

Article

The Meaning of Sexual Harassment in the Eye of the Beholder: 25 Years After the Enactment of Israel's Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law

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Abstract

This study examines perceptions of sexual harassment in sports 25 years after the enactment of Israel's prevention of sexual harassment law, building upon a 1999 study by Feigin and Negbi. Utilizing feminist and power relations theories, this research investigates how perceptions have evolved across genders, competitive levels, and coaching statuses. A total of 361 participants, including non-competitive, competitive, and Olympic athletes, completed a questionnaire assessing perceptions of potentially harassing behaviors. The results reveal significant shifts in awareness, particularly among female athletes, across all four factors of sexual harassment examined. The most substantial change was observed in the "Between concern and interest" factor, indicating increased sensitivity to ambiguous behaviors. Olympic athletes and coaches demonstrated heightened awareness compared to non-competitive athletes. Gender disparities persisted, with female participants consistently showing higher sensitivity to potentially harassing behaviors. These findings underscore the need for tailored educational programs, policy revisions, and increased representation of diverse perspectives in sports leadership.

Keywords: sexual harassment; gender disparities; sports organizations; power relations; MeToo movement; feminist theory; perceptions; Olympic athletes



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1. Introduction

Feminist theory has emerged as a critical framework for analyzing and challenging gender-based inequalities across social, political, and economic domains. It encompasses a diverse range of perspectives that seek to understand and dismantle systems of oppression affecting women and other marginalized groups [1]. At its core, feminist theory posits that gender is a fundamental organizing principle of society, shaping institutions, relationships, and individual experiences [2]. While feminist thought has evolved significantly since its origins in the 18th century, contemporary feminist theory remains committed to intersectional approaches that consider how gender intersects with other axes of identity such as race, class, and sexuality [3]. As both an intellectual and political project, feminist theory continues to evolve, addressing emerging issues such as neoliberal globalization and environmental justice while remaining grounded in movements for equality and social transformation [2]. Importantly, feminist theory is intrinsically linked to activist movements striving for social transformation.

This intersectional approach is particularly relevant when examining power dynamics within social structures, which is where power relations theory enriches our understanding. Power relations theory emphasizes how power is distributed, contested, and negotiated among individuals and groups. This theory posits that power is not merely a possession but is relational and context-dependent, influencing social interactions and institutional frameworks [4,5]. Recent scholarship highlights the complexities of power dynamics, including the interplay between coercive and enabling forms of power in shaping social change [6]. In the context of sports, power relations theory can illuminate how authority and influence manifest within athletic organizations, impacting decision-making processes and access to resources. For example, gender disparities in leadership roles within sports governance reflect underlying power imbalances that affect opportunities for female athletes [7].

The application of feminist and power theories to the sports world reveals how power structures within sport organizations often facilitate environments conducive to sexual harassment and abuse, as they can perpetuate inequalities and silence victims. The hierarchical nature of sports, characterized by authority figures such as coaches and administrators, creates a dynamic where athletes may feel compelled to tolerate inappropriate behavior due to fear of retaliation or loss of opportunities [8]. Research indicates that organizational culture, marked by monopolistic power structures and lack of athlete representation, contributes to an abuse-prone environment, allowing misconduct to persist unchecked [9]. Furthermore, the normalization of male dominance within these structures often leads to a culture that trivializes or ignores reports of harassment, thus perpetuating a cycle of abuse [10].

In the sporting environment, these power dynamics are particularly evident as athletes navigate relationships with coaches and officials. The fear of jeopardizing their careers often silences victims, making it crucial for organizations to implement robust policies that empower athletes and foster a culture of accountability [11–13]. Recognizing these issues, legal frameworks have been established in various countries to address sexual harassment. In Israel, for example, a law to prevent sexual harassment was enacted in 1998 with the purpose of “prohibiting sexual harassment in order to protect a person’s dignity, freedom and privacy, and to promote equality between the sexes” [14]. This law was a response to various societal changes, including the rise of the feminist movement and high-profile cases of sexual harassment that gained media attention.

The Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law, 5758–1998 defines a broad set of prohibited behaviors, including threats of a sexual nature, indecent acts, repeated unwanted propositions, humiliating or degrading remarks based on sex or sexuality, exploitation of authority or professional dependency, and the non-consensual dissemination of sexual images. The law establishes both criminal and civil liabilities, including the right to compensation without the need to prove damage. In addition, it places clear responsibilities on employers (including in educational and sports settings), such as the duty to publish internal policies, appoint a harassment supervisor, and establish reporting mechanisms. These provisions reflect Israel’s attempt to institutionalize safeguards against sexual harassment while aligning with broader principles of gender equality. A detailed summary is available on the Israeli legal information platform [14].

Israel’s sports landscape is structured around its Ministry of Culture and Sport, the Israeli Olympic and Paralympic Committees, and multiple sport-specific federations. As part of ensuring athlete safety, Israel has participated in the Council of Europe–EU initiative “All In Plus: Promoting Greater Gender Equality in Sport.” According to the latest national factsheet (based on 2023 data, compiled May–September 2024), 43% of Olympic Sport Associations in Israel have taken concrete actions to prevent and combat gender-based violence (GBV), and 40% have established a written policy or action plan for GBV prevention [15].

These organizational commitments illustrate a significant national engagement with safeguarding issues, aligning Israel with broader European standards and strengthening the relevance of our current study within a well-defined policy context.

Despite these advancements, there is not always consensus regarding the definitions underlying sexual harassment laws or their necessity, even among legislators. This lack of consensus underscores the complexity of the issue and the need for ongoing research and dialogue [11,13]. Furthermore, legal definitions and enforcement mechanisms vary significantly across countries and cultures; some rely on criminal law frameworks, and others rely on gender equality or workplace legislation, leading to divergent standards in prevention, enforcement, and support. By situating this study within the Israeli legal context, where specific behavioral definitions are codified by law, we highlight the value of legal clarity in shaping public and institutional responses to harassment in sport.

