

Play Like a Girl

NASHRAH HAQUE

Let us imagine a school that restricts the subjects one could take based on their genders.

A school, where girls are not allowed to opt for Math or Physics because they are the more “masculine” subjects and the only way to access restricted subjects was through extra tuition in their own time and expenses, after school.

As absurd as it sounds, this is the reality for many girls when it comes to Physical Education (PE) or Sports classes in many schools. When it comes to accessing training to become skilled in sports or activities in PE classes, girls are usually left behind.

Often, their playtimes are completely cancelled after they’ve reached a certain grade, with little to no regard for their possible aspirations.

“Up until grade 6 we had a games class where we would go outside to play either football or handball. But in grade 7, that class was substituted for sewing classes strictly in the girls’ buildings. The boys still had a designated period for sports. This was incredibly unfair as I remember no one in my class wanted to give up sports for sewing as no one was really interested in the latter,” Fatima Jahan Ena, a former student of Maple Leaf International School shared.

Many girls we spoke to believe they are not treated equally to their male peers in settings where everyone is supposed to be given equal opportunities. They talked

about how they wanted to participate in the same activities as their male classmates, but their teachers told them they couldn’t because it was “meant for males” or “because you’re a girl” or “because it’s not on the schedule.”

“We weren’t allowed to play out in the field after grade 4, the girls would be asked to sit in class while the boys went out to play,” described Mithi Munzeleen Sarwar, who studied in Marie Curie School.

She adds, “We weren’t allowed to wear the sports uniform either because girls were not allowed to wear shorts.”

Sabrina Ahmed*, a former student from Sunnyside School, spoke about how she never even had the chance to explore her interest in sports, since, from a very young age she was not given the same opportunities as her male peers.

Something as fundamental as sports should not be subjected to unnecessary gender roles. Sports encourage good health, leadership abilities, teamwork, self-reliance, and continuous learning. One should not be deprived of it based on their gender. The area of participation in sports becomes problematic when schools fall into the habit of providing “girls sports” or “boys sports”, and when they encourage boys over girls.

Teachers have the ability to affect how students perceive the world around them through their lessons and classroom behaviour. This is a privilege that should be

made use of.

Farzeen Ghani, a recent A Level graduate, stated, “I was not allowed to play with the boys and the fact that I even wanted to participate in sports got me bullied.” Since childhood, she has been subjected to a great deal of discrimination as a result of her participation in sports.

With no support from school, and no girls’ team to participate in, Farzeen only had herself to help her pursue her passion for basketball.

“I would go to Gulshan Club after school every day with my basketball, sit and watch other people play. I didn’t have the confidence to go and play with them, or even, in front of them. When I would come back home, I would watch YouTube videos and teach myself,” Farzeen recalled. She did everything she could to hold on to her love for basketball, despite not having a proper coach.

Ultimately, Farzeen overcame the societal pressures that continually hindered her from playing, and is now a part of Deshi Ballers, which works to create a safe space for female athletes all around Bangladesh.

Farzeen’s perseverance was ultimately rewarded with opportunities, including the opportunity to be trained under Ruthie Bolton, an Olympic gold medalist, the opportunity to attend a mentoring program hosted by ESPN, and even play with the national basketball team. However, it is important to note that most girls do not

receive the same privilege, even if they try and persevere.

“No girl should be told she can’t play a sport just because of her gender. Something needs to change because girls are missing out on opportunities that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. Playing sports in this country for young girls and women should be a right, not a privilege,” Farzeen urged.

Terrible PE experiences are a common occurrence among girls. A startling number of girls shared similar stories of being made to feel uncomfortable, of not being allowed to try the same activities as males, of being bullied, or being made to feel inferior was prevalent in each story. They have all, in one way or another, been made to feel like there’s no point in trying or pursuing their interests further.

It has become impossible to overlook the roles many schools have played as, both, gatekeepers of physical opportunities, and advocates of restrictive gender standards. Schools and instructors must critically examine the environment they are harbouring, and the lessons they are giving through their actions, in order to bring about change that is much required.

**Name has been changed upon request.*

All Nashrah cares about is smashing the patriarchy. Help her at nashrah.haque01@gmail.com



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For the Love of the (Unpopular) Game

SYEDA ERUM NOOR

When I was 14, I was introduced to the wonderful sport of table tennis.

It wasn’t the kind of sport the popular kids would be wrapped up in playing. It wasn’t one that would be playing on television screens all the time, or one that was discussed at dinner tables and parties. It was one that had people raise their eyebrows and go, “Oh. How does that work?”

If not that, they’d laugh with a dismissive wave of the hand, saying, “I bet I could beat you.” I never quite understood it.

In my mind, whether or not it was popular didn’t really matter. A sport is a sport nonetheless. And it was a game that I enjoyed. I was working just as hard as anyone else, putting in the effort and time. There was no difference, other than the fact that from time to time, I’d have to explain table tennis to those who didn’t know about it or laugh off casual insults thrown about.

