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Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities**

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# **Afghan Women in Sports: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities**

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After the collapse of the Taliban regime, in the new framework of governance in Afghanistan, women were provided opportunities to express themselves and participate in various sectors such as media, politics, sports, social activism etc. While Afghan women have made several strides in a wide range of sectors, they have not yet made significant achievements in professional athletics. Several challenges such as the ongoing insurgency, conservative traditions and cultural practices etc. have prevented women from making substantial progress in this sector.

This essay attempts to explore why there are only a handful of female athletes in Afghanistan despite 18 years of investment in women's empowerment. To do so, the essay explores the importance of sport for empowering women; Afghan women's sporting achievements in the past 18 years; the challenges they have faced; and support available (from government or international sources) for Afghan women's sporting activities. As part of the study, this essay relies on existing literature as well as key informant interviews with young Afghan female athletes.

## **The Relevance of Sports for Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan**

In 1978, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) described sport and physical education as a 'fundamental right

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for all.<sup>2</sup> The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes sport as an important enabler of sustainable development, especially its growing and innovative contribution to the empowerment of women and young people, individuals and communities, as well as health, education and social inclusion objectives.<sup>3</sup> A 2013 article published by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) articulated how sport is about participation, and about inclusion and citizenship, and contextualises how it stands for human values such as respect for the opponent, acceptance of binding rules, and teamwork and fairness, all of which are principles contained in the UN Charter.<sup>4</sup>

At a February 2016 event, titled "The Value of Hosting Mega Sport Events as a Social, Economic and Environmental Sustainable Development Tool," former UN Assistant Secretary-General and UN Women Deputy Executive Director, Lakshmi Puri, stated that "every time women clear a hurdle or kick a ball, demonstrating not only physical strength, but also leadership and strategic thinking, they take a step towards gender equality."<sup>5</sup> This characterization is relevant given how Afghan women's sports related choices are shaped by the prevailing traditions in the community. Afghan women mostly prefer sports that are practiced indoors rather than outdoors because they feel safer inside than outside.<sup>6</sup> While the professional sporting sector in Afghanistan is still dominated by men in terms of rate of participation, for those girls who participate, athletics has become a safe public space to grow and come into their own.<sup>7</sup> In 2004, female athletes Friba Razayee and Robina Muqim Yaar represented Afghanistan at the Summer Olympics in Athens for the first time in the country's history.<sup>8</sup> Farzana Mohammadi, a member of the National Wheelchair Basketball team, stated that more women participate

2. "Mainstreaming of Sport as a Tool for Girls' and Women's Empowerment." Olympic organization, November 15, 2017. <https://www.olympic.org/news/mainstreaming-of-sport-as-a-tool-for-girls-and-women-s-empowerment>

3. Ibid

4. "Afghan Women Break New Ground Through Sport." UNAMA, June 02, 2013. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghan-women-break-new-ground-through-sport>

5. "Sport has huge potential to empower women and girls." UN Women, February 16, 2016. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/2/lakshmi-puri-speech-at-value-of-hosting-mega-sport-event>

6. Rezaie, Zeinab, Afghan women athlete. Interview by author on January 20, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

7. Middle East Institute. "The Evolving Role of Afghan Female Athletes". May 2010. Accessed on April 6 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/evolving-role-afghan-female-athletes>

8. Ibid

in sporting activities and that the number is increasing.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the Afghan society too is slowly becoming more flexible about women's participation in sport, since more people are getting educated and gradually becoming more open minded.

There are greater numbers of Afghan sportswomen today than in the past. Afghanistan's women's national football team was formed in 2007 and in 2012, the team won its first official international match by defeating Qatar.<sup>10</sup> International organizations too have stepped in to support women and sport in Afghanistan. Farzana and her teammates were supported by an international NGO to travel abroad to compete with East Asian countries in wheelchair basketball tournaments. Zeinab Rezaie, a professional triathlete, is the first Afghan to have ever competed in the Ironman 70.3 Triathlon, which took place in Dubai in February 2020. She completed a 1.2 mile (1.9 km) swim, 56 mile (90 km) bike, and 13.1 mile (21.1 km) run.<sup>11</sup> Being able to compete on an international level is also a way of becoming empowered via sport and is a step towards changing people's mindset about women's ability to perform in different sports as men.

