

Slow advancement

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THE performance of the Pakistani women's team in the World T20 tournament has generated much excitement and inspired many a tweet and Facebook update about Pakistani women taking over the world. This seems less hyperbolic when you consider the recent string of Pakistani women's achievements, ranging from the Nobel Peace Prize to Oscars, advances in politics, science, and now sport. Indeed, the ridiculous backlash against the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act can be seen as reaction to the gradual yet evident empowerment of Pakistani women.

What we have yet to see is a firm commitment by the government to invest in women's sport. One hopes this is forthcoming and reflected in next year's budgets because now is the perfect time to promote female participation in sports as a fillip to facilitating female participation in society.

Globally, there is a push to involve a greater number of girls in sports from an early age. Sports help girls boost their self-esteem, gain confidence and develop team-building and other collaborative skills that support future integration into educational institutions and workplaces. In an image-obsessed environment, sports offer a healthy way to stay fit (state support for women's sport is largely driven by the desire to take pre-emptive measures to reduce the burden on public healthcare systems).

Tokenism defines our approach to women in sports.

These rationale apply to Pakistani women, and doubly so. The growing profile of certain Pakistani women on the world stage can obscure the fact that most of our women remain in a dismal state: the United Nation's Gender Inequality Index puts Pakistan at 147 in a list of 188 countries because of its poor record on women's health, education, political empowerment and economic status.

Pakistan also remains a deeply patriarchal society as evidenced by a 2014 Aurat Foundation report that found that on a daily basis six women are murdered, six kidnapped, four raped and three commit suicide (and these statistics don't account for domestic violence, acid attacks and other forms of violence against women).

The growing participation of girls and women in sports, and the confidence and strength that inculcates, can start to challenge some of this patriarchal thinking. Women's sports can help reconfigure the perception of women as weak or excluded from certain avenues or activities.

Young boys who grow up watching the girls and women in their lives playing cricket, hockey and other so-called ‘boys’ sports’ will not be surprised by the concept of gender equality when they grow up. Sports will also help young men and women to engage with each other in open, healthy ways that are not immediately furtive or morally charged.

Sadly, we are decades away from a scenario in which female participation in sports is a norm. Sports — for both genders alike — remains a low priority area for government investment (stadiums and gyms struggle to compete with power plants and ports). Budgets allocated for investment in sports infrastructure are often poorly utilised. Female sports as a separate category for investment has yet to be articulated or prioritised.

Tokenism and exceptionalism define our approach towards women in sports. For example, a CricInfo article about the women’s cricket team emphasised that for many of the players, cricket was an ‘afterthought’. Team members were paraphrased as saying that “cricket for them isn’t life ... only a part of life”.

This is apologetic language that indicates that these women can play cricket because they continue to make space in their lives for things that (as the implication goes) matter more, such as family and, if Shahid Afridi has any say on the issue, cooking.

Female sports-related initiatives — such as a boxing club for girls in Lyari — are often the subject of media attention and, to be fair, limited government support, but their existence rarely leads to calls or commitments to scale the initiative.

A push to increase female participation in sports will force the government to confront all the challenges that dog female participation in society more broadly — conservative backlash, religious opposition, lacking infrastructure and training, sexual harassment, etc. We should not forget the tragic case of Haleema Rafiq, the talented young cricketer who in 2014 took her own life after she received no support after lodging accusations of sexual harassment at the Multan Cricket Ground.

This government — and the Punjab and Sindh provincial governments in particular — are setting a good precedent by pushing through progressive, inclusive legislation, including in the context of women’s and minority rights.

By promoting female participation in sports, the state can demonstrate a genuine commitment to the ideals enshrined in that legislation and show that the government knows how to take a holistic approach to a challenge. Legislation will not change as many minds as repeated opportunities to see our women shine in stadiums around the world.

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