In this context, the present study seeks to examine trends in behavior and perceptions in the sports arena 25 years after the enactment of Israel's sexual harassment law. It aims to determine whether definitions of acceptable and forbidden behaviors have become clearer over time. This research builds upon and extends a 1999 study by Feigin and Negbi [16], which examined how female physical education students, teachers, and coaches perceived sexual harassment. By broadening the scope to include both genders, coaches and non-coaches, and different levels of sport, including Olympic athletes, this study aims to provide a comprehensive update on perceptions of sexual harassment in sports.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the original questionnaire, developed in the late 1990s, reflects binary gender assumptions and implicitly frames coaches as male and athletes as female. These limitations mirror the dominant normative understandings of that era and may not fully capture the lived experiences of non-binary individuals or male victims. Despite these limitations, the decision to retain the original instrument was made in order to allow for direct comparison across a 25-year span. We believe this longitudinal continuity provides valuable insight into how cultural perceptions have shifted, even as we recognize the need for more inclusive, updated instruments in future studies.

Understanding perceptions of sexual harassment is critical because perceptions directly shape individuals' responses to incidents, their willingness to report, and their trust in institutional safeguards. Measuring perceptions enables researchers to capture the nuanced and often subjective boundaries individuals draw between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, boundaries that may differ across gender, roles, and competitive levels in sport. Such insight is vital for tailoring educational programs, informing policy development, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing prevention efforts. Moreover, tracking changes in perception over time offers a window into broader cultural and normative shifts within the sporting world, reflecting the impact of legislation, advocacy, and awareness campaigns.

To operationalize the intersectional approach, the study design incorporated a diverse sample that spans multiple axes of identity and power: gender (male and female participants), occupational role (athletes, coaches, and student teachers), and level of sport involvement (from local to Olympic levels). This design enables an intersectional examination of how structural and cultural factors shape perceptions of sexual harassment differently across groups. By analyzing how these social categories interact, this study seeks not only to describe variance in perceptions but also to expose underlying power dynamics and hierarchies within sport systems that may otherwise remain obscured.

The current study's objectives are threefold: to replicate and extend Feigin and Hanegbi's 1999 study [16] regarding perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors, to compare current results with those reported 25 years ago, and to examine which behaviors are perceived as sexual harassment by various groups in sports today, including athletes,

physical education student teachers, coaches, and Olympic athletes across genders. This research will contribute to our understanding of how perceptions of sexual harassment in sports have evolved over time and inform future policies and interventions to create safer, more equitable sporting environments. The participants in both the 1999 and current samples were drawn from similar populations within the Israeli sport education system, namely physical education student teachers and athletes participating in organized sport frameworks. This similarity enables valid cross-temporal comparison while controlling for major cultural or demographic discrepancies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study included a total of 361 participants, comprising 152 males (42.1%) and 209 females (57.9%). Participants were categorized based on their level of involvement in sports and whether they held coaching positions. These categories included non-competitive athletes (both coaches and non-coaches), competitive athletes (both coaches and non-coaches), and Olympic athletes (both coaches and non-coaches).

Among the male participants, there were 12 non-competitive athletes who were not coaches, representing 7.9% of the male group and 3.3% of the total sample. Non-competitive male athletes who were coaches included 20 participants, accounting for 13.2% of the male group and 5.5% of the total sample. Competitive male athletes who were not coaches comprised 22 participants, making up 14.5% of the male group and 6.1% of the total sample, while competitive male athletes who were coaches represented the largest male subgroup, with 84 participants, accounting for 55.3% of the male group and 23.3% of the total sample. In addition, Olympic male athletes who were not coaches included 9 participants (5.9% of the male group and 2.5% of the total sample), while Olympic male athletes who were coaches included 5 participants, representing 3.3% of the male group and 1.4% of the total sample.

In the female group, non-competitive athletes who were not coaches consisted of 33 participants, making up 15.8% of the female group and 9.1% of the total sample. Non-competitive female athletes who were coaches included 41 participants, accounting for 19.6% of the female group and 11.4% of the total sample. Competitive female athletes who were not coaches comprised 31 participants, making up 14.8% of the female group and 8.6% of the total sample, while competitive female athletes who were coaches represented the largest female subgroup, with 65 participants (31.1% of the female group and 18.0% of the total sample). Additionally, Olympic female athletes who were not coaches included 14 participants, accounting for 6.7% of the female group and 3.9% of the total sample, while Olympic female athletes who were coaches included 25 participants, representing 12.0% of the female group and 6.9% of the total sample.

2.2. Questionnaire

The current study employed the same questionnaire used in the 1999 research by Feigin and Negbi [16], who examined perceptions of sexual harassment among female physical education student teachers and coaches in Israel. That instrument, adapted from Volkwein et al. [17] and validated through factor analysis by Hanegbi and Feigin, includes 27 items clustered into four dimensions:

- (1) Severe harassment and exploitation, referring to overtly sexual or coercive verbal and physical behaviors (e.g., kissing, touching, sexual propositions);
- (2) Sexist behavior, reflecting stereotypical, gender-degrading comments or condescending expressions (e.g., affectionate nicknames, jokes about women);

- (3) Professional contact, describing ambiguous but work-related physical gestures (e.g., touching during instruction, congratulatory hugs);
- (4) Between concern and interest, which includes interpersonal gestures with uncertain intent (e.g., private invitations, asking about personal plans).

These dimensions are grounded in feminist and power relations theories, which emphasize the role of authority and dependency in shaping perceptions of boundary violations. The preservation of this structure across studies allows for valid longitudinal analysis, although we acknowledge that behavioral interpretations may evolve culturally over time.

2.3. Procedure

Following the approval of this study by the Institutional Review Board of the Academic College at Wingate (Protocol No. 257, approved 25 April 2020), data collection commenced. Participants were recruited through official email lists and internal communication platforms associated with the Olympic committee and the college. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. All participants signed a consent form of agreement to participate in the study. The questionnaire was delivered to the participants online with a written declaration for anonymity. In recognition of the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were also provided with contact information for national support services and professional helplines specializing in trauma, harassment, and abuse in sport. These resources were included in the consent form and made accessible prior to completing the questionnaire, allowing participants to seek support if needed.

2.4. Data Analysis

For examining the changes in female athlete's perceptions concerning sexual harassment after 25 years, a chi-square test was conducted for each of the questionnaire items. Additionally, an independent T-test was used to compare the means of each harassment factor between the two time points. Cohen's *d* effect size was reported where appropriate. For each of the four harassments factors, a two-way ANOVA (gender X sports level) was used to examine the differences in harassment perception between male and females and between PE students that were not competitive, PE students that were competitive, and Olympic athletes. In addition, a three-way ANOVA (gender X sports level*coaching) was used to examine the differences in harassment perception for males and females, different sport levels, and being/not being a coach. For the two-way and three-way ANOVAs, Tukey's post hoc procedure was used when the sports level main factor was significant ($p < 0.05$). A pairwise comparison test was used when interaction effects were statistically significant. Effect sizes (η^2) were reported. Alpha was set at 0.05 for all statistical tests. While the behavioral items remained identical to those used in the original study to ensure comparability, we recognize that some behaviors, such as cheek kissing or personal compliments, may carry different connotations depending on cultural context and evolving social norms.