More achievements have been recorded by women once they were given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. In 2011, Afghan female powerlifters won three gold and two bronze medals at the 2011 Asian Winter Games in Kazakhstan. In 2012, a team of 18 Afghan powerlifting athletes, including two women, participated in the first Asian Classic Powerlifting Championships in India. The two female athletes, Freshta Hassani and Sadia Ayoubi, won eight gold medals (four each).<sup>12</sup> As of 2013, female Afghan athletes had won around 100 medals at regional and international tournaments,<sup>13</sup> and have continued making greater achievements in the subsequent years. For instance, in 2015, team Asma'i (Nelofar and Zainab), the first all-female ultramarathon team

9. Mohammadi, Farzana, Member of the Afghan women's wheelchair basketball national team.. Interview by author on March 13, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

10. "Afghan Sports History." Afghanistan Online, July 27, 2020. <https://www.afghan-web.com/sports/afghan-sports-history/>

11. "Breaking Records and Taking Names." She Can Tri, March 03, 2020. [https://shecantri.org/ironman-703-dubai-recap?fbclid=IwAR0gy\\_ktzFECCOiciY-DVjH9B6bdYY9XNb\\_7AmvZXTg\\_gGKn94-PjplyJWc](https://shecantri.org/ironman-703-dubai-recap?fbclid=IwAR0gy_ktzFECCOiciY-DVjH9B6bdYY9XNb_7AmvZXTg_gGKn94-PjplyJWc)

12. "Afghanistan Witnesses a Surge in Female Athletes Signing up for Powerlifting." UNAMA, February 18, 2013. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghanistan-witnesses-surge-female-athletes-signing-powerlifting>

13. "Afghan Women Break New Ground Through Sport." UNAMA, June 02, 2013. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghan-women-break-new-ground-through-sport>

from Afghanistan, completed The Gobi March 2015, one of the toughest endurance competitions in the world.<sup>14</sup> In 2018, Hanifa Yousoufi became the first Afghan woman to scale the Noshaq summit, the highest point in Afghanistan; and in the same year, Samira Asghari became the first Afghan to join the International Olympic Committee as an elected member.<sup>15</sup>

### **Key Challenges Faced by Sportswomen**

Afghan sportswomen face several challenges, namely lack of equipment and professional female trainers, objections from their families, cultural norms, threats and violence, harassment and corruption in sport facilitating organizations, and a lack of interest among women themselves. The following sections discuss these challenges and how these factors play out.

**Infrastructure:** The Afghan government has not been proactive in terms of providing the necessary equipment and sporting infrastructure for women in the country. Most existing sporting platforms are made available by individual investors and businesspersons, or women themselves own their own clubs to train others. To illustrate, when Zeinab was training for the Dubai Triathlon, there were no swimming instructors. She had to self-learn most of the swimming techniques relying on YouTube videos. Furthermore, since Afghanistan has very few swimming facilities, Zeinab and her teammates had to travel abroad to receive training, relying on the sponsorship offered by an NGO called She Can Tri.

**Cultural Norms:** In Afghanistan, traditionally, public spaces are dominated by men, with women 'tolerated' only when they are as invisible as possible. Even private spaces like homes witness a degree of negotiation between men and women on decisions made within homes.<sup>16</sup> Cultural and traditional outlooks and practices in Afghanistan regarding gender roles, use of public spaces etc. heavily shape women's access and involvement in sport.<sup>17</sup> For example, Zeinab highlighted how women find it difficult to run or cycle

14. "A Chronological History of Sports in Afghanistan". Afghanistan Online, July 27, 2020. <https://www.afghan-web.com/sports/afghan-sports-history/>

15. Ibid

16. Ayub, Awista. "The Evolving Role of Afghan Female Athletes." Middle East Institute, May 02, 2010. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/evolving-role-afghan-female-athletes>

