

Women, Sports and the Body: Some Dialogue with Sporting Females in Bangladesh

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Abstract: Sporting as an activity and experience is supposed to embody a fertile ground for women to employ their rights and reform identity. Held to be a ground for women's emancipation, sport is also a sphere of activity worthy of scrutiny which reveals a deep interplay of the power structures that influence the lives of the participants. Sport being a rigorously physical activity, women's body becomes a locus for interpreting and negotiating norms and values regarding gender identity. Gender and identity are interrelated with sports, which leaves considerable impact on the lives of the sporting women, but offering a potential opportunity to restructure them. The article examines the way women in different types of sports negotiate with and participate in discourses about body and femininity, in the spatio-temporal context of sports that carries a colonial legacy in these parts of the world.

Introduction:

In this study the sporting experience of women as dominated by the social, local and global forces are analyzed in the context of Bangladesh. All over the world, sports are increasingly implicated in the social construction of womanhood and therefore have been pursued in detail in the academia, especially in the North American and European contexts. Women's sports in Bangladesh can be traced back to the colonial period and up until now are increasingly related to national and international affairs. Alongside these socio-political forces, the lives of female sportspersons are subjective to worldwide power structures such as patriarchy, capitalism and the state. All these forces act in concert to define the sports experience of women, although their dominations are faced with routine resistance with the players working as active agents of redefinition of gender norms and values.

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Sports participation of women has been on the rise since the naissance of the country and from the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the launching of the more popular games like Football and Cricket, this trend has held up even more. But women from all classes and backgrounds are not entering professional sports. This is because of different socio-cultural barriers indeed, but these structural hindrances are deep rooted in broader structures of domination and control. Despite these barriers, however, women do and will participate in sports and it is their will transformed into action that makes sports as a field of emancipation for women. The degree to which Bangladeshi women articulate this field for the purposes of restructuring themselves and transgression of rigid femininity is an area worthy of proper investigation.

This study was done as part of the author's Bachelor's thesis that investigated the different aspects of women's sporting experiences in Bangladesh, with specific attention to the effects it leaves on their identity and gender performance. A significant portion of the work was dedicated to the examination of the player's body as the terrain for struggles of different socio-cultural and political forces. In a dynamic activity such as sports, body becomes an instantly observable object of scrutiny- it is the nexus where biological sex, socially constituted gender and sexuality meet. While looking into body, the study finds the notion of 'body image' and the interrelated concerns of manifestations of sexualities useful for accommodating first hand data, which comprised interviews with national team players, club players, university players, sports organizers and trainers.

Women, Sports and the Body in the Social Sciences

Feminist sports scholarship grew in Britain and the USA in the 1960s and its emergence can be matched with the women's movement of the period and the fact that more and more women were getting involved with sports around the time. The traces of this development can be found as far back as in the aspirations of feminist scholars as Mary Wollstonecraft, who asserted women's right to exercise and to be physically fit in order to achieve equality. Second Wave feminist writer Simone De Beauvoir was concerned with the physical fitness of women as well, and in congruence with her formulations of the body and the process of social construction that it goes through, she wanted women to take control their own body.

Scholars like Eleanor Metheny and Dorothy V. Harris carried out studies in the '60s, in which some of the basic issues were addressed such as the female athlete, her personality traits, motivations, societal perceptions, barriers she faces, etc. With the emergence of Women and Gender Studies as an academic discipline in the late 70s and early 80s in the US, the focus of these studies began to shift more from sex to gender and gender roles as negotiated by the female players were investigated in depth. Also, for the first time sports were scrutinized for being a patriarchal and capitalist institution that inherently nurtures an ideology that oppresses femininity and creates hegemony of masculinity. In 'The Sporting Woman' (1983) Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda San Giovanni laid out the framework of media analysis of sports and how the media affects the sporting women.

