

# Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts

Edited By Homa Hoodfar



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**Homa Hoodfar**

حوائیٲی زبیر اش مسام قوائیٲی  
Women Living Under Muslim Laws  
النساء فی ظلہ قوائین المسلمین  
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

Editor: Homa Hoodfar

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page number
<b>About WLUML</b>	9
<b>Dress Codes and Modes:</b>	
<b>Politics of Women’s Clothing in Muslim Contexts</b>	13
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	18
<b>Table of abbreviations</b>	20
<b>About the contributors</b>	23
<b>Foreword: Our Dress and Their Politics</b>	29
<b>Homa Hoodfar</b>	
<b>Chapter 1: introduction:</b>	
<b>Women’s Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts</b>	37
<b>Homa Hoodfar</b>	
Sport, Nation Building and Modernity	41
Sport as Public Space	44
Sport in the International Arena	49
Challenges to Religious and Cultural Exclusionary Practices	53
<b>Part one:</b>	
<b>Sport as an Arena of Public Politics and Contestations</b>	
<b>Chapter 2: Sport As a Political Arena: Muslim Women’s</b>	
<b>Olympics and Its Aftermath</b>	
<b>Homa Hoodfar</b>	
The Emergence of Sport as A Contestation Arena	70
From the Muslim Women’s Olympics to	
International Women’s Islamic Games	74
Did the Game Work For Women?	90
Accommodating Subversion:	
Islamic Sport Gears and Olympic Participation	93
Concluding Remarks	95

<b>Chapter 3: Female Bodies and the State Power: Women-Only Sport Centers in Istanbul Sertaç Sehliskoğlu</b>	<b>102</b>
Context	105
Sports and Women’s Bodies From a Historical Perspective	
108 Women’s Changing Public Visibilities in Urban Turkey After 1980	115
Recreation Centers as Contested Spaces of Defining the Ideal Women’s Body	117
A Closer Lens on Women Who Prefer Women-Only Recreation Centers	120
Conclusion	129
<b>Chapter 4: Muslim Women’s Football: A Contested Frontier for Gender Politics Hana Askren</b>	
Nothing and Everything Is Possible	136
Football in the Middle East	138
Direct Opposition	148
Conclusion	156
<b>Chapter 5: Gaze Reversed: Iranian Women’s Campaign to be Football Spectators Nasrin Afzali</b>	<b>161</b>
Sport, Nationalism and Civil Society	163
Women’s Strategies to Resist Their Exclusion	166
State and Public Dialogues on the Ban	174
A New Phase: Freedom Stadium Almost Within Reach	176
Assessing the Campaign and its Impacts	178
To Sum-up	180

## **Chapter 6: Claiming Public Space: Women's Sport in Bangladesh**

**Anannya Shila Shamsuddin**

Sport and Quest for Gender Equality in Bangladesh	184
Gender Relations and Public Space	185
History of Women's Sports in Bangladesh	187
Bangladesh State Policy and Organizations on Sport and Physical Education	193
Bangladesh, Formal Sports Association for Women Choice of Sports and Games	198
Current Status	199
National Role Models	200
International Achievements	205
Religion and Politics of Women's Exclusion	206
Looking Ahead	208

## **Chapter 7: *Fin de siècle?* Commanding the Court in Senegalese Women's Basketball**

**Martha Saavedra**

Le Basket	214
The Game (1998)	215
The Sport Clubs	219
State and Organized Sports	223
Basketball a Women's Terrain	224
The Basketball Referee	227
Progress since the turn of the century?	229
Conclusion	233

## **Chapter 8: Saudi Arabian Women and Sport: Bodies, Rights and Public Spaces**

**Aisha Lee Shaheed**

The 2012 Olympics	248
Beyond the Olympics	253
After the Olympics	257

## **Chapter 9: Muslim Women and Sport in the United Kingdom: Breaking with Tradition or Re-inventing Gender Segregation**

**Ayesha Salma Kariapper and Homa Hoodfar**

Islam, Gender and Identity Politics in UK	262
Muslim women and sport in UK	265
Concluding Remarks	283

### **Part two: Beyond Muslim contexts**

## **Chapter 10: Women Defying Exclusion: The Struggle to Participate in Sport in Europe and North America 292**

**Aisling Barratt**

'Femininity' and Sport	293
Funding as a Barrier for Female Athletes	300
The Olympic Games: Contesting Inequalities	302
The Role of the Media	304
The Struggle Continues: Sport and the Second Wave of the Women's Movement	306
Defiance	310
Conclusion	311

## **Chapter 11: The Politics of Gender Testing in International Sport**

**Rima Athar**

Introduction	314
Sports as a Form of Public Citizenship	321
The ‘Gender-Verification’ Test	324
Constructing ‘Normalcy’ and the ‘Appropriate Body’	327
Logics of Control	331
Reading Outside of the Frame	335
Towards a Transformative Vision of Gender-Justice	338

### **Resources**

<b>Resource 1: Trend Setters and Pioneers of Women’s Sport in Muslim Contexts</b>	344
---	-----

**Aisling Barratt**

<b>Resource 2: Using Web 2.0 for Research and Networking on Muslim Women in Sports</b>	351
--	-----

**Sertaç Sehliskoğlu**

<b>Resource 3: Selected Organizations Advocating Women’s Sport</b>	358
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<b>Appendix 1: The Brighton Declaration on Women Sport</b>	363
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<b>Appendix 2: Atlanta Plus</b>	369
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**Homa Hoodfar**

<b>Index</b>	379
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## About Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is an international solidarity network with a mission to effectively advance women's equality, gender justice, and women's human rights through a variety of channels; providing information, research and analysis, training workshops and conferences, as well as facilitating a transnational and intergenerational collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam.

The network started in 1984 by nine women from Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Iran, Mauritius, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Pakistan who came together and formed the Action Committee of Women Living Under Muslim Laws in support of local women's struggles. Since then WLUML has linked individual women and organisations and now extends to more than 70 countries ranging from South Africa to Uzbekistan, Senegal to Indonesia and Brazil to France. It links:

- ❖ Women living in countries or states where Islam is the state religion, secular states with Muslim majorities as well as those from Muslim communities governed by minority religious laws;
- ❖ Women in secular states where political groups are demanding religious laws; women in migrant Muslim communities in Europe, the Americas and around the world;
- ❖ Non-Muslim women who may have Muslim laws applied to them directly or through their children;
- ❖ Women born into Muslim communities/families who are automatically categorised as Muslim but may not define themselves as such, either because they are not believers or because they choose not to identify themselves in religious terms, preferring to prioritise other aspects of their identity such as political ideology, profession, sexual orientation or others.

**What is in the Name:** Our name **challenges the myth** of one, homogeneous 'Muslim world'. This deliberately created myth fails to reflect that laws said to be Muslim vary from one context to another. The laws that determine our lives are from diverse sources: religious, customary, colonial and secular. Many different laws simultaneously govern us:

laws recognised by the state (codified and uncodified) and informal laws such as customary practices, which vary according to the cultural, social and political context.

WLUMML, as a network, has opted for an open structure which has been designed to maximise the participation of diverse and autonomous groups and individuals as well as collective decision-making. WLUMML does not have formal membership and networkers are a fluid group of individuals and organisations who maintain regular two-way contact with the network. For more information please see the WLUMML website at [www.wlumml.org](http://www.wlumml.org).

**What are WLUMML's mission and focus?** Its mission is to strengthen women's individual and collective struggles for equality and their human rights, especially in Muslim contexts. It achieves this by breaking their isolation, by providing trainings, and by creating and reinforcing spaces for women to share experiences and lend support to one another. This support is created by making linkages between women within Muslim countries and communities, and with global feminist and progressive groups. In this way WLUMML promotes the creation and strengthening of both local and transnational women's movements.

**Publications, Research, and Media:** WLUMML conducts research, maps various analyses, mobilizes knowledge through the organization of training workshops, conferences, launch campaigns, circulates information regarding women's diverse experiences and strategies in Muslim contexts and helps to demystify the diverse sources of control over women's lives. It also runs the Feminist Leadership Institute for women in Muslim contexts. WLUMML's current focus is on the four themes of: fundamentalism and identity politics, peace building and resisting the impact of militarisation on women's lives, promoting and protecting women's equality under laws, particularly family laws, and sexuality and women's bodily autonomy. Violence against women, as a theme, cuts across all of WLUMML's projects and activities. Its publications are primarily in English, French, Arabic (and some in other local languages based on the need assessments and in response to the request from activists on the ground) are freely available on the website at [www.wlumml.org](http://www.wlumml.org). Networkers also translate information into numerous

other languages. There are also printed versions of our selected publications, some of which are available on Amazon and other virtual bookstores.

### **Collective Research for Action and Training Projects and Coalition for Women's Human Rights:**

- ❖ Exchange programme (1988)
- ❖ Mothers of Algiers (1987-1993)
- ❖ Qur'anic interpretations meetings (1990-2004)
- ❖ Women and Law in the Muslim world programme (1991-2001)
- ❖ Women's Reproductive Rights (1993- 1998)
- ❖ Vienna Tribunal Campaign (Women's Rights are Human Rights) (1991- 1995)
- ❖ Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institutes (1998, 1999, 2007, 2009)
- ❖ Gender, Militarization and displacement in Muslim contexts (1999-2002)
- ❖ Initiative for democratizing Afghan Family Laws – INSAF (2002 - present)
- ❖ Dress Codes and Modes: Politics of Women's Clothing in Muslim Contexts (2003 – Present)
- ❖ [The International Coalition on Women Human Rights Defenders, http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org) (2005 – present)
- ❖ [The Feminist Dialogue, http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org) (2006 - present)
- ❖ [The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women!](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org) (2007 - present)
- ❖ Violence is not Our Culture Campaign, <http://violenceisnotourculture.org/> (2009 to present)
- ❖ Women reclaiming and re-defining cultures: Asserting rights over body, self, and public spaces (2008-2011)
- ❖ Gender Equality Program (2008-present).
- ❖ Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democratization (2012 to present)

**International Coordination Office**

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Email: [wluml@wluml.org](mailto:wluml@wluml.org)

Website: [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)

The International Coordination Office (ICO) facilitates coordination between networkers.

