

Accelerating women's advancement is an economic imperative that creates higher growth, increases prosperity and stronger communities. To inspire others and celebrate the achievements of women, the EY Muslim Network is publishing a series of articles, putting the spotlight on some outstanding, talented and courageous women from all walks of life, faiths and ethnicities. Their stories will look at the challenges and issues they faced en-route to their professional and personal success.

To find out more on what EY is doing to achieve gender parity, visit:

ey.com/Women-Fast-Forward
#better questions

EY Muslim Network

The EY Muslim Network provides a platform for our members to connect, inspire and promote a better understanding of Islam and its key values within EY, with our clients, other faiths and society as a whole.

Rimla Akhtar

Women athletes are travelling a steep road towards gender parity – from total exclusion, through to the introduction of female athletes in the 1900 Olympics, to 2012 when, for the first time in the history of the Olympics, there were women events in all sports. However, gender parity has not yet been achieved and barriers and biases remain that inhibit women participating in sports, from being a player to coaching and management.

In this edition of Women in Industry, we look at the story of Rimla Akhtar, a woman who is determined to accelerate the journey to gender parity in sports. She is one of only six women sitting on the Football Association Council and the first ever Muslim and Asian female to be elected onto it.

She was born in London to Pakistani immigrants. Growing up in the 80's, she and her two brothers faced discrimination due to their Asian heritage. In Rimla's case, she has also had to deal with discrimination due to her faith, as she wears the head scarf. She says, 'People around me thought that being covered would impact my ability to compete but I never let it get in the way. I would get questioned about whether my clothing made me too hot and whether fasting would mean I wouldn't be able to compete – but it was never an issue for me and I was even more determined to prove that my faith wasn't an obstacle to my ability to participate.'

Rimla began playing football at school at the age of eight. As her skills developed, she realised her on-pitch experiences diminished the difficulties she faced off-pitch: here was a place she felt comfortable, where her abilities were what were appreciated and celebrated. In 2001, she joined the British Muslim Women's Futsal team and in 2005, her skills, passion and dedication resulted in gaining the captaincy.

Whilst in Tehran participating in the Muslim Women's Games, she noticed that the facilities and opportunities for Iranian women in sports outshone those available for women in Britain. And so, on returning to the UK she was determined to change the situation and increase female participation in sports, focusing on women from minority ethnic and faith groups. She became Chair of the Muslim Women's Sports Foundation (MWSF) and set about developing a grassroots strategy to provide a foundation for Muslim women's participation in sport. The MWSF successfully ran the 'Born to Succeed' project to create role models within the Muslim community.



Image: courtesy of Rimla Akhtar

This resulted in sports clubs being established across the country as well as many female coaches, referees and volunteers within sport. It also saw the first ever MWSF Ambassador Awards, which highlighted the talent of international sportswomen such as Ibtihaj Muhammad and local volunteers such as Maryam Amatullah.

Rimla is now a leading expert in inclusion and diversity in sport and business and runs a successful consultancy in this field. Prior to this, she studied Chemistry and Management at Imperial College London and worked during this time for a year at EY. She then moved to PwC as a graduate and also became Chair of the MWSF, continuing her work to improve the situation for women's sport whilst studying for her CA and working globally. She still plays, albeit as a hobby rather than competitively.

Her work has been recognised by many and in 2013 she was awarded the Sunday Times and Sky Sports Sportswomen of the Year. Last year she was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours and she was also recognised as the 15th most influential woman in sport in the 2015 list compiled by The Independent.

Editor: Robbina Qureshi, Senior Consultant, EY

"We should reset the boundaries to suit the community rather than limiting ourselves to norms – set our own standards, do the right thing and welcome others to join us on our journey."

Rimla Akhtar

About EY

EY is a global leader in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services. The insights and quality services we deliver help build trust and confidence in the capital markets and in economies the world over. We develop outstanding leaders who team to deliver on our promises to all of our stakeholders. In so doing, we play a critical role in building a better working world for our people, for our clients and for our communities.

EY refers to the global organization, and may refer to one or more, of the member firms of Ernst & Young Global Limited, each of which is a separate legal entity. Ernst & Young Global Limited, a UK company limited by guarantee, does not provide services to clients. For more information about our organization, please visit ey.com.

Ernst & Young LLP

The UK firm Ernst & Young LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales with registered number OC300001 and is a member firm of Ernst & Young Global Limited.

Ernst & Young LLP, 1 More London Place, London, SE1 2AF.

© 2016 Ernst & Young LLP. Published in the UK.
All Rights Reserved.

ED None

1441859.indd (UK) 04/16. Artwork by Creative Services Group Design.

Information in this publication is intended to provide only a general outline of the subjects covered. It should neither be regarded as comprehensive nor sufficient for making decisions, nor should it be used in place of professional advice. Ernst & Young LLP accepts no responsibility for any loss arising from any action taken or not taken by anyone using this material.

ey.com/uk