

Women's football training in Narail.

Though the married team stood defeated on the field, it was undoubtedly a victory for all the women involved and of course, for village women's football.

Then additional deputy commissioner Hawlader Mohammad Rokibul Bari as well as officials of the district sports committee were in attendance and congratulated the players.

After that, football coach of Narail district sports committee Kartick Das, impressed by the groundbreaking tournament and the enthusiasm for football, agreed to provide the women with regular training, with the support of a local NGO, Bachte Shekha. Later Manusher Jonno also agreed to support the endeavour financially, in order to develop a fixed team and further skill development. With such practical barriers overcome, for the women there was little left to do but to train, improve their skills and play.

"We hope we can continue to run our activities smoothly," says coach Das, "to encourage our players and inspire other women to join the team."

Initially he had been concerned when he noticed his players often faced eve-teasing and inappropriate behaviour from men. "But they learnt to protest this behaviour," he says, "and the local administration has also helped to combat it."

Ultimately women's football in these villages of Narail has become competitive. Of fifty aspiring players, twenty-eight have been selected. While many of the mothers who initially participated are unable to attend regular training due to their household commitments, their daughters continue.

As a sign of the team's success, ten women were chosen to participate in the first Promila Football League tournament at Bangabandhu National Stadium. Local players Bipasha, Runa, Shormila, Beauty, Rony, Soroshati, Potima, Bichitra, Shefali and Samoli are currently attending a football camp in Dhaka for the under 15s national team.

"One of our players," Das smiles, "has gone even further. Our player Saroshoti has already played in the Bangladesh national team!"

In-charge of the Bangladesh Olympic Association and also secretary of the District Sports Committee Asiqur Rahman Miku, meanwhile, believes that local NGO support for women's football has proved a key turning point in developing the game. As a result, women in Narail have been able to benefit from greater opportunity, both on and off the sports field – it has helped to further develop that most obvious of understandings: that women can!

In the meantime the daily journeys into town continue. Training starts at 3 p.m. The dream to be a great player and desire to represent Bangladesh one day is always present. In that, there is certainly no difference to their male colleagues pursuing sport. It's just now the women have overcome societal inhibitions to create the opportunity to pursue that dream: and of course, the future must be bright.

The writer is the Daily Star correspondent in Narail.