Soon sexuality would be weaved into these questions and academics would begin to investigate the way heterosexuality becomes a repressive norm for sportswomen. Helen Lenskyj (1986), along with others, considered essential heterosexual femininity as a form of male control. On a related note, researcher Patricia A. Vertinsky's work 'The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century' (1989) revealed how female frailty itself was constructed through long-standing societal discourse and later by scientific and medical interventions.

In the 1990s, Foucault's ideas of power attracted a lot of these scholars whose previous criticisms of sports as a social construct found a stronger ground in the historical study of the development of the institution, that exercised and reaffirmed the same values dispersed throughout the rest of the system- homogeneity, heterogeneous sexuality, discipline etc. Body became central to the analyses carried out by feminist sports scholars who were interested in the sporting body which was shaped through discourse. These authors showed how female athletes destabilized the static gender norms, their very being retaliated against the omnipresent male dominance and also the notion of sports as a 'male preserve'. With such observations, scholars like Ann Hall, Jennifer Hargreaves called the body into analysis, referring to the theories of Judith Lorber and Judith Butler.

In all this, sports scholarship is highly centered on European, White women and as such, sportswomen in other cultures have been largely neglected. History of women's sport in what has been called Third World countries has different origins than that in the West and the

hurdles that female sportspersons face are more intense, if not entirely dissimilar.

Social Construction of the Human Body and Emancipation through Sports:

The body has been the subject of scrutiny after being discovered as more a biological entity, this kind of analysis took part in the post-modern turn of the '80s. The body is a potential site of cultural construction and discourse, as Michele Foucault has so famously formulated, is an essential instrument to realize it. In "The History of Sexuality" (1981) Foucault shows how something as 'natural' as sexuality has been carefully constructed during the Victorian era. In the process of creating knowledge about the human body and sexuality, the subjects were rather produced in different domains as medicine, demography, psychiatry, pedagogy, government etc. Such construction made possible the institutionalization of ideas about sexuality and body—what is allowed to be them and what is forbidden. Foucault's work thus laid bare the social construction and the context of such construction of human body and sexuality.

In the context of Bangladeshi female players, it is important to look at the transformative possibilities in sport that reflect both on their body and mind. Rather than taking the respondents as passive subjects of different power structures that Foucault tends to suggest, I would reason that, based on my field observations, although social constructions do play a vital part in shaping and articulating a player's body and mind initially, the female players as individuals manage and articulate consciously their body through sports.

Sport itself is an activity that works as a means of transgression of social normative for women. Especially in Bangladesh, where the gender stereotyping of masculinity and femininity is very rigid, sport can be seen as a space where the Bangladeshi gender norms are actively negotiated by the women. Since the beginning of the sporting ventures of women in Bangladesh, when Rabeya Khatun Talukdar, a woman who was introduced to sports while studying in the Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta, returned to the then East Pakistan to inspire more girls to enter Sports, the social grounds were not at all positive for this new venture. Indeed, in that initial stage it was seen that most former female players came from the middle and upper class educated

background, who took sports essentially as a means to ensure women's liberation and emancipation (Mahmud, Roma, 2008).

Female emancipation has been characterized as 'one of the most striking aspects of the industrial phase of social development' (McGregor 1955:48). But in the Western societies this did not come about to be in a day, rather it is associated with a long history of feminist movements. Although most nineteenth-century feminists disregarded sports in their efforts to improve the status of women, nevertheless, because sports are intimately connected with the physical body—the most conspicuous symbol of difference between the sexes—their development represented a new and important form of freedom. Feminism did not reach its peak until the early twentieth century. It was at this time that women's sports expanded rapidly and when there were increasing opportunities for working class well as for middle-class women (Hargreaves, 1996).

