



In a country as football-crazy as Bangladesh, can “playing football” really become part of the ever-growing list of reasons women face gender-based violence?

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Too unsafe to even play football?

Latest attack lays bare the relentless gendered violence faced by Bangladeshi women



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SHUPROVA TASNEEM

When I was a little girl, the only female athletes whose names I knew were Serena and Venus Williams. I wasn't a tennis fan though. I was mad about cricket, especially the Sri Lankan team, and I could tell you what I loved about Ranatunga, Jayasuriya and Chaminda Vaas even before I properly knew how to spell their names.

At that point, if anyone had asked me if I thought women played cricket or football, I would probably have instinctively said no. My school only reinforced this belief, taking out the boys in our class in buses every week to play football and cricket on open fields, while the girls had to do with the small courts within campus walls. It's not that they didn't think we were capable though, they were only protecting us from the lack of safety that they seemed fine subjecting the boys to.

You can only imagine how much pride it gives me now to know that even if the Asia Cup title continues to elude the Bangladesh men's cricket team – who by the way have had my undying fidelity since that fateful day in Northampton in 1999 (if you know, you know) – the Bangladesh women's team, despite having far less experience under their belt, beat six-time champion India in 2018 to clinch the title. Most recently, the Tigresses held their own in their first-ever home series as well, with a 1-1 series draw against India.

As a child, I don't think I imagined that one day, images of Bangladesh's women cricketers and footballers would be on the front pages of major local newspapers like they were after the 2018 Women's T20 Asia Cup, and after the Bangladesh team's dramatic win in the 2022 SAFF Women's Championship. I definitely could not have imagined the hero's welcome our footballers would return to after winning the SAFF trophy, with crowds of people, men and women,

pouring out onto the streets to cheer them on. Whether it's weight lifting, mountain climbing or archery, today's little girls have so many more role models to look up to that it's impossible to not feel hopeful about how far Bangladeshi women have come in the last couple of decades.

This is why it's all the more difficult to be shocked back to reality by the attack on four members of the under-17 Khulna divisional football team on July 29 in Khulna's Batiaghata upazila. According to media reports, not only were these young girls assaulted simply for wearing sports attire and practising football; they were then threatened with acid attacks if they refused to withdraw the case they had filed against their attackers.

Unfortunately, and as we are all aware, such gender-based violence is an everyday reality in Bangladesh. The media is so saturated with horrific cases of rape and violence that the regular abuse, harassment and threats women face for simply daring to inhabit public spaces barely make it into the conversation. Too often, their experiences are trivialised and ignored: by families, communities, law enforcement agencies and the justice system. But the truth is that the rosy picture of Bangladeshi women's achievements has always masked a darker underbelly: whether it is of greater financial insecurity, social stigma, lack of support, or being undermined and underestimated at every turn.

And this is all the more pertinent when it comes to women's sports. In fact, I doubt we would be able to find even a single female athlete in the country who has not, at some point in her journey, faced criticism, threats or even verbal/physical abuse for her chosen profession.

The fact that female athletes have a harder time of it than men

is hardly new information. The ongoing Fifa Women's World Cup, where viewership is expected to hit over two billion for the first time, has once again shone a spotlight on the inequalities and difficulties faced by female athletes. Jamaica made history by becoming the first Caribbean country to reach the final 16. Despite having so little financial backing, they needed crowd-funding to get to their games. Morocco also made history by reaching the top 16 in their first-ever World Cup appearance, and their players spoke to the media about the social stigma they faced at home for wearing “men's clothing” and playing football. At the same time, Moroccan defender Nouhaila Benzina became the first player to wear a hijab at a World Cup, proving that diversity and representation can exist not only on the same field but even in the same team. In a world where everyone else seems to be taking a step forward, why does it feel like we're not only failing to keep up but taking a step back instead?

After England won the UEFA European Women's Championships, I remember watching their captain Leah Williamson speak of England's 50-year ban on women's football in an interview, and how her mother pretended to be a boy so she could play when she was young. Thankfully, this was one regressive colonial law that never managed to seep into our system, but the same patriarchal views of a woman's “place” in society continue to guide attacks like the one in Batiaghata.

If the relevant authorities fail to bring the perpetrators to justice, it will only highlight the incongruity of our situation in terms of equal rights and freedom. In a country as football-crazy as Bangladesh, can “playing football” really become part of the ever-growing list of reasons women face gender-based violence? In a place where women occupy some of the highest positions in office, and where women's involvement in economic development has been so widely lauded, why should the most ordinary activity that every young person should have access to become a test of courage and act of rebellion?

Six years on, a solution to the Rohingya crisis is still elusive



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MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

Since my last piece was published in *The Daily Star* in May 2023 – titled “What if the Rohingya are not repatriated?” – discussion surrounding repatriation has been continuing at all levels, without any tangible results. The Bangladesh government wants at least a “pilot” or trial run of repatriation, leaving the rights issues for the Myanmar military regime to sort out. In the latest development on repatriation, the Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Deng Xijun reportedly hinted at taking back the Rohingya to their own villages in North Maungdaw, instead of any camps. The move still falls short of addressing the Rohingya citizenship issue which is central to the crisis. A pilot or trial run also does not offer a solution to the Rohingya demand to resettle

various forms of discrimination in the Bamar state, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya started fleeing the country as early as the 1970s; further outflow followed after the 1982 nationality law, which stripped the Rohingya of Myanmar citizenship. The continued repression, indiscriminate arrests as suspected separatists, rape, murder, and arson by the Myanmar military forces triggered the mass exodus in 2017. Let's not forget the genocidal actions against the Rohingya that took place with democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi at the helm, who also shamefully defended the military action at the Hague Court. Today, of an estimated 2.0 million Rohingya, less than 200,000 live in military-guarded camps in Sittwe, Rakhine's capital city, without any

crisis in various forums since 2017 but failed to take any concrete action for accountability. China and India are playing both ways – i.e. expressing concern over the ethnic conflict in Myanmar while supplying weapons to the military junta that led the coup in 2021, plunging the country into a civil war. India has already imprisoned many Rohingya refugees for living “illegally” in the country. No one should be imprisoned for being a refugee. Both India and China have a responsibility to effectively resolve the “tragic” situation in Myanmar. The US is also playing regional power politics, essentially driven by economic and strategic interests. It appears that the powerful countries and alliances are reluctant to condemn the Myanmar junta and side with the Rohingya. The targeted sanctions by major powers have not yielded effective results yet.

