

FUTSAL

Women's futsal team seeks support of federation

National squad already preparing for 2020 championship after last year's disappointment

By **Lea Akil**
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A collection of passionate female futsal players ran across the Saint Joseph University indoor stadium at a steady pace. The sounds in the room varied from squeaking shoes to indistinct communication as the players collectively strove for continental success.

Practice starts at 9 p.m. and takes place five times a week.

The Lebanese national women's futsal team have begun rigorous preparations for the 2020 AFC championship in the hopes of bettering their disappointing performances from 2018.

The unsatisfying results suffered in the previous championship – they were eliminated in the group stages with one win from three matches –

have motivated the players to push harder. However, Maroun El Khoury, the coach of the women's national futsal team, expressed belief that the outcome was partially influenced by the neglect of the federation toward the team.

Khoury was hired to coach the group in February, a few months before the May 2018 AFC futsal championship. After the tournament, he wrote a procedural document, aiming to achieve more promising results in 2020. But weeks passed before he heard back from the federation, Khoury said.

"The national sports federation doesn't have expenses. The girls don't have transportation, the coaches are volunteers and our stadiums are provided by USJ. All we ask for is attention from the federation," Khoury told The Daily Star.

After a period of silence concerning negotiations that involved his plan and the creation of the seasonal program, Khoury was surprised to receive a schedule for the men's futsal team that excluded the women.

Meetings were initiated between the clubs, coaches and the national



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federation in a bid to solve the problem. After talks hit an impasse, the women's team was deprived of a futsal season. Khoury expressed concern that they could encounter the same issue in the coming season.

A member of the Lebanese National Futsal Committee, Dory Zakhour, told The Daily Star that there was a conflict between the new bylaws and some of the women's clubs, so the federation took the decision to postpone the season.

In response to Khoury's claims, Zakhour said the federation was not depriving the women's team of financial support, but that the men's team required more finances due to their more demanding schedule.

The secretary-general of the futsal

committee, Salim Awada, defended the decision made in 2018 to postpone the futsal season. He blamed the clubs for their lack of cooperation to find common ground.

"The clubs were not ready to sacrifice for the team and the committee was not going to back out of their plans," Awada told The Daily Star.

Reem Chalhoub, a player for futsal club SAS and the women's national team, told The Daily Star that the main conflict between that clubs and the national team was the lack of coordination between club training and that of the national team.

She expressed concern that the players could be exposed to injuries due to insufficient rest between club training and national team sessions.

Awada said the committee issued a decision to work with the plan that separates football from futsal periodically, adding that the issue of players being exhausted and getting injured would be solved after the new schedule was implemented.

Chalhoub also expressed belief that the team was not getting the public support it needed due to the lack of media coverage. "The federation is depriving the women's team of having the same media coverage as men," Chalhoub said.

The former captain highlighted that her concern was a common one among the players and coaches because media attention was a way to achieve public recognition for the team and would encourage spon-

sors to invest. Chalhoub recognized the federation's support in some aspects, such as equipment, but criticized its neglect in others.

Awada argued otherwise by listing the efforts made by the committee toward the women.

He said it provided as much coverage as possible and that unlike the men's team, the women got live coverage as well as recognition on the official website.

Khoury, meanwhile, remained optimistic about future results, expressing belief his charges were passionate and committed players capable of great achievements. "We are not far from success," he said.

The women's AFC Futsal Championship will take place in July 2020.