



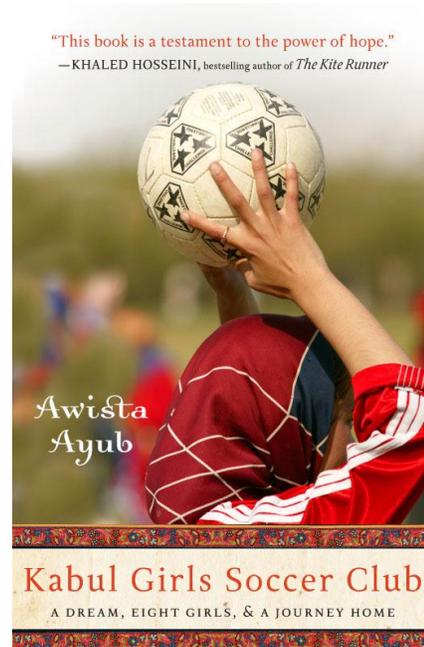
the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Kabul Girls Soccer Club

Awista Ayub

Review and author interview by Sanem Güner

The London 2012 Olympics are a few months away. For most of us, it is just another great sports spectacle. For others, like the Afghan women's boxing team, it is a milestone; a chance to prove themselves as female athletes to the world. Despite major restrictions on their liberties, Afghan women have made inroads in competitive sports such as boxing, martial arts and soccer. Hence it is an opportune time to have a closer look at an inspiring true story of an Afghan-American woman bringing eight Afghan teenagers to the United States for soccer camp and how playing soccer changed the lives of these girls. In the pages of *Kabul Girls Soccer Club*, Awista Ayub interweaves her own story as an Afghan-American, the girls' personal struggle to play soccer and hard-hitting realities like war, oppression, displacement and poverty.



Having experienced 9/11 in the United States, Ayub's grief was amplified when Afghanistan became synonymous with "terrorism" as the training ground of those who planned and carried out the attacks. Despite the fact that her family fled when she was two years old, and had not gone back, Ayub felt Afghanistan was her homeland, and that she had a role to play in changing the fate of the country. So she initiated the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange (AYSE), a program that would bring Afghan youth to the United States to train in various sports. Her first program aimed to recruit girls from Kabul (with the help of an international nongovernmental organization called Roots of Peace) to attend soccer camp in the United States and then participate in the Afghan-American soccer cup tournament. In the book, Ayub's recounts this experience from the viewpoints of the girls, against the backdrop of their daily lives and challenges in Kabul. Five different stories in the book shed light on different realities in Afghanistan.

Samira, Robina, Freshta, Laila, Ariana and Miriam come from different backgrounds. Miriam, Samira and Robina grew up during the civil war and then under Taliban rule. Freshta and Laila did not witness those periods because they were immigrants in Pakistan until they were eleven and twelve. Ariana, who comes from a better off family, has her heart set on becoming a soccer player, yet faces much resistance and ridicule from boys her age when she tries to practice. The girls all have some traumatic element in their lives – whether it is a family member tortured by the Taliban, having to live in extreme poverty, or longing for their homeland. Their paths cross when they decide to play soccer and participate in AYSE.

One of the striking stories is that of Robina, a top student from a poor family, who has to leave school during the Taliban period. Robina is schooled in an alternative institution called *Aschiana* (the Nest) where Dari and the Qur'an were taught. One day, a Talib visits the school for an inspection and Robina

has to recite a verse in Arabic. She recites it so beautifully and the Taliban is so moved that he donates money to the school. Unfortunately her encounter with the Taliban is not confined to this incident: one of her brothers is severely beaten up at the Taliban headquarters, and one time she sees body parts hanging from a pole on the street – possibly a punishment by the Taliban. Despite these traumatizing incidents and a difficult life, once the Taliban is gone, Robina enjoys her life in Afghanistan. She likes watching soccer on television and dreams of herself playing for Afghanistan and winning trophies for her country. When an opportunity presents itself, Robina’s mother decides to send her to the United States for soccer camp, in an effort to show her an alternative life outside of Afghanistan. Little does she know that upon Robina’s return, she will be mocked by her friends and neighbors. “Oh, you have relations with Americans” boys in her neighborhood mock her, “does that mean you’re American?” (p. 87). Her mother consoles her and explains to her the conservatism in their society: “From the time of Daoud Khan, Afghans have been consumed by the bitterness of the world (...) Change takes time” (p. 87) Indeed, the reader understands that Afghan girls still have a long way to go when Robina prays: “Insh’Allah that I may go to school. Insh’Allah that I may play soccer.”



Soccer practice. Photo by Awista Ayub, Kabul, 2006.

In telling the stories of these girls, Ayub doubtlessly wants to inspire girls like them, but when doing that, she is always very realistic and emphasizes the downs as much as the ups. There is no clean victory or success in any of the stories. Ayub makes it clear that there is a price to pay for any success, whether it’s homesickness, falling out with your family, or facing pressure from society. The book is as much a story of failures and frustration as of perseverance and victory. The girls also have to struggle with their bodies as women because they are playing a physically demanding sport and have to wear outfits that are not traditionally acceptable. Ayub admits that her project “put a group of young Kabul girls at the center of a struggle for acceptance – a struggle that continues today” (p. 158)

Ayub asks herself and the reader a crucial question at the outset: What are the limits of adopting modern practices in societies with deeply-rooted traditions, especially those that stem from religion? The response to that question, according to Ayub, defines this very moment when Afghanistan is “grappling with the profound issue of the type of country it will become”. She hints that one can push those limits in ways that seem very simple yet require perseverance. In Ayub’s words, “a ball can start a revolution”.

