



# WOMEN'S CRICKET

## ready for its biggest stage

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Which is the bigger tournament in cricket, the men's ICC World Cup or the women's?

On most metrics, this seems like a ludicrous question. The men's tournament has more teams competing, with even more trying to qualify; it generates more buzz, attracts more eyeballs, gets better sponsorship deals, and hence is the bigger tournament on most metrics.

But not on all.

While judging the stature of a tournament, its longevity and the prize money involved are two vital markers, the first giving an idea of its legacy and the other showing what's at stake from a financial perspective.

As per these two metrics, the forthcoming ICC Women's World Cup 2025 surpasses all previous showpiece events of the game, be it in women's or men's cricket.

### LONGER LEGACY AND GREATER REWARDS

A bizarre fact that sounds false but is actually true is that the first ever World Cup in cricket was played by women, not men.

It took place in 1973 in England, two years

before the men's event in the same country. Rachael Heyhoe Flint, who captained England to victory in the inaugural Women's World Cup, and British businessman Jack Hayward are credited as the driving forces behind it.

Back then, even the men hardly made any money from cricket, let alone the women. The amateur days of the sport are long gone, but pay disparity on the basis of gender is still a reality. But the ICC has seemingly made it its mission to change that.

In September this year, the ICC announced a record-breaking USD 13.88 million prize pool for the 13th edition of the tournament in India -- a 297 percent increase from the USD 3.5 million pool at the 2022 event. The amount is 38.8 percent higher than the prize pool of the Men's ODI World Cup in 2023, making it the biggest cricketing event ever in terms of cash rewards.

This leap in prize money and its legacy shows the stature of the tournament. But the real intrigue lies in how the cricket itself unfolds among old powers and new challengers.

### LAW OF THE LAND

For the seventh straight time, eight teams are set to compete in the Women's World Cup.

The matches will be held in four venues in India and one in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

India, two time finalists, are one of the top contenders this time as the Harmanpreet Kaur-led side go into the tournament with an exciting unit and are in with a realistic chance of lifting their maiden trophy in front of their home crowd.

The chief obstacle in their path, though, are Alyssa Healy's Australia.

In a high-scoring three-match WODI series between the two sides in India this month, the visitors outgunned the hosts 2-1, even posting a mammoth 412 in the final game in Delhi.

Defending champions and seven-time winners Australia come into the tournament as favourites. England, who have lifted the trophy on four occasions, are under the leadership of new captain Nat Sciver-Brunt and remain a serious contender.

New Zealand, the only other side to have won it apart from Australia and

England -- back in 2000, will be led by the legendary all-rounder Sophie Devine, who is in her swansong, and after their triumph in the ICC Women's T20 World Cup last year, will be eyeing to complete the double.

With the men's team breaking the chokers' tag in the ICC World Test Championship, it's the South African women's team's turn to break new ground at the world stage. But it would take a big effort from the Laura Wolvaardt-led side, who have struggled for consistency.

Pakistan cricket board's stance of not sending their team to India due to security concerns has led to an unexpected advantage for Sri Lanka, who will play five matches at their home ground.

Led by experienced batter Chamari Athapaththu, the Lankans would hope to make it to the

knockout stages.

Pakistan, meanwhile, have a unique chance of taking the final away from Indian soil, just like the men's Indian team had done in the ICC Champions Trophy. But for that to happen, they would have to make it to the final first, which seems highly unlikely for Fatima Sana & Co.

This leaves Bangladesh, who, admittedly, are going into the tournament to make up the numbers as for Nigar Sultana and Co, winning a couple of games would make it a satisfactory tournament.

### WHAT TO EXPECT

As all eight team participants will face each other in the league phase, a few one-sided affairs could be on offer, and the gulf in quality between the sides could be exposed.

Still, history, increased prize money, more eyeballs and the chance of seeing the end of Aussie and English dominance will make this World Cup a must-see event.

