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Review - The Long Game: Aliya Soomro's Boxing Journey

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Abstract

The Long Game: Aliya Soomro's Boxing Journey” is a poignant and uplifting radio documentary that goes beyond the typical sports narrative. It offers an in-depth analysis of gender norms, societal obstacles, and human resilience, emphasizing the power of podcasting to promote distinct and marginalized voices.

Keywords

Women, sports, empowerment, stereotypes, global south, Pakistan

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The Long Game: Aliya Soomro's Boxing Journey, is part of a podcast series by *Foreign Policy* magazine that highlights stories of courage and conviction on and off the pitch. Hosted by the insightful athlete Ibtihaj Muhammad, the episode explores the life of an amazing young female athlete from Lyari, Karachi, a working-class area within the heart of Pakistan's most populous city. The episode transcends conventional sports storytelling and serves as a lens through which we examine the intricacies of gender conventions, societal issues, and the achievements of the human spirit.

As a Pakistani, I find the podcast topic exceptionally effective and a brave piece of journalism. In Pakistan, women encounter gender stereotypes in their families and communities that portray sports and physical activities as unfeminine. As women get older, their opportunities to participate in sports and physical activities diminish. By opposing the system, the young women in the Long Game adopt a variety of ways to pursue their interests. Lyari is one of the many localities in Karachi that has faced extreme outbreaks of violence and crime in the past two decades (Sumrin, 2016). Displaying great resilience, in the male-dominated field of boxing, Aliya is often referred to as a change maker (Laar, Perveen & Ashraf, 2022). This success story of a girl from Lyari, reported on by local journalists is therefore powerful and commendable. In this review, I dissect the episode's storytelling and its potential impact on a broader audience.

Conflicts and Power Struggles in Lyari

Lyari is a multi-ethnic, diverse community influenced by migrant waves. Despite the emphasis on Baloch citizens, other ethnic and religious groups coexist here. Once a traditional fishing village, Lyari has faced systemic challenges such as employment loss, industrialization, and extended periods of neglect since the British colonial administration. A situation exacerbated by post-partition migration. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), a popular political party in Pakistan, first earned popularity in Lyari by promising stable land tenure, but people began to feel abandoned over time, and the development of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), another regional political party, in the 1980s isolated the neighborhood. In Lyari, ongoing hostilities are set against a backdrop of historical neglect, political upheavals, and socioeconomic disadvantage (Kirmani, 2015).

The conflicts in Lyari are situated within the city's and the region's evolving relationship with power. The fight for land ownership, aggravated by extortion, is linked to Karachi's unregulated population development. Strategically situated near a lucrative financial hub, Lyari faced fierce rivalry from a variety of factions and since the 1980s, criminal entities have been interwoven with politics. Figures such as Rehman Dakait and Uzair Baloch, who were initially linked with illegal operations, rose to prominence. Despite being outlawed, the People's Aman Committee (PAC) grew into a dominant force in Lyari. The PAC, which began as a deterrent to violence, subsequently cemented gang authority in the region. Conflicts erupted owing to schisms among the gangs, resulting in bloodshed and state involvement (Kirmani, 2015) This is the backdrop against which *The Long Game* plays out.

Structure and Storytelling

As the documentary begins, podcast host, Ibtihaj Muhammad shares her *personal* experiences in sport, creating a relatable connection with the audience in the opening moments of the episode. "Growing up, sports was more than just a game for me. It was a source of empowerment and resilience," she reflects. This personal touch is a strong and compelling entry point, drawing listeners into the broader context of Aliya Soomro's story. That story is not only vivid and engaging but a compassionate piece of work, encouraging audiences to connect emotionally with the subject matter.

Researchers have argued that, unlike visual storytelling, where emotions are portrayed through actions and expressions, audio stories create a unique space where voices and sounds are intimately conveyed directly into the audience's ears (Lindgren, 2016). There are ambient sounds from Lyari's streets, a sensory immersion into the community's past with archival echoes of bloodshed and sounds of present-day vibrancy. The boxing gym's rhythmic thuds of punches and shuffling feet add to the dynamic soundscape, bringing Aliya's training to life. We hear discussions in Urdu between Aliya and her mother. Here the auditory medium has the capacity to create a profound connection between the voices in Lyari and the audience, particularly if they are listening on headphones (Lindgren, 2016).