**Africa & Middle East Coordination Office**

Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes

et les Lois au Senegal (GREFELS)

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Email: [grefels@gmail.com](mailto:grefels@gmail.com)

Website: [www.grefels.org](http://www.grefels.org)

**Asia Coordination Office**

Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre

PO Box 5192, Lahore

Pakistan

Email: [sgah@sgah.org.pk](mailto:sgah@sgah.org.pk)

Website: [www.shirkatgah.org](http://www.shirkatgah.org)

## **Dress Codes and Modes: Politics of Women's Clothing in Muslim Contexts**

**WLUML** publications, including their annual journal *Dossiers* are meant to support the struggle for women's equality and autonomy, and the promotion of women's human rights worldwide. They are also intended to provide information about the lives, struggles and strategies of women living in diverse Muslim communities and countries while making the accumulated knowledge and experiences of women's rights movements accessible to a wide readership, as aids to activism for creating a more equitable world. They aspire to provide a collective transnational and intergenerational space to share experiences, strategies, analyses and initiatives.

The Dress Code And Women's Bodily Autonomy Program was launched as a means of widening the debate about Women's Bodily Autonomy and sexuality, a major area of the WLUML Concerns from its inception. WLUML's research and documentations has made it amply clear that woman's body is the site of many social, cultural, religious, legal, and political struggles. In the name of religion – be it Islam, Christianity or many other religious beliefs – or in the name of cultural purity and tradition, women have been subjected to discriminatory practices, codes of conduct and laws with the ultimate goal of controlling their sexuality and excluding them from public life. These practices and laws constitute and reinforce insidious forms of violence against women. Dress code has also been a powerful tool of political struggle in various parts of the world but in particular in Muslim contexts since the 20th century.

The goal of the WLUML Dress Code and Women's Bodily Autonomy Program has been to develop new tools of analysis through exploring, mapping new avenues and sharing strategies initiated in different communities and by women activists to claim their rights and exercise control over their bodies as well as minds. It examines the various means by which women resist and subvert their marginalization from public life and public spaces.

The dress code program and publications have intended to explore and map new avenues to support women's initiatives to resist control of their bodies and sexuality. This program has produced a considerable number of workshop sessions and has contributed substantially to other WLUML programs. It has also produced a dress code exhibition that since early 2003 has successfully travelled to many parts of the world. The program and various research projects developed under this program has produced many articles and book chapters as well as several books, some of which have been published by WLUML and yet others have been published by mainstream publishing houses (in English or other languages, see table below). Many of the other research reports and articles dealing with politics of dress codes in Muslim contexts have been published as articles in the various Dossiers: Journal of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and other book chapters. There are also several other books and articles in the pipeline which will be published within the next two years.



**WLUML Exhibition: Dress Codes & Modes - Women's Dress in Some Muslim Countries and Communities**

(<http://www.wluml.org/node/2663>)

This exhibition looks at the diversities and commonalities of women's dress through space and time, highlighting the influence of many forces – class, status, region, work, religious interpretation, ethnicity, urban/rural, politics, fashion, climate etc. Dress codes are one of the crucial elements which contribute to the construction of a 'Muslim' identity by both local and international forces operating from within Muslim societies as well as from outside Muslim contexts. By now the well-traveled exhibition celebrates both the diversity as well as similarities and our histories. The exhibit is comprised of 20 large printed panels focusing on women's clothing in Muslim contexts generally, and then in 7 specific countries and regions: Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Northern Nigeria, South Asia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It uses 250 images (paintings, drawings, photos), past and present, and over 85 quotations from a rich variety of sources plus some explanatory original text. The diverse life size panels indicate the diversity, commonality and evolution of women's customs in Muslim contexts through space and time. Recording the changes in dress that have and continue to take place within various Muslim contexts has a political meaning particularly in more recent decades when state and non-state actors are using force and violence to impose them on women and sometimes on men too in order to enforce a particular form and brand of identity. *(If you would like to know more about the exhibition or would like to display it, please contact [wluml@wluml.org](mailto:wluml@wluml.org))*



***Walking a Tightrope: Women and Veiling in the United Kingdom* by Ayesha Salma Kariapper (2009) <http://www.wluml.org/node/5756>**

This book examines the ways in which public debates over the headscarf and the full-face veil have shaped the strategies of women from Muslim communities particularly in the UK and Europe. It examines strategies developed to deal with the limitations imposed on them in the name of religion, culture, tradition and identity within their ethnic community, and with racism and exclusion from main-



stream society. This book is based on field research in the United Kingdom, and review of legal structures facing women in Muslim communities in other European countries. The purpose of this field research based study was to examine the various, sometimes oppositional debates within Muslim communities on issues of Muslim women's dress codes and document the experiences and analyze the implications of veiling practices for women living in a multicultural society.



**The Complete Collection of the Dress Code Laws and Decrees Under Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-2009) (Published In Farsi)**

Iran went through a liberalization of dress code and banning the veil and chador (a cape form of garment which envelopes women head to toe except their face, hands and feet) and promoted European fashion in 1936 in the name of modernity. The state employed police and other state machinery to impose the new dress code in the name of 'modernity' and women's liberation. However, in 1979 a sudden u-turn occurred of imposing a very restrictive dress code in the name

of 'Islam'. The very frequent justification of these laws is that the sight of women not fully covered distracts men as they cannot control their sexual desire and this creates social disorder! Women's resistance to dress code has presented a major challenge to the state. Thus to insure its application of the Islamic dress code the regime employed the national police force, as well as the newly introduced moral police and other state machinery and vigilantes to impose the new dress code. State has introduced severe consequences for the women who resist the new dress code regulations. The women's resistance and refusal of state denying them the very basic rights of what they may choose to wear forced the state to continuously revise and develop new laws and strategies to insure women's compliance with this draconian law. Shadi Sadr, an attorney and women's right activist has undertaken the monumental task of collecting the various laws in a 236 page book. This book is witness to women's refusal to be bullied to comply and the state insistence to control their bodies and present them as obscene and a source of social disorder. The book is also intended to facilitate various research in the area of sexuality and dress code in Iran as it is not easy to have access to these documents for those who are unfamiliar with the varieties of rather complex legal systems in Iran.



## **Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restriction and Resistance**

**Edited by Anissa Helie and Homa Hoodfar**

The impulse for this book came out of a multi-country research on Women's empowerment in Muslim contexts that WLUML and several of its partners conducted, focusing on indigenous strategies. Clearly issues of sexuality including dress code and gender segregation beamed large in all countries involved in this project. The book provides a new and much-needed angle to the study of sexual identities, rights, and women's citizenry in Muslim-majority societies. The collection of essays goes beyond the vexed and reductionistic "western vs authentic" dichotomy, and maps the various ways that women in diverse Muslim communities have exercised and developed indigenous strategies to resist the restriction imposed on them in the name of religion and cultures. Several chapters in this book deal with dress codes while others deal with various aspects of sexuality. This excellent volume should be praised for its ability to widen our understanding of how hegemonic norms of sexuality and sexual behaviour are challenged and contested by diverse actors across religious, secular and sexual orientations. A crucial book for scholars of gender, Islam, rights and sexuality.

## Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the considerable support I have received from many colleagues and WLUML networkers at various stages of putting together this publication. In particular I would like to acknowledge invaluable support from Aisling Hope Barratt, who generously invested much time to finalize this publication, reading many drafts of the papers and in the process becoming interested in the history of women's access to sport in Europe and North America. She produced her own chapter to remind the readers of similar struggles in these contexts which continue even after more than a century. I am also grateful to Rima Athar who was involved in various stages of planning the book as well as final copy editing. She was instrumental in reminding us at the publication committee that the struggle over gender equality has to broaden and move beyond the double binary of male/female and men/women category and the political pitfalls that such a binary creates. I extended an invitation to her to develop her ideas in a chapter to remind our readers of her concern. Indeed as we are putting the final touches on this manuscript, the new development in Iran imposing gender testing on women football players bears witness to her concern. Sertaç Sehlikoğlu, whom I had invited to help me with organizing the 2008 Symposium, "The Role of Sport in Resisting and Accommodating and in Remaking Muslim Women", 28 March 2008, Concordia University, Montreal, and who remained committed to the project, carried out some research in Turkey which unpacked the complexity of politics of women's access to sport and later contributed a chapter to this work. Her enthusiasm and energy has been a source of inspiration. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Shirin

Abdmolaei who joined the publication committee and read the final manuscript. My thanks and appreciation also go to Sarah Hilton, whom WLUML has kept very busy since she joined the WLUML editorial committee and for patiently reading and editing various chapters and the final manuscript. My special thanks also go to Hessam K. Rad, who worked hard to design the cover art that reflects the spirit of this book. Last but not least I would like to thank the contributors for their patience as we went through various versions and reviews, and for putting up with long delays in the publication of this book. I would also like to thank Concordia University, Canada for their support of the first symposium as well as the Feminist Review Trust (<http://www.feminist-review-trust.com/>), an organisation dedicated to funding scholarly research and other activities on all aspects of gender, for their initial support of this publication.