In the book, Kabul is presented as a sophisticated stage where a duality between tradition and modernity play out. Ayub describes it as a “dense amalgam of thousands of years of conflicting cultures” (p. 22) and an “intersection of cultures, high art, extravagant history, continual war, and wretched poverty” (p. 23). We see Samira riding in a car through the hustle and bustle of Kabul, among the busy streets lined with produce vendors on one side, tents of the nomadic Kuchi tribe on the other, then moving into the “sedate streets of Wazir Akbar Khan district with universities, schools and embassies [and] homes with elegant patterning carved into the walls” (p. 24). Kabul is a chaotic symbiosis of rich and poor, old and new, traditional and modern.

Ayub’s own story courses through the pages of the book. Her relationship with Afghanistan and Afghan culture has been (self-admittedly) confined to her private sphere: her family worked hard to teach her and her siblings some of the traditional crafts and to keep Pashto as the language of the household, but these were not sufficient. Ayub perceived her “hyphenated identity” at best as unimportant (p.155), she thought that who she is as a person should be beyond any nationality or familial roots. Her perception changes somewhat after 9/11 and with the AYSE experience.

In the epilogue, Ayub presents several interviews to bring the reader up to date about the current situation of women in sports. She presents a cautiously hopeful picture. She notes that there is still that wall of conservatism among high ranking officials (such as the chief of physical education at the Afghan Ministry of Education), yet there are inspiring stories such as Sabrina Saqib’s and Shukria Hakmat’s. Saqib is one of the youngest members of the Afghan parliament elected in 2005. She became a basketball player and would eventually face the challenging task of recruiting women for Afghanistan’s basketball team. Hekmat is the deputy for Afghan women’s participation in the Olympics and in her own words, built women’s sports in Afghanistan “from the ground up”, making house calls and recruiting women for Olympic sports (p. 225). Both women, says Ayub, see “women’s sports as a sign of peace and progress in Afghanistan” (p. 226). It is with this cautious hopefulness that one puts down the book, especially on the eve of a period of uncertainty with U.S. withdrawal scheduled for 2014.

Q&A with Author

Awista Ayub an expert on issues related to Muslim women in sports, previously served as education and health officer at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C. Currently she serves as the director of South Asia programs for Seeds of Peace. In addition, she is an advisory panel member and contributor to ESPN's women's sports site, espnW.com. She participated in the Hollings Center’s Next Generation Dialogue on the [Future of Afghan-U.S. Relations](#).



Awista Ayub (Courtesy of the University of Rochester)

Sanem Güner interviewed Ayub to discuss *Kabul Girls Soccer Club* (reprinted in hardcover under the title *However Tall the Mountain*, available by [Hyperion Books](#)).

Güner: When you're talking about the girls' first game in the U.S., you say that you were expecting the girls to lose (p.15). What did you mean by that?

Ayub: It was not simply that I expected them to lose, but it was more that I, by thrusting them too early into competition, failed to properly respect what the competitive arena can do to an athlete. I knew to a narrow degree what I was hoping to accomplish when I decided to bring the team to the States; that they would be exposed not only to the technical aspects of playing soccer, but they would also be exposed to the discipline of participating in organized athletics and then be able to take those valuable lessons gained, both on and off the field, back with them to Afghanistan. What I didn't think through, though, was the level of competition they would be thrust into during the trip and, as an avid sports fan and athlete, I forgot how conditioned I had become to competing in games. I inherently understood that the nature of competition means that at the end of the game there will be one team, or individual, who is considered the victor and the other who is not. As someone conditioned to what competitions entail, I failed to take into account that these girls had rarely, if ever, participated in a competition that would label them in such a manner and, further, had forgotten the deep emotions that are connected to a game. It was at that moment that I fully realized what they would face that day, but I also realized that it was also something that they, by participating in sports, would have to become conditioned to as well.

Güner: You say that "the younger generations had no memory of a time without war and destruction". How do you think this manifests today's in Afghanistan's youth?

Ayub: I think for those of us who grew up outside of a conflict zone, it is difficult to understand the overwhelmingly negative impact of growing up in a culture of war. These girls, and millions of other Afghan children, grew up over the back-drop of war which brought violence and conflict into their lives on a daily basis. Certainly, living under these circumstances has impacted the manner in which they handle conflict in their own lives as they were likely used to seeing issues resolved through arguments and, in some cases, violence. With the team what I noticed was that their initial reaction to dealing with conflict in their own lives—both on and off the field—was to immediately react with arguing rather than calmly talking through their issues of conflict, though one cannot blame them for this. While these girls did not participate in organized sports until their trip to the States, I think the soccer field became a new space that afforded them an opportunity to change their behavior and to learn how best to deal with conflict. So, while I was initially surprised by the arguments, I came to better understand where it stemmed from.

Güner: In the epilogue, the Afghan education minister talks about gender-segregated spaces as a step towards granting girls more freedom especially in sports – like the Iran model. How do you feel about that?

Ayub: In looking at the sport culture of women in other Muslim countries, girls are participating in sports at various levels, and are doing so in spaces reserved only for women. This is the case in Iran, and Morocco as well as many other Muslim countries. By providing a safe gender-segregated space for young female athletes, local sports bodies are actually taking the proper steps in order to increase female participation into the athletic arena, as oftentimes, family support is a necessary prerequisite for many of these athletes. By building upon their success to date and from learning from other Muslim countries in the region, Afghanistan will continue to make positive strides toward providing more opportunities for Afghan female athletes and can only do so by continuing to be aware of their local needs, rather than trying to conform to someone else's standards.