How Fear, Intimidation, and Cover-Ups Protect Predators in Rwandan Sports

Inside some Rwanda's sports federations, sexual exploitation and abuse of female athletes remain an open secret. Behind the medals and national pride lies a dark reality: young women coerced into silence by the very administrators and coaches trusted with their careers. For many, speaking out means risking their livelihoods, their reputations, or their safety, leaving a trail of quiet cover-ups and unresolved cases.

In June 2018, five female Taekwondo athletes broke that silence. They alleged that two national coaches, Master Eugene and Irene Bagire, demanded sex in exchange for spots on the national squad heading to international competitions in Morocco. Master Eugene denied the claims.

"The coaches asked to sleep with us in exchange for being listed on the national team," one victim recalled. "Some girls accepted out of desperation. Others refused."

When the allegations surfaced, the Rwanda Taekwondo Federation (RTF) launched an internal probe. Fabrice Elysee Mugorewase, then RTF Vice President and head of the investigation, insisted that only one athlete came forward, only to recant her statement during questioning. "When the girl was subjected to the investigation, she denied the allegations," Mugorewase said.

However, federation insiders telling a different story revealed to this reporter that the athlete was intimidated by senior officials prior to her hearing, forcing her to backtrack, a charge the RTF firmly denies.

Placide Bagabo, RTF President, claimed he was shocked by the allegations. Citing a lack of internal capacity, Bagabo said the federation halted its probe and handed the file over to the Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB).

Yet, answers remain elusive. Former RIB spokesperson Modeste Mbabazi confirmed back in August 2018 that an investigation was under way, but years later, no official findings have been made public.

"The coaches, club masters, and the RTF president were all summoned for questioning, but we are still waiting for the outcome," admitted RTF Secretary-

General Boniface Mbonigaba.

World Taekwondo (WT) sent a formal inquiry demanding a full account from the local body. “We told them we are still waiting on the report from RIB,” Mbonigaba noted.

Meanwhile, former federation technical director Martin Knooce, an American who was deeply unsettled by the scandal, pulled his financial sponsorship for student fees before returning to the United States. Athletes are walking away, too. Denise Muvunyi, a female Taekwondista, switched disciplines entirely, citing the toxic environment and damage to the sport’s reputation.

Taekwondo, however, is not an isolated case. Similar patterns of abuse and cover-ups run deep through Rwandan cycling and women’s football.

Inside the Rwanda Cycling Federation (FERWACY), long-standing complaints of sexual misconduct have met institutional stonewalling. Before his resignation, former FERWACY President Aimable Bayingana, who was forced to resign amid accusations of corruption and sexual abuse, according to various reports dismissed the claims as a smear campaign aimed at sabotaging Rwanda’s bid to host the UCI World Cycling Championships.

Yet former cyclists describe a far darker reality. Bertin Mukarukundo, 31, recounted being sexually exploited by her coach, Straton Nzabazumutima, while training in Musanze. After becoming pregnant, Mukarukundo said Nzabazumutima promised her family he would take responsibility—a promise he never kept. Tragedy followed when the baby girl died just two days after birth.

FERWACY initially issued only a temporary suspension, later allowing Nzabazumutima to coach at Muhanzi Cycling Club for over six months. It was only after law enforcement intervened that the federation permanently banned him from all cycling activities.

By late 2019, pressure reached a boiling point. Allegations from young riders in Nyamata, combined with broader governance failures, forced Bayingana and his entire executive committee to step down on December 6, 2019. RIB subsequently opened inquiries into the cycling body.

The legal system has occasionally intervened, though often through convoluted

battles. In women’s football, Grace Nyinawumuntu, former head coach of the national team and AS Kigali Women Football Club, was dismissed in early 2017 after player Shadia Mahirwe publicly accused her of encouraging sexual misconduct and homosexuality among teammates.

Nyinawumuntu fought back in court, filing wrongful termination and defamation suits. She argued her dismissal lacked due process and maintained the claims were fabricated to ruin her marriage and career.

In March 2019, the court ruled in her favor, ordering AS Kigali to pay Rwf 40 million in damages and directing Mahirwe to pay Rwf 10 million for defamation. Both parties appealed, leaving the matter tied up in the judicial system.

The Ministry of Sports acknowledges that sexual assault and coercion remain persistent problems across national federations. While officials insist a comprehensive, zero-tolerance policy is in development to govern all sports organizations, female athletes continue to wait for real protections, and real accountability.