3. Results

Results will be presented according to the order of the research purposes. The first purpose was to find out whether female athletes' perceptions concerning sexual harassment have changed along the last 25 years. The *t*-tests that were conducted show significant differences in all questionnaires' mean factors (See Table 1).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations and rates of agreement and disagreement with the questionnaire’s items among female athletes—today vs. 25 years ago.

Questionnaire Items		Past <i>n</i> = 301		Present <i>n</i> = 80				χ	<i>p</i>		
		<i>M</i>	<i>S.D</i>	Not at All	To a Great Extent	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D</i>			Not at All	To a Great Extent
<i>Severe harassment and exploitation</i>		3.67	0.39			3.81	0.30			2.89^t =	0.03
22	Proposes sexual encounter and issues rewards, or threats for rejection			0.00	90.00	3.92	0.27	0.00	92.41		
25	Kisses an athlete on her mouth			0.70	77.40	3.92	0.27	0.00	92.41	9.06	0.01
11	Shows a sexual interest in the athlete			2.30	78.70	3.88	0.40	0.00	90.00	5.81	0.05
12	Proposes sexual encounter without rewards, or threats for rejection			3.00	80.10	3.85	0.45	0.00	88.75	4.27	0.12
21	Asks athlete about her sex life			0.00	74.40	3.90	0.30	0.00	89.87	8.61	0.00
19	Pinches athlete in behind			0.00	71.10	3.92	0.27	0.00	92.41	15.37	0.00
16	Stares at athlete’s breasts			1.00	68.40	3.84	0.40	0.00	85.00	15.86	0.00
13	Tells an athlete about his sex life			2.70	74.80	3.78	0.64	0.00	85.00	4.72	0.09
27	Caresses athlete			1.00	61.50	3.61	0.56	0.00	64.56	0.96	0.62
17	Gives an athlete a back/shoulder massage for fun			4.30	41.50	3.38	0.88	0.00	56.25	7.84	0.02
<i>Between concern and interest</i>		2.52	0.77			2.73	0.65			2.2^t =	0.03
4	Invites an athlete to his home for a coffee			16.30	17.30	2.47	1.12	11.39	22.78	2.01	0.37
6	Invites the athlete for a dinner			8.30	39.90	3.38	0.91	2.50	60.00	11.47	0.00
5	Asks the athlete what does she do in her leisure time			27.20	15.00	2.28	0.95	21.25	10.00	3.25	0.20
10	Asks the athlete for her weekend plans			17.60	28.90	2.80	0.99	12.50	27.50	1.53	0.47
14	Invites the athlete for lunch in a local cafe			20.60	14.30	2.73	0.94	8.86	21.52	7.01	0.03
1	Invites an athlete to train at his home			28.60	10.30	2.33	1.24	18.99	22.78	9.82	0.01
<i>Sexist behavior</i>		2.31	0.67			2.71	0.70			4.70^t =	0.00
23	Complements athlete on her looks			17.90	6.30	3.15	0.82	2.53	39.24	64.31	0.00
26	Makes derogatory remarks on women			9.00	28.90	3.05	0.88	2.53	34.18	3.99	0.14
15	Talks about what he likes to do in his free time			41.20	5.00	2.26	1.01	23.08	14.10	13.84	0.00
18	Calls the athlete by pet name (such as sweetie and honey)			19.90	8.30	2.62	0.96	11.39	22.78	14.42	0.00
20	Tells the athlete about his weekend plans			23.90	13.30	2.41	0.91	13.92	15.19	3.66	0.16

Table 1. Cont.

Questionnaire Items		Past <i>n</i> = 301		Present <i>n</i> = 80		χ	<i>p</i>				
		<i>M</i>	<i>S.D</i>	Not at All	To a Great Extent			<i>M</i>	<i>S.D</i>	Not at All	To a Great Extent
<i>Professional contact</i>		1.91	0.61			2.48	0.57			7.53^t =	0.00
8	Places his hand on the athlete's shoulder or arm when greeting her			40.90	3.70	2.33	0.99	18.75	15.00	23.28	0.00
2	Touches the athlete on her shoulder or hand while instructing her			55.50	2.00	1.89	0.98	40.00	10.00	14.73	0.00
3	Stands or sits close to the athlete during office conversations			35.90	7.60	2.53	0.94	13.75	17.50	17.85	0.00
9	Closes the door while talking in office			12.00	31.90	3.69	0.54	0.00	72.73	44.80	0.00
7	Kisses the athlete on her cheeks			39.90	9.30	2.63	1.00	10.00	20.00	27.28	0.00
24	Hugs athlete when winning a competition			70.10	1.00	1.75	0.95	49.37	7.59	19.52	0.00

The *Severe harassment and exploitation* factor in the Me Too era had a significantly higher Mean compared to the one measured before the Me Too era ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.30$; $M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.39$, respectively), $t_{(379)} = 2.89$; $p = 0.03$. In general, it was found that all the behaviors that the coach demonstrated related to this factor were perceived by the female athletes as disturbing to a higher degree in the Me Too era than they were perceived before this period, 25 years earlier. Significant differences were found for item 11 (shows sexual interest in the athlete) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.81$; $p = 0.05$, item 16 (stares at athlete's breasts) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 15.86$; $p < 0.001$, item 17 (gives athlete a back/shoulder massage for fun) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.84$; $p = 0.02$, item 19 (pinches athlete on behind—the biggest difference in the perception rate of women between the two periods) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 15.37$; $p < 0.001$, item 21 (asks athlete about her sex life) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 8.61$; $p < 0.001$, and item 25 (kisses an athlete on her mouth) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 9.06$; $p = 0.01$.

