



The need for proper exposure in ‘HERSTORY’

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I am facing different obstacles despite being a South Asian Games gold medallist. For example, I can't lead the training session whereas a bronze medallist male karateka leads the training session as a senior player despite having no experience of how to lead a team.

Karateka
MARZAN AKTER
PRIYA



KHALID HOSSAIN

It seems that culturally we are inclined, as if somewhat programmed, to do the bare minimum in providing deserving attention and a wide-scale media coverage when it comes to women's sport in the country despite the fact that women athletes have had been giving their all, working just as hard as their male counterparts, day in day out over the years.

Take the case of Bangladesh women's national team's maiden SAFF triumph in September last year, for instance, when Sabina Khatun and company defeated hosts Nepal to present the country with a trophy that eluded the men's team since 2003.

Following the historic victory at Kathmundu's Dasharath Rangasala Stadium, it was quite bizarre that it almost took forever for the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) official Facebook page to publish the news while many of the success-starved football fans in the country, in the midst of celebration, kept reloading the BFF fan page but only to find the latest post in the form of results of some men's domestic matches that had taken place that day.

It can be said that to nit-pick over the activity of a social media handle is unnecessary but when it comes to this day and age, the power of internet's flow of information to reach on a massive scale has matched the television, if not surpassed it, courtesy of the accessibility of budget-friendly smartphones. A study commissioned by Sky Sports in the UK has shown in 2021 that 32% of people in a survey, conducted since March, 2020, had learned more about women's sport through advertising and social media, while a two-third majority cited an increase in broadcast coverage as their reason for increased attention in the field. Thus, it becomes paramount that the powerful tools are not left unused when Bangladesh football has continued to fail in churning out success, in quantitative terms to say the least, leaving its once-passionate supporters demoralised and pessimistic of the future.

And equally, if not more, strange was how that tournament got little to no national television coverage as supporters resorted to

live online streaming at elevensports.com. It was only up until the final that T Sports – country's lone television channel dedicated to sports coverage – decided to telecast after mighty India – the then reigning champions, winners of all five editions prior – were forced to exit the semi-finals by the women in red and green in their marauding run to the finale.

Lack of coverage can happen for several reasons, from financial limitations to failure in acquiring broadcasting license in time to a matter of prioritising over other ongoing events. Back then, the Bangladesh men's cricket team – the most popular team in the country by a landslide – had finished their Asia Cup assignment and so one would like to believe that, in that time, the latter was not the case.

While the ongoing trend in the country's overall news media lingers, of springing into action whenever success arrives in women's sports but lacking its anticipation and the follow-up, there remains a grave concern to whether the ongoing evolution of women's sports in Bangladesh is set for a U-turn in the foreseeable future.

Our women's SAFF success did not arrive as a fluke rather it was well in the making. The golden generation of girls – the likes of Monica Chakma, Maria Manda, Sanjida Akhtar, Rupna Chakma, Rituporna Chakma – lived up to their reputation and had sealed the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship title in 2021. In line with the global trend that defied the predictions regarding how Covid-19 pandemic was going to flatten the curve of public interest towards women's game, it was pleasantly surprising to witness how enthusiastic were the home crowd that had arrived in numbers, amounting to around fifteen thousand, at the at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur, Dhaka.

Filled with those aforementioned players who had shown that they are comfortable in thriving under pressure at the big stage, the possibility of the senior team to bag a maiden SAFF title was not far-fetched by any means, and so the broadcasting and advertising, or lack thereof, during and in building up to the tournament had left a lot to be desired.

As far as the positive developments are concerned in terms of exposure, the reception given to the victorious women footballers as they paraded the streets of Dhaka on an open-top bus, from Dhaka airport to BFF headquarters, was unprecedented. Moreover, its impact in promoting women's football, and sports in general, in raising awareness and acceptance among the general population can go a long way in time.

However, the open-top bus parade event could still be treated as a glaring exception to the norm following our success at the international stage brought by women. Another refreshing anomaly recently surfaced on the advertisement front as the Apex Footwear television commercial that starred Jamal Bhuiyan had featured two teenage girls playing football with Bangladesh men's national football team captain on the streets. The makers of that TVC had cashed in on the SAFF success and timed the release to perfection, on the eve of the men's football World Cup in November last year. A month prior, also commendable was how popular local film director Raihan Rafi managed to set the narrative of his “Damal” movie revolve around a group of Bangladesh's female footballers as they derived inspiration from the legendary Shadhin Bangla Football Team that had played a pivotal part during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

It is quite natural that the followers of a title-winning team find it agonisingly hard to wait to see their side back in action, like how the fans of Argentina men's team eagerly await the Albiceleste's first international match against Panama this month since becoming the world champions in Qatar in December last year. And although the Bangladesh women's senior team is yet to take the field in an international match since SAFF win as they gear up to take part in the Women's Olympic Qualifiers from Asia early next month, but, in between, at least the recent edition of the Women's Football League – featuring the SAFF winners and others – was streamed live on BFF's YouTube channel. Now, isn't that the beauty of low expectations!