17. Ultra Runner Girl. "Exploring women in sports in Afghanistan." Ultra Runner Girl, December 12, 2012. <https://ultrarunnergirl.com/2012/12/12/exploring-women-in-sports-in-afghanistan/>

in public areas due to cultural sensitivities. “Most of the conservative men would like women to only look after children, sit at home and do the household chores. They think that a woman’s physique is not made for sport,”<sup>18</sup> she stated in an interview. In a video posted on social media in 2019, a woman explains that they cannot indulge in sports or exercise without wearing burqas because men from the neighbouring houses stare at them.<sup>19</sup> In this video, women can be seen doing aerobics while wearing burqas in a park in Maimana city.

**Harassment and Corruption:** Corruption and sexual harassment in the country, especially in government departments dealing with women’s sport has also created distrust among people towards the government. The sexual harassment scandal at the heart of the Afghanistan National Olympic Federation is one such case. Khalida Popal, Shabnam Mobarez and Mina Ahmadi were the first to expose the widespread sexual harassment and abuse in the Federation which also forced Popal, a former head of the women’s football department at the Afghanistan Football Federation, to ultimately flee the country in 2016 and seek asylum in Denmark.<sup>20</sup>

**Women’s Mindsets:** Men are not the only section of society preventing women from participating in sports. Women too can be a barrier to other women. Farzana Mohammadi stated that “besides men suppressing women, there are women against women too. In our team, I have witnessed girls saying that their mothers ask them why they practice sport while they suffer disability, and tell them to just sit at home and do nothing.”<sup>21</sup> To overcome these challenges, Zeinab emphasized that “we need to fight for our rights and gender equality in a way that we do not face more limitations and barriers. Gradually, and considering the religious and cultural norms, we should act according to our family values and practice sport in a way that convinces our family and the society.”<sup>22</sup>

18. “Exploring women in sports in Afghanistan.” Ultra Runner Girl, December 12, 2012. <https://ultrarunnergirl.com/2012/12/12/exploring-women-in-sports-in-afghanistan/>

19. Sorush, Rohullah. “Afghan Sportswomen: Courage, hurdles and harassment.” Afghanistan Analysts Network November 25, 2019. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/afghan-sportswomen-courage-hurdles-and-harassment/>

20. Wrack, Suzanne. “FIFA Examining Claims of Sexual and Physical Abuse on Afghanistan Women’s Team.” The Guardian, November 30, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/nov/30/fifa-examining-claims-sexual-physical-abuse-afghanistan-womens-team>

21. Mohammadi, Farzana, Member of the Afghan women’s wheelchair basketball national team. Interview by author on March 13, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

22. Rezaie, Zeinab, Afghan woman athlete. Interview by author on January 20, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

**Sporting Gear:** Women's sport relevant clothing is another factor that poses a challenge because in Afghanistan, women are expected to cover themselves in a manner that is acceptable to the society and does not violate Islamic rules. For instance, most people in Afghanistan do not find swimming costumes acceptable because the outfit's fit highlights the wearer's physique. Therefore, swimming is not yet viewed as an acceptable sport for women since it has to be performed in front of an audience and/or covered by the media.

### **Government Initiatives**

After the fall of the Taliban, with the support of donor organizations, the Afghan government built new playgrounds for school girls.<sup>23</sup> In 2008, the government of Afghanistan adopted the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) to empower women and achieve gender equality. Published in 2007 and enforced until 2017, this NAP was the government's main vehicle for implementing policies and commitments to advocate the status of women, and included recommendations regarding budgetary allocations for gender related work in various agencies' annual budgets. Section III of this NAP states that "the fundamental right of Afghan women, as for all human beings, is life with dignity," and lists 10 specific rights, which includes "the right to participate in cultural activities including theatre, music and sports."<sup>24</sup> However, Farzana Mohammadi pointed out the inadequacies in government support for female athletes and argued that there has not been much support in practice.<sup>25</sup> Zeinab echoed the same view and stated that the government has not been very cooperative in promoting women in sport. Both Zeinab and Farzana are part of sports programs funded by international organizations such as 'Free to Run' and 'She Can Tri'.

