



SHINING THROUGH NEGLECT

Tigresses churning out more than what meets the eye

NAZIBA BASHER

In June this year, in what seemed like a step in the right direction, Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced a pay bump for the contracted women's cricketers.

The salary cap was raised to Tk 1 lakh, with minimum being set at Tk 50,000.

Although the highest paid women's cricketer was set to earn eight times less than the highest earners in the men's team, it was an improvement from how things were

five years ago, when the maximum a women's cricketer could earn was Tk 30,000 per month.

But just when it seemed like the authorities were finally taking women's cricket seriously, news broke out in November that the 25 contracted women's cricketers haven't received any salary in five months.

Of course, after the cat was out of the bag, BCB was quick to clear the dues. But the incident once again exposed the sheer neglect the country's women's cricket has

been enduring from onset.

Beginning their journey in 2007, the Bangladesh women's team announced their arrival almost immediately by emerging as champions in the ACC Women's Tournament that very year.

In the nascent period of women's cricket, it was the fiery passion of one Salma Khatun that caught people's imagination, especially as she rose to the top of the rankings in T20s as a bowler in 2014 and an all-rounder in 2015.

The fire that Salma and Co. had

ignited is being carried forward by the likes of Nigar Sultana Joty, Fargana Haque, Nahida Akter and others.

Just a month ago, the Tigresses defeated Pakistan in an ODI series at home and also registered their first win away to South Africa on December 3.

Yet, they remain very much on the periphery of the country's cricket.

The financial disparity alone is glaring.

At a time when the ICC has

announced equal prize money for men's and women's events; India, England and New Zealand are paying the same match fee to their men's and women's cricketers, BCB is stuck in its old ways.

With the rest of the world moving ahead with the times, is there any justifiable reason that we don't yet know how to respect and reward the talent of our women?

Then comes the lack of women-oriented facilities for the future Tigresses, the absence of understudy teams and

underdeveloped age-level scene -- all highlighting the poor structure of the country's women's cricket.

Women's cricket has been on a steady rise in Bangladesh despite such neglect from all ends.

It cannot be lost on us, as a nation, that these girls can do only so much on their own.

They, now more than ever, need the backing they truly deserve from their own nation -- to flourish as individual sportspersons as well as country representatives.

Women cricketers making waves, but is next-gen ship steady?

MAZHAR UDDIN

The vast potential of women's cricket in Bangladesh has come to the fore again following the national team's success of late, across formats and conditions this year. But has reality at the grassroots escaped the harsher sides or, at least, on the verge of it?

In sharp contrast to their male counterparts, the country's capital has only a handful of cricket academies for women. Attempting to obtain a better understanding of such crucial yet underrated establishments, this reporter visited the Durgam Cricket Academy situated on a small-sized field at Begun Bari ground in Pallabi, Dhaka.

WHERE DREAMS SIMMER

Under the supervision of former women cricketer-turned-coach Reshma Akter Aduri and Billal Hossain, five to six girls were honing their skills at the two nets located on the far side of the ground, devoid of grass and its outfield uneven.

Aduri and Billal founded the Durgam Cricket Academy and, despite their personal financial constraints, they provide free coaching to poverty-stricken aspiring women cricketers.

Like most of the other girls who venture into the capital from all over the country, Ayesha Akter arrived all the way from Shariatpur to the Durgam Cricket Academy to avail better training facilities and accomplish her ambition of representing Bangladesh.

A seemingly shy Ayesha felt nervous at first as it was her first interview with a journalist, but there were sparks of pride and delight in her eyes as she began to tell her story.

"I used to play with my older and younger brothers during the school



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

days since I was a child, and my coach suggested that I join training. I used to train in my district, but I heard that this [Durgam] Academy had superior facilities. When I told my parents that I wanted to go to Dhaka, they encouraged me to pursue my dreams.