# 'Felt I had to take the initiative for Bangladesh'

**Shathira Jakir Jessy is set to create history in the upcoming ICC Women's World Cup in India and Sri Lanka by becoming the first woman umpire from Bangladesh to officiate in a senior World Cup. The former national cricketer started seriously pursuing umpiring in 2022, and within three years through hardship, sacrifice and dedication, has reached the highest stage. Before departing for the World Cup, the 34-year-old talked to The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan about her journey as an umpire, her experiences and challenges in this profession. Here are the excerpts:**



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The Daily Star (DS): You are set to make your senior World Cup debut as an umpire. How does it feel?

Shathira Jakir Jessy (SJJ): First of all, I am still very new at this. I hadn't expected this opportunity. My previous tournaments--the Women's World Cup Qualifiers in Pakistan and the Women's Under-19 World Cup in Malaysia this year--went very well. Maybe that's why I was picked. This is a huge chance for me. Now comes the big challenge -- working alongside some of the world's best umpires. There are many teams that are new to me, whose matches I've never officiated before. Adjusting to these situations and aligning myself with them will be tough, but I'm preparing for it. Hopefully, good things will happen.

DS: You were once a cricketer, then did anchoring and commentary before taking up umpiring full-time. When did you realise umpiring was the career path for you?

SJJ: I could have continued with commentary. But when I saw female umpires from Pakistan, Qatar, and the UAE, I asked myself, "Why isn't anyone from our country doing this?" Since I had completed the umpiring course a long time ago, I thought, okay, it's time to start. With no one else stepping up, I felt I had to take the initiative for Bangladesh. From then on, I took it seriously. I studied hard and gave up everything else to focus on umpiring.

DS: What specific challenges did you face in making this transition?

SJJ: I started from zero, treating it as an investment without knowing what the future held. I began at the root level with the men's Third Division matches, which were extremely challenging. Honestly, umpiring was never my passion, nor did I ever follow it closely, so everything was new to me. There are so many aspects players don't fully understand until they step into umpiring. I had to learn and study a lot,

and physically I find it even harder than playing.

After the Women's Asia Cup in 2022 in Bangladesh, I set myself a goal: to do the next Women's Asia Cup. Once I achieved that, my next target was the World Cup. I worked hard for a year, and now I've been assigned both the U-19 and the senior World Cup.

DS: How much support have you received from the Bangladesh Cricket Board?

SJJ: Immense support. Whenever there was a match at any level that I wanted to officiate--whether it was in the district level, divisional level, or men's matches, I just informed the BCB. They always gave me preference and opportunities. Recently, they even assigned me to the men's Dhaka Premier League and for national team matches in Bangladesh. Even India hasn't dared to appoint a woman for men's national team matches, but Bangladesh already has. For that, I give

full credit to the BCB, Mithu [Iftekhar Rahman Mithu] bhai, Abhi [Abdullah Al Noman] bhai, and the umpires' department.

DS: You mentioned the 2022 Asia Cup. What exactly was your role there?

SJJ: I worked as a Liaison Officer (LO) with a team. Initially, I didn't want to go, but Abhi bhai and Towhid [Mahmood] bhai convinced me. Before that, I had only done an exhibition match and after that I thought umpiring wasn't for me. So I stopped. But in 2022, when all the female umpires arrived for the Asia Cup, they encouraged me to go -- even if only as an LO. They said: "Go, see them up close. If you feel inspired to umpire, great; if not, no pressure". I agreed, thinking at least I'd be close to the action. But after going there, seeing all the female umpires and officials, I felt both proud and upset. Proud to see women there, but upset that Bangladesh--a Test-playing nation--had no representation. That's

when I set my target to be part of the next Asia Cup.

DS: Umpiring requires quick and accurate decisions. How do you prepare yourself to meet those standards?

SJJ: You have to study constantly. If you don't read and update yourself, you won't know the laws and conditions, which change every year. Something you've memorised for years can suddenly change, and you might get confused. But as an umpire, you cannot make mistakes. Players expect us to know everything. That's why the preparation--both physical and mental--is so demanding.

DS: How many matches will you officiate at this World Cup?

SJJ: A total of nine matches: five as an on-field umpire, two as the TV umpire, and two as the reserve umpire. I think it's a very good assignment. I've received big matches and overall a very good schedule.