The numbers of active female sportspersons are considerably lesser than those of males. Afghanistan's General Directorate of Physical Education

23. Nawrozi, Marzia. "Afghan Women are Paving the Way for Future Athletes." Free Women Writers, August 16, 2016. <https://www.freewomenwriters.org/2016/08/16/kimia-yusufi-afghan-women-sports/>

24. "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan." Government of Afghanistan, 2007. <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg149120.pdf>

25. Mohammadi, Farzana, Member of the Afghan women's wheelchair basketball national team. Interview by author on March 13, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan..

and Sports recorded 752 women among the 3,662 national team members in 52 Olympic and non-Olympic sports federations (around 21%).<sup>26</sup> Only two sports federations are led by women: badminton and table tennis. Robina Jalali, a sprinter (now also a parliamentarian), is the second deputy of Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee for Women's Affairs.<sup>27</sup> Overall, there is still a long way to be paved to get a satisfactory level of women sport practitioners in Afghanistan.

### **International Organizations' Support For Afghan Women In Sport**

Several international organizations are active in Afghanistan focusing on helping Afghan women progress in sport. Zeinab, who is currently learning professional swimming, is one of the women who have been empowered by She Can Tri, a foreign NGO. She Can Tri has enabled Zeinab to practice swimming, cycling and running, and to participate in international competitions. She Can Tri and Free to Run are among the international NGOs that enable Afghan sportswomen with financial support, equipment, and access to training essential for competing at the international level. ASCEND and Shirzanan are some other international organizations operating in Afghanistan with an aim to support female sportspersons. ASCEND aims to empower women through mountaineering<sup>28</sup> and Shirzanan aims to empower Muslim women in sports by amplifying their work in global media.<sup>29</sup> Overall, support from international NGOs has enabled Afghan women to participate in international competitions. However, such support alone is insufficient to transform social and institutional obstacles to engender a favourable environment for women in sport in the country.

### **Conclusion**

At present, several women and young girls practice different types of sport in Afghanistan. Many own their own clubs and gymnasiums as

26. Soroush, Rohullah. "Afghan Sportswomen: Courage, hurdles and harassment." Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 25, 2019. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-sportswomen-courage-hurdles-and-harassment/>

27. Ibid

28. ASCEND Website. <https://www.ascendathletics.org/about-us>

29. "Player Profile|Hajar Abulfazl, Afghanistan". Equal playing Field, April 25, 2017. <http://equalplayingfield.com/blog/2017/4/25/player-profile-hajar-abulfazl-afghanistan>



well.<sup>30</sup> However, international NGOs are the ones currently plugging the gaps to enable talented Afghan women to partake professionally in sport. Sustainable support from the government is essential for Afghan women to not only be able to compete on the domestic and international levels but also to transform prevailing stereotypes about women's participation in sport.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- The Afghan government must create more sporting programs and hire more women and girls for key positions at sports organizations.
- The Afghan government should make sport mandatory for girls in school in order to empower them from the early stages of their lives.
- The government should allocate a reasonable portion of the aid funds it receives, for women's sporting activities and programs.
- Afghan women's sporting achievements should be highlighted via mass media until individuals even in the remotest parts of the country get to know about it. This way, women's abilities, efforts and achievements will have a better chance of appreciation, and in turn, people's mindsets about women will gradually change, especially in terms of their participation in sport.
- International organizations and NGOs must conduct more sporting activities and programs for women in the capital cities of various provinces.
- Investments should be made for sports related infrastructure for women in rural areas as well. Both the Afghan government and international organizations should pay more attention to women's sport in all other provinces of Afghanistan as well, instead of concentrating a bulk of their efforts on Kabul and other major cities.
- Regular capacity building programs must be carried out to attract more women to partake in sports.
- Women in positions of authority, be it in government or in the private sector, should pay serious attention to women's empowerment through sports.

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30. Rezaie, Zeinab, Afghan women athlete. Interview by author on January 20, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.