

"This is our gift to the nation on its 50 years of independence. We wanted to win this trophy for our countrymen."

Maria Manda, captain of the Bangladesh team, after winning SAFF U-19 Women's Championship final against India.



## 'We must be bestowed with the deserving respect'

They used to tell me that one day I will play for my country. That's when the seeds of my dream were planted. In 2011, I had set out playing professional cricket and got my maiden call-up to the national camp in 2013-14.

Women's cricket in Bangladesh has taken a big stride in 2021. Under Nigar Sultana Joty's leadership, Bangladesh women's national team qualified for the first time in the ICC Women's ODI World Cup. The 24-year-old spoke about her journey in cricket, the obstacles for women in taking up sports and her ambitions during an interview with The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin.

The Daily Star (DS): Tell us about your

journey in cricket? Nigar Sultana Joty (NSJ): I began playing cricket in my backyard when I was two years old with my elder brother and cousins. They used to tell me that one day I will play for my country. That's when the seeds of my dream were planted. In 2011, I had set out playing professional cricket and got my maiden call-up to the national camp in 2013-14. Finally, I got the chance to play for Bangladesh in 2015 against Pakistan.

DS: What are the challenges you still face as a female athlete?

NSJ: Nowadays, the scenario has changed for women athletes, I guess. As you can see, the outlook of Bangladesh women's cricket changed totally after the 2018 Asia Cup. Now people are showing more interest in women's cricket in Bangladesh and it's an extremely



positive sign.

DS: Bangladesh women's team qualified for the ICC World Cup for the first time under your captaincy. How big is this achievement, in the context of women's cricket in Bangladesh?

NSJ: This is a huge achievement for women's cricket in Bangladesh. It was a great experience for each and every person on the team and it was extra joyful for me because it happened under my captaincy. It gives us the opportunity to play a lot of international cricket throughout the year. We always wanted to play the ODI World Cup because we always knew that if we qualify it will elevate the whole atmosphere. By being able to play a lot of cricket we have the chance to show the world how good we are, and how we improved as a unit.

DS: What are the areas that need addressing to ensure the continuous improvement of women's sports in Bangladesh?

NSJ: I think we need to improve a lot of things to encourage and boost women's sports by presenting them the best opportunities, great facilities for preparation alongside a healthy financial support. Last but not the least, we must be bestowed with the deserving respect.

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## Women's sports through the lens of two generations

Women's participation in sports in the country formally began soon after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Breaking all the barriers, female athletes like Rani Hamid and Zobera Rahman Linu became central figures in Bangladesh's sporting landscape in those early days. But in the last few years, the female athletes have started to garner a greater portion of the limelight, especially the age-group successes in women's football and the significant growth and success of the Bangladesh women's cricket team on the international stage, and the emergence of athlete like Diya Siddique in archery has been a key highlight if one were to chart the rise of women's sports in the country over the last 10 years. Their success and heartwarming stories, where we can mention the recent triumph of the SAFF Under-19 Championship, about how they overcame all barriers to bring laurels for the country have led to not only a newfound belief among female sporting aspirants but also uplifted the nation's spirit. It has been an encouraging scenario in terms of creating a positive vibe in the state of women's sports in the country, although the road to ensuring that there is no discrimination between male and female athletes in terms of pay gaps and facilities is still a work in progress. And speaking of progress, which mostly yielded through the athletes' self-motivation and encouragement from some individuals rather than a well-formed system, the ones made over the last few years are no less encouraging. However, a big question remains about whether the existing system encourages females to take up sport as a profession and untap their true potential through sport. As we venture into a promising new year, The Daily Star Sport talked with two generations of women athletes to shed light on different aspects surrounding women's sports in Bangladesh.

## 'A positive mentality has been instilled in society'

Before calling time in 2002, celebrated sportsperson Zobera Rahman Linu emerged champion in the national women's table tennis championship for a record 16 times. And later, apart from working as the general secretary of Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation for one term, she served as the vice president of Bangladesh Cycling Federation. Linu, who is now the chairman of the Athletes Commission of Bangladesh Olympic Association, expressed her views to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the state of the country's sports while addressing the persistent organisational limitations.

The Daily Star (DS): What's your view on Bangladesh's sporting progress in the past 50 years?

Zobera Rahman Linu (ZRL): During this period, the progression in sports has not gone as much as we had expected even though some sectors of the country have improved. In sports, especially in women's sports, I think cricket, football and



archery have thrived a bit compared to other disciplines.

DS: Why did the country's sports lag behind compared to other sectors?