Compared to other three factors of the questionnaire, the factor *Between concern and interest* demonstrated the biggest gap/difference in the rate of agreement between the two measured time periods. The Mean for this factor in the Me Too era was significantly higher compared to that measured 25 years ago ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.65$; $M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.77$, respectively), $t_{(379)} = 2.24$, $p = 0.03$. The item invites an athlete to his/her home for training (item 1) was perceived by female athletes as a more disturbing behavior in the Me Too era than it was 25 years ago $\chi^2_{(1)} = 9.82$; $p = 0.01$. Additionally, it was also found that the behavior invites the athlete to dinner (item 6) was perceived as more disturbing in the Me Too era $\chi^2_{(1)} = 11.47$; $p < 0.001$. Also, a significant difference appeared in the item invites an athlete to lunch at a local cafe (item 14), indicating that females perceived this behavior as more disturbing in the era of Me Too compared to the earlier measure $\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.01$; $p = 0.03$.

Altogether, regarding the behaviors that are described in the Sexist behavior factor, female athletes perceived them as more disturbing in the Me Too era ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.70$) compared to female athletes 25 years ago ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.67$), $t_{(379)} = 4.7$, $p < 0.001$. Two items showed the biggest differences—calling the female athlete affectionate terms such as “sweetie and honey” (item 18) $\chi^2_{(1)} = 14.42$; $p < 0.001$, and compliments an athlete on her appearance (item 23), where 32.94% more athletes in the present perceived this behavior as highly disturbing than in the past $\chi^2_{(1)} = 64.31$; $p < 0.001$.

A significant difference between the present and past measures was also found in the Mean of the factor *Professional contact* $t_{(379)} = 7.53$, $p < 0.001$. The difference was the highest in relation to other factors tested ($Md = 0.57$); the perception of professional contact was perceived as more disturbing in the present compared to 25 years ago ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.57$; $M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.61$, respectively). Female athletes perceived all the behaviors described in this factor as significantly more disturbing in the current measurement. The highest gap appeared in the item kisses the athlete on her cheek (item 9); 40.83% more female athletes perceived this behavior as highly disturbing compared to 25 years ago $\chi^2_{(1)} = 44.8$; $p < 0.001$.

Two-way ANOVA was applied to examine the differences between males and females and between athletes from different sport levels. The results are presented in Table 2.

It appears that females found the behaviors described under the “*Severe Harassment and Exploitation*” factor to be more disturbing than males did, regardless of their sport level $F(1, 355) = 11.213$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.031$. However, for the other three factors, differences were influenced by sport level; the higher the sport level, the lower the perceived severity of the behavior.

To examine the differences for each factor of harassment separately, a three-way ANOVA was conducted with gender (2), type of sports participation (3), and involvement in coaching (2) as variables (see results in Tables 3 and 4).

Table 2. Means and SDs of questionnaire factors according to gender and sport level.

Factors	Males			Females			Gender (1355)	Comp. (2355)	Inter (2355)		
	STs Non-Co N = 32	STs-Co N = 105	Olympic Ath. N = 14	STs-Non-Co N = 74	STs-Co N = 96	Olympic Ath. N = 39					
1	M S.D	3.711 0.337	3.701 0.472	3.533 0.482	3.815 0.301	3.852 0.255	3.757 0.243	F η^2	11.213 ** 0.031	2.366 0.013	0.415 0.002
2	M S.D	2.475 0.674	2.245 0.764	1.879 0.755	2.795 0.716	2.576 0.688	1.930 0.774	F η	3.203 0.009	14.896 ** 0.078	0.610 0.003
3	M S.D	2.475 0.751	2.606 0.670	2.114 0.855	2.721 0.692	2.692 0.703	2.304 0.680	F η	3.424 0.010	6.805 ** 0.037	0.428 0.002
4	M S.D	2.310 0.557	2.277 0.669	1.983 0.653	2.493 0.590	2.381 0.546	1.716 0.451	F η	0.007 0.000	13.495 ** 0.071	2.158 0.012

1 = Severe harassment and exploitation; 2 = Between concern and interest; 3 = Sexist behavior; 4 = Professional contact; STs Non-Co = Student teachers non-competitive; STs-Co = Student teacher competitive athletes; Comp. = Level of competition. ** ≤ 0.01 .

Table 3. Means and SDs of questionnaire factors by gender, level of sport, and coach position (yes/no).

Factors	Sport Level	Coach	Males						Females					
			STs Non-Co		STs-Co		Olympic Athletes		STs Non-Co		STs-Co		Olympic Athletes	
			Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
N	N = 12	N = 20	N = 22	N = 84	N = 9	N = 5	N = 33	N = 41	N = 31	N = 65	N = 14	N = 25		
1	M S.D	3.65 0.36	3.74 0.32	3.51 0.69	3.74 0.38	3.50 0.53	3.59 0.42	3.88 0.27	3.76 0.31	3.79 0.34	3.88 0.19	3.72 0.15	3.77 0.28	
2	M S.D	2.56 0.77	2.41 0.62	2.51 0.68	2.40 0.78	1.74 0.60	2.12 1.00	3.09 0.60	2.55 0.71	2.69 0.69	2.52 0.68	1.52 0.61	2.15 0.77	
3	M S.D	2.15 0.65	2.67 0.75	2.66 0.72	2.59 0.65	2.08 0.80	2.16 1.03	2.98 0.61	2.50 0.68	2.72 0.66	2.67 0.72	1.88 0.658	2.53 0.58	
4	M S.D	2.02 0.35	2.48 0.59	2.40 0.72	2.24 0.65	1.81 0.60	2.28 0.69	2.75 0.43	2.28 0.61	2.42 0.46	2.36 0.58	1.58 0.41	1.79 0.46	

1 = Severe harassment and exploitation; 2 = Between concern and interest; 3 = Sexist behavior; 4 = Professional contact; M = Mean; S.D = Standard deviation; STs Non-Co = Student teachers non-competitive; STs-Co = Student teacher competitive athletes.

Table 4. Inference statistics of questionnaire factors by gender, level of sport, and coach position (yes/no).

Source	1			2			3			4		
	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	12.54	0.00	0.035	1.65	0.20	0.005	2.93	0.09	0.008	0.02	0.90	0.000
Level of sport (participation)	1.36	0.26	0.008	16.09	0.00	0.085	7.94	0.00	0.044	12.25	0.00	0.066
Coaching	2.04	0.15	0.006	0.01	0.94	0.000	1.21	0.27	0.003	0.84	0.36	0.002
Gender × Sport participation	0.40	0.67	0.002	1.18	0.31	0.007	1.07	0.35	0.006	3.89	0.02	0.022
Gender × Coaching	1.75	0.19	0.005	0.12	0.73	0.000	0.45	0.50	0.001	5.01	0.03	0.014
Sport participation × Coaching	1.71	0.18	0.010	4.68	0.01	0.026	1.42	0.24	0.008	2.31	0.10	0.013
Gender × Sport Participation × Coaching	0.19	0.83	0.001	0.69	0.50	0.004	5.59	0.00	0.031	5.51	0.00	0.031

1 = Severe harassment and exploitation; 2 = Between concern and interest; 3 = Sexist behavior; 4 = Professional contact; M = Mean; S.D = Standard deviation; Sig. = Significance.

