

... love of football

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Everything used to be so different compared to the strictly disciplined life that we lead here in the camp of the Bangladesh Football Federation, but one thing stays the same: my determination to do something for the country by playing football," adds Sanjida, who is getting ready for the upcoming SA games.

Here at the BFF camp, the girls wake up at the crack of dawn every day, and swiftly make their way to the field where the practice sessions are held.

"We have limited fields as many different sport teams come to practice here," says coach Golam Rabbani Chhoton. The team's turn begins at 6:30 in the morning. After two hours of practice, they come back to the camp, have their breakfast and sleep till noon. After lunch, the second round of practice begins for another three hours.

Their love for football does unite them in their goal to play and win but they all have another thing in common- their willpower to prove detractors wrong.

"Neighbours would sometime tease me for playing a 'boy's' game," says Krishna.

"Don't forget to mention about people whining that 'girls should not be allowed play football wearing shorts'," adds Moushumi, laughingly. "If they fall down and get injured no one will marry them," taunts the coach.



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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The days of squinting in disapproval and disbelief, and getting apathetic reactions from people are over; the villagers and families of players now take immense pride in the girls. Several girls of their village consider Marzia and Sabina as their idols as they strive to enter the world of football.

Even though the scene has changed quite a bit with this victory, women footballers face challenge beyond the playing ground.

"The problem remains elsewhere," adds Kiran. "As soon as they turn 20 to 22 years, they start getting pressurised into getting married. We try to make them financially independent by giving them job opportunities with Bangladesh Ansar, BJMC (Team

Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation) or Bangladesh Navy so that their families don't put pressure on them to get married," Kiran says.

Also football, being a physical demanding sport and one of the toughest games in the world, require yearlong training, believes Kiran.

Just like many other countries, our women football team is also grappling with gender bias and discrimination when it comes to finding a sponsor. "Lack of sponsors in football means we have to settle on fewer training sessions as well as compromise on the yearlong camp that they need," she explains. "I am affiliated with international football organisations, and I have seen first-hand that the footballers there

have a number of trainings and intense supervision during off-season periods." Kiran argues that an academy dedicated for women footballers is a must. The women's wing of BFF tries to train the young footballers through yearlong practice sessions by organising different national championships, age-level championship, club leagues and school leagues so that they are always in practice.

She believes that having tournaments like Bangamata Gold Cup Football Tournament is a positive step that helps to find different talented footballers from all over the country, and hopes that many more football competitions are organised for women in the country. She also emphasised on

the importance of different inter-school and inter-college competitions within the city which would help them find more talented players.

Like Kiran, coach Chhoton too believes that the scenario has changed over the past few years. In fact, more and more women are participating in sports these days and both the print and visual media are covering women's sports, according them the same importance given to men's sports teams.

This was not a serendipitous victory, believes the coach. "I believe each one of these girls is capable of doing something even bigger than this," the proud coach concludes with hope in his eyes.

The writer is a feature writer for Star Weekend, The Daily Star.



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