## Table of Abbreviations

ABL: American Basketball League  
ACC: Asian Cricket Council (Bangladesh)  
AFC: Asian Football Confederation  
AKP: Justice and Development Party (Turkey)  
ASC: Associations Sportive et Culturelle (Senegal)  
ASCC: Associations Sportive et Culturelle Club (Senegal)  
ASCM: Association Sportive et Culturelle – Marine or Association Sportive de Cheminots et Marine (Senegal)  
ASFO: L'Association Sportive des Fonctionnaires (Senegal)  
BCB: Bangladesh Cricket Board (Bangladesh)  
BJMC: Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (Bangladesh)  
BKSP: Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protisthan (Bangladesh)  
BME: Black and Monrty Ethnic  
BMKS: Bangladesh Mohila Krira Sangstha (Bangladesh)  
BOPP: A neighborhood in Dakar (Senegal)  
BTMC: Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (Bangladesh)  
CASA: Casamanca Sporting Football Club (Senegal Chapter)  
CFA: Senegal Currency (Franc); 1 CFA = 0.0015 Euro/ 0.0020 US Dollar (Senegal)  
CK: Cemal Kamacı Sports center (turkey)  
CNEPS EBC: Centre National d'Education Populaire et Sportive Basketball Club (Senegal)  
COUD: Le Centre des oeuvres universitaires de Dakar (Senegal)  
DUC: Dakar University Club (Senegal)  
EBC: The basketball club for the Centre National d'Education Populaire et Sportive (Senegal)  
FA: Football Association  
FAC: Fonds d'Aide et de Cooperation (Senegal)  
FIBA: Fédération Internationale de Basketball (Senegal)

FIFA: Fédération Internationale de Football Association  
FSFI: The Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale  
GDP: Gross Domestic Product  
GNP: National Gross Product  
ICC: International Cricket Council (Bangladesh)  
IAAF: International Amateur Athletics Federation  
IFW: International Federation of Wushu  
IFWS: Islamic Federation of Women's Sport  
INSEPS: Institut National Supérieur de l'Education Populaire et du Sport (Senegal)  
IOC: International Olympic Committee  
IRI: Islamic Republic of Iran  
JA: Jeanne d'Arc (Senegal)  
LGBTTIQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer  
MDGs: Millennium Development Goals  
MJS: Ministère de la Senegalaise de Basketball (Senegal)  
MWSF: Muslim Women's Sport Foundation (UK)  
NBA: National Basketball Association (Senegal)  
NCAA: National Collegiate Basketball Association (Senegal)  
NGO: Non-governmental Organization  
ODI: One Day International (Bangladesh)  
PE: Physical Education  
SA: South Asian Games (Bangladesh)  
SAARC: South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Bangladesh)  
SAF: South Asian Federation (Bangladesh)  
SIBAC: SICAP Basketball Club (Senegal)  
SICAP: Société Immobilière du Cap-Vert (Senegal)  
UCAD: Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (Senegal)  
UN: United Nations  
UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund  
UNIFEM: United Nations Fund For Women  
US: United States

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republic  
WEMC: Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts  
WLUML: Women Living Under Muslim Laws  
WNBA: Women's National Basketball Association (Senegal)

## About the Contributors

**Nasrin Afzali** received a BSc in Atomic & Molecular Physics from IUST University. She received her MA in Women's studies from Tehran University. She is currently a PhD student in Concordia University. Her research interest include Muslim Women sort, sexuality, and Muslim veiling. A women's rights activist and journalist, she was a commentator for "Women in Iran", the first online feminist website in Iran, editor of the "Feminist Theories" section in *Zanan* magazine, and an analyst at *Shirzanan*. She held the position of research assistant for a project on women and sport as part of a wider research project on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC). Currently, she is the director of the *Hamsari* NGO, providing free legal consultancy and awareness raising for women, and the editor of Farsi/ Dari page of WLUML website- Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

**Rima Athar** is a feminist educator and organizer currently living in Montreal, Quebec, by way of Pakistan and Switzerland. She has spoken internationally on questions of culture, gender, sexuality and human rights, within a framework of anti-violence pedagogy, as a co-founding member of the global campaign *Violence Is Not Our Culture* ([www.violenceisnotourculture.org](http://www.violenceisnotourculture.org)). Her research and teaching interests include the creative use of sound and arts as advocacy; the politics of presence in public spaces; learning from the global south; promoting critical literacy; race and representational practices in media; story-telling as alternative history; queer and lesbian identities. She also enjoys publishing, archiving, and greening city planning. She has a background in Economics, a Bachelors' in International Development Studies and Social Studies of Medicine, and a



Masters' in Education & Society from McGill University. She is currently co-organizing *Politics & Care: A Project*, exploring transformative approaches to personal healing and collective-well being in contexts of community organizing.

**Hana Askren** is a reporter by day and a doula (birth attendant) by night and a wrestling coach in her spare time. A Los Angeles native, Hana holds a BA in Italian Studies and an MA in Arabic Studies from McGill University in Montreal. After her graduation she spent a year at Concordia University doing research on women's sport in the Middle East before moving to New York as an editor at *Mergermarket*. While at McGill she was Head Coach of a Women's Team at McGill University in Canada from 2004 to 2006. She has competed in various national and international wrestling tournaments and has won a gold medal in the 48-kilogram class as well as other bronze and titles. A competitive athlete on the freestyle circuit, she experiences sport as an emancipatory activity and works to facilitate participation in sport for other women who might share her experiences.

**Aisling Hope Barratt** is an Irish anthropologist now living in Montreal, Canada. After completing a thesis on island identity formation off the coast of the West of Ireland, she broadened her research to involve gender and sexuality in sport. For the past two years, she has been actively involved with the organization Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) as an intern and has worked on their publication committee for numerous projects with the organization.

**Homa Hoodfar** is Professor of Anthropology at Concordia University. Her primary research and expertise lies in the intersection of political economy, gender and development and women's movement and electoral Politics in the Middle East. She has extensively studied indigenous empowerment strategies amongst those marginalized by legal constraints, particu-

larly in the areas of family law and citizenship, economic penury, the making of the civil society, women in local and national politics and displacement, with a particular focus on women in Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and amongst Canada's Muslim community. She has written extensively on reproductive health policies, their discursive justifications, and impact and implications for women's lives. She has been actively involved in Women Living Under Muslim Laws network since 1980s and currently is a WLUML board member.

**Ayesha Salma Kariapper** was born in Lahore, Pakistan. She was educated at the Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan and the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague in The Netherlands. She has lived in London since 2005, working as an independent researcher and a development professional. She has held varied roles in both the human rights and international development sectors in the United Kingdom and Pakistan. She has several years' experience of managing development projects in South Asia and Africa particularly in maternal and child health, formal and non-formal education and rights awareness among women and girls. Her research interests include social movements, peasant struggles and women's rights.

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**Sertaç Sehlikoğlu** is currently a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, UK. She is writing

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# Foreword

## Our Dress and Their Politics

Homa Hoodfar

This book, like most of WLUML's publications has a history and story behind its conception. WLUML's publications as a rule are prepared in response to the demand of WLUML constituency and are based on the assessment of resources needed to help the activists and proponents of gender equality and women's human rights in their endeavours. In that regard this book is not an exception. Indeed it has a very long history, and in a way it has been more than a quarter of century in the making since the central tenet of the book is part of WLUML Dress Code and Bodily Autonomy Program launched under WLUML sexuality (Widening the Debate about Women's Bodily Autonomy) focus, one of the four critical concerns identified by WLUML Networks in every Plan of Action with more emphasis, which indicates its political significance(Aramon, France 1986 ; Lahore, Pakistan 1990; Dhaka, Bangladesh 1997; Dakar, Senegal 2006).<sup>1,2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In each of the four plans of action, sexuality and bodily autonomy was identified as a major critical issue for the Network as one of the areas that a transnational space can push the advancement of bodily autonomy in the time of raising political Islam. For further details see WLUML's last Plan of Action (Senegal 2006).  
(<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/import/english/pubs/pdf/poa/senegal-2006-poa-en.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup> A search under "dress code" on the resources section of WLUML would make it amply clear that dress code for women has become increasingly more political, not just in the Middle East but even in Africa and historically more liberal Muslim communities in Indonesia and Malaysia. Moverover, often states in an attempt to win over the conservative religious forces work in cahoots overtly or implicitly with them to impose restrictive dress codes on women and limit their mobility and life options.

Dress code in Muslim contexts has been one of the central concerns of WLUML from its conception given that the imposition of what a woman can wear is a major means of denying her independence and bodily autonomy in what may appear as the most mundane everyday act. As Farida Shaheed once said “...imposition of a particular dress code on women is a way of saying to a women that her body belongs not to her but to her community including state and non-state actors and her family. She is just a carrier of the body but does not own it and cannot claim it.” (personal conversation Dhaka 1997). However as James Scott so eloquently discussed in his book “Art of Resistance”, the oppressed do not accept their oppression silently and find ways to resist and subvert the forces of oppression. The story of dress codes and women’s desire for their bodily autonomy is not an exception.

While historically in all communities there were mostly informal rules and customs that communities and families used in dressing women’s bodies, the trend to control women’s bodies in public space emerge as modern states’ preoccupation in many Muslim contexts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and which unfortunately is continuing even stronger in 21<sup>st</sup> century. In pre-modern eras in Muslim societies such a pre-occupation was focused on men’s gear, presumingly because women had little presence in public spaces and public posts (Ahmad 1992).<sup>3</sup> The modernist states viewed women’s presence (at least visually) in European style of clothing as part and parcel of their ideology of modernity. In contrast, theocratic states like Saudi Arabia, Gulf sheikhdoms, The Islamic Republic of Iran, Sudan and even the Taliban of Afghanistan (though subscribe to modernity in many areas of politics and state building but not ideology of gender

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed many scholars have pointed out that concern with women’s clothing and covering emerged as a religious pre-occupation only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the colonisation of Muslim nations and European pre-occupation with veiling and segregation (Ahmad 1992, Kabani 1986, [Malek Alloula](#) 1986)

equality) have made restrictive covering of women's bodies part of their Islamic identity even though historically it has never been part of the 5 pillars of Islam. Indeed scholars have established that such concern with women's clothing and covering, over and above segregation, emerged as a religious pre-occupation mostly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the colonisation of Muslim nations (Ahmed 1992, Kabana 1992). Furthermore, in many contexts such as Algeria, many parts of Indonesia and post Jasmine Revolution (January 2011) Tunisia, Muslim states of Nigeria and India, non-state actors are imposing their own interpretation of Islamic requirement (usually based on Saudi Arabian practices and extreme conservative Wahhabi school) of restrictive Muslim dress codes on women in the name of religion, while often the state often turns a blind eye on the phenomena.