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of gender on perceptions of the factor *Severe Harassment and Exploitation*, $F(1, 349) = 12.54$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.035$, indicating that females reported higher levels of perceived disturbance compared to males (males = 3.63 ± 0.45 , females = 3.80 ± 0.27).

For the second factor, *Between Being Concerned and Showing an Interest*, a significant main effect was found for the level of sports participation, $F(2, 348) = 16.09$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.085$. Post hoc Tukey comparisons indicated that Olympic athletes ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.76$) reported lower levels of perceived disturbance compared to non-competitive students ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) and student athletes ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.73$, $p = 0.002$). Additionally, a significant interaction was observed between the level of sports participation and involvement in coaching, $F(2, 348) = 4.68$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.026$. Follow-up analyses showed that non-competitive students not involved in coaching ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.69$) perceived behaviors as more disturbing than those involved in coaching ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.69$, $p = 0.037$). In contrast, Olympic athletes not involved in coaching ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.60$) reported lower disturbance than those involved in coaching ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.80$, $p = 0.021$).

For the third factor, *Sexist behavior*, the results of the ANOVA indicate a significant main effect of sports participation, $F(2, 346) = 7.94$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.044$, and a significant three-way interaction between gender, sports participation, and coaching involvement, $F(2, 346) = 5.59$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.031$. In a follow-up Tukey analysis for sports participation, it was found that, overall, Olympic athletes ($M = 2.17 \pm 0.71$) perceived such behaviors as less disturbing compared to students who did not participate in competitive sports ($M = 2.58 \pm 0.72$) and competitive student-athletes ($M = 2.67 \pm 0.69$).

The follow-up analysis of the three-way interaction between gender, sports participation, and coaching shows that, among men, there is no significant difference between those involved in coaching and those not involved in coaching within the athlete group ($M_{no} = 2.09$, $M_{yes} = 2.16$) and the competitive student-athlete group ($M_{no} = 2.67$, $M_{yes} = 2.59$). However, in the non-athlete student group, those involved in coaching ($M_{yes} = 2.67$) had a significantly higher mean compared to those not involved in coaching ($M_{no} = 2.15$).

Among women, no significant difference was found between those involved in coaching ($M_{yes} = 2.68$) and those not involved ($M_{no} = 2.72$) within the competitive student-athlete group. For non-athlete female students, those not involved in coaching had a significantly higher mean ($M_{no} = 2.98$) compared to those involved in coaching ($M_{yes} = 2.51$). In contrast, among Olympic female athletes, the trend was reversed, with those involved in coaching ($M_{yes} = 2.54$) having a significantly higher mean compared to those not involved in coaching ($M_{no} = 1.89$).

For the fourth factor, *Professional physical contact*, the ANOVA results show a significant main effect of sports participation, $F(2, 349) = 12.25$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.066$, a significant two-way interaction between gender and sports participation, $F(2, 349) = 3.89$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.022$, a two-way interaction between gender and coaching, $F(2, 349) = 5.01$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.014$, and a significant three-way interaction of gender \times sports participation \times coaching, $F(2, 349) = 5.51$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$.

In the follow-up analysis for sports participation, it was found that Olympic athletes ($M = 1.87 \pm 0.52$) perceived these behaviors as less disturbing compared to non-competitive students ($M = 2.39 \pm 0.58$) and competitive student-athletes ($M = 2.36 \pm 0.62$).

The follow-up analysis of the two-way interaction between gender and sports participation shows that, among men, there is no significant difference between levels of sports participation ($M_{student\ no\ comp} = 2.25$, $M_{student\ comp} = 2.33$, $M_{athletic} = 2.05$). However, among women, the perceived severity of athletic women was significantly lower

than in the other two groups (M student comp = 2.39, M student no comp = 2.25, M athletic = 1.69).

The follow-up analysis of the two-way interaction between gender and coaching shows that, among men, those involved in coaching perceived behaviors as more severe compared to those not involved in coaching (M yes = 2.34, M no = 2.08). Among women, the trend is reversed, with those involved in coaching perceiving behaviors as less severe compared to those not involved (M yes = 2.15, M no = 2.25).

The follow-up analysis of the three-way interaction between gender, sports participation, and coaching shows that among both men and women, there is no significant difference between those involved in coaching and those not involved in coaching within the athlete group (M male no = 2.09, M male yes = 2.16; M female no = 1.58, M female yes = 1.79), and within the competitive student groups (M male no = 2.67, M male yes = 2.59; M female no = 2.24, M female yes = 2.36). However, in the non-competitive student group, there is a significant difference between those involved in coaching and those not involved in both men and women, but with opposite trends. Among men, those involved in coaching (M yes = 2.48) had a significantly higher mean compared to those not involved (M no = 2.02). Among women, students involved in coaching had a significantly lower mean (M yes = 2.28) compared to those not involved (M no = 2.76).

The differences between coaches and non-coaches and males and females at the three sport levels are presented for each factor separately in Figures 1–4.

Figures 1–4 indicate the differences between males and females and coaches and non-coaches according to the three sport levels in four questionnaire factors.

