

focus

Afghan women



Masooma Alizada, left, and Zahra Alizada, members of Afghanistan's women's national cycling team, train on the outskirts of Kabul to avoid insults and harassment from men. The team is breaking new ground in women's sport in the country and pushing boundaries. Top left, coach Abdul Sadiqi assists Malika Yousufi. Centre and right, members of the women's cycling team. Mohammad Ismail / Reuters

Cyclists make small revolutions

Afghanistan's women's cycling team are making inroads into sport

Viewed through its recent chaotic past, Afghanistan conjures certain images. Bombs and guns, mangled bodies and broken buildings, cowed women hidden in burqas, abject poverty and the constant threat that the Taliban will return.

The members of the women's national cycling team challenge that perception. Clad in Lycra and the niqab, they take to the roads of Afghanistan in the face of many challenges.

To avoid insults and the unwanted attention of men, the women like to ride outside Kabul, with coach Abdul Sadiqi, who is also president of the Afghan Cycling Federation, riding shotgun in his car.

Even so, a member of the team is recovering from a crash caused by a passing male motorist who tried to grab her.

Women's sports in the country generally struggle in the face of family opposition



Members of Afghanistan's women's national cycling team during an exercise on a snowy mountain in Qargha, about 10 kilometres west of the capital. Women's rights have made gains since the Taliban was ousted from power in 2001, but they are still underrepresented in politics.

and the pressure to get married. For instance, the Afghan women's cricket team has been disbanded because of threats from the Taliban and a shortage of players.

Members of the women's cycling team have not received their monthly salary of Dh62 for a year, although the male cyclists continue to be paid.

"We want to prove ourselves to the women outside Afghanistan that Afghan women are able to do this. We don't want to be locked inside the home any more," says cyclist Zahra Alizada.

"Whether it is in sports or studies, we want to prove ourselves. We don't want to be imprisoned any more as we were during the Taliban era."

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