ZRL: I think the organisers have to bear some burden of failure to take the country's sports ahead and simultaneously, the athletes haven't been able to shine. Although I must admit, a few federations have started grooming the players from grassroots but most federations are out of such action. Another point, the athletes tend to come from insolvent families and prioritise on ensuring basic financial security first, so their focus gets divided producing neither good performances nor good earnings. If the athletes received handsome salaries, then they could have produced worthy performances with undiverted attention to the game.

DS: Could you compare the restrictions between your playing time with the current one?

ZRL: I came into sports without facing any type of hindrances because our family was sports-oriented with my father playing sports too. However, most athletes faced some restrictions at that time. Despite the limitations, there was no big financial barrier, which is now the big hurdle for the current crop of athletes. If they can't get out of the financial trouble from playing sports, then big expectations from them are not justified.

DS: But do you imply that currently there are no restrictions from society and family to come into sports?

ZRL: Women are now playing football apart from athletics, swimming, handball etc. That means a positive mentality has been instilled in society but the uncertain future and financial inconsistency come in the way of women athletes.

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## 'GIRLS OF BANGLADESH possess ample spirit'

Having tried her luck in a BKSP trial after picking up bow and arrows for the first time in 2017 as an eighth-grade student in Nilphamari, Diya Siddique never quite looked back ever since. Fast-forward to becoming an Olympian in 2021 in Tokyo, she also clinched silver in the Archery World Cup this year to create history for Bangladesh. As a significant contributor to the country's sporting success in 2021, the 17-year-old shared her thoughts on women's progress and scope while speaking to The Daily Star's Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq.

The Daily Star (DS): In 2021, where the men failed to bring success in the international levels, the women on the other hand, yourself included, brought tremendous sporting glory for Bangladesh. What's your take on that?

Diya Siddique: The way the standard of Bangladesh women's sports has gradually improved so far, I think this is a very positive sign for us given that women usually lag much behind men in terms of sports in this country. We have seen the women's cricket team qualify for the ODI world cup, and the U-19 girls become the SAFF Champions in football. On social media, I've seen people urge the boys to learn a thing or two from the girls (smiles). Actually, these girls have been



through so much in their lives, they get hell-bent on proving doubters wrong.

DS: Do you see this year's success by our women to carry on to the future?

Diya: The way we are evolving, I think it's very possible to sustain success for a long time, but only if we get a proper safety net in return for our struggle and hard work. I think the girls of Bangladesh possess an ample spirit that enables them to achieve anything. They are determined to do well for their country, their families, and for themselves.

DS: We have seen noticeable wage differences between men and women in

sports, not only in Bangladesh but also around the world. As a professional archer, have you faced such discrimination? Diya: Not really. We archers play for different agencies, and as far as I know, both men and women get equal payment based on their ranks. However, we don't get any salary from the national team. We do get some remuneration every month, but it's more akin to pocket money for buying soaps and shampoo (smiles). If anyone plays for defence (Service teams), they get extra payment if they perform well, or else they have to settle with the regular monthly salary.

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## 'Need to patronise less popular sports'

WIM Rani Hamid is a household name in the country as the veteran sportsperson still continues to play top-flight chess for 43 years with an undecayed enthusiasm since she first set the pieces in motion at the age of 34. From having clinched an overwhelming 20th National Women's Chess Championship title in 2019 as a 75-year-old to eyeing a Guinness Book of Records next year, the living legend talked to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the past, present and future of chess.

DS: In your view, how has Bangladesh's sports progressed in the last 50 years? RH: I don't have in-depth awareness on other disciplines but what I understand is that chess could not progress much here. We once fought on level terms against the Indians but now we can't compete against them and beating them is beyond possibility. Back in the day, I had beaten a top Indian player to secure the title of British Women's Chess Championship. However, Bangladesh Chess Federation is currently trying to groom players from the grassroots. Let's see what happens in future but one thing is certain that no athletes can improve unless they receive proper training and financial support. If we can't produce results in the next four to five years, I'm afraid we can't do it ever.

DS: You have witnessed the transformation of two different environments since you embarked in chess. Do you see any difference between past and present scenarios?

RH: Playing environment of past and present is almost similar but commuting has become troublesome for the players, who have to



spend hours on road for daily practice even though there exists opportunity to practice online. Also, the social restrictions had remained the same, I think. In some cases, the restrictions became tighter as these days the parents don't want to keep their daughters out of their sight due to poor social conditions, whereas we had played freely in the past.

DS: Where do you want to see the country's sports in future and what initiatives need to be executed by the organisers and even the government?

RH: We are lucky that our Prime Minister (Sheikh Hasina) loves sports and that's why we are also drawing a few sponsors. The Prime Minister is cordially trying to take the country upward in every sector and we, the athletes, also have some responsibility to shine on the ground.

Unlike cricket and football, the other fields of sport don't get the same attention, so the government need to intervene to patronise the less popular sports directly.

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