Sportswomen as Change Makers

Haryana is a region of strange contrasts. On the one hand, girls are unwanted in a state with an index of prosperity. On the other, girls given a chance have excelled in national and international sport events. Battling almost every conceivable prejudice at the individual, family and social levels and despite a negative sex ratio, sportswomen from Haryana have carved out a niche for themselves over several years. Yet, their potential goes largely unrecognized. Significantly, most of the award-winning sportswomen have emerged from poor families.

In one corner of Sir Chhotu Ram Sports Stadium in Rohtak, a few girls practice the uneven bars as part of gymnastic training. It is late evening and they stand huddled in a cramped corner, a 10-by 7-foot rectangular space, wearing shorts and T-shirts, quite conscious that they are the only women around. They are visible only to the discerning viewer; otherwise, their presence is swamped by the groups of boisterous men practicing kabaddi, wrestling and basketball. The “corner” is chosen mainly to avoid attention.

“We have a sports ground and if we try to play in the open, a lot of taunting goes on. When we play in shorts and T-shirts, women and men in the village ogle at us and say that we are trying to ape Sania Mirza. When we win anything at all, there is no encouragement from the government. We went to the gram panchayat (village council) leaders and told them that we had won a tournament and that we should be rewarded. The elders refused us, saying that this would be quite expensive as we will claim a reward every time we win. This situation was described by Nisha who is from Panipat.

All of these girls come from poor families. They come on their own. Sometimes, they are siblings from the same family. But they have to put up with a lot of opposition within the family and also within the institutionalized discrimination at the level of government. Men and women players are given different amounts as prize money in the championship and the cash prize for woman’s title is lower than men’s cash prize. This discrimination at the level of money continues even after it is well known, that woman have reached the sports
standards in terms of power play, stamina and energy and the quality of game. Haryana government has a sports policy, which was updated only in 2004. A delegation met the Chief Minister recently to ask for some basic facilities, such as a common room and an enclosed space for indoor activities, for girls in the common panchayat-owned land. The idea was to float a *Mahila Vikas Kendra* (Woman Development Center) for women and teenage girls. The CM surprised them with a single question, “Where are girls playing in Haryana?

Sport has been envisaged as a mass movement in the policy but it does not take into account the realities faced by aspiring sportswomen. It is not enough to conceive of sportswomen as mere medal producers. Deep-rooted social bias and poverty have to be redressed for any meaningful change to take place. It is usual for girls to be married off as soon as they were 16 or 17 years old. A woman is seldom allowed to make her own choices. Several star players drop out because of poverty and the pressure of early marriage that usually goes with it. There should be a mass sports culture which provides not only healthy entertainment but opportunities for creative expression.

Some organizations as well as individuals though believe that one of the crucial ways of addressing gender incongruities in Haryana would be to reclaim aggressively the right of full physical development as guaranteed in sporting activities – sport not only in the competitive “medal-oriented” sense but as an enabling factor for the overall physical and mental development of individuals. The only way this can be done is by providing, to young girls and women, facilities that will help them to deal more effectively with structural biases. A lot more could be done if elected panchayats would have taken it upon themselves to encourage girls in sport events.

In a unique public convention organized in November 2005 in Rohtak, aspiring and former sportswomen expressed strong resentment at the prejudices they face. The convention was attended by more than 500 sportswomen from across the state. Many young girls spoke about the problems they faced starting from opposition at home to threat of violence in the streets. During the convention, it was decided to make this an annual event and build capacities of
these young girls to take up more challenging issues like dowry, sexual harassment, Violence Against Woman (VAW) and female feticide.

Due to lack of funds, we could not organize the convention in 2006. The core committee set up in the first year has decided to have the meeting in January-February 2008 again. Aim of this exercise is to create a strong bonding amongst sports women and utilize their skills to create a better society. This will provide platform to demand spaces for girls within the existing common facilities like play grounds and stadiums and organizing them as a resource group or change makers to take up social issues like VAW, Female Feticide, dowry, etc.

The core group believes that women in sports have already crossed the barriers of mobility, communication and are in a position to make a difference as they are the role models at village level. We are aware that event-based approach will not solve these problems but we are planning to make sustained efforts to address these problems.

Resource teams will be formed at district level and Training of Trainers will be organised for them. They in turn will sensitize the sportswomen to take up issues related to the field. All the sports Associations organize camps before major tournaments like nationals and that is the time when these women are relatively free between 10 am to 4 pm. This time will be utilized to prepare them to be change makers. Each group will be given inputs on the following aspects:

- **VAW at different stages of their lives like** female feticide, dowry deaths, domestic violence and old age related insecurities
- **Leadership**
- **Communication**
- **Advocacy at all levels**
- **Networking**
- **Reaching out to others**

The activity plan will be prepared in consultation with the groups and the nodal agency, Himmat (Courage) will coordinate and will be responsible for implementing the Action Plan.