

Islam and Women's Sports

More and more Muslim women are taking up sports, and Tehran is setting an example.

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Islamic women in sports appears to be a contradiction in terms—at least this is what many people in the West believe. The conviction that women in Islamic countries either cannot, will not or may not take part in sports (or at least in competitive sports) is partly borne out of the fact that Muslim immigrants, especially women, scarcely take any active part in sports.

In the Olympic Games, for example, where nearly half of the participants are female, women from Islamic countries are a small, nearly invisible minority. But there are exceptions. There is Nawal El Moutawakel, a Moroccan hurdler who won the women's 400-meter event at the 1984 Summer Olympics, or Hassiba Boulmerka who won an Olympic gold medal in the 1500-meter run in 1992. When the latter returned to Algeria, she was hailed as a national heroine and a model for Arab women who want to break away from restrictive roles. But she was also condemned by Islamic fundamentalists and was forced to move to Europe to train.

Increasing Interest in Women's Sports

Except in Islamic cultures in North Africa, modern sports do not play a prominent role in the various Islamic cultures, and Muslim women particularly do not have easy access to physical activities. However, we should be aware that interest and the engagement of Muslim women in sports is increasing.

I invite you now to follow me on a discovery trip to Muslim cultures where we try to find out about the contested and ambivalent relations between women, bodies, sports, religion and culture. As we go on, let's remember that the lives and roles of women (and men) differ decisively, depending on the country, as

well as on such variables as social class, religious orientation, place of residence (city or countryside), etc.

Women's Exclusion: Different Interpretations

In Islamic countries, women's (and men's) lives and roles are influenced, to a high degree, by the Qur'an and the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. However, these texts can be read and understood in various ways, and their interpretations are often controversial and contested.

This is especially true in recent Muslim history where reactions to the challenges of modernity range from fundamentalism to liberalism. For example, current movements which espouse *ijtihad* (exercise of reasoning) have led to differences in reading and understanding the laws in the new context of modern life.

These days, discussions and heated debates on the "clash of the cultures" often focus on the role of women in family and society. Muslim feminists claim that neither the Qur'an nor Muhammad's sayings prescribe women's exclusion from public life. According to them, the dominance of men in all areas of society is to be attributed to a mixture of Islam and patriarchal traditions. However, in the context of threatening modernization and globalization processes, women's bodies and roles have become "politicized." Their subordination is embedded in the collective identities of many Muslim societies where the notion of gender is based on the assumption of the essentially different "natures" of the sexes. The construction of woman as the "weaker sex" and concern about women's bodies have decisive influences on sports and the physical activities of girls and



women.

In the following, I will focus on Islamic perspectives on women's bodies because they have a huge impact on the opportunities and obstacles that women face in sports. Islamic law, as well as everyday life, has a focus on the need for men and women to be shielded from sexual temptation.

Islamic Perspectives on a Woman's Body

In many Islamic countries, and we cite Iran, below-the-knee coats and headscarves are the minimum requirements of correct dress for women. Over this, many women also wear the *chador* (literally, "tent"), a long black robe that hides any female curve. The face and the hands are not covered. Why are women's bodies such a "contested terrain?"

In Islam, sexuality is not looked upon as a threat and a sin, but its proper place is only inside marriage. Sexuality is not controlled via an internalization of norms but by a segregation of the sexes, either with the help of walls (women have to stay at home) or with the help of scarves or veils. Virginity is absolutely required of Muslim girls, and numerous rules and regulations are intended to guarantee that they do not lose it. The main strategy is to keep them under control and to prevent contact with boys and men.

Chastity Involves Family Honor

In Muslim culture, the chastity of women is a matter of honor, which is the basis of a family's reputation. Honor means the ability of the head of the family or its male members to fight or avenge aggression and to guarantee the chastity of their wives, sisters and daughters. Men have the right and the duty to control female family members and to sanction transgressions. Girls and women have to avoid every sort of behavior that might endanger the good reputation of the family. Moral integrity for women means, among other things, following Islamic rules with regard to their bodies. A major tenet that women have to observe is that in public, the body, a symbol of sexuality, has to be covered.

We have to be aware that the covering of the body has to be interpreted and understood in context. All Muslims agree that clothes should be decent and not sexually arousing, but there is a lot



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of controversy about the scarf. Some Muslims claim that neither the Qur'an nor the sayings of the Prophet prescribe the covering of the hair. But we also have to take into consideration that a scarf is not only a scarf; it can look quite differently and it can have different meanings. To wear a scarf can be a fashion statement or a habit, it can be a religious duty, it can be used as protection against the "male gaze," and it can also be the expression of gender hierarchy and the suppression of women.

