



#WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

# Celebrating the Women Who Redefined Bangladesh Sports

## INSPIRING TALES OF STRUGGLE, RESILIENCE, AND TRIUMPH

Over the years, Bangladesh's women have grabbed headlines in the world of sports. In 2018, the women's cricket team clinched the Asia Cup, while the women's football team brought home two consecutive SAFF championships (2022-2024). Throughout their journeys, they had to face myriad obstacles and struggles but despite those, they fought on out of sheer passion and the love for their games.

Star Lifestyle caught up with four such female sportspersons who have had their impacts on Bangladesh's upward journey in global sports.

"It wasn't easy," said Sabina Khatun, captain of the Bangladesh women's football team, when asked about this year's SAFF Championship victory. "Of course, it meant a lot. We feel great, all victories bring joy. To win twice in a row means a lot. But last year, we were able to play with a lot of freedom. This year, there were many challenges for us both on and off the field."

Despite not getting paid for two months by the then federation, the girls took to the Dasharath Rangasala Stadium in Kathmandu knowing they would not give up the title. They have not yet received their payments for the four matches they played in the championship.

Ritu Porna Chakma, who was given this year's Most Valuable Player award said, "Almost all the other teams that took part in

the tournament were able to play warm-up matches with each other. We didn't get that chance. Most of us girls felt neglected. I guess that's where a sense of stubbornness came from, which led us to victory."

Sabina chimed in, "Our group too was challenging, with Pakistan and India. In South Asia, India are always a threat to any opponent. We had 200 per cent pressure but we played with all we had and we proved ourselves."

The last big achievement on an international level by the Bangladesh women's cricket team, or Bangladesh cricket as a whole, was winning the 2018 Asia Cup. But since then, the team has been on a relatively downward slope.

Jahanara Alam, who has been representing the Bangladesh team since its inception in 2007, has come back to the squad after a year-long break for an ODI series against Ireland.

When it comes to holding on to success on an international level, she believes ups and downs are inevitable. "This is sports, you cannot expect the graph to keep going upwards."

"But when we play well, whether it's the men's team or women's team, it's a win for all of Bangladesh cricket. Maybe in the World Cups, we didn't win many matches, but that only pushes us further to do better next time."

"The international platform is always highly competitive. And still, we managed to bring home the Asia Cup in 2018. So, ups and downs will always be there. What matters is that we keep a positive mindset," Alam said.

Vice-captain of the women's team and the first Bangladeshi woman to ever become "ICC Player of the Month", Nahida Aktar believes teamwork is key in international matches.

Jahanara said, "We showed what we can do when we perform like a compact team in 2018. Each player made impactful contributions in their own way and we all had each other's backs. This is what worked for us."

**Bangladesh vs the World**  
Asked what factors need improvement when compared to other international women's teams, Sabina said, "The discipline and structure needed for an athlete is where we fall behind."

"If you compare us even with just Asian teams, we don't have even 10 per cent [of the discipline] they have. The lifestyle required to be at the top of our game is missing and that is something the authorities concerned need to ensure."

For an athlete to reach their fullest potential, there needs to be a proper diet, routine, practice facilities, and medical care.

"We don't have a guideline for such things. It's necessary to meet each player's individual and specific requirements to make sure they are at their best when on the field. We are all different physically, technically and tactically, and so we each have separate needs which need to be met."

Meanwhile, Jahanara thinks the lack of experience is what is holding her team back.

"We need more matches with teams that are currently dominating international cricket. The style of play of teams like Australia, England, South Africa, remains unknown to us as we don't get to play bilateral or home or away series with them. We need to learn to adjust to the environments and pitches of countries outside of South Asia."

Sabina also thinks more teams coming to Bangladesh will help them up their game.

"We need competitive matches at the Asian level. Sometimes, it's inevitable we will lose. But I think whether we concede 10 or even 20 goals, we will come off the field learning a lot."

**Authorities' responsibility**  
"I must mention, with regard to girls' football, not the boys', the impact that Kazi Salahuddin sir [former president of the Bangladesh Football Federation] had. There're very few countries in Asia who have a year-long camp for girls. He kept

60-70 of us together, ensured our training and preparation for several age-level games, which was very appreciable."

"We just got a new committee and president and it would be unfair to expect so much right now, especially as the change came after 15 [16] years. However, I hope the trends left behind by Salahuddin sir continue and are further advanced. I hope they [the new committee of the federation] work on our facilities and increase opportunities to play more matches. I am certain they have good plans for us."

Left-arm spinner Nahida believes the Bangladesh Cricket Board, who in the past have been heavily criticised for treatment of the women's team, has improved in many aspects and has been supportive.

"But only when we have proper viewership, will we be granted improved facilities. Our board and president too are new, so we need to give them time to give us the support we need. The better we play, the more support we get from the board. Simple as that."

### Men vs Women

As the women's teams have successfully been bringing accolades back home, the men's performances at the international level have been facing serious criticism.

The women, however, think it is unfair. Sabina says, "The boys don't deserve it. They have to face more flak because people say things like 'If the girls can do it, why can't you?'"

At an individual level, the captain believes all players must feel the responsibility of bringing achievements to the country.



"Sports is entertainment. Nobody wants to sit in front of the television for hours only to see us lose. We need to feel the responsibility of making our game worth their while."

Ritu Porna finds negative criticism can sometimes be very aggravating.

"When we play well, people make nice

comments and it works like motivation for us. But one bad game, and they say things that can be quite unbearable."

After drawing the first match against Pakistan in this year's SAFF championship, Ritu Porna received messages like "Give up football and become a TikTok star instead."

"I couldn't take it. It was very hurtful."



Comments like this won't help us. Whether the boy's team or the girl's team, we need your [the audience's] support and encouragement. Only that will help us get better with each match."

Our cricketers agree. Vice-captain Nahida said, "I don't like this comparison. Everyone has bad days and good days. Ultimately, we all are representing Bangladesh."

Jahanara said it is because of the men's team that the women's one even exists.

"How did women's cricket team even come about in this country? It was thanks to the men's team. I don't appreciate belittling them because it's because of them that we are getting the chance to play cricket. The ICC trophy won in 1997 by the men's team is the foundation on which the men's and women's cricket teams stand."

She also highlighted the differences between the sexes in terms of physicality. "We have to agree there is a difference in the physicality of men and women. As a matter of fact, the balls we bowl with are made slightly smaller because our hands are comparatively smaller. Our boundaries are also a little closer. But the difference is so minimal that I don't think there needs to be any comparison. We all play to make the people of the country happy."

"Everyone has the right to criticise and the audience will always be emotional, but there needs to be a limit. I can only request they take into consideration what the players might feel."

The triumphs of these women are not just victories for sports but for the spirit of Bangladesh itself. These trailblazers continue to inspire a nation, proving that with support and determination, the boundaries of achievement can be pushed further every day.

**By Naziba Basher**  
**Photo: Sheikh Mehedi Morshed/Collected**  
**In frame: Ritu Porna Chakma, Sabina Khatun, Jahanara Alam, Nahida Aktar**

