww-issues-statement-wrestling-federation-india>

44 United World Wrestling, "UWW issues statement on Wrestling Federation of India," 30 May 2023. <https://uww.org/article/uww-issues-statement-wrestling-federation-india>

45 The Indian Express, "Sanjay Singh, Brij Bhushan's close aide, gets control of Wrestling Federation of India as ad-hoc committee dissolved," 19 March 2024. <https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/sport-others/sanjay-singh-brij-bhushan-aide-gets-control-of-wfi-ad-hoc-committee-dissolved-9220916/>

46 The Indian Express, "Express View on WFI elections: Stranglehold of Brij Bhushan Singh," 24 December 2023. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/express-view-wfi-elections-brij-bhushan-singh-sanjay-singh-sakshi-malik-9079218/>

47 ESPN, "International Olympic Committee condemns treatment of wrestlers, urges IOA to protect athletes," 31 May 2023. https://www.espn.com/wrestling/story/_/id/37766456/wrestler-protest-international-olympic-committee-condemns-detention-wrestlers-urges-ioa-protect-athletes

48 Sport & Rights Alliance, "Olympics: Act on Sex Abuse Complaints by Indian Athletes," 7 June 2023. <https://sportandrightsalliance.org/olympics-act-on-sexual-abuse-complaints-by-indian-athletes/>

Recommendations

“I had told one of my seniors and also my parents when I was harassed by him early in my career. My parents felt speaking up will end my career and advised me against complaining. I wish I knew about any independent body where one could complain at the time when this happened. It is so important to make sure that athletes feel safe to report harassment.”

Sakshi Malik, Olympic medal-winning wrestler



The following recommendations are based on Indian athletes' direct expressions and wishes. With this report, we aim to amplify their voices and advocate for systemic change in Indian and international sports. By understanding the current sports governance structure, this section is divided into each of the respective Sport Governing Body and member state. The Sport & Rights Alliance is committed to supporting the Indian wrestlers in their fight for justice and remedy.

To the Indian National Governmental

- Investigate the New Delhi police's role in leaking confidential information about athlete accusations of abuse;
- Investigate the New Delhi police response to the athlete's public, peaceful protests against Singh and the WFI.

To the National Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sport

- Conduct an expansive, trauma-informed investigation of the WFI, to include any abuse committed by federation officials, employees, coaches, trainers, and other individuals that regularly interact with wrestlers;
- Make public the 2023 investigation of Singh's abuse by India's Department of Sports, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports;
- Ensure that all sports bodies at the national and state level have internal complaints mechanisms for athlete abuse; these mechanisms should be staffed by independent members, incorporate reporting best practices, and follow the guidelines of the 2013 PoSH Act;
- Organize public awareness campaigns and programs that promote athletes' rights, and safety and wellbeing;
- Fully cooperate with an international or other national investigation of the scale and scope of athlete abuse within the WFI.

To United World Wrestling (UWW)

- In collaboration with the IOC, fully investigate the WFI and make the findings public;
- Raise awareness about the UWW's Safe Wrestling guidelines among athletes and as a resource for the reporting of abuses;
- Require and ensure that all national federations adopt a strong safeguarding policy, and require that athletes and survivors have a role in the creation and evaluation of such policies;
- Include background checks as a procedural requirement for administrative or governance positions at both national and international level of wrestling.

To the International Olympic Committee (IOC)

Ensure a comprehensive, independent and trauma-informed investigation of Singh's abuse during his tenure as president of WFI, other claims of abuse by federation officials, coaches, and staff, and any threats and harassment Singh and his allies directed at the reporting athletes;

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- (1) In collaboration with UWW, fully investigate the WFI regarding their adherence to safeguarding and good governance standards, and make the findings public;
- (2) Overhaul the existing abuse hotline for Olympic athletes,⁴⁹ to establish an effective resource where survivors of abuse can safely report any physical, sexual, or emotional abuse – when national bodies are unwilling or unable to effectively respond and especially when there is a clear conflict of interest – and access a clear pathway to remedy;
- (3) Ensure the hotline is legitimate, rights-compatible, trauma-informed and in accordance with best reporting practices, specifically that it:

- Operates year-round, including outside of Olympic and Paralympic Games;
- Ensures survivor confidentiality, options for anonymity, and digital and physical security;
- Provides a transparent, predictable investigative process and recourse with an indicative timeframe for each stage;
- Has complete independence, including from international and national sports entities;
- Connects survivors with equitable resources, counseling and safety to support an informed reporting process and healing journey;
- Is accessible for all athletes and whistleblowers, with translations and inclusive formats;
- Is developed and operated with continuous engagement, learning and dialogue with civil society and affected people; and
- Is well promoted amongst athletes and across the Olympic movement.

- (4) Consider the establishment of the next IOC regional “safeguarding hub” in India, which should provide victims independent guidance toward psychosocial support, legal aid and other assistance;
- (5) Require and ensure that a human rights due diligence check, including in regards to athlete safeguarding, is run for any host nation or any bidding nation for the Olympics;
- (6) Secure safeguarding funds to provide remedy for victims and survivors of athlete abuse.

49 International Olympic Committee Integrity and Compliance Hotline. <https://ioc.integrityline.org/>



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