Islam Encourages Sports . . .

Now, we examine how sports activities, in general, and girls' and women's participation in sports, in particular, are influenced by Islam. But first, let me state that there is no general prohibition of sports, including girls' and women's sports.

Islamic sport scientists, both male and female, emphasize that health and fitness are important for men and women alike and should be sustained by sporting activities. Many point out that in various sayings, Muhammad had advocated living a healthy life, recommending to Islamic adherents such sports as running, horseback riding, swimming and archery. Some Muslim sociologists, citing Islamic sources and authorities, even conclude that sports, for their health benefits, ought to be obligatory for women.

Traditional Muslim physical activity culture, including strength training, is

not focused on breaking records. But with globalization and its processes, this is changing. With the spread of modern sports of English origin in Muslim countries, women, too, are now being “infected” by the general craze of sports.

... but the Female Body Must be Covered

Muslims interested in sports must contend with the fact that whenever sport is practiced, Islamic laws must be followed. This means, above all, that the body must be covered and that men and women must practice sports separately.

Another factor that hinders or even precludes women’s freedom of movement, and thus their participation in sports, is Islam’s precept of virginity. What is important, here, is the intense fear that the hymen might be damaged while practicing a sport, and that a girl’s whole future could be at risk because of it. Moreover, a girl’s or a young woman’s good name is jeopardized whenever she leaves the house, especially in the evening hours when she is out of her family’s supervision and control. A further obstacle preventing women from taking up a sport is the fear that they might become physically and mentally “masculinized.”

Here, however, it must be emphasized that there is a wide range of attitudes and behavior patterns in the different Islamic cultures. Likewise, there are great differences in the extent of interest and active participation shown by Muslim women in sports. In some countries, women engaging in sports is considered anathema to the Islamic concept of femininity, which restricts women’s actions to the home and family. In other countries, like Iran for example, some flexibility has surfaced with the emergence of a women’s sports movement.

Women in Iran: Possibilities and Limitations

Today in Iran, sports is “in” and the enthusiasm surrounding sports has had a great impact on society. It is men’s soccer in particular that has enthralled the masses.

Iranian women have two possible ways of practicing sports—either in private facilities to which men have no access, or in public where they have to wear appropriate clothing. For example, women can take part in skiing and hiking. The numerous hiking paths and skiing pistes in the mountains to the north of Tehran testify to this. On public holi-

days, the winding road up to Tochal Mountain (whose summit is served by a cable car) is crowded with masses of people making their way to the top and women in coats and headscarves.

Mountaineering is popular among women and is largely accepted. There is a Women’s Mountaineering Association, whose president is a woman, of course! The group even led a women’s expedition to the Everest region in October 2001. Three of the climbers reached the peak of the 7,000-meter Mount Pumori. In 2005, two Iranian women even conquered Mount Everest.

Let us return to Tehran, where decently dressed youngsters can play badminton, table tennis or volleyball in the parks. It can happen, however, that girls, if they are not well-covered, are rebuked by stern-looking women wrapped in chadors. Other sports that are possible in public are jogging, canoeing and horseback riding, which are made difficult by the dress code but not impossible. Nevertheless, warning voices from the conservatives are very much alive. They often quibble that even with loose and ample clothes, too much of a woman’s figure is revealed, as is in archery for instance, when drawing back the bowstring. They argue that cycling is not only an unchaste sight but more importantly, provides a greater radius of freedom to a girl or woman, thus limiting the possibility of male control.

Freedom in “Exclusive” Facilities

When women are among themselves, they can move freely without the hindrance of long gowns and headscarves. In private, they appear with make-up and colored hair, and wear shorts and swim suits. Sports centers, swimming pools and fitness gyms are available to them. It must be borne in mind, however, that the sports facilities only benefit a small portion of the female population. “Most sports centers are reserved for men. We don’t have a tenth of the facilities they have,” complained an Iranian sportswoman in an interview.

The gender segregation enables girls and women to take up a sport. However, many sports are considered to be “unfeminine,” even if they are practiced out of sight of men. An extremely controversial issue was allowing women to play soccer, the national sport. It took a lot of hard work on the part of women activists to convince religious leaders that playing soccer did no harm. In 1998, the first training session took



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place in Tehran. “Schoolgirls, students and older women were there that day simply because they loved soccer,” reported a female coach in an interview.

