



ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN PAKISTANI SPORTS: LACK OF A POLICY FRAMEWORK?

Sara Illahi Panhwer

We live in a confused world. A product of rich histories, cultures, famines, wars, pandemics, diseases, scientific and technological breakthroughs, it is insane to think that this home to eight billion people hasn't been able to reach a consensus on something as central as allowing a woman to engage in sporting activities. Some might not find this unpalatable because it engenders debate and dialogue but I would simply call this folly. Maria Toorpakai Wazir, a brilliant squash player who has represented Pakistan internationally, had to disguise herself as a boy for almost two decades simply to be able to play squash. To think of the sort of hostility and opposition she must have received from her community that she had to resort to that, and the sheer passion to push on regardless, is nothing short of breathtaking.

As an observer and perpetual learner, I find this amusing because this is pretty much how things have always been in Pakistan. For comprehensive policy on topic like sports to emerge, you need people to spearhead it – otherwise, it remains limited to elite circles who are more than content to simply enjoy the privilege without having to push for broader access. The process of policymaking is difficult, after all: and requires time, patience, political activism, the navigating power brokers, and more.

In our part of the world, policies do not change if people can't adapt to them. The people, in other words, must be open to having their 'traditional' modes of being challenged. In Pakistan, there seems to be little incentive for stakeholders in the policymaking arena to do their jobs effectively. This is particularly the case when it comes to pushing policy to promote female sports in the country. A learned policymaker

sees flaws in the formulation and implementation of such a policy (i.e. not letting women out of their homes to play), a politician may not worry because they never finished college, while a journalist/motivational speaker might add sentiment and emotion to it and end up trivializing it. It's rare for the struggles of the person in question to be discussed: in this scenario, the women of Pakistan with an undying love for sports.

It is important to ask ourselves: how long we are going to keep romanticizing women defying the odds and breaking the shackles of patriarchy? While it is important to recognize the contribution of women in sports, every sports-related story of a Pakistani woman has the same old narrative. Why should a woman playing a sport be odd? There used to be a time when it was considered odd for women to get education. Even the most renowned of institutions refused to allow women access. The most privileged of these women were home-schooled while the others missed out on education entirely.

The change we see today, where the stations of Mumbai have women jostling for seats in an 8:30 am local and rickshaws steer through the densely populated streets of Karachi for the female passenger to arrive at work on time, definitely did not happen overnight. Education was prioritized. The social mediatization of the plight of women and their struggle for fair and equal wages, benefits and security led to initiatives like the World Bank's Securing Human Investments to Foster Transformation (SHIFT) program to improve the conditions of home-based workers and women working in the private sector of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Not only that, the push from media and activists alike also led to big companies like Engro and Habib Bank introducing policies allowing women to take sabbaticals and resume working after long breaks.

When things are prioritized, results are seen. Take India's Khelo India Youth Games, for example. The annual national level multidisciplinary grassroot games in India are government funded. Khelo India has been marketed brilliantly and the results? Women indulged in almost every sport: tennis, badminton, gymnastics, shooting, archery, track and field, to name a few.

According to the World Economic Forum, an increasing number of women are participating in the Olympic Games every passing year. In 1996, the ratio of women in the Olympics was only 34% - a figure that rose to 44% in 2012. In 2021, almost 49% of the participants were women. This is promising, but a bit like saying extreme poverty has declined globally. Things look quite different and a lot bleaker, frankly, when a regional - rather than global - perspective is adopted.

Such is the case with Pakistan. The last revised sports policy of Pakistan came in 2005. The former government was to announce a national sports policy, but it was never released given the chaotic political scenario of the country. It has been almost two decades since. The education curriculum on sports has, to be sure, been developed: but a holistic policy that addresses the discrepancies at hand, fills the gaps, presents a grassroot level framework for execution, and effectively publicizes sports in general and for women in

particular, is the need of the hour.

The objection may be raised that women are still deprived of more basic rights - a large chunk of them are either uneducated or facing issues like lack of mobility, poor access to healthcare, financial dependencies on spouses or other family members, etc. Some might claim these ought to be addressed first. This may or may not be true. A whole host of ministries, not-for-profit and corporate organizations exist can join hands to increase women's mobility, provide better healthcare, and offer livelihood trainings to improve employment prospects. There is no reason for the two, therefore, to be mutually exclusive. Various countries in Africa, for instance, perform superbly in a variety of highly competitive sporting events around the world on a regular basis despite the fact that they are poor in terms of social development indicators.

The lack of women's presence in Pakistani mainstream sports is a policy issue: and must be addressed accordingly.

The author is a final year undergraduate student at Habib University, Karachi.

¹Fact check: How many people died for the Qatar World Cup? <https://www.w.d.w.com/en/fact-check-how-many-people-have-died-for-the-qatar-world-cup/a-63763713>

²Burney, S. (2012). CHAPTER ONE: Orientalism: The Making of the Other. Counterpoints, 417, 23-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981698>