On the other hand, the background of women's sport in Bangladesh is filled with discontinuities, owing especially to a colonial history. After the division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Pakistan became a distinct nation-state comprised of two major provinces- East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. As a rising state, Pakistan placed special importance on sports to shape national identity and culture, starting from the National Games in 1948. But it was not until 1954 that women participated in the national games, the event being Pakistan Olympic Games. Being a country dominated by religion which had been the essential tenet of national identity of the post-colonial Indian subcontinent (Chowdhury, 2000), this was not an easy development to come through.

Participation of women in sports here, in contrast to the Europe and America, was not preceded by a long journey to women's liberation. Sports had not been incorporated consciously into social life through a historical process, rather introduced later as a novel space for women's emancipation. The sports venture was initiated in Bangladesh by women educated in the British system of education. These women, Rabeya Khatun and the three sisters of the Kazi family, believed in the emancipation of women through sports which they thought would be an effective way to bring them out of the private sphere where they were thought to belong. There was also active the notion to build the new nation, make the women capable counterpart of men in the making. (Talukder, 2004) There were several social restrictions

including purdah, and taking part in sporting events that included athletics meant not only breaking social conventions about femininity but also called for the making of a new conception of femininity.

Whatever different the history may be, what both European and Bangladeshi women shared were the same reactions- sports, especially athletics were deemed inappropriate for women. Much of these evolved from fixed conceptions about the 'nature of woman', which emphasize the biological differences between men and women. Women's sports can be understood as processes of struggles and contradictions, and women are active agents in those processes. In sports, women are determined and determining. Firstly, their very participation in sports militates against the social constructions of biological myths about women's body. And secondly, they continuously construct and reconstruct such social conventions as active agents.

Body Image and Female Players

Body image refers to the ways in which people see themselves, and in turn, how others see them. It is an important constitutive notion of human body and gender identity. The concept, although initially a psychological construct, is also important in Anthropology, because of its roots in the cultural premises. Body image includes the following themes:

- Body images are multidimensional and multifaceted; that is they include perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that involve components as diverse as physical appearance, size, sensations, spatial positions, boundaries and sexual identity.
- Body images are personalized and subjective experience; thus the images we have of our own bodies may be quite different from the way others see us.
- Body images are dynamic and changeable rather than static and absolute.
- Body images are socially constructed rather than genetically determined.
- Body images influence information processing and behavior; that is how we feel and think about our bodies influences the way we perceive and act in the world.
- Body images are intimately related to self-concept. (Pruzinsky and Cash, 1990)

How we perceive ourselves and others is a complex subject, with femininity blended in with the issue even more so. Feminists have detected long before how a person's gender constantly guides perception of herself. This happens, according to them, due to a complex matrix of consumer culture and the media, which by producing unrealistic ideals for women create a false need to fulfill them, in so much so that their femininity depend on them. These 'ideals' are often seen to state particular qualities for the 'true sex'- masculinity would be often be associated with 'powerful' and 'large' and femininity with 'small' and 'weak' or 'fragile'. (Grogan, 2001) Under these circumstances, female athletes could be expected to be entangled with the dilemma of remaining 'feminine' in the course of accomplishing her 'masculine' passions.

In the data collected in the field from three groups of female players- Girls playing in the university level, Girls playing in sports clubs and the Girls and Women playing in national teams of Bangladesh- suggest that most players have positive body image about themselves. When asked about their response to the reactionary behavior toward sporting women, most of them responded in a positive way, seldom showing any negativity toward their developed body images. But they showed significant differences in body image toward others, especially among middle-class educated non-professional female players of the University teams. The interviews carried out with twelve players of Volleyball team revealed that some of them had negative body images toward professional players, who seemed to be undesirably 'masculine' (*chele-chele*) to them. One of the respondents from the Volleyball team, who also participates in different athletic events at Inter-Hall and Inter-University level, expressed her repulsion toward the 'masculine' image of professional players in this manner-

"I've been playing and competing since my childhood. I've successfully secured first place in Badminton in the Rangpur Zilla tournament and third place in Short Foot at the National Games. But when I saw the women competing from Ansar and BGMC I was horrified! They were so muscular and seemed to be non-feminine. I told my mother that I will be a sportsman but I never want to become like them."

