

Women-Only Gym Sparks Controversy

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Female sports, even when conducted away from public view, remains a sensitive issue.

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The first government-sponsored gymnasium for Afghan women may not have spectacular premises, but its impact has already been felt well beyond the confines of its walls.

With a vast central hall built to hold more than 200 people, the Kabul centre is the first purpose-built women's gym in the country. In the short time since it was inaugurated by women's affairs minister Massouda Jalal in September, it has seen a lot of use – but also sparked controversy.

The building is secluded in the women-only Bagh-e-Zanana - Women's Garden - in southwest Kabul. But unlike the private fitness club which opened nearly a year ago, concealed inside a beauty parlour with expensive membership fees, there is no attempt to hide the existence of this gym.

The young girls and women who are already flocking here are not afraid to speak out.

Sixteen-year-old Zahira, an eighth-grade pupil at the city's Manuchehri school, has been practising karate at the gym for ten days.

"I am very glad that the way has been paved for girls to do exercise. I am already feeling much healthier since I joined the gym," she told IWPR.

Dressed modestly all in black, Zahira said she used to exercise, but had problems finding somewhere to do it before her family persuaded her to join the gym.

Her only complaint was the lack of equipment, "We are able to exercise regularly, but the only problem we face here is lack of sports kit and equipment."

The gym is sparsely furnished. On a floor marked out with white lines for athletics, there are 10 mattresses for exercising and for practising falls, and two basketball nets. Off the main exercise area is a changing room and two shower rooms.

Despite the lack of equipment, 19-year-old Safia said the gym was a positive step towards improving the lives of Afghan girls and women, who now had somewhere to go out of the house.

Speaking as she practised gymnastics, Safia, a student in the tenth grade at the Rabia high school, was dressed modestly in black trousers and a long white top.

Concerns about immodest dress, seen as likely to lead young girls into trouble, are part of the controversy provoked by the gym.

One woman who voiced alarm at the prospect was Zarghona, 47, waiting to go home at the Khair Khana bus station.

With glimpses of dark hair streaked with grey beneath her headscarf, she told IWPR in harsh terms, "I'm not happy with this gym. These places soon change into centres of immorality. Working at home and bringing up children is a good sport for Afghan women."

Even before the gym existed, Marina, 18, an 11th grade student at the Sheerino high school, has been exercising since last year, taking advantage of the fact that the Women's Garden is barred to men.

"But we used to face a lot of problems before the gymnasium was built. Every day, it was either dust being blown into our faces, or else people were watching us exercising from the roofs of their homes. We weren't free," she said. "Now we are saved from both dust and these people by the shelter of the gym."

Nooria Banwal, head of the economic development department at the women's affairs ministry, said the gym was a major development for Afghan women's sports.

"We built this gym because there wasn't one for women anywhere in Afghanistan, and we wanted young girls to be able to exercise freely," she said.

The gym was financed by the non-government group Action Development Solidarity International, but as it was in Bagh-e-Zanana, which is owned by the authorities, it came under the ministry's remit, said Banwal.

She said karate and gymnastic lessons were given for free on Mondays and Wednesdays by female instructors from the French organisation Athletes Without Frontiers. All girls and women are welcome to exercise in the gym without charge.

"We are determined to bring some sports equipments to the gym in the near future for our sisters to use," said Banwal.

The chief advisor for Afghanistan's Olympic committee, Din Mohammad Safi, described the gym as an effective step towards the development of women's sports.

People not involved in sport had varying opinions about the gym.

Farida, a health worker for the Save the Children Clinic who was visiting the Women's Garden, told IWPR, "I think it is a very effective step forward. Sport is good for everyone, particularly for women who are overweight. This gym is very effective."

The preacher at the Mustafa Mosque, Maulawi Abdul Rahman, cautiously supported the idea of sport and education. They were useful and essential for all Muslims, provided the modesty issue was addressed. Women used to practise sport in the era of the Prophet Muhammad, he pointed out.

But he cautioned, "I think that just as there's been an increase in vice in all other aspects of people's lives, this gym may also have been built for other, immoral purposes."

Momen Halimi, a member of the Islamic department at the Afghan Academy of Sciences, said, “Women are allowed to do sport under Islamic conditions. They are also permitted to practise sport in order to strengthen the Muslims’ ranks. But it should be conducted in places where they are not seen by men.”

Salima Ghafari is an IWPR staff reporter in Kabul.

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