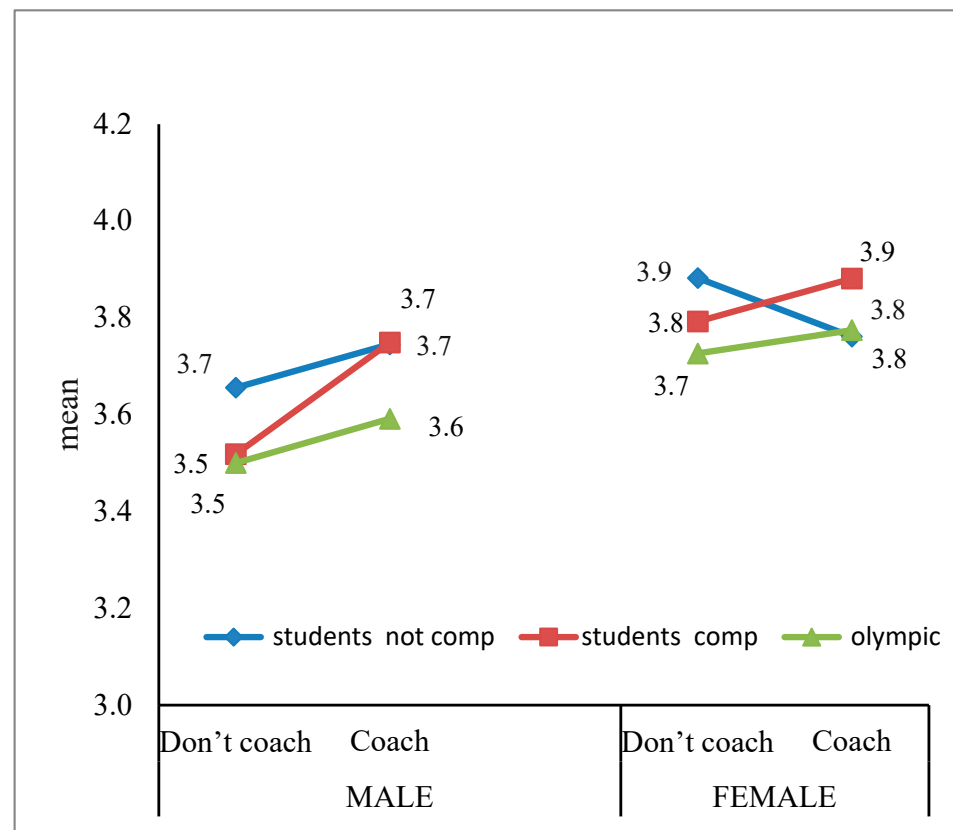


Figure 1. Severe harassment and exploitation.

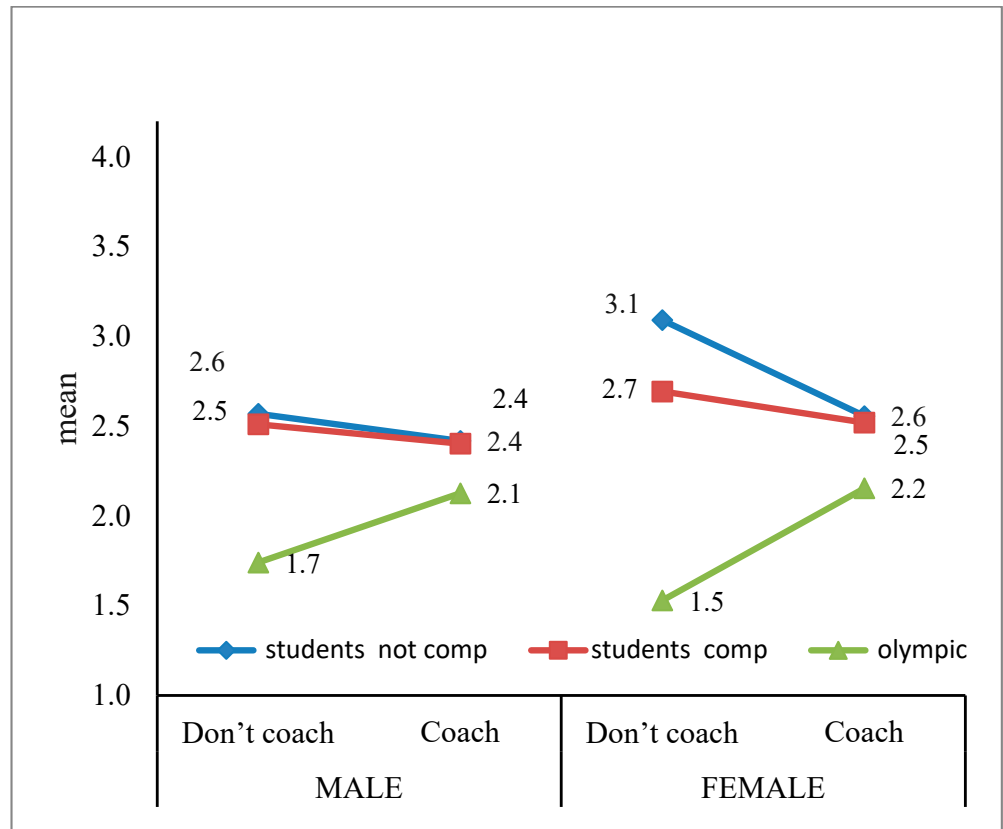


Figure 2. Between concern and showing an interest.

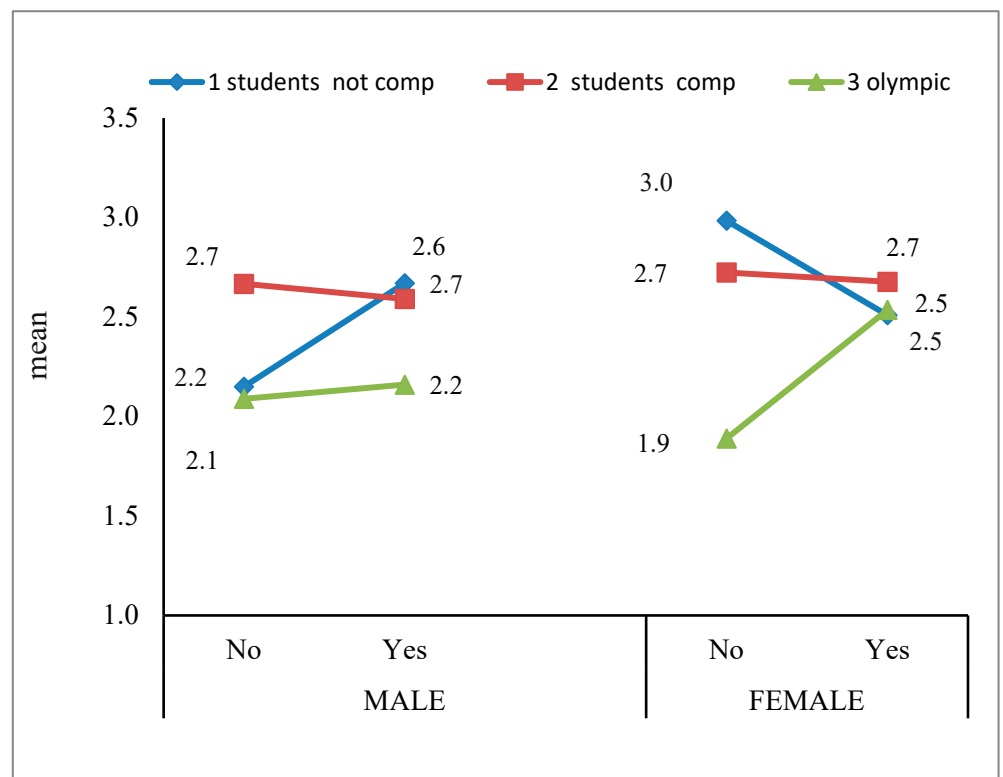


Figure 3. Sexist behavior.