This state of affairs led WLUML to research the history and evolution of women's fashion and community and state dress codes in many Muslim societies through examining both visual and other historical documents. The result of this project clearly established the historical diversity of dress codes and fashion in different Muslim contexts and that there was never a fixed Muslim women's fashion or even head gear. Historically Muslim hijab was understood very differently and indeed sometimes did not include head gear at all. Rather it was understood as a general state of acting and behaving modestly by both men and women. Given the huge politicization of Muslim veiling and more recent the *niqab* (face veil) in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts, to reach the largest audience possible WUML prepared public talks and a Women's Dress Code Exhibition which thus far successfully has successfully travelled to many parts of the world.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore WLUML has contin-

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.wluml.org/node/2663>. See also <http://www.wluml.org/node/5598> and on Sudanese women's dress codes <http://www.wluml.org/archive/wrrc/content/sudanese-womens-dress-codes-and-african-protocols-womens-rights-projects-salmaa>



ued its research in diverse contemporary Muslim contexts, documenting the collective, common and individual strategies women have developed in resisting, subverting or sometimes adopting the veil and “Islamic dress codes”, in pursuit of their own autonomy and breaking away from other cultural restrictions imposed on them in the name of religion.<sup>5</sup>

It was in this unholy environment and a push toward obscenification and eroticization of women’s bodies as sources of evil and disorder that conservative Muslim forces condemned women’s sport as non-Islamic and below Muslim women’s ‘dignity. Hence the question of women’s sport emerged as a space for women in Muslim contexts to challenge both state and non-state actors and question their customary exclusion from the field of sport, in the name of religion and morality. Sport games have increasingly evolved as a collective space and a national spectacle for claiming and establishing one’s citizenry claim, thus women’s exclusion was indicative of much broader discriminatory attitudes toward women. While such a resistance was not new, the politicization of women and collective actions as well as common actions and entering into dialogues with state authorities, particularly in the context of theocratic states, is rather new.

In many societies during the 1970s, women’s sport had emerged as a new frontier for gender equality and feminists were demanding equal access to various fields of sport as their male counterparts. In the aftermath of 1979 revolution, newly established Islamic Republic of Iran, limited women’s access to sport and introduced restrictive gender segregation of sport facilities and denied women to participate in some fields of sport. Furthermore, it prevented women from participating in the Olympic Games on religious grounds in 1988 and 1992. Iranian women had been participating in the Olympics, even if it

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<sup>5</sup> See Kariapper 2009, Hoodfar 2003.

was in token numbers, since 1964. In the light of other restrictions imposed by the Islamic Republic on women, this move further alarmed women of the systematic policy of excluding them from all public spaces and public life, even where their presence was rather faint. In many ways, this state imposition politicized sport and encouraged women in Iran, both seculars as well as those working from within a religious perspective, to defy their exclusion from public sporting events, especially the Olympics. They brought their concerns to the national public sphere and ensured a continuous and lively public debate. They also involved international and transnational civil societies and worked to bring together various women's sport initiatives in Muslim contexts to help build a transnational movement that included both women from Muslim contexts and wider alliances with the various women's and human rights movements. Women realized this struggle has to be challenged at the global level. They collectively objected to the presentation of women's bodies both as obscene which needs to be hidden from public view or sexually objectifying them. WLUML followed these developments and supported various campaigns launched to end the exclusion of women from sport arenas and public spaces. These concerns reached a new level of complexity when many practicing Muslim women joined and demanded from international bodies accommodation for their needs, particularly around their head covering and sport uniforms, thus challenging the cultural hegemony of European standards in defining presentation of women's body.

The resistance to the exclusion of women, particularly on religious grounds, emerged as an inter-generational activism movement where many young women still in their teens engaged alongside the more seasoned activists in rejecting the exclusionary practices. Moreover many women who had little interest in sport per se joined in because they understood marginalization of women from such sport arenas, 'assumed

politically banal activity' as signifying their exclusion from other aspects of public life and their citizenry rights. WLUMML was particularly supportive of younger women's engagement and viewed sport as a space of intergenerational activism and forms of resistance and collective actions. WLUMML had been always interested in developing and facilitating the inter-generational feminist movements as the best way to transmit experiences to the younger generation, thus following and supporting these movements has a special place in the network.

The women's resistance movement received a boost when the United Nations identified sport as an important mechanism of development and empowerment and a tool for promoting peace and stability (Darnell & Black 2011, Donnelly et. al 2011, Hayhurst 2011). The UN encouraged national Governments to harness the potential of sport to contribute to the achievement of development objectives, specifically the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and peace. The emphasis by the UN on sport and the link with empowerment brought a new array of legitimacy for women demanding access to sport and calling for the removal of discriminatory policies as well as equal access to resources for men and women's sport and physical education.

In 2007 one of the side-events of the Feminist Leadership Institute, where some 30 young women from diverse Muslim majority countries had gathered in Pang, Malaysia for a two week long training session, was looking at women and sport and the role of public spaces for promotion of gender equality. The interest and lively discussion around the subject and diverse analysis and linkages participants made to other forms of exclusion of women from public life led to a decision for closer examination and more systematic research and documentation on the subject of women and sport in Muslim contexts. There

was particular interest in the documentation of various arguments including religious and veiling requirements as a justification used by some states and non-state actors, for exclusion of women from sport-games and strategies that women have adopted in countering these arguments and policies.

With this mandate WLUML launched a more systemic research in several different Muslim contexts, under its Dress Code and Bodily Autonomy Program and invited other interested scholars to share their work with WLUML. In collaboration with Concordia University, in March 2008 WLUML organized a symposium under the title of “The Role of Sport in Resisting, Accommodating and in Remaking Muslim Women” in Montreal.<sup>6</sup> This was followed with several smaller workshops in Iran, UK and Montreal in 2009 and 2010 and 2011. The present book represents some of the research papers which were presented at these workshops. We hope this volume works as a catalyst for further research, workshops and publications as well as visual media by other scholars and activists, particularly those working in the Muslim contexts on the subject, and pushing the boundaries for women in national and international sport events and public spaces.

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<sup>6</sup> A short report of this symposium was prepared by Homa Hoodfar and Sertaç Sehliskoğlu (see <http://www.wluml.org/node/6005>)

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# Chapter 1

## Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts

Homa Hoodfar

....Why can't girls - Muslim or not - play sport because they enjoy it...

....Firstly, I agree with you that in an ideal world women/girls should engage in sport because they enjoy it. However sport is a social institution and reflects the values and injustices of a given society – sport is no exception to this. Indeed, in all societies women's access to sport has been limited often on the grounds of modesty, if not religion and even science. If you look at the history and struggles of European and North American women to gain access to sport and Olympic participation, you see that sport is much more embroiled in sexual politics than we would like to believe. The book I am editing for Women Living Under Muslim Laws, to which we have invited you to contribute, deals with the diverse obstacles that prevent women from engaging in sport. These obstacles are neither coincidental nor isolated; rather they are aspects of a systemic and orchestrated attempt to prevent women from sport and athletics by opponents who recognize that sport is one of many arenas in which changes to gendered practices will lead to other social changes, and to women's

demands for other rights that will challenge male privilege.

I suggest that you try and find time to read two books, *Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in Sports* and *Grace and Glory*, both easy reads that will give you a taste of how women in Europe and North America had to fight for access to athletic programs in schools, never mind at a competitive level. If you knew what women went through – including going to court in the USA just to have the right to modify their clothes for exercise or riding a bicycle, I think you would appreciate the extent to which sport and innocent activities such as bicycling are political. I am not talking about state politics here, but sexual and social politics. Have you asked yourself why it is that in Pakistan women do not ride bicycles? Why the highly skilled Pakistani women's national cricket team faces more criticism than admiration? I, like you, prefer to believe that we live in a world where our capabilities and desires for fulfilment shape our choices and activities, including sport. However, this is not the case; ordinary citizens and in particular women have had to struggle for every inch of such basic rights, which ideally should be taken for granted. And we will not get there if you and I do not struggle against the limitations placed on women in all forms, using all kinds of excuses...

The above quote is from a letter that I wrote in response to a young friend; an excellent writer I had invited to contribute to this edited book on Muslim women's sport, drawing from wider research she had conducted earlier for WLUML. She declined, responding "...why should we politicize everything?"

Indeed, not being very athletic myself, her attitude was not that different from how I used to think of sport, even though I

was passionately engaged in debates over women's rights from a very young age. But my perspective changed some two years after the Iranian revolution, in the spring of 1981 when I returned from the UK to Iran to visit my family and catch up on developments in Iran during the previous two years while I was away studying. I had supported the revolution with hopes for greater democracy and citizens' rights. However I was very dismayed to find that things were going terribly wrong, particularly for women.<sup>1</sup> A couple of days after my arrival a neighbour asked if I would like to go for an early morning, prebreakfast walk and get some exercise in a park not far from where I lived. I was perplexed as she was not known for any interest in sport, or politics for that matter. Seeing my puzzled look she laughed and explained:

Homa we all have changed. We have learned that if we are not out there holding our ground, they take away the little we have, wanting us to live even worse than our grandmothers. They want to force the veil on us, tell us we should not do sports and we should not be out in parks and public spaces, or work. As it is going, tomorrow they will say women do not need education. All in the name of religion. Who knows where this will end? We just have to be there.