‘It cannot go on like this anymore’

In her field, Bangladesh's table tennis icon Zobera Rahman Linu remained a cut above the rest during her stellar 24-year playing career between 1977 to 2001, having bagged a whopping 16 national titles from 1977 to 2001. However, her trajectory from being a celebrated sportsperson to being a woman in power has not manifested as predicted. The chairperson of the Bangladesh Olympic Association's (BOA) athlete commission spoke with **Sabbir Hossain of The Daily Star** in an exclusive interview, where the Guinness Record-holder addressed the issues that have been hindering the evolution of the women's game in the country. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): Having been associated with sports for almost 50 years, do you think the number of women arriving into sports in Bangladesh have met expectations?

Zobera Rahman Linu (ZRL): Women are participating increasingly in cricket, football and other outdoor sports, which was inconceivable just 15 years ago. Still, although the situation has improved in comparison, women are not flocking to sports as expected.

Financial security is the key to freedom as the majority of female athletes come from lower middle-class families. If we can assure financial security, women from upper-class families will swarm into sports as well.

As the circumstances do not provide the needed economic self-sufficiency, the desired number of women from well-to-do families are not coming here. Therefore, even after so many years since Bangladesh's independence, women have not come forward to the extent they were supposed to.



DS: How do you think the public attention can be increased so that women's sports garner

a greater exposure?

ZRL: People will know more about female athletes when there are tournaments, so tournaments should be held more frequently. It often happens that women sportspeople remain idle for months on end.

Moreover, when we open the newspaper, we only see the news of cricket. This mentality of only promoting cricket should be changed. We should ensure publicity for other sporting events too.

DS: As one of the country's sporting legends, you have observed how the administration operates to a large extent. Could you tell us what has been your realisation in recent times?

ZRL: Dirty politics and discord among members can be seen within numerous federations. Also, many organisers do not have a positive relationship with athletes.

The country has 52 sports federations and associations, but what is the percentage of women in various positions? There are no women in positions of power. They are denied the opportunity, and it has even been said that ‘women cannot’ [when it comes to operating at top positions in federations].

I was the [Bangladesh] Table Tennis Federation's (BTTF) general secretary for just a few months before being forced out by a hastily scheduled election. There was a plot against me. Also, I was a member of the [Bangladesh] Cycling Federation (BCF) but its election was held without my knowledge. It cannot go on like this anymore.

‘Encouragement is key’

While women have long been making remarkable strides in the world of sports, it is only recently that we have even come to learn some of the big players' names. We know the likes of amazing cricketers like Salma Khatun and captain Nigar Sultana Joty, young bloods like Marufa Akhter and Afia Prottasha, and footballing queens like Sabina Khatun, Sanjida Akhter or Krishna Rani Sarkar and Maria Manda, but how well do we know our badminton, tennis or even basketball players? Is it the authorities who are not investing in women enough? Is promotion the bigger issue? Or is it the society's lacking in accepting women in sports in all their glory?

In conversation with Ashreen Mridha, founder of Deshi Ballers and former shooting guard of the national women's basketball team, **Naziba Basher of The Daily Star** delves into some of the deeper questions of why the women are still made to lag behind.

The Daily Star (DS): What do you think are the biggest challenges sports women face in Bangladesh right now?

Ashreen Mridha (AM): Firstly, the obstacle comes from family and society as a whole. In many households, sports for women is still considered recreational, not professional. We get some encouragement when it comes to school sports, but beyond that, there is almost none. While families may give importance to their sons in sports, they focus on academics when it comes to their daughters. The basic need



for having an active life is somehow not required for girls.

Then there are institutional challenges. If you look at the boards, those who make the decisions at the table – there is no female representation and that is where the problem of unequal wages arises.

As a matter of fact, the topmost authorities have stamped an age-limit for women in sports: 25, which makes no sense at all. Why should they stop playing if they are fit to play? No one really asks when Shakib Al Hasan will be retiring, right? Other institution-based discriminations, even from the ministerial-level, come when the woman is married or has children. We don't even have facilities to help women come back to their sport after a maternity leave.

There also needs to be substantial

brand endorsements. More corporate brands, media houses and publications need to come forward and actively push to get sportswomen as brand ambassadors. That is when the funding will come and the mass media will turn their focus to women in sports – that will bring our audiences to the galleries as well.

DS: What about the difference between men's basketball and women's basketball?

AM: At the federation level, there is a huge gap. I had been playing for the national basketball team for a decade, and what I have seen first-hand is the bias in terms of facilities. The federation makes us feel like we don't deserve these facilities because of poor performances in comparison to the men, but where will the good performance come from with poor facilities and no

grooming?

DS: How do you suggest we can bring in more girls into basketball?

AM: Basketball isn't as underrated as it used to be. But it is still considered an elite sport due to its infrastructural demand, so it becomes inaccessible at the grassroots. We also need accessible facilities to increase girl's participation. Encouragement is key!

DS: What are your suggestions for authorities to popularise women's sports in the country more?

AM: It is the era of social media and we need to use that to its fullest potential. But I must say, the female athletes themselves also have a lot to do. I think many times, us girls get embarrassed to self-promote. We need to talk about our achievements and struggles, not just our trophies.