

Promoting Gender Equity Through Sports

Once when Haleema Sangar saw her brother and friends play soccer in their school ground she ran in and kicked the ball. It went so high that her friends and other children kept clapping for a long time. Nobody had seen the ball go so high before, and for the next two weeks, everybody in the school and nearby areas was talking about it.

Many people also said a lot of bad things about Sangar, because they believed girls showing interest in sports was a sign of delinquency.

That was Kandahar in the 1960s.

Things are not much different in modern-day Afghanistan, says Sangar, now 62 and a fitness teacher at the Rabia Balkhi High School in Kabul. Recently, when two of her students got selected for the national soccer team, their families refused to let them go.

“Because families see sports as a sign of moral deviation,” says Sangar, who personally got in touch with two girls’ families and after much persuasion and reassurances, one of the girls’ father gave his permission.

“Today I am very happy. My student kissed my hands...she is a member of the Afghanistan team, and she will go to India to participate in the South Asian championship.”

Sangar is among a small group of people working to promote sports among women in Afghanistan. They receive support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, on behalf of the German government, which has contributed to Afghanistan’s reconstruction since the Taliban regime fell in 2001.

GIZ, via its ‘Sports for Development’ programme, on behalf of Germany’s Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), has launched a pilot project to make sports and physical activities more popular among girls and young women in Afghanistan.

In a country where women have been excluded from public life as well as cultural activities and sports for several years, perhaps the only opportunity to involve young women in sports is through schools.

This is where the GIZ programme comes in. It provides pedagogical and practical training to sports teachers to improve the quality and quantity of physical education in girls’ schools.



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Monitored by German Sport University Cologne, the programme launched last year has so far trained 116 physical education teachers (PE) in 58 girls' schools in Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif and Aybak. The training is conducted by 'master trainers', partly from the physical education directorate of the Afghanistan Ministry of Education who have undergone trainings in Kabul for 2 weeks.

With an average of 1,500 students in a school, the programme has reached approximately 87,000 students.

Morteza Emami, project manager of Sports for Development at GIZ, explains that the project is active in Balkh and Samangan provinces, as well as in Kabul.

"We have also developed a tutorial DVD illustrating different sports exercises and warm-ups adapted to different prevailing conditions and resources so that it can be used by all schools and sports instructors across the country," he said. The DVDs will be distributed to more than 2,500 schools in Afghanistan.

Anywhere else in the world it may be a basic requirement for PE teachers to be trained, but in Afghanistan a majority of fitness teachers in schools have no formal training; many of them teach other subjects, and teach fitness because they did well in some sports in their schools or universities.

The GIZ training is expected to change the way sports is taught in girls' schools across Afghanistan, as it provides teachers with practical and scientific knowledge of their subjects. Furthermore, schools whose teachers have participated in the training have received sports equipment, so the teachers can apply what they have learned.

Weeda Ghyasi, a PE teacher at Cheelston Girls School in Kabul, says she can now teach many new things to her students, from rules of different games to how to pass the ball and how to play volleyball and basketball.

"Prior to the GIZ training, I didn't know the rules of the game of basketball and how to dribble the ball and pass; now I know all this," she says.

Ghyasi, 25, is a former student of Haleema Sangar at Rabia Balkhi school where she was part of the soccer and basketball teams.

Sangar says the GIZ training was most beneficial for unprofessional teachers. "Here (in Afghanistan), we are only four or five professional teachers. Most our teachers don't know anything; they just take students to the playground and tell them to do this or don't do this," she says. "They have learnt a lot from the programme."



Furthermore, she says that one important aspect of the GIZ training is that they also distribute materials and equipment such as different types of balls, obstacles and rings. “If there are no materials, we can’t teach,” she says.

But most schools in the country have neglected this subject, hardly spending money on sports equipment and materials and allotting just one hour in a week for sports.

“We have requested the Ministry of Education to increase body fitness class to two hours,” Sangar says.

Urging her countrywomen to practice simple sports and exercises such as yoga in their homes, Sangar says it will not only help them get rid of back pain and diabetes but will also help tackle their psychological problems.

“As the old Afghan saying goes...‘Those with healthy bodies have wise brains’,” she says. “I have one request: In their homes, Afghan women should make sports, along with prayers, their daily routine.”

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Partner: Physical Education Directorate (PED) at the Afghan Ministry of Education, education departments of the Afghan provincial governments, GIZ’s Basic education programme for Afghanistan (BEPA), German Sport University Cologne (DSHS)

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