Iranian Women Take Up Sports

The chief motives for women in taking up sports are to keep physically fit and, above all, to have a slim figure. Jane Fonda’s book on aerobics, for example, is available in Farsi, with the photos replaced by drawings. The ideal of a slim figure is widespread in Iran, as it is everywhere. During the 1999 conference on women’s sports in Tehran, many speakers emphasized the significance of sports to acquiring a good figure. They argued that a good figure is a sign of health and being fit; it does not matter that the body is hidden under the long coats. It must be added, though, that commercial fitness gyms and aerobics studios are only accessible to a relatively small number of well-off Iranian women.

Since the early 1990s, Iranian women have been taking part in sporting competitions. Among the very first competitions held were shooting competitions, obviously because women could wear the head-to-toe clothing to do the sport.



In addition, leagues have also been set up in various ball games, such as volleyball, handball, basketball, table tennis and even women's soccer (1998). Activists advocated in both local and international meetings that women's participation in sports could be a way of demonstrating to the world the superiority of Islam.

Participating in the Olympic Games

Because of gathering voices from the ranks of women, Iranian women have been allowed to compete in international sports meetings, and since the early 1990s, in the Olympic Games. However, because of Islamic restrictions, their participation has been limited to shooting events. To allow women to compete in other competitive sports, which had to involve wearing clothes that bared parts of the body, an alternative had to be found, and the Muslim Women's Games was organized. Now, the women could play, and men would be barred from organizing and watching; they could neither be officials nor spectators!

These games were initiated by Fa'ezeh Hashemi, daughter of the former

President Rafsanjani, and took place for the first time in Tehran in 1993. At the Women's Games, the athletes marched into the stadium wearing the *hijab* for the official opening ceremony, watched also by male spectators. Afterwards, the women competed in the various events, wearing the usual sports attire but not exposed to the view of men. The presence of female judges, journalists, medical doctors and coaches proved that such events could be successfully held without men in the stadiums, gyms or at the swimming pools.

In 2005, the Women's Games program was made up of 18 events. Some 1,700 athletes from 40 countries competed in events that included taekwondo, karate and *futsal* (five-a-side soccer), as well as volleyball and table tennis for women with disabilities. The opening ceremony, attended by 10,000 spectators, attracted public attention, as well as concern and apprehension from the country's religious leaders. Large groups of women—and also men—performed a modern dance, accompanied by psychedelic music, earning several standing ovations from the cheering audience. Delegates from 36 states, among them British and American women, participated in the various competitions.

The Women's Games were greeted in Iran as a great opportunity for women and sports, and as an alternative to the Olympic Games. However, many athletes (including women from the West) have pointed out that events of this kind support and legitimize the exclusion of women from the "real" world of sports. Also, many observed that the Muslim women athletes representing Western countries were not top-level.

More Questions, More Issues

A British participant, let's call her Shirin, described the situation very aptly. "Why is the British team so weak?" asked Shirin, kindly but uncomprehendingly. "Arsenal, Manchester United, don't they have women's teams?" I tried to explain to her that the female athletes representing Britain were in the Games because they were Muslim; that this tournament was special to them as it was the only opportunity that allowed them to remove their hijab in order to play. Shirin shrugged; she doesn't wear the hijab by choice like British girls do. "I'm ready to play with anyone from any religion," she said. "I'd like to have good competition."

A major problem that athletes have repeatedly complained about is the lack of audience. The lack of interest in women's sports, which itself is a problem in the West, is aggravated by the Islamic law of covering the body. Under present circumstances, Muslim female athletes can only be shown in photos or on film wearing the hijab. As a result, women's sports are given little media coverage.

I won't dwell into the dispute about opportunities and problems connected with the Muslim Women's Games, which are closely connected with the discourse on values. Such a discourse would eventually ask whether we have to accept culture-specific values even if they contradict principles like equality, and whether there are universal human rights and, if so, who defines them.

Suffice it to say that Iranian women athletes, coaches, and ordinary girls and women who are taking up sports are taking advantage of the current favorable conditions. They have started demanding more sports facilities, not only in cities but in small towns, as well as the provision of materials and other resources. To the athletes who insist on observing Islamic principles, the Women's Games are the only chance they have for competitions. 🕌