Others did not reject such developed muscularity in an outright manner, but only seemed to be okay with such body images basing it on 'professionalism'. It is okay to be muscular if one is a professional player. Indeed one of them sanctioned such different body image by saying-

"Well, professional players are bound to be that way. In any case, variety is good."

What did the players who played professionally think about themselves and their body? Both the interviews and observations suggest that female professional players are far more at ease with their bodies than non-athlete women and even non-professional female players. This was reflected both in their body gestures and interviews and the focus group discussion (FGD). But nonetheless they also legitimized their difference from conventional femininity by dint of their 'professionalism'. But none of them expressed negative body images about themselves.

However, as body image is argued to be conditioned by shared spaces and relationships (Browett, 2009), how the players embody, practice, reproduce and challenge gender constructions was found to be relevant to spaces of interactions. Players at all levels would change between dress codes respective to private and public sphere. Also there seems to be a division in the public sphere for the players- one is the Field (the space where the sporting activities take place) and the other includes those public places excluding the field. They admitted that they dressed up in accordance with social spaces. A young University player commented-

"I would not go to even the class (university) wearing a jersey. It wouldn't be appropriate."

In contrast they seemed highly at ease with their sporty body images in spaces associated with sporting events and activities like the Gymnasium Field of the University and the Field of their respective Halls. Some of them however, wore 'Upper', an extra layer of jacket over tee-shirt even in the Field, saying that without it they feel uncomfortable.

Nine times National Award winner in Swimming, Dolly said-

"Of course I wouldn't wear the same clothes I wear inside the Ansar Academy or the Stadium in the village house (Gramer Bari). People in there won't take those things easily, and I have to think of them too."

Thus images of body are constructed and reconstructed by the female players as they embody both the conventional and unconventional notions of femininity.

Homophobia and Heterosexual Femininity

The comment made by the young educated University player brings in another topic of discussion related to body images, one which is significant and is to be found in almost any book about female sports-Homophobia. Homophobia here is referred to the fear of the masculinizing effect of sports on women (Hargreaves, 1986). This kind of fear is deeply related to major issues as gender roles and the compulsory heterosexuality in sport as elsewhere. Compulsory heterosexuality sets masculinity and femininity on fixed tracks that dictates in clear-cut terms what it means to be a woman and man. Any deviation from this track may lead to stigmatization and ostracization of the individual involved, especially in a society where heterosexuality is the norm. As indicated before, muscularity is taken as connected with masculinity, and most female players try to avoid achieving such traits lest they are tagged as 'less feminine'.

This scenario did not differ in Bangladesh also, where most female players seemed conscious about maintaining heterosexuality to some extent. They too, must traverse through the terrain of women's sport that is steeped in homophobia. They must be ever vigilant of their appearance, behavior, mannerisms, and so on. As expressed in their interviews, the players, especially those playing the games that are sanctified as appropriate for women, such as Volleyball, Handball and Swimming, voiced their concerns about managing a 'proper' femininity. One of the female students who is also on the University Volleyball team commented explicitly-

"We're players and we will play. But we must also maintain femininity."

By femininity she referred to the essentially feminine body. She also expressed her concerns about women playing the 'male' sports as Football, Cricket, Kabaddi, deeming the masculinizing impacts they can leave on one's body and mind. She wouldn't be alone, even professional players playing these heterosexual games, deemed Football to be more appropriate for men, as they are 'body-touch' and 'endurance game'. More will be discussed on this related issue of women in extreme games in the following section.

However, this picture is sharply contrasted when the professional players are taken into account, their gestures, behavior suggested otherwise. This applied especially to the players who are mainly operative in the 'male' sports, such as Football and Cricket.

