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17. Across the Wall



Stars in her eyes (Indian Express, 2007)



Just 13 years old, Afsana Mansuri has already jumped over the wall. The wall between her *jhuggi* and the local basketball court. The wall made by society, for a girl who washes

utensils for a living. The gender wall her mother had put up for her.

Today, Afsana herself has become a strong wall of NBA, the Nagpada Basketball Association of Mumbai.

Today, she is the source of strength for five other girls who have come to the basketball court, leaving behind the problems of their everyday lives.

Today, she is the star of a young team. This team has managed to surprise some of Mumbai's club teams. With a lot of guts and courage, the team has reached the semi-finals of a district-level tournament.

Meeting the team

We read in the newspaper about Afsana and the Nagpada basketball team. We thought of meeting these girls and introducing them to you.

We took the train and got off at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus Station (railway station). From there we walked towards Nagpada. It took us just twenty minutes to reach there.

There we met Afsana and the other girls of the Nagpada Basketball Association. Read the interview with the team members.



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Meet this special team!

Meet Afsana, Zarin, Khushnoor and Afreen. At first the girls were quiet, but once they started, they just did not stop!

Zarin began, “My house is just in front of this ground. My brother



used to play here. I would stand in my balcony and watch the boys play. I was in Class VII at that time. Whenever the boys played a match, many people came to watch. The winning team got a lot of praise. Everyone cheered the players. On seeing all this, I wished I

could also play. Would I too get a chance to show my talent? I asked the coach, but was afraid. He is a good friend of my father. The coach said, “Why not? If you bring some more girls, you can make a team. Then I will teach you.”



Find out

- ♦ Is there any place to play near your house?
- ♦ What do people play there? Who plays there?
- ♦ Do the children of your age also get a chance to play there?
- ♦ What other things happen at this place?

Teacher's Note : Give opportunities to children to share their experiences about games. Discuss these to build children's understanding on issues, such as, similar games for boys and girls, equal opportunities for all while playing, etc.



We asked – Was it easy to make a beginning?

Khushnoor: At first my parents refused. But when I insisted they agreed.

Afsana: My mother works in the flats and sends us to school. I also help her. When I told her about my plans to play basketball, Ammi got angry. She said, “Girls do not play basketball. Do your work, go to school and study hard. No need to go to the ground to play.” But when my friends and Coach Sir talked to her, Ammi agreed.

Afreen : We were not allowed, because we are girls. My grandmother gets very angry with all of us. But still, we three sisters come here to play. Grandmother scolds us and even scolds our Coach Sir! She tells us, “You need proper equipment to play. You need to have a lot of milk for strength. Where will the money for all this come from?” But daddy understands our feelings. He even teaches us some special moves used in the game. My daddy also used to play on this ground when he was young. He did not have proper shoes or clothes. He used to practice with a plastic ball.

Daddy tells us that Bacchu Khan was the coach when he used to play. He saw my daddy playing once. He realised that the boy played very well and that he should be trained properly. He gave proper shoes and clothes to my daddy. My daddy could have become a very good player. But because of his responsibilities at home, he left the game and took up a job. So he wants us to play and become good players.



Tell

- ◆ Has anyone ever stopped you from playing some games? Which games?
- ◆ Who stopped you and why? What did you do then?
- ◆ Did anyone help you and encourage you to play?



We asked – Tell us about your team

One girl: We felt a bit strange in the beginning. We were the first girls' team here. People used to come and watch us practicing. They were curious to see how girls would play basketball. Now people are no longer surprised. They have begun to accept that we girls can also play well.

Afsana: I was eleven years old when we first started playing. At that time we were not allowed to go anywhere else to play a match. It has been two years since then. Now we go to other places also for matches. But all this could happen only because of our hard work and Sir's coaching.

Another girl : Yes, we really work hard. Sir is also very strict. We first jog together and then do our exercises. Sir teaches us how to play the game well. We practice how to keep the ball with us, to dodge the players of the other team, how to throw the ball in the basket, to score a goal, to pass the ball well, and to run fast on court.

Afreen: Sir says, "While playing, don't think you are girls. Play



like a player. Keep playing even if you get a little injured." We support each other and say – Come on, get up, you will be fine!" Now our game has improved a lot. Everyone says that we play as well as the boys' team.

Teacher's Note : Make different groups of children in class to give them a chance to play different games. Try to encourage the children to play for the team, not for themselves.



One girl: We also play with boys' teams. We want them to play with us as equals. They should not be lenient because we are girls. Sometimes we get angry when the boys imitate us. But we take it as a challenge and correct our mistakes. If the boys try to cheat, we scold them!



Discuss

- ◆ Do girls and boys play different types of games in your school or neighbourhood? If yes, then which games do the boys play and which do the girls play?
- ◆ Do you think that there is any difference between the games and the way they are played by boys and girls?
- ◆ Should the games for boys and the girls be different? What do you think?

We said – Tell us more about your team.

One girl : Our team is very special. Our team is united. Even if we quarrel, we quickly make up and forget about it. Here we have learnt how to stay and play together. Some of the girls from our team got a chance to play as part of the Mumbai team. The match was at Sholapur.

Zarin : When we went to Sholapur we found that the team had girls from different parts of the state. They did not talk to us nicely and treated us like juniors. They would not even give us a chance to play properly. We felt very bad. There was no cooperation at all in that team.

Teacher's Note : If possible, try to develop an understanding in children that players are recognised by their ability to play rather than by their caste or economic status.



During the match I threw the ball to one of the team members. But she could not catch it. In turn, she started scolding me, blaming me for the mistake. In all this misunderstanding we lost the match. But this never happens in our own team. If we do miss a basket because of someone's mistake, we do not get angry. We say, "Never mind, next time we will do better!" It is most important to support each other, because we are all part of a team.



