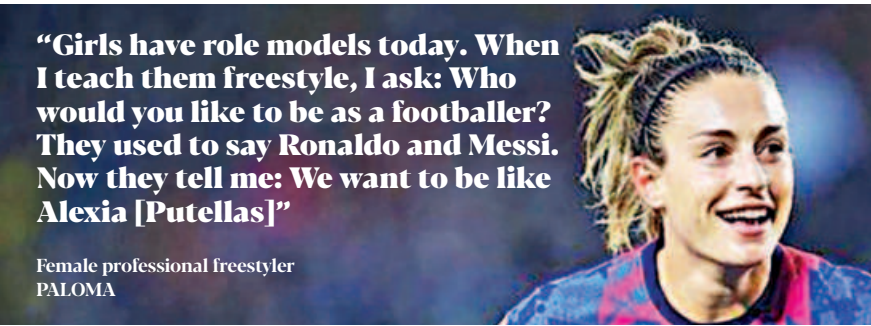




In sync despite being 5 thousand miles apart

One can easily imagine a Classico where the likes of Karim Benzema, Vinicius Jr. and Luka Modric were lining up against Pedri, Sergio Busquets, and Gerard Pique, but none of those megastars were on the pitch that night.

ASHEFAQ UL MUSHFIQ

The beautiful game has been the most popular sport on the planet for over a century, but although the field has been dominated by men for most of its history, times have begun to change in the last few decades.

Women's football can trace its history back to the 1890s, when there were a number of women's clubs in England and one in north London was reported to have attracted 10,000 to a game at Crouch End.

Preston was the stronghold of women's football in those days after the famous Dick Kerr's Ladies were formed in 1894. Their match with St Helen's Ladies on Boxing Day 1920 featured the largest crowd for a women's game as 53,000 packed into Goodison Park and thousands remained locked outside.

However, following this success, the Football Association initiated a ban in 1921 in England that disallowed women's football games from taking place on the grounds used by its member clubs. That ban

remained in effect until July 1971.

While there were independent bodies that organised Women's World Cups, FIFA only held the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup in China in 1991, which accelerated the women's game's popularity on a global scale. Since then, the sport has gained in popularity, with over 1.12 billion people worldwide tuning in to watch the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France.

Nations like Germany, USA and Japan have dominated the international stage, but FC Barcelona Femeni have emerged as the crown jewel of club football in Europe and pulled off miracles.

On March 30 this year, Barcelona faced off against Real Madrid in front of a capacity Camp Nou. A record crowd of 91,553 turned up for that Champions League semifinal clash, which saw Real Madrid thrashed 5-2 at Camp Nou.

One can easily imagine a Classico where the likes of Karim Benzema, Vinicius Jr. and Luka Modric were lining up against Pedri, Sergio Busquets, and Gerard Pique, but none of those megastars were on the pitch that night. Instead, it was the Barcelona Femeni taking on their counterparts.

Only matches at the unofficial 1971 Women's World Cup have ever attracted attendances for a women's sporting event in excess of that, with 110,000 people turning up for the final between Mexico and Denmark at the Azteca Stadium.

It was little over a decade ago that Barcelona Femeni were training on whatever pitch was available at ridiculous hours of the day. They have only been a professional side since 2015, but they now dominate Spain and have won the Women's Champions League in 2021 while breaking a 22-year record for attendance at a women's game.

How this team has become such a powerhouse in such a short amount of time? The main factor was the injection of Barcelona's DNA, shaped by iconic figures like Johan Cruyff and Pep Guardiola and the philosophy of the three P's: possession,

pressure and positioning. Even while their men's team has failed to entice spectators to the stadium on a regular basis, the Femeni team are beloved not only in Catalonia, but all over Spain.

A similar scenario has unfolded 5068 miles away in Bangladesh over the last few years, albeit on a smaller scale.

Packed stadiums during domestic football matches have not been witnessed in generations, but female footballers have started to get appreciable success after groundbreaking success in SAFF competitions, starting when the Under-15 side recorded huge wins such as the 6-0 hammering of Nepal and 3-0 triumphs over Bhutan and India in 2017.

The following year, a 14-0 victory over Pakistan in the SAFF U-15 Women's Championship and 10-0, 8-0 and 7-0 victories against Bahrain, Lebanon and UAE respectively in the AFC Under-16 Championship qualifiers inspired the entire nation.

Ever since, the number of spectators for the women's game has increased drastically. The most recent example would be the final of the 2021 SAFF U-19 Women's Championship, when Bangladesh beat India 1-0 in front of a capacity Bir Sherestha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium.

At the same venue this year, the Bangladesh senior women's team defeated Malaysia -- a team ranked 60 places higher than them -- by a massive 6-0 margin in front of yet another bustling crowd.

Despite the difference in level and quality, the growth of Barcelona Femeni and the Bangladesh women's football team have followed roughly the same timeline.

The only question that remains is what the future holds for these young footballers of Bangladesh. Will there be a sustainable approach that can form a solid foundation? And can the Bangladesh Football Federation implement a structure that ensures a long-lasting impact defined by the current run of success?

‘Spectators boost our confidence level from 100 to 120 per cent’

Twenty-eight-year-old Sabina Khatun is the captain and top-scorer of the Bangladesh women's national football team. The veteran striker shared the experience of the change of perspective and scenario of Bangladesh's football fans towards women's football throughout her career and made comparisons on their journey of success with the story of FC Barcelona Femeni while talking to The Daily Star's Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq. The excerpts are below:

The Daily Star (DS): 6-0 in the first match against Malaysia and then a goalless draw in the next one despite dominating them. What was the realisation after the last match?