Heterosexism constituted the least of their concerns. But their conversations revealed some concerns about masculinization as they considered short hair and an 'unfeminine' appearance may repel their suitors and consequently ruin their marriage possibilities. It is significant to note that many of the Football and Cricket players seemed concerned about a body beauty image as well. They used cosmetics regularly trying their best to replenish their damaged skin that is overly exposed to the sun during long hours of practice and the game matches.

The media plays a significant role in constructing and marketing images of sportspersons and discriminations have been seen even in these images. Players who seem to fulfill the stereotype of ideal heterosexual femininity are more emphasized in the media, and those who are not are neglected, even scathingly criticized. Hence, players like Maria Sharapova and Sania Mirza are emphasized in the media over others, and consequently become more worthy idols for young amateur and professional players worldwide, as well as in Bangladesh. Seven out of ten respondents mentioned these two female athletes as their idols. Again, others mentioned sportsmen like Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps.

But one of the most significant finding is the sports authority's interference with the players' body, heavily guided by the intent to impose and maintain heterosexual femininity. The Captain of the National Women's Cricket team of Bangladesh, Salma Khatun, revealed that they were instructed to exercise in a way so as to not grow muscles and get hardened. As per Salma's words-

"We do exercise alright, but we are told by our instructors to do them quicker, lifting weights faster so that we don't come to be muscular like men... The goal of our exercising is to grow stamina, not to harden our bodies."

This comment is greatly reminiscent of Michel Foucault's idea of 'docile bodies', which the French philosopher and historian has defined as "one that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. And that this docile body can only be achieved through strict regiment of disciplinary acts". (Foucault, 1977) The authority subjects the players to the necessary state project of projecting a liberal modernist image of itself in the world, while at the same time impose the feminine beauty ideal that prescribes soft, docile body that also conform to the traditional female body image, both locally and internationally. Even

when there is no explicit restriction, the players do try to adhere to such images as indicated above, albeit in varying degrees, which are manufactured and circulated by the media.

Even in a 'male' game where the goal of women's playing is to attain the same privileges and choices as men do, women are trained and treated in a different way, for the same reason as everywhere, keeping the maintenance of the conventional femininity above all purposes.

Hargreaves in her book 'Sporting females' (1996) claimed in the context of USA-

"In the 1990s there are no universal conventions of female sports and no universal representations of the female sporting body. But although cultural value is much less clear, this is not a result of random events, but a result of our experience, history and culture." (p. 173)

To reach this desired state, we too, have a long way to go to establish sports as the probable arena to demonstrate the fragility of the heterosexist notions about femininity and debase the idea of homophobia.

The Gendered Segregation of Games and Women in 'Male' Games

Segregation does not stop at the sexes, rather permeates every aspect of our culture. In sports, certain games are labeled 'masculine' and some as 'women-appropriate', based on amount of strength and hostility involved translated as virility, exposure to injuries, body contact, uniform requirement. Traditional male games are football, wrestling, kabaddi (most team sports) etc., while games as swimming, tennis, gymnastics (most individual sports) are considered more suitable for women. It is clear that such beliefs and practice have constricted the sporting experience of female athletes; they also have resulted in a restricted and oppressive movement vocabulary for most women.

The history of women in sports in Bangladesh is studded with numerous accounts of oppositions to women's participation in 'male' games- particularly in the case of Football. Women's football started in Bangladesh in 2003 as Exhibition Matches, as confirmed the Head of the Women's Wing of the Football federation of Bangladesh, against violent threats from the fundamentalist groups of the country. Players were collected from other game teams and an official Football team

was formed. In 2004 invitational matches took place in Dhaka. But it was not until 2009 that a National team was formed, following a talent hunt for female footballers around the country. In 2010 the team secured Third place in the SAAF Games (South Asian Games). The secretary of the women's sports association 'Mobila Krira Complex' (Women's Sports Complex), Quamrun Nahar Dana, made a curious observation- that women's football itself took a concrete shape as a result of external pressure from the international community of sports, since in 2007 it was declared by AFC (Asian Football Confederation) that unless women participate too in the game, the donations for the men's football will be cut down too.