"I consider myself fortunate that my parents were supportive. When I arrived here and saw so many other girls playing the game, it inspired me because I was the only girl in my district who practiced. I look up to [Nigar Sultana] Joty apu and hope to play for Bangladesh one day," Ayesha remarked.

PESKY INEQUALITY STILL AT LARGE

Ayesha is one of the very few lucky girls who received family support. Coach Aduri informed that, despite the rise of women's cricket in the country, the majority of parents are still reluctant to allow their daughters to pursue a career in cricket -- evident not only in rural areas, but also in the capital.

"Look, it's not that all the parents aren't supportive, but the number is much lower than we expected given the recent success of women's cricket in Bangladesh. Many of the girls I know play cricket against the will of their families," Aduri said.

"A certain girl came to Dhaka against her family's will, and her parents stopped communicating with her as a consequence. She has been on her own ever since. If that girl had received some support from her family, she would have been able to concentrate more on cricket."

"It is still tough for women to pursue a career in cricket. The parents would prefer that their daughters study and acquire a career. Their parents say, 'Why would she play a sport, being a girl? She should get married and eventually look after her children and husband.'

Aduri, one of Bangladesh's few female coaches, went on to relate her personal predicament since taking up coaching as a profession.

"No-one would choose to be a cricket coach in Bangladesh unless they are mad about cricket. Few coaches enter this profession, knowing there's no guarantee of success. I don't see any situation right now where the coaches in Bangladesh can be financially benefited; and especially being a woman, the chance ceases to exist," Aduri remarked.

WHEN REAL LIFE TRUMPS CINEMA

Despite all hurdles, inspiring stories of resilience continues to pop up; stories more dramatic than a cinema as girls carry on conjuring inner strength to keep their flame of aspirations alive.

While talking about the passionate students at his institution, coach Billal mentioned Mitu Khatun, who was absent from the training session. The reason for her absence could take a while to sink in: she was busy pulling a rickshaw.

"Mitu comes from a poor family. Hailing from Pabna, she arrived with a lot of hope because she wants to be a cricketer. Mitu lives alone in Dhaka, and because she has to pay her own

costs, she pulls a rickshaw every morning to make ends meet," Billal continued.

"In the afternoon, Mitu would show up at training and she goes through it almost religiously every day. She is a very strong girl with determination in her eyes. Despite all obstacles, Mitu attends training session with a smile and full of hope in her eyes," Bilal informed.

Many other girls, like Mitu, are going through everyday challenges with the hope that one day they would be aptly guided to blossom into stars like Joty, Marufa Akter, and company.

players were unaware that their division's selection trials were being held in Gopalganj.

Unfortunately, things remain somewhat similar at the national level, where bias and favouritism frequently deny individuals the opportunity to demonstrate their potential.

Aduri informed, "We know that cricketers who excel in the NCL, Premier League, and under-19 levels are chosen and have access to better practice facilities.

"Despite substantial performance, many players have been overlooked and are not even selected for training



MILES TO GO IN TURNING TIDE

Even if a girl overcomes the social and financial barriers to become a cricketer, there is a likelihood that not many of them will go on to realise their ambitions. This is due to a lack of clarity in the selection process prevalent in the country's women's cricket.

Last week, Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) did launch the Divisional Women's Combined School Cricket Competition, in which girls under the age of 16 from eight divisional teams competed.

However, the majority of the eight divisions did not even hold any school tournaments prior to being chosen for the combined school tournament. Interestingly, many Dhaka division

camps. It eventually demotivates the girls, who then opt to quit the game out of frustration. I don't know why this is happening, and those involved in the process can tell you better."

It appears the experience of the visit can be extrapolated to get a grasp of the overall state of affairs at the all-important places, where the platform for growth and prosperity are set in motion for the foreseeable future.

The Tigresses' recent success should not be taken for granted, especially by BCB. Rather, it presents the ideal scope to capitalise on the momentum, ensuring that women's cricket is here to stay and gets to flourish in tandem with the fast-improving global standards.