

NATION NEWS

Trying to beat habit

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ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS impacting the growth and development of women's Olympic style boxing is the mentality that only men should box.

This was identified both in the United States and Sri Lanka by Dr Christy Halbert and Nieva Embuldeniya, respectively, both of whom were in Barbados last weekend for the International Boxing Association (AIBA) Women's Commission meeting.

"Women's **Olympic** style boxing is growing worldwide as well as in the United States. There are still some misconceptions that we are trying to deal with, but the best advocates for the sport are the boxers.

"They are talented, strong, courageous, articulate, and they are participating in the toughest sport against many odds, including the traditional concept that boxing is only for men and the fact that boxing is the last sport to admit women into the **Olympics**," Halbert said.

"So against these odds, we still see women's boxing increasing worldwide. There are over 120 countries that have women's boxing. Our **World Championships** grow every year and we hope that more national federations would put money towards the recruitment and development of women's boxing."

In Sri Lanka, men's boxing is well developed and it is even being taught in schools for boys, but the women's game is lagging behind.

"The first barrier is the mentality of the men towards female boxing. About 50 per cent of the countries in Asia have female boxing. There are some that do not want to develop because they think women still should not box," said vice-chairman Embuldeniya.

They also have to deal with other cultural issues.

"In Asia we have a lot of Muslims, so it is a cultural thing. In those countries women will not be able to box at all. There are some countries which have the same religion, but there are not as hardline so they still allow women to box, for example Lebanon and Syria."

Still there are other countries like Jordan which are not against boxing, but do not like the competition outfit and women have to wear leotards.

In both countries, it has made recruiting difficult.

"The best athletes are often attracted to other sports where they get lots of media attention and scholarships and they nurture **Olympic** dreams. We think this will change because in the next 14 months, the IOC [International Olympic Committee] will make the decision about 2012.

"So we believe once women's boxing is identified as an **Olympic** sport, everything is going to change," said an optimistic Halbert.

She tries to get around this by challenging the best athletes to try boxing because it is a sport with specialised skill and requires a very high level of fitness.