As the episodes unfold, Aliya's life is vividly portrayed against the backdrop of a challenging environment marked by poverty, high crime, and conservative

societal norms. The narrative skillfully unfolds, from Aliya's initial foray into the world of boxing and the scepticism she faced due to her age and gender from her family. Aliya's determination is echoed in her words as she recounts, "I was after everyone in the house to start boxing and make a name for the family in the sport, which no one else managed to do. Once I decided I want to learn, I made everyone's life miserable. I kept insisting, insisting that I wanted to train." Hers is a compelling journey of resilience, defiance, and societal transformation.

The podcast thus also sheds light on the broader challenges faced by women and girls pursuing sports in Pakistan, particularly in more conservative areas and communities. The host further highlights Aliya's dedication to boxing, despite limited resources and society's disapproval, showcasing her exceptional achievements, including maintaining an undefeated record in her weight class. By doing so, the host strikes a solid balance between mentioning problems and triumphs while keeping the audience optimistic.

One intriguing aspect of the podcast is its exploration of the positive impact of the Pakistan Rangers (Pakistan paramilitary forces) in Aliya's life. The financial support, stipends, and educational opportunities provided by the DG Rangers underscores the potential for positive change when influential institutions recognize and nurture talent in marginalized communities. However, the Rangers' support and funding of athletes, is contradictory to their role as a state security force and controversial. This account will seem ambiguous for those aware of the country's dynamics and the role of Rangers especially in Karachi (Suhail, 2015). While the podcast presents a positive narrative about the Rangers' involvement, it is essential to consider potential biases or influences, perhaps in line with *Foreign Policy's* editorial stance, or broader geopolitical considerations that may shape the portrayal of state institutions. In his (2015) article, 'The clothes have no emperor! Reflections on the crisis of violence in Lyari Town, Pakistan', Suhail notes:

Suffice it to note for now, that at this point in most public narratives they enter the picture claiming to be the solution or the only instrument of control and order, at the inauguration of the crisis. This is what statist discourses often maintain. Instead, the Rangers' interests in Karachi—which have only recently come to the fore in public discourse—have been systematic and long-term. Well before the time when Lyari began its career as the site of a crisis. That, arguably, began in 2011.

The Long Game then delves into the personal and family sacrifices made by Aliya and her family to support her boxing career. The portrayal of financial difficulties, instances of going without food, and the challenges faced by Aliya's father, a construction worker, adds depth and a human angle to the story. It paints a poignant picture of the hurdles faced by individuals pursuing their dreams in the face of adversity which many audiences in similar conditions may relate to.

The host and podcast producers effectively weave together these personal narratives with broader themes of community development and women's empowerment. In her own words, Aliya reflects on the initial scepticism she faced: "People would tell me that I don't look like a boxer, and said, 'Look at your condition.'" Her tenacity, however, proved them wrong, and she shares, "After I fought in the game, people said, 'The one who doesn't look like a boxer is the one.'

Aliya's journey is more than just a sports narrative; rather it is a story of societal change and challenge and the use of multiple perspectives creates a more nuanced understanding of the societal difficulties faced by women in Pakistan. For example,; "When I started, my father was told, 'Don't you have any shame? You're teaching boxing to your daughter. Teach her namaz. Make her recite Quran.'" Says Aliya. Aliya's mother recounts how neighbours chastised her decision to involve her daughter in boxing, arguing that she should instead focus on her religious education. Furthermore, we learn that Lyari already has a reputation for producing outstanding athletes. Mariya, the narrator in the podcast notes, "Some of Pakistan's best footballers are from there, and the neighbourhood loves boxing so much that Muhammad Ali himself visited Lyari back in the 1980s."

Aliya's struggles, are illuminated by her spirit: "For equipment, I faced a lot of difficulties. Shoes were torn. Bag was torn. There was no track suit, no boxing kit." Yet, she persists, creatively finding ways to continue her pursuit. Stories of female boxers may not be unique, but this podcast is important for the way it uncovers the intricacies, contradictions, challenges and achievements of the people of Lyari, whose voices are too seldom heard. The community's scepticism about female boxing is heard alongside their pride in their athletes. Aliya Soomro's journey from a young girl in one of Karachi's most troubled areas to a promising boxer, stands as an inspirational story that highlights the transformative power of sports for women and girls.

‘Aliya Soomro’s Boxing Journey’ is episode 10 of *The Long Game*, a co-production of Doha Debates and *Foreign Policy*. It can be found at <https://foreignpolicy.com/podcasts/the-long-game/?episode=boxing-provides-a-path-out-of-poverty-for-girls-in-pakistan>

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