



# Girls under-12 school football match



**Pankhar Bazaar Public Highschool  
Noakhali, Bangladesh  
Wednesday, 28 February 2018**

One Billion Rising with Nijera Kori arranged a girls football match in Suborno Char, one of the most conservative areas in Noakhali. Giving these incredibly talented young females the opportunity to play in front of their whole community will foster courage and a sense of independence. Among the guests were urban planner Salma A. Shafi and FIFA council member & Chairperson of Bangladesh Women Football Wing, Akhter Kiron Mahfuza.

Imagine a village where no girls are allowed to leave their homes till it is dark outside. The reason is that no stranger should be able to even catch a glimpse of these girls. This was the sort of mentality that tyrannised much of the female contingent in Noakhali, particularly those along the coastal belt of Subarnachar. Back in September 2017, when the idea of a football match for school going girls sprung to the minds of Nijera Kori workers, the workers themselves were more excited about its prospect than the schoolgirls themselves. It wasn't because these girls weren't willing to play the sport—they had an ingrained sense of fear. Stepping out of their homes, wearing casual clothes to engage in an activity which was rather alien to them. They asked themselves, what would society think? What would the religious fanatics think? Perhaps the bigger challenge ahead was not going to be to teach them to play sports, but to break these mental barriers that had dominated their childhood.

The thought of being so exposed to the public seemed daunting to them. Therefore, easing in this concept took a few months of soft training programmes within their own communities. Preliminary training sessions were held during their tiffin breaks, behind the school building in the field which was open but not public, originally used for livestock shelter. Eventually the girls caught on to the idea of the game and made good progress. A few girls stood out in terms of ability and leadership, but a common denominator among all girls was their unerring commitment and punctuality. We weren't training them to go on to be professional footballers. The idea was for these girls to understand how much more capable they are than they are made to believe, to participate in something beyond their private sphere, encouraging them to build confidence and find health and happiness by exploring different outlets that, unfortunately, so many women are deprived of.

A 6-day camp brought girls ranging from ages 9 to 15 together to participate in a generally male-dominated sport—a task that is no small feat for young girls from a district that has historically been conservative, adhering to traditional and religious fundamentalist influences that set up expectations for women to fulfil a very specific role in the family and community: that of a homemaker and invisible worker. For women to wear a full burqa and niqab, next to no interaction in public and being groomed to be married off at the tender age of 14 or 15 are common practices in these areas. To see young girls playing openly in a public space, as innocent and normal as it may seem to many outsiders, is simply unheard of in these parts. When the first trainer came from Dhaka, the girls were very excited and embraced her with cheerful faces followed by hugs, flowers and fruits that they themselves had picked. According to the trainer, she was impressed at how much interest everyone showed – and she immediately took notice of some girls who exhibited natural talent. This was a testament to how important it is to give girls these kinds of opportunities and exposure. Branching out of their comfort zones through football should have implications far into their futures. After the first trainer departed, they made the transition from semi-public to public. There were continuous trainings taking place since then till mid-February.

After a few months of capacity building and mobilisation process, it was time to put all that patience to good use. By now football was a regular feature of their lives and present in their thoughts. When the big day was only a week away, the training intensified: rigorous refining of skills and techniques, and mental preparation of being able to absorb the presence of a huge crowd. During these times, there were many challenges. A madrasa being located next to the playing field wasn't exactly ideal. Protests from group leaders, villagers and family members alike made it a formidable task to continue training. But by now, the young girls had a value system in which they believed in and weren't going to be pushed aside. They stood firm on the stance that not only are they going to play but, they would also choose to spend nights at training centres along with their peers to gain as much practice and knowledge before the big day. From not being allowed to step outdoors to spending nights away from home for their own development was a huge step in the right direction. Indoor capacity building procedures included brainstorming sessions and watching clips of professionals. Most importantly, they were also educated about the gender perspectives, on the physical aspects of the sport and why men have been more socially accepted to play than women. Initially the girls were withdrawn, playing with full-sleeve jackets because they felt showing skin was blasphemy. However, over time their thinking changed, which led them to be more than comfortable to be donning half sleeve t-shirts on match day.

The big day had finally arrived, and the girls were doing warm up activities from as early as dawn. One Billion Rising with Nijera Kori were able to organise a football match for these young school girls of this local school in Char Jabbar. Chief guests included Urban Planner Salma A. Shafi and FIFA Council Member and Chairperson of Bangladesh Women Football Wing, Mahfuza Akhter Kiron, who said that this was a significant example of women empowerment. For these girls to leave their burqas at home, break the shackles of the patriarchal mindset and take to the field to play a sport that was enjoyed exclusively by the male population, was ground-breaking to say the least. Even 5 years ago, these girls would've been victims of child marriage and an event such as this would've been inconceivable. This is exactly the sort of setting One Billion Rising looks to establish itself in. The core objectives are simple. First, to firmly embed the idea that both men and women can participate in football—or any sport for that matter—and that it should be socially recognised. Secondly, the impact of these girls taking part in an activity which they were otherwise deprived from and the courage shown to perform in front of their whole community, should go beyond the boundaries of the football pitch. We now hope that these girls will evolve from the socially and religiously conservative mindset they've been accustomed to and foster liberal thinking which will in return provide the basis for personal development.

Upon the completion of the match, the girls were interviewed and the overwhelming consensus among them was that they felt invigorated, and they now had an innate desire to play football, as footballers and in appropriate football clothing. There are instances of family members, who had previously protested the idea of this event, who made long journeys from neighbouring cities to attend the football match.

Following this event, over the year there were several achievements that are worth mentioning. The girls have now earned a reputation in their villages as sportswomen. They are provided with one egg in their tiffin every day for school. They won and became champions of the Bangamata Gold Cup Tournament at the district level (Noakhali). They have boldly declared that they no longer wish to play wearing full trousers and have asked for appropriate shorts for football. They have been provided with jerseys, football shorts and boots and are now wearing them to attend regular football practices under a qualified coach. The coach who is volunteering to train them is an ex-goalkeeper of the Bangladesh national football team. Furthermore, the girls have refused to stop playing even in the face of fundamentalist persons asking them to do so. They were invited for tea with the Government Upazila Executive Officer at his office.

Ultimately, we hope that this team of formidable young women of the area can take the values taught to them and their activities forward and apply them in their daily lives. We also hope that more and more of the female population will be inspired by these girls and learn values pertaining to their freedom of thought and movement. Slowly but surely, this practice will allow the women of Noakhali to uproot themselves from the sort of inequality and bigotry that has stifled them for much of their lives.



