

Girls Get a Kick Out of Sports

Author: [Hazifullah Gardesh](#)

Along with other new-found freedoms, young women are getting a chance to participate in sports such as football.

No longer satisfied to sit on the sidelines, young female athletes have traded in their burqas for sports jerseys, laced up their cleats and charged onto the football pitch.

They are doing what young Afghan women could only have dreamed of just three years ago, and sometimes are still prevented from doing.

“I believe that women should play all sports,” said Maliha Ghani Baraki, a coach at the Zarghona High School in the centre of Kabul. “I wanted the people to know women can do whatever men do.”

Her team has 12 players, all in their teens. They play on a small field at the school, shielded from public view behind a wall, and wear uniforms and shoes provided by the Afghan Olympic Committee. To play, they must be appropriately covered, which means long-sleeved shirts, sweatpants and scarves. Each player must have written permission from her family.

So far, the response to the team has been positive. “We have not faced any obstacles yet,” Baraki said. Her biggest challenge has been to find a suitable pitch on which to play.

Baraki said her dream would be to see Afghan women compete on the international level.

It's a dream shared by Fareda, a 17-year-old player who said she had “wanted to join a football team before, but there wasn't any”. She said she watches football on television and especially admires the Brazilian player, Renaldo, and the French-Algerian player, Zinuddin Zidan.

Hania, 15, said she became interested in football after watching it on television. The ninth grader said her favourite teams are from Brazil and Argentina.

There are other women's football teams in Afghanistan as well.

The Maiwand girl's football team was formed as part of the private Hamza-e-sayadushohaddah sports club, located west of Kabul. The team has 26 female players, aged 14 to 21. They practice indoors in a hall 11 metres long, 8 m wide and just 2.5 m high.

Club director Musa Jafari formed the club when he noticed a growing interest among women in football. Some 56 girls now participate in various sports at the club, he said.

Although the club charges its male members a monthly fee of 80 afghanis, Jafari does not charge girls because he wants to promote their participation in sports.

“Within two months I discovered that girls [were] talented, and I hope that we are prepared for football matches inside and outside the country,” Jafari said.

Like Baraki, Jafari said the biggest problem is finding a suitable place for games. He said he is currently seeking financial assistance to build an indoor gymnasium where the girls can play.

Meena, 14, who along with her family returned to Afghanistan from Iran, said she was inspired to play football after watching games on television. She said she approached Jafari about forming a team and he agreed.

While Meena said her family encourages her to play sports, she admitted that boys sometimes harass her and her teammates. “Some boys are annoying us,” she complained. “Some shout, ‘athlete.’”

Meena’s teammate Zuhra, 14, also returned to Afghanistan from Iran after the collapse of the Taliban. For her, “Afghanistan [didn't exist] before. Afghanistan was established after the collapse of Taliban. It is total freedom now,” she said.

The female footballers even have the support of some of their male counterparts. Ahmad Khesro, 21, a member of Kabul’s professional Pamer team, said, “We are happy and wish that our women can compete in international levels”. But he acknowledged that female athletes still face social obstacles. “Our society is backward, so women [must] play [indoors].”

Sayad Zia Muzafri, director of the Afghan football federation, said his organization supports women’s sports. “We plan to improve women’s sports,” he said, adding that his organisation would like to provide better playing facilities, good trainers, coaches and equipment.

But before that can happen, Muzafri said that the federation and other organisations need to change public opinion so that female athletes are not only accepted, but supported.

Hazifullah Gardesh is an IWPR trainer and editor. Mohammed Jawad is an independent journalist.

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