Amidst all this, the dwindling financial commitments by the international community are affecting the work of various humanitarian agencies on the ground. The camps in Cox's Bazar are suffering from lack of food



The recent “go and see” visits to camps in the Rakhine state's Maungdaw town by a Rohingya refugee delegation and Bangladeshi officials did little to revive hope in the long-stalled repatriation.

PHOTO: REUTERS

in their original villages and have their rights as Myanmar citizens restored. As things stand, the repatriation issue still stagnates at a “dead end,” posing a big dilemma for Bangladesh.

More than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees have been sheltered by Bangladesh for six years now. Two previous attempts at repatriation were stalled in 2018 and 2019. The UN refugee agency and other rights groups are against any trial run without ensuring a suitable environment conducive for the Rohingya to return safely. The recent “go and see” visits to camps in the Rakhine state's Maungdaw town by a Rohingya refugee delegation and Bangladeshi officials did little to revive hope in the long-stalled repatriation.

That trip to Myanmar took place in May, under a bi-lateral arrangement between Bangladesh and Myanmar brokered by China. Apparently, there were no “takers” for the repatriation opportunity despite cash “incentives,” backed by intimidation from various forces, in the camps. The UN has called to halt and suspend the move for trial repatriation. The apparent silence and pause indicate that the pilot run plan has been abandoned. The Rohingya refused to accept any such repatriation “trap” by the Myanmar military to deflect international pressure. In fact, the Myanmar government has never been sincere about taking the Rohingya back. The so-called verification lists for repatriation in 2018 and 2019 ultimately proved to be a hoax.

Myanmar's majority Buddhists are not ready to acknowledge the Rohingya Muslims as their own despite the fact that the Rohingya have lived for generations in the Rakhine state. The Myanmar state largely viewed them as “illegal” settlers and interlopers from East Bengal/Bangladesh. Faced with

right of free movement. The rest fled to Thailand, India, Nepal, Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and even to the US, the UK, Canada and Europe, but the majority have been in Bangladesh since 2017.

Six years on, the international community is not doing enough

As a host country, Bangladesh is now faced with dilemmas over diplomatic and security concerns, among others. It seems that regional interests of the major players such as China, India, Japan and the US may determine both the timing and outcome of any repatriation in the long run. Until then, and given the current status quo, Bangladesh should take a long view requiring simultaneous and protracted engagements, and push for more international attention on the repatriation issue balancing between support for the displaced Rohingya in the camps and sustainable solutions to the crisis.

for Rohingya repatriation. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) lost traction on the Rohingya genocide case and conducted a ground investigation in Cox's Bazar only recently, after four years. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has discussed the

supplies, and health and hygiene issues, coupled with lack of education for the Rohingya children. The protracted uncertainty and increasing deterioration of the law and order situation inside the camps have taken a heavy toll on the refugee population, particularly the youth, who are trying to escape the camp life by land and sea, often assisted by human traffickers. The situations inside the camps have reached a boiling point. In 2022, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 3,500 Rohingya individuals ran away from the camps in Cox's Bazar and Bashaan Char, primarily by sea to Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries, risking their lives.

The Rohingya crisis, resulting from systematic state atrocities inside Myanmar, has triggered crises across borders in many countries in the region. The armed forces of Myanmar are still struggling to establish control locally despite increased violence on its people. The situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. As a host country, Bangladesh is now faced with dilemmas over diplomatic and security concerns, among others. It seems that regional interests of the major players such as China, India, Japan and the US may determine both the timing and outcome of any repatriation in the long run. Until then, and given the current status quo, Bangladesh should take a long view requiring simultaneous and protracted engagements, and push for more international attention on the repatriation issue balancing between support for the displaced Rohingya in the camps and sustainable solutions to the crisis. The new initiative and efforts to send the Rohingya refugees back must address what they have been demanding all along and ensure their safety and security in the Rakhine state.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bugler's evening call

5 Plot

11 Trumpeter Al

12 Blackout thief

13 Smell

14 White Rabbit's cry

15 Turned over a new leaf

17 Eden name

18 Check marks

22 English county

24 Peach center

25 — Angeles

26 Veto

27 Pretentious people

30 Grant's bill

32 Snowy wader

33 Top pitcher

34 Theater seat features

38 Chin cover

41 Tibet setting

42 Confuses

43 Big ringer

44 Plagues

45 Historic periods

DOWN

1 Hammer wielder

2 Staff member

3 College figure

4 Tried hard

5 Slender

6 Astronomical sightings

7 “Wait a sec!”

8 Greek vowel

9 Convened

10 Before, to bards

16 Sheepdog in “Babe”

19 Priest, at times

20 Polo shirt, e.g.

21 Hot

22 Different

23 Musical number

28 John or Paul

29 Manhole setting

30 Way off

31 Pleistocene period

35 Clutter

36 Turner of song

37 Yields to gravity

38 Chatter

39 Dedicated verse

40 Spots

FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

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