I joined her and a rather large group – some 20 women of all ages, mostly housewives from 30 to 50 years old – at the park

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<sup>1</sup> The 1979 Iranian revolution, demanding democracy and freedom, was one of the most popular revolutions in modern history. Although the revolution successfully ousted the modernist dictatorial regime of the time, a theocratic regime, with little respect for democracy, individual liberties or gender equality, replaced it. This regime quickly set about creating a gender apartheid society through the introduction of various discriminatory policies and decrees (Hoodfar & Sadeghi 2009, Paidar 1995). Indeed the introduction of compulsory veiling has been the hallmark of this regime. The antiquated view of women and society upheld by the regime has unleashed widespread resistance and a new form of politics which the regime had not anticipated (Azimi 2008: 357-450, Keddie 2003, Piadar 1995).



to do exercises. All the while we passionately discussed the need to be out there “in their faces”. This was not the politics I expected but I was intrigued to see that the revolution had brought these women to some engagement in public politics, if not in formal conventional politics; women who had previously dismissed politics as “not their business”.

A week later when I visited acquaintances in a low-income neighbourhood to assess the possibility of conducting my PhD fieldwork, the neighbourhood women told me how their lives had changed, though they themselves had not participated in the revolutionary anti-regime demonstrations. Now when they went to buy fresh bread each morning they also met in the small local park for exercises, and, as several told me, “... this has been very good for me”.<sup>2</sup> One of them said, “To be good Muslim mothers we have to take care of ourselves and our health, which is a gift of God”. Over the next couple of months I heard more discussion about women's sport and the Islamic views on the subject than I had heard in the previous 30 years of my life. I felt something interesting developing, something I should keep tabs on, and I did.

A few years later, living in Cairo, I sat through many sessions with young women in the low-income community where I was doing my research, listening to their complaints that boys have all the opportunities to play while girls have none. “The local streets are taken over by boys playing football, but we are told Muslim girls should not play in the street” (explained to me one teenager involved in a dispute over women playing football). They asked me whether it was different for girls in the

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<sup>2</sup> From March to May 1981, I visited several low-income neighbourhoods where I had previous connections. Different women I met repeatedly brought up how fitness exercises were good for their health and spirit. This focus on fitness and personal health was unusual in these traditional neighborhoods, where mothers were expected to act selflessly (personal communication, Spring 1981, Tehran; also see Hoodfar in this volume for more details).

UK, where I had been living prior to this, looking for confirmation of other possibilities. A friend in old Cairo told me about an incident that caused a neighbourhood shouting match. A group of girls were playing football, the national passion in Egypt, on the roof of her old four-story building. During the game the ball fell to the street in front of a shop and the shopkeeper shouted that if God had wanted them to play football, he would have made them men. The ensuing argument continued as neighbours joined in shouting from roofs and balconies and the street supporting one side or the other. This led to ongoing discussion in the neighbourhood about whether and where women should play sports. Such discussions have continued in many Muslim contexts over the last three decades, and as various chapters of this volume show, women have devised diverse strategies to create a more equitable social environment for women to engage in sport and public life in their societies.

### **Sport, Nation Building and Modernity**

In the early part of the twentieth century many of the newly established nation states used sport, and in particular women's sport, as a means of claiming modernity and refashioning gender roles (Yarar 2005, Woodsmall 1936). As Hoodfar and Sehliskoğlu describe in this volume, the opening of public space to women, refashioning women's roles and the presentation of female bodies, were based on assumptions and preoccupations of newly established modern nation states in the Middle East and other post-colonial contexts concerned with achieving the appearance of modernity. In these contexts sport and physical education were adopted by the various states as strategic tools to communicate modernist ideological leanings to their nations and to the international community at large, even though these practices were in fact embraced and accepted by

only a very small segment of the population.<sup>3</sup> However, since the late 1970s and with the rise of political Islamism(s), many Muslim majority states have stopped supporting women's sport and the often meagre state resources allotted for physical education are mostly directed towards men's sport; women's games have rarely been encouraged, and in many cases have been eliminated from national sport programs.<sup>4</sup> These developments, frequently claimed to be in line with 'authentic' traditional or religious dictates, had major implications for the advancement of women's sport, since state support provides not only resources but, more importantly, ideological legitimacy.

Sport was certainly not the only arena of exclusion for women; from Algeria to Iran, and even in Indonesia and Malaysia where historically women enjoyed significant freedom of movement and access to the public sphere, political Islamists<sup>5</sup> inside and outside of state structures were exerting pressure to exclude women from public space and impose restrictive dress codes and gender roles (Wee 2012, Hoodfar 2012a, Hoodfar & Ghorishian 2012, Kandiyoti 1991). Indeed in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution that brought to power a republican theocracy in 1979, the questions of women's dress code and public roles have become highly politicized in many Muslim societies, used by both liberal forces and by political Islamists who view imposed hijab and gender segregation as a superior way of life. Political Islamists promote a restrictive and marginal under-

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<sup>3</sup> While many Muslim majority states promoted modernity, none promoted democratic development or an opening of the public sphere to citizen debates concerning the state. Thus public/civil society politics were conducted through social institutions, public spaces and religious practices normally considered non-political.

<sup>4</sup> Physical education for girls was generally limited to fitness exercises, as opposed to games where women could develop leadership qualities and compete in national and international arenas.

<sup>5</sup> Concepts of Political Islamist refers to those who use Islam and religion for achieving their political goals and to gain access to state and formal power.

standing of Islam based on literal readings of religious texts rather than on the diversity of lived Islam, draped in a rhetoric of cultural authenticity and anti-Westernism.<sup>6</sup> Their anti-cultural imperialism rhetoric however is primarily directed at reversing the expansion of roles and rights that women have carved for themselves in public life in the aftermath of liberation movements and the dismantling of colonialism.

It is important to note however that the Iranian political Islamists expanded – if not fully invented – interpretation of Islamic laws goes far beyond any rule of modesty, dictating the wearing of hijab to cover the entire body except face, hands and feet. Political Islamists, having deemed women's bodies and bodily movements to be a source of chaos that arouse male sexual desire and create social disorder, claim to promote an ideal segregated society based on an imagined 'glorious early Islamic community' where a woman's role is limited primarily to motherhood and care giving; ideally excluding any form of contact with men outside their immediate kin. To this end they may grudgingly accept that women may become teachers, nurses, and doctors in order to provide services to female students and patients. However, in their segregated worldview there is little room for women in any other capacities, including as athletes.

Such ideological environments are the context for placing sexual politics at the centre of much debate for women's rights proponents, who are fighting the framing of restrictions on women as divinely directed and anti-cultural imperialism. This era of sexual politics is different from previous decades, in both style and vigour, as women, from Saudi Arabia to Iran, from Nigeria to Indonesia, speak loudly and act publicly to shape and reshape public discourses about much more com-

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of political Islamism (also referred to as fundamentalism) see Akbarzadeh (2012) and Volpi (2011).

plex current debates, involving wider and more diverse segments of women than in previous eras. Issues of religion and political Islam, hijab and gender segregation, international relations and cultural imperialism as well as women's rights as equal citizens form important axes in public discourses on sexual politics. In this complex matrix women must devise contextualized strategies in navigating their political and cultural interests as well as the "common/collective good". As the various case studies in this volume show, this focus on the "common/collective good" is important.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that women who engage in discourse and action, whatever their ideological viewpoint or religious conviction, are undermining the very goal of excluding women from the public arena and public life simply by refusing to be passive observers.

### **Sport as Public Space**

Women have learned through centuries of struggle that public visibility is the first step in establishing their rights as citizens. Contemporary Muslim women from all backgrounds are resisting the attempts of political Islamists and conservatives to take away, in the name of religion and cultural authenticity, the limited rights they have secured, while these forces are equally committed to rhetorically manipulating religion and Islamic morality to minimize women's access to public space and the public sphere. Given the lack of formal democratic channels for meaningful citizen impact on public policy and programs in many Muslim majority societies, women are politicizing spaces

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<sup>7</sup>These debates frequently go beyond individual rights, though at their heart they argue for just that. Rights advocates must show that they are interested in the common good and society as a whole. Thus discourses move beyond the liberal notion of maximizing personal interest and instead place the interest of collective women and society at the heart of demands.

normally considered outside politics.<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that sport in particular has become an arena of vociferous contestation where gender politics are played out as women fight to re-map the boundaries of their public engagement rights as citizens. Such a strategy is particularly important in societies such as Iran where political Islamists control the state, and in places where they exert considerable influence over the government such as Malaysia or Algeria.<sup>9</sup> Aside from its inherent value, sport has emerged as a medium through which women from various Muslim cultures and walks of life have fashioned strategies for redefining their identities; through their stances on sport they also express their positions concerning ideals of womanhood and the role of sport in women's public life. In Muslim majority societies sport has thus emerged as a site where women's entanglement with politics, power, religion and resources is playing out. As Askren, Hoodfar, Afzali, and Shaheed emphasize in this volume, sport is a versatile medium and does not determine the message itself. Rather, a variety of messages can be conveyed, influenced by specific actors, the nature of their demands, and the particular religio-political context. Given the heterogeneity of states and political forces, as well as the variations in degrees of the establishment of gender equality and women's rights in Muslim societies, proponents of gender equity and women's sport have had to devise context-specific strategies to achieve their goals.