“It seemed so easy for everyone to dismiss it as being ‘easy,’” says Saif Sakif Ahmed, captain of the North South University table tennis team. “No one bothered to understand it, and so everyone had already concluded what I did was easy, and therefore, not worthy of praise. Somehow, I didn’t measure up to other athletes.”

It was a divide that was ever present, going as far back as school days. Going to my school tournaments, we’d have a bus full of spectators to attend our football, basketball or volleyball matches. When it came to anything other than that, people were seldom there.

“I immediately noticed the difference in the buzz and energy of people between my football games and my table tennis ones,” agrees Syed Irfan Noor, student of Stride International School, national-level table tennis player and member of the school football team.

For me too, this feeling carried through when I decided to pursue table tennis on a national level. The stadium was empty and our award ceremonies were sombre, with no one but the players and their coaches. While we celebrated our victories, they were easily dismissed by other people.

I soon came to realise that my achievements in table tennis didn’t quite mean the same as the other sports. Most of the time, I accepted it as a consequence of choosing a game that didn’t appeal to the masses.

As time passed, however, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the challenges that came with it. As it turns out, I’m not the only one. Dola Barua, badminton player and national-level multiple award-winning cyclist, states, “Social barriers have always been, even to this day, my biggest challenge. Most people don’t consider cycling to be a sport.”

The root of the problem has always been the same: lack of awareness. This unawareness was starting to affect more than just recognition or simple acknowledgement of our hard work. It was starting to affect our opportunities and



hinder our chances to ever reach our true potential.

“Not many resources are going into events and games, and no one takes this seriously,” says Dola Barua.

“Tournaments are less frequent, which is a huge disadvantage in itself,” agrees Saif. “We don’t get the chance to compete, to practice playing with pressure. We can’t learn if we can’t compete.”

National Muay Thai fighter Mohammad Rashed adds, “There’s a big gap in the resources available to us. It’s difficult to come across proper training facilities and trainers.”

We do have one thing that most refer to as an advantage: less competition. Most of us athletes don’t see this as an advantage, however, because we play these games out of passion and the drive to grow and become better. A lack of competition ends up being another challenge.

“We don’t get a chance to play against higher rated players,” says chess player Tamjid Ahmed Tanu, from North South Uni-

versity. “There aren’t enough clubs or platforms for us to play.”

Most of us don’t play only for the sake of winning. We play because we love the game. So, in my opinion, a lack of competition makes the awards I’ve won that didn’t require a decent fight mean little to me. It is unfulfilling to be unable to play to one’s best potential. Without competition, there is no growth. And our motivation is impacted if we have nothing to reach for.

“We don’t get to compete as much,” Beauty Ray, national archer, agrees. “We don’t have as many players and it eventually begins to affect our personal motivation. If there’s no chance to aim higher, we’re stuck.”

There is a lack of funding and federation initiatives due to these sports being immensely unpopular, and so players can’t even consider going professional. The option to do this full time is ruled out and so, for every athlete, there comes an abrupt end to their growth. Priorities change. The years of time and effort do not bear any fruit.

“We can’t afford to keep playing if we can’t earn a living from it,” says a saddened Saif. “No matter how much I want, it’s sad to realise my passion won’t last as long as I would have hoped.”

This lack of opportunity, recognition and publicity is not only affecting the participating players at present, but also aspiring talents who may have otherwise been attracted.

“Trophies and award ceremonies were my single motivation to start when I was younger,” recalls Maryam Noor Yunus, former national handball player. “It drew me in when I saw players being acknowledged for their talent. Love for the game grows with time, but initial attraction comes from recognition.”

Why would anyone be motivated to play, let alone win, where their victories become meaningless? Was their hard

work dismissed because the sport isn’t as popular as other ones?

Everyone agrees, support from the government, federations, and relevant authorities is necessary.

“With some support from the federation, we must try and drive more of our forces and resources in attracting players, in helping grow the community,” says Beauty.

Already, many of us are seeing a change for the better, a small step in the right direction as more effort is being poured into giving these sports and the athletes that come with it, a shot.

“I do see some progress being made,” says Saif. “Our university athletics club is actively trying to allocate better resources into organising more tournaments. It’s a start. There’s still a long way to go.”

Dola agrees, remembering her early days as a cyclist. “I was the only one there. With no other women to participate against, I competed against the men. Now, there are over a hundred female cyclists and counting. It tells us we’re on our way.”

In the end, each and every one of these athletes remained rooted in their position and their unwavering love and respect for their sports.

“Passion and willpower are the only things you need,” Dola asserts. “You need nothing else but yourself to spread the love for the sport. Keep participating and don’t let these obstacles stand in your way.”

We have our fair share of challenges and setbacks, but what keeps us going is our passion for the game. We have no other motivation or inclination other than our love for it. As do all other athletes, without a doubt, no matter the sport.

Being an athlete is so much more than just playing a game. It’s about discipline, passion, dedication and an unspoken respect for all kinds of sports and athletes.

Syeda Erum Noor is dangerously oblivious and has no sense of time. Send help at erum.noor1998@gmail.com