As it is, most games now popular and practiced on a national level in Bangladesh are non-traditional, i.e. they are sports originated in places external to the country, especially in England. The history of games like Football, Cricket, Badminton, Tennis, Shooting, Rowing, Athletics, and Gymnastics can be traced back to the English who for the first time provided the games with formal rules and a competitive pattern, establishing separate federations for each one (Hargreaves, 1996). These games were introduced to the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period, and the native games that were practiced could not be called 'sports' in then sense the word retains its contemporary meaning. Anthropologists Niko Besiner and Susan Brownell (2012) commented in this regard-

"Comparative works (in Anthropology) typically observed that the English word "sport" did not acquire its contemporary meaning until the late-eighteenth century and that, everywhere in the world, the word "sport" had come to refer to Western sports upon their adoption." (p. 446)

Being a colonial venture, women's sports in Bangladesh does not have a history of almost 150 years to pride on, unlike that of the Europe. This meant that their entrance into traditionally masculine games like Football and Cricket would be met with tremendous opposition and obstruction. In the case of Bangladesh, the opposition came from primarily a religious ground, 'purdah' being a part of it. Most women in the 'feminine appropriate' games, such as Swimming, Volleyball, Handball and even Cricket, deemed Football as a less 'appropriate' game for women as it is an 'endurance game' and 'body-touch' game, which made its players more prone to injuries. Some also mentioned the uniform being a source of discomfort as it exposes a part of the

legs. The Captain of the National Women's Cricket team, Salma Khatun, commented-

"I have always played and preferred Cricket... Football doesn't seem to be a proper game for girls to me. You have to wear shorts and it's no good. Cricket is comparatively a more civil (bbodro) game for me, considering the uniforms."

Such comparisons between games are interesting indeed, for it shows how deep the social construction of gender roles is ingrained in us. Another player, the Opener for the National Women's Cricket Team, Ayesha who has a mixed background of Football and Cricket pointed out the possibility of injury and financial benefits as the reasons for her switching to Cricket from Football-

"I loved Football, then after playing three years in the team, I got an offer from the Cricket Board to play in the National Cricket team. I wanted to stay in the Football team but my brother almost forced me to enter into Cricket, as it is safer for women, posing less possibility of injury... I also saw that there's no future in football, other countries are way ahead of us in talent, strength and nutrition, whereas not much is invested in this game in our country."

Thus, despite the fact that women have been participating in games like Football and Cricket for years, changes in attitude toward women's participation are yet to come. The struggle for the establishment of women in these games is an ongoing process in Bangladesh, and the growing positive attitude toward women footballers, based on the notion of 'Equality of opportunity' indicate a prosperous future of these games for women.

Conclusion

The female players in Bangladesh show altogether a positive body image, which in turn is informed with their conformation to the feminine ideals to some extent. Participation of women in 'male' games like Football and Cricket is enforced by international and national powers, but it has been also been appropriated as an opportunity by the women to emancipate themselves to some extent to negotiate and reform their identities, to demonstrate the rigidity of the black and white gender dichotomy. Although homosexuality is not an issue that has been directly addressed here in this essay, the pervasiveness and rigidity with which heterosexuality is reinforced in women's sports shows the existent manner of homophobia here. Compulsory heterosexuality eases the way for uniform, non-variable body images,

although this does not go without challenge in the sports world. The women seek a balance between their 'regular self' and the sportsperson in them, and the line is to be maintained with caution. This constricts the way they perform themselves, their gender, the effects of which require further scrutiny. Also, the concept of space seems to be of importance. How they women carry themselves and switch between the selves rely on their presence in the 'Field'. The connection between space and habitual reality warrants further investigation into the issue.

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