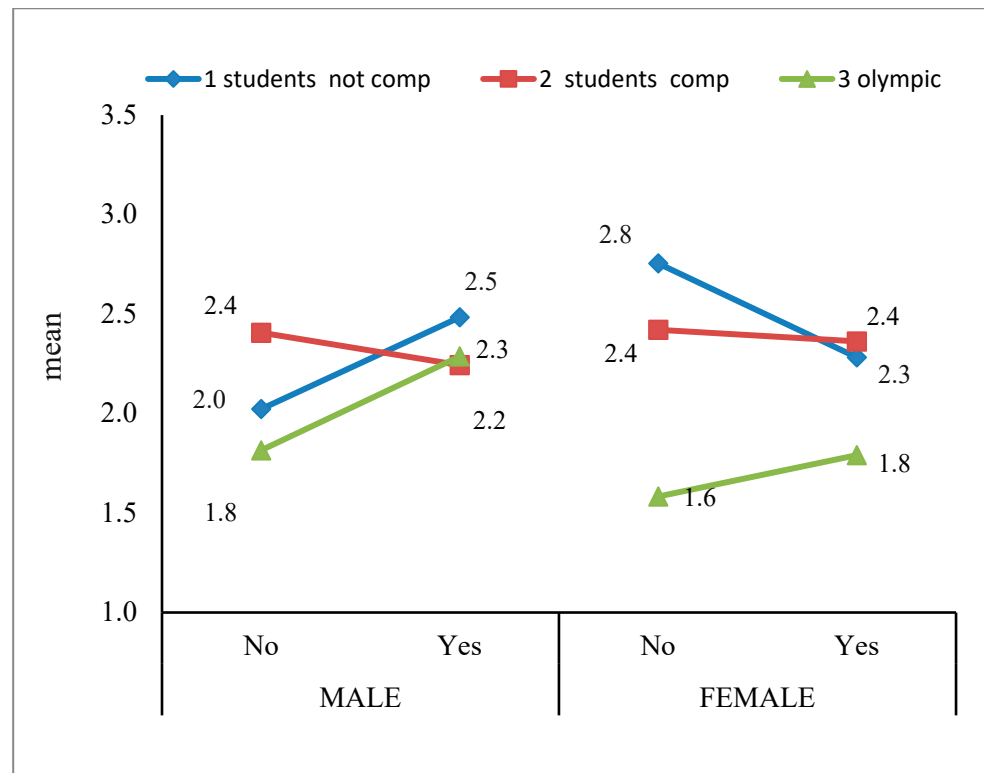


Figure 4. Professional physical contact.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the evolution of perceptions regarding sexual harassment in sports, 25 years after the enactment of Israel's sexual harassment law. The results reveal a complex landscape of changing attitudes, influenced by gender, level of sport participation, and coaching status, all of which can be understood through the lenses of feminist theory and power relations theory.

4.1. Gender Differences in Perception

One of the most striking findings of this study is the significant shift in perceptions among female athletes across all four factors of sexual harassment examined. Female athletes in the present study demonstrated a markedly heightened sensitivity to potentially harassing behaviors compared to their counterparts 25 years ago. This increased awareness aligns with the core tenets of feminist theory, which emphasize that women's lived experiences are shaped by systemic gendered power hierarchies. In the context of sport, these hierarchies manifest in the normalization of male authority, which historically delegitimized female discomfort or objection to borderline behaviors. Feminist theory helps explain how awareness grows when such experiences are named, validated, and contextualized socially, not just individually [18].

When viewed through an intersectional lens, these findings suggest that female athletes' perceptions are shaped not only by gender but also by their position within athletic hierarchies, cultural narratives surrounding femininity in sport, and differential exposure to risk and protective mechanisms. From a feminist and intersectional perspective, female athletes are situated at the intersection of institutional marginality (as women) and organizational dependency (as athletes under coach authority). This dual positioning may sensitize them to subtle cues of coercion, which power relations theory conceptualizes as asymmetrical dependencies that influence perception and limit response options.

The most substantial change was observed in the “Between concern and interest” factor, suggesting that behaviors previously considered benign or ambiguous are now more likely to be perceived as problematic by female athletes. This shift indicates a growing recognition of the subtle ways in which power dynamics can be exploited in coach-athlete relationships, a key aspect highlighted by power relations theory. This recognition of subtle ways in which power can be exploited refers to behaviors that may appear innocuous, yet carry coercive undertones due to unequal hierarchical dynamics, such as ambiguous physical contact justified as part of training, unsolicited personal remarks that blur professional boundaries, or one-on-one mentoring meetings that mask implicit demands. In coach-athlete relationships, where authority, trust, and dependency coexist, these behaviors are readily normalized. Power relations theory explains that such ostensibly benign gestures function as covert mechanisms of social control; athletes, particularly those in less powerful positions, often feel unable to refuse or report discomfort for fear of jeopardizing their selection or career prospects. A comprehensive global study published in early 2025 found that approximately 20% of athletes across 49 countries had experienced “sextortion,” where implicit promises or threats were used to coerce compliance for sexual gain, underscoring how subtle coercive dynamics exploit both institutional dependency and fear of reprisal [19]. Similarly, research from Ghent University [20] demonstrates that a controlling coaching style and normalized club climates serve as gateways to psychological abuse, highlighting how everyday interactions, when embedded in hierarchical culture, can carry coercive implications and reinforce power asymmetries.

