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Farmers and football: The Vietnamese women scoring big on the field

Legs stiff from long days in the rice terraces of northern Vietnam, scores of female farmers dressed in colorful cloth headbands and skirts gather on a gravel pitch for a game of football. The all-female squads of Huc Dong commune, a mountainous village only 40 kilometers from the Chinese border, have little time to practice and may spend months away from the sport when it's time to tend their crops. But the com-

story in women's football in Vietnam, with the national side multiple South East Asian championship winners. Trying to catch a pass from her teammate, striker May Thi Kim bumps against her competition as she aims for the goal on the community's gravel hill-top stadium overlooking the paddy and bamboo-covered valley. Her team from Mo Tuc village is facing off against friends from neighboring

ago. "I told the youth union they must let us women play."

Skirts shortened, shirts loosened

Kim and her fellow players in Huc Dong commune — 14 in all across two teams-play in black skirts, long-sleeved blue shirts and headbands that have been part of their traditional dress for generations. "There is no difference playing football in either the traditional clothes or sportswear," Kim told AFP before the match. That said, their skirts have been shortened, shirts loosened and some of the women play with colourful long football socks. Midfielder La Thi Thao, 15, says she might be more comfortable in regular shorts and T-shirt, but is happy to show off the clothing of her tiny community, which numbers just over 2,000. It helps "people, including tourists, understand us better", she said.

'It hurt every muscle'

All the players in Huc Dong, including Kim, make a living from hard grind on the terraced paddy fields and in the forests, where they grow cinnamon, star anise and pine trees. Their step count climbs into the tens of thousands each day as they traverse hills and navigate rocky streams. But although strong, the women did not have the physical agility at the outset that football demands. "When we first started, it hurt every muscle," Kim said, admitting they had very little time to train due to the combined pressures of farming and housework. Coach May A Cang has trained them hard to improve their flexibility, asking the women to run regularly to limber up their muscles.

It was tough work at first, with the women soaking their legs in warm salt-

ed water and medicinal leaves for pain relief-but gradually their bodies adapted to the training. While Cang has taken on a coaching role, he admits that even he was initially hesitant when his wife, a squad member, wanted to join the team. "I thought her playing could hurt her



legs and then she could not go to the field to work," he said. "But she told me she would train and would know how to play properly." The women believe they have proved their doubters wrong-some have even transferred their passion on to their daughters. "Even if it hurts, we are ok to take it for our love of football," Kim said. — AFP



Ethnic Dao women wearing traditional clothing watch a friendly football match as part of the Soong Co festival celebrations.

mitment of the women, who hail from the San Chi ethnic minority group, has earned them respect-plus a little money and fame-in football-mad Vietnam.

Since they began playing in 2016, the women have featured regularly in national press and across social media. But they are far from the only success

Luc Ngu in a sports event that is part of the traditional Soong Co festival. As the team dribbles the ball closer to the goalposts, spectators-many of whom are their husbands, children and tourists-cheer the women on. "I used to watch football on TV," Kim, 29, told AFP, recalling the beginnings of the team five years



Ethnic San Chi women dressed in traditional costumes wait before the start of a friendly football match.—AFP photos



Ethnic San Chi women dressed in traditional costumes play a friendly football match as part of the Soong Co festival celebrations in northern Vietnam's Quang Ninh province.

Black ballet dancer wins payout in Berlin racism row

A black ballet dancer has been awarded 16,000 euros (\$19,000) in compensation and the renewal of her contract at the Berlin State Ballet in an out-of-court settlement over allegations of racism. Chloe Lopes Gomes, the first black dancer to be hired by the company in 2018, began legal action after her fixed-term contract was not renewed last summer, accusing her bosses of

forcing her to wear white make-up, among other things. "Lopes Gomes' contract will be renewed for one more season and will be terminated at the end of the 2021/22 season," the company said on Thursday after a settlement was reached in a Berlin court.

