**Breaking barriers**

BY S A H A R B A N D I A L 2020-12-07

MY generation of women in Pakistan grew up with a relative lack of visible female sports role models. Though equally struck by the cultural cricket frenzy of the 1990s, many of us unquestionably accepted that our place was in the stands and not on the field; that we would cheer on heroes, not heroines.

It felt surreal to sit at the cricket pavilion at Aitchison College with my two daughters, recently, watching the Pakistan women`s cricket team on the field. The `girls in green`, as referred to by my fiveyear-old daughter, scored a sure win against the Aitchison boys; the teams tied the series 2-2. I drove out of the gates of the College, that day, feeling optimistic that my daughters would grow up in a different sociocultural paradigm.

Public space for and perception of women in competitive sport in Pakistan has changed with time. Victories of female athletes are being recognised and celebrated by the state and media, though not with the fervour or prominence they deserve. Corporate entities have taken on female athletes in their ad campaigns in a clear (though possibly not principled) show of support for their sport. The intelligent voices of female sports commentators are now a norm on TV. Female role models in sports are not hard to find: Maria Toorpakai Wazir, the squash legend from Waziristan, who was awarded the Salam award for her contribution to the sport; Sana Mir, the former captain of the women`s cricket team who topped ICC rankings for international women bowlers; footballer Abiha Haider who was recently listed amongst the `30 Most Powerful Muslim Women in Sport`.

While several women athletes have won international accolades for the nation, the institutional and financial support required to help them realise their potential is lacking. The huge gendered differentials in pay, prize money and corporate sponsorships, limited access to training/ practice spaces and opportunities for competitive events, and inadequate provision of equipment show the low priority accorded by sports boards and federations to women in sports in Pakistan.

The women`s football team has, for instance, remained inactive for seven years. It is reported that the women`s cricket team is given limited training facilities with no home ground; they arenow reliant on offers to practise their game on school grounds of Aitchison College with its current principal and director of cricket taking the lead. Pay differentials in male and female sport are shocking. Reportedly, till 2017 male cricketers in Pakistan earned nearly $77,000 a year, while women made around $12,000. More recently, match fee and prize money for women cricketers have been increased by 100pc and daily allowance by 50pc, which is commendable. However, the differential in pay remains.

It is also important to note the high attrition rate in sport amongst girls in Pakistan. The phenomenon, though global in nature, is possibly moremarked in Pakistan. A study conducted in Sindh in 2019, reported that a signiñcant proportion of young girls do not participate in sport on account of financial constraints, lack of adequate and gendersegregated facilities, family opposition, and cultural attitudes regarding acceptable gender roles and gendered spaces. One student reported that she was told to stop playing cricket because it was an inappropriate sport for women and that she was mixing too much with boys.

In a country where `standards of appropriateness` are often imposed on women through fear and force, it is no surprise that many female athletes have faced security threats. The first public women`s cricket match was played in Karachi in the late 1980s in the presence of 8,000 police personnel; no spectators were reportedly allowed. Former Pakistani track and field Olympian Shazia Hidayat from Chichawatni, had to relocate to Canada for safety reasons. Maria Toorpakai disguised herself as a boy to train for squash. National footballer Karishma Ali from Chitral received death threats on social media. It is obvious that we have a long way to go.Women`s access to sport must be framed within the human rights discourse. The IOC`s Olympic Charter recognises the `practice of sport as a human right`. The right to rest, leisure and recreational activity are recognised under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on the Rights of the Child as basic human rights that are essentialfor aholistic education andfulldevelopment of the human personality. Articles 10 and 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women mandates all state signatories to ensure equal opportunities for women to participate in sports and physical education. Pakistan has ratified these international conventions.

The connection between physical activity and health physical and mental is well-established. Engagement in sports helps foster selfesteem and confidence, resilience, leadership and interpersonal networks. Such engagement becomes particularly important for young girls, who in general face more limited avenues for social interaction outside their home. In cultural settings such as ours, women`s involvement in sport takes on an important symbolic value as well. Their presence on the playing Helds challenges gendered stereotypes and can help build an alternative narrative with regard to culturally acceptable conduct for women and the idea of permissible public spaces.

Competitive sport, if properly funded, is incomegenerating and a means of financial independence and empowerment. To state that women`s presence in sports may be a driver for gender equality would not be incorrect.

The government must engage in awareness campaigns to encourage women`s participation in sports generally, highlighting the benefits of such engagement. It should also accord full support to women`s sporting federations and boards through meaningful resource allocation and opportunities for training and competition, as well as make efforts to close the pay gap. There is no dearth of women`s sporting talent in Pakistan. We need to encourage it. It is heartening to know that in the male domain of Aitchison College our women cricketers have found an unlikely supporter. The writer is a lawyer.