

Afghan Women Fight for a Sporting Chance

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Defying conservative traditions, female enthusiasts continue to pursue their goals.

Jamila has been a regular visitor to the women-only Bibi Sabri sports club in Pul-e Khumri city over the past six months.

The 45-year-old said that exercise was the only thing that could relieve a back condition so severe she had travelled abroad several times over the last three years to seek treatment.

"Sports has given my health back," she said. "It gave me my life back. Although sometimes I get harassed by nasty, ignorant people, I ignore them and continue to pursue my goals."

Women's participation in the Afghan sports scene has grown massively since the fall of the Taleban in 2001. As well as amateur enthusiasts like Jamila, Afghanistan's female athletes have brought home numerous medals from regional and international tournaments in recent years.

However, adequate facilities only exist in a few provincial capitals and conservative traditions deem exercise to be damaging to women's moral and physical health.

Jamila said that both Baghlan officials and the Afghan Olympic committee - which promotes sports around the country - had to be proactive in improving both safety and access for women who wanted to participate.

"A large number of women are interested in sports but can't pursue it because of a lack of facilities," she said.

Baghlan is relatively well-resourced, according to Mohammad Osman Shirzai, deputy director of the province's Olympic committee. He said that there were 30 federations of men's and women's sports registered with the provincial government.

"We have very good female athletes at the Olympic committee," he continued. "They take part in running, volleyball and basketball competitions with teams from other provinces, and done well."

Female runners in Pul-e Khumri can use private sports grounds such as Bagh-e Qahwa Khana, where they are shielded from the public eye.

Then there is the Bibi Sabri Club, which launched a year ago under the auspices of the local department of women's affairs and with equipment donated by the Aga Khan Foundation. It currently has 40 women on its books, each paying ten dollars a month in fees.

Shirzai said that the popularity of sports among local women was steadily increasing, but agreed that conservative traditions were a big problem.

"Although there are unpleasant customs and cultural beliefs that hinder women's sports more than anything else, women must fight this and prepare the ground for themselves," he continued.

Lida Rahnawardis is cultural director at the department of women's affairs and has been working on an unofficial advisory basis with the Aga Khan Foundation.

She said that fear of attack was deterring many women from pursuing sports.

"Families are worried about insecurity," she continued. "For this reason, they do not allow their female relatives to take exercise."

Zabihullah Shuja, head of press at the Baghlan police headquarters, dismissed such concerns.

"We have no security problems inside Pul-e Khumri city," he said. "The department of women's affairs, the attorneys office, the provincial council and the governor's office are located near Bagh-e Bibi Sabri. Security is guaranteed in these areas and women should not worry about security there. They should pursue their sports activities with confidence."

Shuja added that the security forces were also planning to set up checkpoints around women's sports facilities to provide an extra layer of security.

As for prejudices around health risks for women who exercise, medical experts said that they were just old wives' tales.

"Sports are not harmful for women at all," said Marzia Noori, a Baghlan obstetrician. "Quite the reverse; they are beneficial. They keep women healthy. Even weightlifting is not harmful, although pregnant women need their own special exercises."

Noori said that families should certainly allow female members to exercise for the sake of their health. She recommended that women work out for an hour a day at home if they were unable to leave their houses.

For some, the media has played an important role in encouraging women to take part in sport.

Exercising at Bagh-e Bibi Sabri, 25-year-old Habiba Najibi said, "When I saw the achievements of [Afghan] sportswomen on television I felt proud, because there's a negative attitude prevalent in our society that women are inferior. But women these days are clearly able to take part in all fields."

Najibi works out for an hour each day. "I told myself that if I can't achieve the same as our sports heroines, then I can at least exercise to maintain my health," she continued, adding, "As well as its physical advantages, sports also strengthen the human mind and makes people more patient."

Public perceptions appear to be changing.

"Exercise is a woman's right," said Pul-e Khumri resident Ahmad Rishad Sakhi. "Nobody has the right to prevent their activity. Those who oppose it are actually ignorant of the Islamic and civil rights of women."

He cautioned, however, that women should take care to maintain standards of modesty, adding,

"Since we are a male-dominated society, women should take into account complaints some have about their participation in sports [and avoid them] so as to avoid giving naysayers an excuse to object."

But for some Pul-e Khumri residents, such as 60-year-old carpet seller Aqa Gul, there is no way that women taking exercise can ever be acceptable.

"I do not agree with women's sports at all," he said. "Firstly, there is no security. Secondly, women risk hundreds of different kinds of harassment by vulgar individuals when they venture out of doors. Thirdly, this is all a way in which infidels try to distract people from their path and impose Western culture on Muslims. It would be better for women to pay attention to educating their children, looking after their household and praying instead of sports."

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