

SPEECH 30th NOVEMBER 2022

Q1

For almost 10 years I have been fighting for girls and women's right to participate in an equal playing field. As an Afghan Muslim refugee in a western society, I have been challenged both on and off the football field verbally. In my time inside the white lines as a player I was facing excluding club structures that limited my potential and saw nothing but an aggressive Muslim, and in my time outside the white lines as a coach I am still facing the challenges of being a minority woman in a white man's world and being a woman in a so-called man's game. I don't mind being a minority. I take pride in it. And if there is one thing that football has taught me as a player of the game, it is that hard work and dedication can make you go far. No matter your background or status in society - hard work will always conquer all. Many of the players who are playing in the world cup right now, come from minority backgrounds. So, no matter what the barriers are, it is possible to make it anyway. But that doesn't mean we should accept them. I can't accept the fact that being a minority often leads to limitations. There was a time where I used to tell myself that if I just do better than everyone else, then they have nothing on me - but when you see even the best of the best players in the world, become victims of hate speech, you really have to dig deep to find the motivation to keep going.

There will always be challenges in this imperfect world, and whenever we are facing one of them or become aware of one, we should try to overcome it even if it is not fair and even if it does not affect us directly. Because in the process of overcoming these challenges we learn exactly how the challenge is built and how it can be prevented. We should respect that process, but also make sure to start it today before tomorrow. I believe that it is our responsibility as fellow human beings to correct what is wrong. That is also why I became a coach – not because I fell in love with a perfect game, but because I fell in love with an imperfect one that even did everything it could to push me out – so you can say that I have always had a love-hate relationship with football. But it was never the game, it was the people directing it.

There has been a lot of noise about Qatar, especially in Denmark. But there is something seriously wrong with the way we operate if we as democratic western countries with millions of civilized people let our activism depend on an armband. Is that really all we got? That said I also believe that national teams including the Danish football team have a responsibility of using their platform to serve human rights, not only because they are representing all of us, but also because they are humans first and then athletes. We should never distance ourselves from our humanity. I am a human first and then a Muslim. I am a human first and then a woman. We are humans first, and then workers to whatever organization we refer to. So, if we lean towards humanity in every decision we make, then how can we go wrong?

Q2

Ever since the Council of Europe for the first time invited me to give my testimony on international women's day, I have felt like I have a voice that goes beyond the white lines on the football pitch. Each time you have invited me and provided me with an opportunity to speak by sharing your platform in front of multiple stakeholders, I always return home with a

heart full of hope and the comfort in knowing that I do not stand alone anymore. But this is only a part of it. Because surely when you, The Council of Europe, have been willing to listen to me, just a regular Afghan football coach from Denmark, then others have immediately followed in your footsteps. The impact of your willingness to listen has been huge to me. In the last few months, I have experienced the narrative in my city about female minorities in football changing. Your interest in me has made people take me more seriously and made the local and national media in Denmark interested in my activities. When the media is interested in my activities, they write about it and that also means someone will read about it. And those people who read about it are exposed to diversity when it is at its finest - and maybe these stories about me have been the ones neutralizing the discriminating perspectives of girls and women like me who are used to being perceived as either suppressed females with no power or Muslim extremists full of power. To mention just a few examples of how daily life have become much easier: strangers have become more tolerant, local politicians have become more willing to listen, leaders and managers have become more sensitive, and parents have become more understanding. It has become easier to push through my messages and create change. A special moment I want to share with you, was after our last meeting in Turkey. When I returned home and got ready for the weekly football practice with the girls and women, I noticed local Turkish moms standing outside the pitch, holding their daughters' hands wanting to sign up their daughters.

Thanks to your attention.

Your faith in me has given me courage and faith to the extent that I just recently founded my own organization called GLOBAL where I am working to develop female football ambassadors from minority backgrounds all over the world. Through tailor-made educational programmes I contribute to the development of female football role-models in socially disadvantaged areas by using the power of football to achieve sustainable development goal nr 10. Right now, next to my studies and my work, I am focusing on innovative ways to create more inclusive sport facilities. A few days ago, I got my building permission from the Municipality, alongside their support, to build a "female" football pitch that will be designed by local girls and women to attract more females to the game. I have raised almost a half million but still have a long way to go, while fighting for the financial survival of my new organization. But this struggle is a privilege, because I have reached longer than I ever would without your interest – so thank you Council of Europe.