Afreen: After playing in Sholapur we realised what was special about our team. Cooperation between us is our strength. We understand and support each other well. Even if every player is

excellent, the team can lose a match if all do not play together as a team. To play as a team it is important to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses.



Write

- ◆ Have you ever played as part of a team of your class, school or neighbourhood? Whom did you play with? What game did you play?
- ◆ What is the difference between playing for yourself and for the team?
- ◆ While playing in a team would you like to play for yourself or for the team? Why?
- ◆ Is your team like the team Afsana played with at Sholapur or like the Nagpada team? How?



We said – You have done so much. What next?



Afsana: We have been playing well. So we have got a chance to go to many places. We have played for our city and our state. We hope to work hard and play for our country some day.

Yes, then we will also be popular like the cricketers!

We all want to play well. We should bring glory to our area and our country. We want to show that the Indian girls team can win a gold medal! We will make this happen.



Discuss

- ◆ Have you ever taken part in some game or competition from your school or area? How did you feel?
- ◆ Did you go to some other place to play? What was that place like? How did you like going to that place?
- ◆ Have you seen matches being played between India and other countries? Which ones?

Teacher's Note : It is necessary to develop an understanding among children that players are recognised by their perseverance rather than at what level they are playing. If a child plays or participates at the school level with full devotion, that should be the real achievement. It is not important what position he or she secures. In fact, ranking and unhealthy competition needs to be avoided.



- ◆ We all know about the cricketers of India, and we all like them. Do people also know and like the Indian players who play some other games? (Yes or No). What do you feel about it? Do you know the players of the Indian football or kabaddi team?

We asked – Did you face some other difficulties?

Khushnoor: To tell the truth, we have not got all this very easily. As girls, even to be able to start playing was difficult. We had to convince our families. Sometimes we even had to fight. Even today not many girls can play like this. Forget games, earlier some people did not even allow girls to study. My mother wanted to do many things, but she never got a chance. So my mother encourages me to take part in all activities – like games, swimming and drama.

Afsana: Even now, we are supposed to go home as soon as we finish playing. The boys go here and there, and can chitchat till late. No one says anything. After coming from school, I help my mother with the cleaning work in two or three houses, do my studies and then come here to play. I also help at home. If my brother wants tea and he makes it for himself, then mother says, “He has three sisters. Yet, he has to work.”

One girl : Now, just look at Zarin’s younger brother. He is only five years old but he says, “Mummy, why do you send *didi* to play? She does not look nice playing like that on the ground.” Ask him if he will play and he says, “I am a boy, of course I will play!”

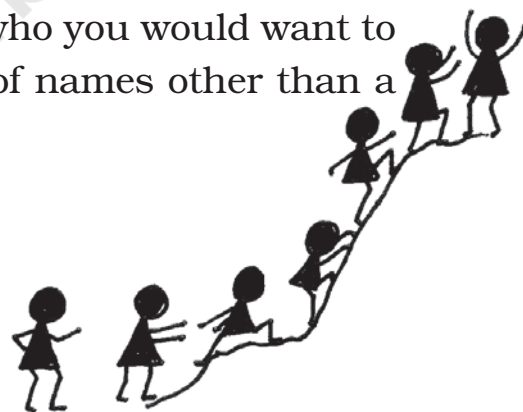
Afsana: But it is good for everyone to play. We have now realised, how much we benefit from playing. I want to be such a good player that other girls and boys would wish to be like me.





Discuss

- ◆ What would happen if girls are not allowed to play games, to study or do some other work of their choice?
- ◆ How would you feel if you were not allowed to take part in some game or drama?
- ◆ Have you heard of any women players? Name them and the games they play.
- ◆ In which areas other than sports have you heard of women getting recognition?
- ◆ Are these women less known than men? Why?
- ◆ How would you find the world to be, if girls never got a chance to take part in games, drama or dance? How would you feel if such a thing happened to boys?
- ◆ Do you know of any woman or girl who you would want to be like when you grow up? (Think of names other than a film actor or a model)



What next?

Afreen: I just want to say that if you have some dreams for yourself, give your best to fulfil them.

Khushnoor: If you have a wish or a dream, have courage to speak about it. If you don't do this now, you may regret later.



We said – The newspaper wrote about all of you. Now students will read about you in this book. How do you feel?

Afreen: We are so happy about it that we have no words to explain our happiness. We now feel we must play even better, to make our area and our country famous.

All Girls : Yes, this is our wish too.

Coach Sir

The coach who made this team, Noor Khan told us – “This part of Mumbai is very crowded. This is the only playground in this area. This is our small ‘Bacchu Khan playground.’ A person named Mustafa Khan used to live in our area. Everyone was afraid of him. But children were very fond of him, so everyone started calling him Bacchu Khan. There was no ground then, it was just muddy land. Bacchu Khan used to train children to play. We were among those children. It is because of Bacchu Khan’s devotion and training that players from this

area are able to compete with the teams of other countries. Like Bacchu Khan, I have trained the children of this area. Today our team has some who play at the international level. Some have even won the Arjuna Award.”

Noor Khan continued – “In the last few years we have also prepared a girls team here. Our girls play for the Maharashtra State team. They practice well

with good discipline. Our girls and boys come from different types of families. Some are from poor homes, some from richer. Some study in Urdu medium and some in English. But once they come here, they all make a team.”





Think and write

- ◆ The newspaper report said, “Afsana has jumped over the wall. The gender wall that her mother had put up for her.” Think and write in your own words, what was this wall? What do you understand by ‘gender bias’?



What we have learnt

- ◆ Should games for boys and girls be different? Think and write what you feel.
- ◆ If you are made the leader of a team, how will you prepare your team?