The 29-year-old French dancer said

in a video posted on Instagram that she would receive 16,000 euros in compensation. "It's a small victory but already a big step for the ballet world and I think this will make a huge change," she said. Lopes Gomes, who has also performed with the Opera de Nice in France and Switzerland's Ballet Bejart, told AFP in

January she had been subjected to continual "harassment" by the company's ballet mistress. In one production, when the ballet mistress was handing around white veils for the dancers to wear, Lopes Gomes said she was told, "I can't give you one. The veil is white and you're black."

On another occasion she was asked to wear white make-up, which felt like "denying my identity," she said. Christiane Theobald, acting director of the Berlin State Ballet, said the dispute with Lopes Gomes had been "a wake-up call" and the company had a "zero-tolerance policy with regard to racism and any form of discrimination". The company has embarked on a "structural transformation", she said, setting up an office where employees can anonymously report experiences of racism or discrimination. —AFP



Chloe Lopes Gomes

Yemeni model detained as Houthis impose morals crackdown

Entisar Al-Hammadi was just starting a career in modeling when she was arrested two months ago in Yemen's rebel-held capital Sanaa, where the Houthis are enforcing a morals campaign. Born to an Ethiopian mother and Yemeni father, the 19-year-old had been pictured online in traditional dress as well as leather and denim jackets, and sometimes she went without a Muslim headscarf. With her high cheekbones and piercing green eyes, Hammadi had several thousand followers on Instagram and Facebook where she posted sessions with local stylists and designers.

The Iran-backed Houthis, who seized the Yemeni capital from the government in 2014 and control much of the north, have not commented on her fate. But Hammadi's lawyer Khaled al-Kamal said she was targeted for working in the fashion industry which the Shiite rebels consider a violation of Islamic culture. Hammadi was snatched on February 20 along with two other models and their friend who was driving them to a photo shoot, the lawyer told AFP. "I still don't know what she is accused of," he said.

According to Kamal there have been attempts to defame the young woman, with unverified local reports alleging that she was involved in prostitution and drugs. "The prosecution is trying to make it look like an act of gross indecency, claiming that my client has let out two strands of her hair out or was not wearing a hijab in a public space," he said. Yemeni society, although conservative, has traditionally allowed space for individual freedoms and cultivated an appreciation of music and leisure. But all that changed with the rise of the Houthis.

Morals crackdown

Hammadi's detention follows a series of incidents in rebel-held areas that illustrate the Houthis' determination to impose their own moral code on Yemenis who have been enduring years of grinding conflict. Restaurants where men and women mingle have been shut down and reports say women have been harassed for wearing belts around their abaya robes, with rebels tearing them off, saying the silhouette they create is too "exciting". An investigation into Hammadi's case was finally opened on April 21, her lawyer said, but the charges against her have not been clarified.



This undated handout picture obtained from the Facebook page of Entisar Al-Hammadi shows her posing for a 'selfie' at an unknown location.—AFP

The friend who was driving her is being prosecuted for possession of hashish, he said, but the two cases have been separated. Essentially, he said, the group was targeted because the Houthis "hate art and artists". "They are trying to accuse her of any crime because of her work, which the Houthis oppose," as if to say "How dare you be a model in a Muslim country?"

'Catastrophic' for women

Kamal has reached out for support from civil society groups which have launched an online campaign under the hashtag #FreeEntisar. "According to the Huthi vision, this issue is a moral one because they are an extremist religious group," said Tawfik Al-Hamidi, head of the SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties. "Entisar's activity and the field of fashion modeling is new in Yemen, and it is something the group cannot accept," said the Vienna-based Yemeni human rights activist.

Violence and discrimination against Yemeni women and girls has worsened as a result of the war that has ravaged the country, leaving tens of thousands of people dead and millions pushed to the brink of famine. Hamidi said the situation of women in Yemen-where Houthis are battling a government backed by a Saudi-led military coalition-is "catastrophic", with all warring sides contributing to it in one way or another. But it is worse under the Houthis, who have adopted an Iranian model of the Muslim moral code. "Arrest, torture, enforced disappearances and sexual violence are particularly prevalent in Sanaa," he said.

The rebels have targeted women in terms of economic rights, freedom of movement, and exclusion from public sector jobs.—AFP