Interestingly, while this study provides robust data on the changing perceptions of female athletes, it reveals a gap in our understanding of how male athletes’ perceptions have evolved over the same period. While this study emphasizes significant perceptual changes among female athletes, the relatively modest shift observed among male athletes merits further interpretation. One explanation may lie in entrenched norms of hegemonic masculinity; men are socialized to exhibit toughness and emotional restraint, which may lead them to perceive boundary-crossing behaviors as innocuous or flattering rather than problematic. Moreover, recent comparative research by Zach et al. [13] discovered that male athletes consistently rated the same behaviors as less disturbing than female athletes did, suggesting a gendered tolerance for ambiguous conduct rooted in institutional power norms [21]. Additionally, qualitative evidence indicates that boys and men in sport frequently struggle to recognize or disclose harassment due to stigma and fear of appearing weak, factors that suppress awareness of subtle coercion even in the face of power imbalances.

This disparity in data points to a critical area for future research and underscores the need for a more comprehensive examination of gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment in sports.

4.2. Differences Across Levels of Sport

The inclusion of Olympic athletes in this study offers valuable insights into how perceptions may differ at elite levels of competition. The results suggest that Olympic athletes, both male and female, tend to have a heightened awareness of behaviors that could constitute sexual harassment, particularly in the “Severe harassment and exploitation” and “Between concern and interest” factors. Power relations theory provides a lens through which elite athletes’ heightened sensitivity can be understood; their dependency on selection committees, federations, and sponsorships amplifies the stakes of speaking up. The theory posits that the more centralized the control, the greater the potential for coercive dynamics even if unintentional, which leads to a heightened awareness of behavior that may undermine autonomy or dignity [22].

An intersectional reading of this pattern reveals that elite athletes occupy a unique position where gender, performance expectations, and organizational scrutiny intersect. Female Olympic athletes, in particular, may experience compounded vulnerability, both as women and as high-profile representatives of their country, making them more alert to institutionalized power dynamics and the risks of harassment.

Conversely, non-competitive athletes showed lower levels of awareness across all factors compared to both competitive and Olympic athletes. This difference could be explained by the varying levels of exposure to professional sporting environments and the associated power structures, again aligning with power relations theory. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that elite athletes are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, partly due to their dependency on powerful figures within high-stakes, performance-driven environments. Fasting et al. [23] found that elite female athletes reported higher rates of harassment than their non-elite counterparts, while Vertommen et al. [24] reported that elite athletes were significantly more likely to encounter sexual abuse in sport settings compared to recreational athletes. These studies reinforce the notion that the elite sport context can amplify risks due to its intense power hierarchies and culture of silence.

4.3. Coaches vs. Non-Coaches

This study reveals intriguing differences in perceptions between coaches and non-coaches. Coaches, regardless of gender, generally showed a higher level of awareness of potentially harassing behaviors, particularly in the “Professional contact” factor. This heightened awareness among coaches could be attributed to their professional training and the increased emphasis on ethical conduct in coaching education programs over the past 25 years [25].

From an intersectional perspective, female coaches occupy a distinct social location at the intersection of gender and authority in male-dominated sports structures. Their dual identity, as women and as authority figures, may heighten their awareness of the ethical boundaries in professional contact, particularly in environments where power asymmetries and gender norms interact.

However, it is important to note that female coaches consistently demonstrated higher levels of awareness across all factors compared to their male counterparts. This gender disparity among coaches aligns with feminist theory’s emphasis on the different lived experiences of men and women in professional settings [26,27].

Viewed through the lens of feminist theory, these results demonstrate a significant shift in how gender-based power dynamics are perceived and challenged within the sporting world. The increased awareness among female athletes and coaches reflects the broader societal changes driven by feminist movements, including the recent #MeToo movement [25]. Power relations theory provides a framework for understanding how these changing perceptions reflect evolving power dynamics within sports organizations. The heightened awareness of subtle forms of harassment, particularly among elite athletes and coaches, suggests a growing recognition of how power can be abused in seemingly benign interactions [11,28].

One limitation that warrants attention is the unequal distribution of participants across subgroups, which in some instances led to low cell counts in the comparative analyses. While this may compromise the robustness of statistical inference in certain comparisons, we opted to retain all responses to ensure the inclusion of the full spectrum of participants who provided consent to participate in this study. This decision was guided by ethical and methodological considerations, including the importance of inclusivity and the exploratory nature of the research. Future studies may consider narrowing the

comparison groups or employing stratified sampling strategies to ensure more balanced group sizes. In addition, the response rate is influenced by individuals who were willing to participate in the study. We cannot recognize the reason for others who were not willing to participate. Nevertheless, this study's strength lies in its systematic comparison of sexual harassment awareness before and after the #MeToo movement, highlighting significant shifts in understanding power dynamics and potentially harassing behaviors. It provides insights into how various groups in sports perceive different types of conduct, ranging from severe harassment to ambiguous professional interactions. Expanding on the original 1999 study by Feigin and Negbi [16], which focused exclusively on female physical education student teachers and coaches, this research includes both male and female participants, coaches and non-coaches, and athletes from non-competitive, competitive, and Olympic levels. By revealing changes in perceptions over time and across diverse groups, this study offers valuable information for policymakers and sports organizations to develop more effective strategies for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in sports. This comprehensive approach fosters a deeper understanding of how perceptions have evolved, considering factors such as gender, competitive level, and professional roles.

4.4. Practical Implications and Future Directions

These findings have important practical implications for sports organizations and policymakers. The heightened awareness of sexual harassment, particularly among female athletes and at elite levels, underscores the need for more comprehensive and nuanced policies addressing a wider range of behaviors. Sport's governing bodies should consider revising their guidelines and training programs to reflect this evolving understanding of what constitutes harassment.

In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence of a significant shift in how sexual harassment is perceived in sports, particularly among female athletes and at elite levels. These changes reflect broader societal movements towards greater awareness and lower tolerance for gender-based harassment and discrimination. However, the persistence of sexual harassment in sports, despite increased awareness, suggests that perceptual changes alone are insufficient to address the problem fully.

Moving forward, sports organizations must translate this increased awareness into concrete actions, including more comprehensive policies, improved reporting mechanisms, and cultural changes that prioritize athlete safety and well-being. By continuing to research, discuss, and address these issues, the sports community can work towards creating safer, more equitable environments for all athletes, regardless of gender, level of competition, or coaching status.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: After receiving approval (No. 257) from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study began. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (Ethics Committee) of The Academic College at Wingate (protocol code No. 257 and 25 April 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all the subjects involved in this study. All participants signed a consent form of agreement to participate in this study. The questionnaire was delivered to the participants online with a written declaration guaranteeing anonymity.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to ethical issues.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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