Sabina Khatun (SK): When you play consecutive matches against the same side in the space of a few days, the opponents will understand your plans better. Even though they are well ahead of us in the FIFA rankings, I think they couldn't read us well in the first match. However, they came back well in the next match and gave us a good fight.

DS: Women's football in the country has been witnessing a greater amount of spectators on a regular basis compared to men's football. Since you're a veteran of the game, how much difference do you see today from the time you started playing?

SK: I think spectators generally come to watch women's football matches. But to me, what changed noticeably is people's perception. And this is noticeable on social media as well. Whenever we play good football, fans appreciate us and feel hopeful that these girls can actually give something to the country's football and take it a long way. In Bangladesh, there are some people who don't like girls playing football and wearing shorts. But I think success speaks for itself and what we have achieved in the last 5-7 years has changed people's perception and the pattern of saying things about women's football.

DS: Do you find similarities in the growth of Bangladesh women's football with FC Barcelona Femeni?

SK: Actually the scenario of women's football now is very different from the time when we started. At first, people thought that the girls were barely able to play. But times have changed since the success of age-level teams, especially from the U-15 level. People now automatically arrive in stadiums during the girls' games hoping to see a good display of football. And in terms of Barcelona's tiki-taka style of play, there was a time when the women's team only played defensive football and concede as less goals as possible. But now times have changed and girls can now play dominating football. We can now dominate in the opposition half more than ever. These girls have stayed together in the camp for a long time, we have great chemistry and we understand each other's roles very well. If you follow our games, you will see that our players don't stick to the



same position the entire game; we rotate around the pitch and change our roles. That's something quite similar to Barcelona's possession game. But in the end, when it comes to fans, their presence in the gallery boosts our confidence level from 100 to 120 per cent.

DS: You once said that girls are now keener to take football as a profession. But is there any guarantee of longevity in terms social and cultural obstacles in Bangladesh?

SK: Well, there was a time many girls, including myself, struggled a lot financially while playing professional football. But now so many girls are not only earning well but also are the breadwinners of their families. So today families don't force the girls to quit football and get married like they once used to.

DS: In the world of football dominated by male role models, did you come across girls saying, “We want to be like Sabina Khatun”?

SK: Yes, I hear that a lot, and it's a different kind of feeling when someone says she looks up to me as a role model. Even after the 1 scored against Malaysia, the junior girls told me that the goal really inspired them.

‘Aim to give girls a beautiful life’

Golam Rabbani Choton has been the head coach of Bangladesh women's football team, both at senior and age-level, and has delivered nine trophies at different international age-group tournaments while also guiding his side to the runners-up position four times, including once in the SAFF Women's Championship. The 52-year-old spoke to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the different aspects of women's football in Bangladesh. The excerpts are below:

The Daily Star: How would you describe the journey of the current batch of girls?

Golam Rabbani Choton: (GRC): This journey started in late 2013 under the U-13 football tournament programme initiated by the BFF women's wing and financed by Plan Bangladesh. Changes started at that time because we before formed the women's squad with the girls from different disciplines like handball, kabaddi, volleyball and judo but they returned to their respective disciplines after participating in football matches or tournaments. We lacked specialised football players, who would be playing only football and then we found that group of girls from the U-13 tournament.

Then the BFF groomed them through long-term training of 210 footballers. The number was trimmed to 46 ahead of the AFC U-14 Championship Qualification in 2014.

Since then, the girls have been kept in a group and trained round the year. Their development gathered steam when those girls became group champions and moved into the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Thailand. The journey is still going on.

DS: What was the main challenge in grooming these girls as a team?

GRC: Compared to countries like India, Nepal and Bhutan, a footballer is trained through academies before coming into the national teams. But in Bangladesh, girls come into the national teams directly from villages without proper knowledge or techniques. Fresh footballers also lack nutrition. These have actually been our main challenges. The girls in the BFF training camp also have to face challenges every day because they must show improvement daily, otherwise they have to quit. With 68 girls from different groups in the training camp at present, some 50 to 60 girls had to leave the camp due to non-improvement. Newer, talented players replaced them.

DS: The women's football team hardly drew spectators before but that has changed and spectators now

come to the stadium in numbers. Why do you think that is?

GRC: We used to defend and try to resisting the opponent in our own half. But now our coaching philosophy is to play entertaining football. Irrespective of results, the girls can now build-up the play and play pressing football, which spectators love to watch. International success is another reason. Although these girls are gradually improving, I think they have to improve in every area.

DS: There are concerns that the girls, who are growing older, might leave football due to family pressure. What initiatives has the BFF has taken to keep them in football?

GRC: The federation has kept them in training round the year. They are still under 20 and the BFF provides a salary. They also earn from the women's league and get bonuses



from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina whenever they deliver international success.

DS: Do you think the existing women's football league is helping the girls improve?

GRC: The women's football league is being held as required, but I think it is not helping the girls much apart from financial benefits. I think the authorities should find a way to make the league more competitive. Our national women's team players run 9,000 to 1,000 meters each game against Malaysia but they can hardly run 4,000 meters in league matches.

DS: What is the target for women's football in Bangladesh?

GRC: There was no target or vision a few years ago, but now it is to give the girls a beautiful life in the future through football. Eight to nine players have already been admitted to different private and government universities as footballers. The girls are also dreaming of getting big contracts from clubs in the coming women's league. Our target is to play the final of the next SAFF Women's Championship.