Women's rights discourses can never be autonomous of their contexts; their success depends on the ways in which their ar-

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<sup>8</sup>Indeed such strategies are not limited to the arena of sport. Other examples include young people in the Middle East using music to register their discontent; as well as in Egypt and elsewhere ordinary people have organized mass citizen boycotts of companies that support the Israeli government (Naafs 2010, Djerdjerian 2009, Nooshin 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The considerable debate among Iranians over women in sport since the 1990s, and especially following the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, is indicative of discontent that has been brewing since the 1980s (see Hoodfar in this volume), and this is currently a topic of debate among Saudis (see Shaheed in this volume).

guments and demands resonate and are tied to those of the larger public, if not the state. In some contexts women have organized more formal public campaigns such as the “Open Stadiums” campaign in Iran which aimed to remove the ban on women spectators at football matches (Afzali in this volume, Hoodfar 2012) or the Saudi “Let Her Get Fat” campaign demanding the introduction of physical education in girls’ schools in Saudi Arabia (Shaheed in this volume). However, in the absence of democracy and freedom of expression in most Muslim majority contexts, such organized activism can be dangerous for organizers (and often their families) and sympathizers. In these contexts women must minimize the risk of public political engagement and devise alternative strategies.

One prominent successful strategy has been to engage the public, and indirectly the state, by organizing collective programs including football teams, hiking groups, fitness classes and more.<sup>10</sup> As Hoodfar suggests in this volume, women use their bodies and their common actions (rather than organized collective protest) in claiming, transforming and sometimes creating alternative public spaces. Using sport as the medium for reclaiming women’s bodies and redefining their rights and spheres of influence allows women from a variety of social and religious backgrounds to participate, since these informal group activities can often be undertaken without necessarily subscribing to a particular ideology or being subject to any chain of command, and can generally be practiced in ways that accommodate any ideological or religious position. Sport in particular lends itself to such informal protest actions, even if participants are not always conscious of their transformative nature. The power of these informal movements stems in large

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<sup>10</sup> It is understood that the state does not approve of these activities for women, though they cannot issue direct orders to this effect. They often create obstacles by focusing on dress-codes or other excuses, such as protecting women from dangerous activities.

part from their fluidity and the absence of any public speaking component; thus large segments of women, who may not have much appetite for “politics”, who may have never engaged with activist leaders, or who may never have considered themselves leaders, can participate and contribute without having to ideologically conform to a formally defined institutional perspective.<sup>11</sup> Never-the-less, by their very actions they are transforming and expanding the definition of women’s spheres delimited by conservative forces.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed even in the context of totalitarian regimes such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, women (and marginalized groups) have adopted non-organized movements and have successfully raised and found support for their issues in the public discourse, without directly targeting powerful state or non-state actors (particularly political-Islamists), and without necessarily challenging existing cultural norms. They quietly re-interpret what is permissible and act on it; we might argue that they have in fact appropriated a neo-Gramscian approach whereby certain practices and ideals are achieving a significant if not hegemonic status, as social change is instituted from below through ongoing actions and persuasive rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> Proponents

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<sup>11</sup> Although some scholars refer to these informal social movements as leaderless, I view these movements as “leaderful” and transformative, as well as much more democratic. For a discussion of different forms of leadership and social transformation, as well as the concept of “leaderful”, see Bunch (2002) and Batliwala (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Social scientists have more recently shown interest in these non-organized movements that transform social norms, religious practices, cultural-codes, and values, without needing structured organizations, formal leadership, or ideologies (Bayat 2010, Hoodfar & Sadeghi 2009, Salvatore & Levine 2005).

<sup>13</sup> The political theorist Gramsci offered a new understanding of culture and political control. In his works, particularly in *Prison Notes*, he explored how the state and ruling political forces – through multifaceted channels and constant reminders – encourage social groups to accept and comply with their view, even when it goes against their very interests. He pointed out that while techniques of coercion and discipline are important to such hegemonic influence, it is through education, persuasion and the constant and variable interplay of various rituals, rewards and intellectual productions, that power over the public is maintained. Gramsci was preoccupied with the power of the state and ruling classes, and



of women's sport are of course not the only social actors attempting to reshape cultural hegemony from below. The promotion of Islamic schooling by various Islamist political parties (in particular Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (Starrett 1998), the mobilization of grassroots women by Islamic political parties in Turkey (White 2002), and Muslim women's mass involvement in charity work in Lebanon (Deeb 2006), are all initiatives which share this strategy, however, unlike the entirely informal expansion of "women in sport" movements, these initiatives are primarily directed by formal institutions, even if they are outside state structures.

In contexts where state legitimacy stems from public support, when women's "common actions" and public discourses on sport (or other concerns) generate significant public agreement, this can lead to policy change. For instance as Sehliskoğlu shows in this volume, following the 2002 election of the Development and Justice Party in Turkey (owing heavily to the mobilization of support by pious women) urban municipal recreation centers have created "women-only hours" in addition to running mixed-sex centers. In Iran in the 1990s, activities and discourses concerning women and sport led, albeit reluctantly, to the creation of international Islamic Solidarity Games (see Hoodfar this volume). Conversely, in contexts where totalitarian regimes largely owe their stability to external support, while lobbying internally and informally, women have also learned to harness the power of transnational women's organisations and movements, human rights activists and transnational civil society to indirectly pressure the state, as we observed when Saudi Arabia agreed to send two women to the 2012 Olympics (Shaheed in this volume). Although their presence may have been largely tokenistic, it nonetheless represented an achievement,

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did not consider that such techniques might also be adopted by the "powerless" from below in their attempt to resist control.

which Saudi women can use to lobby for the introduction of physical education into the female school curriculum.

In more socially, if not politically, open societies such as Bangladesh, proponents of women's sport have orchestrated initiatives through existing formal institutions, both inside and outside state structures, as outlined by Shamsuddin (this volume). In such contexts, committed women lobbying for gender equality in physical education can also play a pivotal role in opening public space to women. Indeed experience has shown that gender equality requires mobilizing to address all sectors – social, economic, political and religious. Sport is itself multifaceted – concerning both health and public participation, and can include girls from a very young age, effectively engaging girls early on in preparing for public life that includes females.

However, opponents of gender equality, and conservative and Islamists forces understand equally well the significance of sport as medium for undermining the ideology of gender segregation and limitations on women. They have thus vigorously argued against developing women's sport, or at the least relegating it to segregated public spaces, largely through expanding interpretations and impositions of modesty and the construction of all expressions of female physicality as erotic. Other arguments have included state and religious discourse identifying women's sport as part and parcel of cultural imperialism aimed at undermining Muslim society, with the goal of making it difficult for women to participate in international sport.

### **Sport in the International Arena**

Conservatives and political Islamists continue to rhetorically link the development of modern sport with colonization and

cultural imperialism.<sup>14</sup> To be sure the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as well other international sporting organizations such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have played a prominent role in promoting modern sport. But, while arguably states do use sport and the production of elite athletes (particularly Eastern Bloc European countries since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Riordan 1982) to gain international prestige, there is little evidence to support the notion that promoting sport in foreign nations by Western states has been used as a means of influencing relations or dynamics within developing countries. In fact, most research on modern sport suggests that contemporary athletic activities have developed primarily in response to the needs of urban industrial contexts (Guttmann 1994).

While economic and political agendas undoubtedly play a role in promoting sport, it is the agency of people in a given community and society that is key to whether a particular sport or athletic activity is practiced or adopted. The issue of sport and cultural imperialism has been extensively discussed in the literature (Guttmann 1994, Clumpner 1978); an in depth review is outside the scope of this work. However, I make my point by

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<sup>14</sup> Most scholars agree that modern sport is a by-product of modernity, urbanization, and social and economic transformation. However there is little evidence that imperial powers used sport as a way of controlling colonized nations, or for diplomatic purposes. The financial contributions from wealthier and developed nations (particularly the US) to developing countries for development of sport had been negligible (Clumpner 1978). Germany is the most prominent country that adopted sport in the 1970s as a way of supporting education and international development in developing countries, yet it was modern games such as football and basketball that Germans themselves had only slowly incorporated into their culture which they promoted abroad (Guttmann 1994, Hazan 1987). As for the US, until recently it provided little aid for sport to developing countries. Roy Clumpner (1978) analyzed US involvement in the promotion of American interests through the promotion of sport, and did not find any evidence of interest in sport for diplomacy in the post-WWII era, when the US emerged as the world's leading imperial power (see Lowe, Kanin & Strenk 1978). Indeed the USSR had been a little more generous, at least in regards to Africa (see Hazan 1987: 250-271). However a decade into the new millennium this picture might change, now that the United Nations (UN) has identified sport as a means of empowerment, development, and peace-making (Hayhurst 2011).

quoting Edward Said, probably imperialism's most outspoken critic:

...the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings. Cultures are not impermeable; just as western Sciences borrowed from Arabs, they had borrowed from India and Greece. Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures. This is a universal norm. Who has yet determined how much the domination of others contributed to the enormous wealth of English and French states? (1993:217).

Ongoing borrowing and exchange, and indigenizing and incorporating aspects of diverse cultures and societies, are incontestable. And though the terms and conditions of such encounters and exchanges are often embedded in unequal power relations that are highly problematic, never-the-less countless advances across civilizations and history owe their development to the processes of cross-cultural "fertilization".

Along with borrowing, innovation and adaptation, contestation is a fact of every living culture and also acts as an engine of social change. Ideals of political democracy and citizenry rights, modern medical sciences and communication technologies, all of which emerged from the West, are fully incorporated in contemporary Muslim cultures, and modern sport along with traditional sport has been accepted and integrated into many Muslim societies alongside more traditional forms of sport. "If there is no objection to placing the holy book of Muslims, the Qur'an on the internet – a western invention – then why can't we play football?" a young Iranian woman football (soccer) player asked me, when I raised the issue of cultural imperialism at a gathering in Tehran in 2007.

The rhetoric of cultural authenticity and resistance to imperialism is frequently the pretext for objections when women demand space and resources to engage in sport or other aspects of public life. However few religio-political leaders, regardless of the extent of their conservatism and “anti-westernism” would argue that Pakistani men should not play cricket, or that Egyptian or Algerian men should stop playing football because these games were developed or promoted by the British.

The rhetorical power of the cultural imperialism argument against women's sport in Muslim societies has clearly diminished over the last couple of decades. Moreover, the United Nations has recently identified sport as an important mechanism of development and empowerment and a tool for promoting peace and stability (Darnell & Black 2011, Donnelly et. al 2011, Hayhurst 2011). Experts point out that sports teams can incorporate members from diverse ethnic, racial and religious groups, and can thus act as a means for national integration.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, hostile nations with histories of conflict and war may rebuild relations through games (Chehabi 2001). This recent emphasis by the international community on sport has brought a new legitimacy to sports and provides women an avenue for mobilization, especially in countries where international aid plays a pronounced role, such as Bangladesh. The commitment of the United Nations (UN) to gender equality has also strengthened women's claims for a larger share of sport resources.

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<sup>15</sup> It is also important to note that sport is a tool and indeed can also work as a vehicle for division and hostility as some have pointed out ([The \(Almost\) Football War: Algeria-Egypt 2010 World Cup Qualifiers](http://www.footballiscominghome.info/video/the-almost-football-war-algeria-egypt-2010-world-cup-qualifiers/)). <http://www.footballiscominghome.info/video/the-almost-football-war-algeria-egypt-2010-world-cup-qualifiers/>; Algeria vs Egypt – a bitter battle before it's begun, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20091112-algeria-vs-egypt-bitter-battle-before-begun-match-14-november> (12/11/2009)

## **Challenges to Religious and Cultural Exclusionary Practices**

With the debunking of the cultural imperialism argument, opponents of women's sport have focused on religion to justify their position, arguing that women's sport compromises modesty and contravenes the requirements around sex segregation. However in most Muslim contexts they have lost the battle opposing women's sport, as proponents have successfully shown that Islam actually encourages sport for all, since it is "incumbent upon all Muslim to take care of their health which is a gift of God to them" (as read a billboard on the entrance of Ministry of Health in Tehran in 1991; see also Hoodfar (2001). Having mobilized women under the banner of Islam and Islamic social justice in many recently Islamist-ruled states over the last decades, political Islamists and conservatives (whether inside or outside of state power structures) now find it difficult to ignore women's demands for sport opportunities, thus their focus on issues of modesty and gender segregation. Women have responded with various strategies to lobby for sports, depending on the particular political context, sometimes with unexpected consequences.

Perhaps because of the diversity of voices calling for women's sport the issue has gained prominence in public discourse and increasingly widespread support; this appears to have contributed to a shift in norms towards progressive social change. As many of the articles in this volume indicate, there is increasing demand for equitable sharing of resources for male and female sport activities and facilities. Proponents generally reject segregation as a waste of already meagre resources, and reject the conventional and rigid gender boundaries that conservatives and political Islamists present as natural, arguing that this approach contradicts the Islamic ideal that women and men should maximize their potential. Advocates of women's sport

are redefining femininity and womanhood in presenting sport as an arena for allowing women's abilities to flourish, and promote female athletics as a means of shifting the notion of women as weak and dependent, to women as citizens invested with equal rights, demanding that authorities and public policy recognize, honour and respect women's rights in public life.

Pragmatically women's sport advocates identify areas of discrimination, whether budget allocation or school curricula, and offer possible solutions. The extent to which this strategy is successful depends on state ideology, available resources and the degree of public support. Thus for example women in Bangladesh and Senegal have had considerable success (see Shamsuddin and Saavedra in this volume), while in Iran and Saudi Arabia – both rich oil countries<sup>16</sup> – the strategy for legitimizing women's demand for sport facilities and opportunities, though articulated within the framework of state and religious gender ideology, has been less successful (Afzali and Shaheed in this volume). The concurrent existence of more "radical" and uncompromising gender equality voices in these latter contexts makes the voices of those who call for more sport opportunities for women – even if they are to be segregated – appear moderate and more acceptable (see Hoodfar this volume).

Having established that women's sport is not in fact contrary to Islam, proponents have found it more challenging to address modesty requirements which political Islamists have redefined in such a way that any movement of a woman's body is framed as obscene and erotic. Political Islamists and conservatives thus insist that women can engage in sport only through the crea-

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<sup>16</sup> With oil production nationalized, the money from oil means that these governments do not need to raise taxes to fund government expenses. In these kinds of rentier economies, democracy is rather weak and citizens have less avenues to influence the state.

tion of segregated facilities. While women in Europe and North America had similar struggles to open the world of sport to women (see Barratt this volume), the major obstacle they faced was pseudo-science claiming sport was hazardous to women's fertility (Howell 1982) – which they used science to refute. While they also collided with and challenged notions of public morality, women in Muslim contexts have to deal with claims of divinely ordained restrictions. This complicates their struggle as they address super-natural claims, backed by the state and purportedly hundreds of years of legitimacy.

Thus activists – practicing Muslims and non-practicing alike – in states controlled by political Islamists or where political Islamists and conservatives have significant power, have largely tried to lobby for women's sport without challenging traditional boundaries concerning gender roles and gender relations. There are certainly women who embrace rules concerning modesty and dress code as defined by Islamist states, and who implicitly appear to accept a state gender ideology relegating women to second class citizens, who still advocate for women's sports. However, the notion of a segregated sport culture and structure as defined by political Islamists excludes publicizing women's sport in any way, including notifying the public through the media of events and activities, as well as documenting through print and images any female sports events, and this is clearly problematic. Thus while segregated facilities may open the possibility to many women from more conservative backgrounds to engage in sport, it denies women as a collective the opportunity to establish themselves in the eyes of the public as athletes or become role models for other women through sport. Even when women succeed, as Iranian women did, in establishing international women-only games, the constraints engender a quite subdued and lesser public arena (Hoodfar in this volume). In short, working within such restrictions leaves the core worldview of political Islamists un-



disturbed, which has challenging implications for advocating for broader gender justice. It generally results in the development of a less-valued gender-apartheid women's sport culture, which re-enforces the idea of women as lesser citizens.

Furthermore, as Kariapper and Hoodfar examine in this volume, while women-only sport initiatives amongst Muslim communities in the UK have expanded women's social networks, their self-confidence and their overall health and well-being, it also encourages women who might otherwise have joined non-gender segregated facilities or mixed faith groups to forgo these options. While this is not always/ necessarily negative, it does contradict one of the initial intentions of the initiatives, which was to engage young Muslim women in sport as a means of helping them enter into wider society and take their rightful places as equal and rights-bearing citizens. Thus Kariapper and Hoodfar note that while women's rights and anti-racist advocates celebrate the expansion of Muslim women's public space in the UK, they should be mindful of possible unintended consequences and adopt strategies to counter them.<sup>17</sup>

In contexts where women are dealing with newly instituted modesty requirements (either formal or informal), strategies include selecting sports such as fencing, archery, rowing and shooting, where outfits and movements do not easily lend themselves to erotic interpretation even by radical Islamists in Iran. Ironically many of these sports have historically been considered "intrinsically male". Other strategies include taking up

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<sup>17</sup> Many studies in a variety of societies have long established that sexual segregation (including rigid division of labour) is disadvantageous to women (see Halim & Meyers 2010, Sandy 1974). More recently research concerning European policies on multiculturalism indicates that benefits of gender segregated societies are few and far between, while there are many negative consequences for women (van den Brink, Loenen & Tigchelaar, 2010). Furthermore it is important to note that promoting segregated sport facilities is a long way from adopting the veil in order to engage in the wider society, which many Muslim women in both Muslim majority and minority contexts have adopted (Ahmed 2011, Kariapper 2009, Hoodfar 2003).

the veil and designing loose fitting sport gear in order to be able to play games such as football or basketball, both at home as well as regionally and internationally (see Hoodfar in this volume). Sadly, while Muslim women athletes continue to battle political Islamists at home who use every legal and social barrier to oppose them (including intimidation and threats of violence), they have also faced prejudices at the international level and have been denied the right to play at international venues because they were veiled based on their state requirements or were unwilling to wear the required uniforms which were too revealing according to their personal convictions, religious beliefs or national laws (Hoodfar forthcoming, Hamzeh forthcoming(b)).<sup>18</sup> Their exclusion was often presented as a safety issue, but with the design and production of the “safe sport veil”, this shifted to an objection to religious symbols. However, as many were quick to point out, many players had been wearing large crosses without it ever becoming a concern.<sup>19</sup>

These objections to conservative dress and “religious symbols” by various sport federations, and in particular FIFA, which governs football – the most popular sport in many Muslim countries – re-awakened cultural imperialism arguments. The idea

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<sup>18</sup> On several occasions the Iranian women’s football team was denied the right to play the international game because they were wearing veils, and yet wearing the veil is compulsory in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, and socially enforced in many other contexts as well. At times this ban on the veil in sports had been justified as safety issue, and other times because it is assumed to be a religious symbol (see Hoodfar 2013).

<sup>19</sup> In June 2012 just before the London Olympics, FIFA removed this objection and now women can play wearing a safe veil (see, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2012/jul/23/sports-hijabs-muslim-women-olympics>). This move was in line with recent modifications to dress requirements from other organizations as well. See for instance “Weightlifter wins her fight to wear the hijab in competition as international body bows to pressure for rule change” (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2010277/Muslim-weightlifter-Kulsoom-Abdullah-wins-fight-wear-hijab-competition.html>).

that “international” is for all practical purposes synonymous with “western sensibilities and values” was once again thrown at advocates of women’s sport by opponents as proof of cultural imperialism and an indication that sport, like the West in general, treated women as sexual objects for public pleasure. When the president of FIFA infamously suggested that women play in skimpier “more feminine” uniforms to increase the popularity and viewership of the game; along with the more recent suggestion that the uniform for Women’s Olympic Boxing be skirts, women in many contexts experienced significant setbacks in their efforts to promote a more inclusive form of women’s sport at the international level as their adversaries used these as proof that women in international sport are presented mainly as sexual objects.<sup>20</sup> Indeed when exploring the issues of dress code and sexism in international sports, we are provided with an arena to connect struggles across cultural and religious lines – enlarging the debate in Muslim contexts beyond the confines of ‘traditional gender roles’, deconstructing the body, and seeking broader solidarity in international efforts to promote sport (see Athar in this volume).

It has not been easy to galvanize transnational support for the right of female athletes to wear head-coverings and less revealing sport uniforms, because women’s rights activists and proponents of women’s sport are themselves divided over the issue of veiling. Some argue that the veil is oppressive, and represents and reinforces patriarchal ideology and should not be permitted in international contexts; the other side argues that sport has never claimed to be a secular/religious free

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<sup>20</sup>For details on these controversies, see *The Guardian*

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/jan/16/football.gender> (accessed 7 Oct. 2012)

and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/3402519.stm> (accessed 7 Oct. 2012).

For the recent boxing controversy see,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/04/olympics-2012-london-boxing-body-women-skirts-dress-code\\_n\\_1076934.html?ref=women&ir=Women](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/04/olympics-2012-london-boxing-body-women-skirts-dress-code_n_1076934.html?ref=women&ir=Women).

space and that preventing women from manifesting an essential aspect of their belief system is hardly a liberating move. Moreover, they point out that a ban on head coverings in international competition deprives many women athletes from representing their countries in international competition, as this contravenes certain national laws. Such rulings by international sporting bodies plays directly into the hands of regimes – such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, who enforce veiling – which would prefer their female citizens not participate internationally at all (Hoodfar 2013). It took years and much international campaigning to affect the June 2012 change the FIFA regulations to allow veiled women to play football at the international level.<sup>21,22</sup>

In the midst of these debates, the significant and inter-related influence of the neoliberal market economy and globalization on the issue of Muslim women's sport has received little attention by either proponents or scholars. But it is certainly notable that the emergence of Muslim women's sport and segregated sport spaces, with their uniform and other requirements has created entrepreneurial opportunities and raises other issues, especially as a growing practicing Muslim middle class has become more outwardly pious and modest, notably in Turkey which is also a tourist destination for many oil-rich Arab Muslim nations (see Sehliskoğlu in this volume). These spaces have offered a sense of empowerment to pious Muslim women who have become more assertive and subversive at the same time, as they challenge and rebel against their exclusion by their

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<sup>21</sup>See FIFA lifts ban on hijab for women footballers

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/404321/fifa-lifts-ban-on-headscarves-for-women-footballers/>; and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2012/jul/23/sports-hijabs-muslim-women-olympics> .

<sup>22</sup> Yet the manner in which the restriction was removed was very disappointing for all those who had campaigned for its removal and played more to the re-enforcement of undemocratic decisions of states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia who disallow women to choose whether or not to veil (see Hoodfar 2013).

male folks and communities, as well as secular forces and demand egalitarian opportunities. Ironically it is the neo-liberal ideology and neo-liberal market relations with their strong patriarchal tendencies that have responded to their demand. The social and political implications for women of these trends await future research. As well, in some Muslim majority countries, for example Senegal, where there are fewer social restrictions around women in sport, women have excelled in basketball. But with a very limited national budget for sport (see Saavedra in this volume), talented athletes look to North America and Europe to further their athletic successes. The implications of this aspect of globalization are very different for men and women from Muslim contexts where women's social and familial obligations often limit such options.

Discussion around veiling and modesty have emphasized the female body but paid little attention to analysing the criteria defining womanhood in these debates, though women athletes and sports enthusiasts are often labelled tomboyish and unfeminine; religious leaders in some Muslim contexts such as Malaysia have gone as far as issuing *fatwas* on the topic of what defines a woman (See Hoodfar & Ghoreishian 2012). And, while in Iran women have on occasion disguised themselves as males to circumvent legal restrictions around attending football games or riding bicycles (see Afzali in this volume), activists and scholars have not made any links between this and the heated international debate around gender-testing and the criteria for being designated female in national and international sport. It is only in 2014 as we are putting the final touches on this book before it goes to press that gender testing has made a headline and suddenly the criteria of gender testing has been adopted by the Iranian state, which has banned several women players from the women's football team for

their *ambiguous* gender state.<sup>23</sup> Athar (in this volume) looks at the 2008 case of Caster Semenya of South Africa and at several other women Olympic participants before her, to examine the assumptions about a women's body on which gender testing has been justified. The preoccupation with fighting the exclusion of women from sport in Muslim contexts has meant little attention has been paid to the transnational developments which are in some fundamental ways extensions of the very debates advocates of women's sport in Muslim societies are struggling against. The questions of what criteria should define a body as female, who should have the right to define these criteria, and many more are not asked. Neglecting such questions from the overarching struggle may be risky, however, especially when the pre-occupation with women's bodies and the definition of womanhood cuts across contexts and cultures, and is at the heart of a broader collective struggle for gender-justice at the international arena. Indeed women activists and athletes have been caught off guard when state authorities introduced gender testing.

To sum up, sport has emerged as an arena through which women from various walks of life in diverse Muslim cultures and political contexts engage in redefining their social and pub-

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<sup>23</sup> Four players were banned from the Iranian women's national team for failing gender tests (see <http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/soccer-dirty-tackle/four-players-banned-iranian-women-national-team-failing-144334186--sow.html> accessed 25 Feb 2014) also see: Female Iranian soccer players to undergo gender testing; <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/female-iranian-soccer-players-undergo-gender-testing-article-1.1607619>) [Islamic Republic football officials and gender-based discrimination against female athletes](http://www.6rang.org/en/news/report-and-activities/english-islamic-republic-football-officials-gender-based-discrimination-female-athletes/) <http://www.6rang.org/en/news/report-and-activities/english-islamic-republic-football-officials-gender-based-discrimination-female-athletes/> accessed 25 Feb 2014). Football Federation chief Ahmad Hashemian said: "If these people can solve their problems through and be in a position to receive the necessary medical qualifications, they will then be able to participate in women's football." Female Iranian soccer players to undergo gender testing; <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/female-iranian-soccer-players-undergo-gender-testing-article-1.1607619>, (access 28 Feb 2014).

lic roles. Through their various organized, “non-organized” and “common” actions women continue to insert the issue into public discourse, reformulating what womanhood is or should be, and in doing so they are re-shaping the basis of gender-relations. Women's sport has emerged as an arena where gender politics and religion are playing out. Sport has allowed women to manoeuvre between the local and the global on one hand, and to network with women in other Muslim contexts on the other, in order to challenge and at times remove some of the discriminatory practices of their cultures. Several chapters in this volume, by examining the various strategies and discourses adopted by advocates to promote sport for women conclude that sports can be a very versatile medium for seeking gender justice and equality. In some instances, this happens without directly challenging the legitimacy of the state ideology; whether women's arguments are framed through the discourse of Islamic justice or gender equality, cultural norms are being re-interpreted and reformulated, and citizenship rights are being claimed.

Many of the chapters also indicate however, that opponents of gender equality and conservative and Islamist forces are well aware of the potential of sport and its promotion to actually undermine their gender segregation ideology. They have thus vigorously argued against women's sport on several fronts. They insist that women's sport is part and parcel of cultural imperialism and a corruption of Muslim society as it sexualizes women and promotes hetero-sexual socialization. They have thus set out to impede women from international sports participation. However their most potent strategy has been to increasingly expand the rules concerning modesty and hijab, having lost the argument that Islam does not support women's sport. In some of the more restrictive national contexts they now argue that all women's bodily movements are erotic and thus women's sport must never be observed by men. In prac-

tice this has meant promoting a separate public sphere hidden from the public and mass media. In this way conservative forces attempt to minimize the potential power of sport to engender social change through creating a limited second-rate sphere of activity for female athletes.

It is in this wide and deep framework concerning women and sport in the Muslim world that various chapters examine both the intended and unintended consequences of various strategies that advocates of women's sport have adopted. And some warn that while segregation may increase women's chance of participation in sport in the short term, in the long run this may only contribute to the continued subordination of women in particular societies and contexts unless new approaches to this issue are devised.

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## **Part one**

# **Sport as an Arena of Public Politics and Contestations**



## Chapter 2

# Sport as a Political Arena: Muslim Women's Olympics and Its Aftermath

Homa Hoodfar

### **The Emergence of Sport as a Contestation Arena**

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979, sport – in particular women's sport – has emerged as a site of contestation between citizens and the state. While the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979) viewed sport in competitive international venues and games as an occasion to promote its vision of a modern Iran, the IRI decidedly viewed such activities as imperialism and an imposition of western values that undermined their vision of an Islamic society. The public understood the regime's hostility towards the sport sphere, however, far beyond the face-value of such claims. They viewed the leaders' disapprovals as symptomatic of their wariness of the public persistent demand for democracy and expansion of civil society, which greatly threatened the regime's power and influence. To the great detriment of sport culture in Iran, under the claim that competitive sport even for men, was a luxury that Iran could do without, the regime refused to send teams to the Asian and Olympic Games during the 1980s. The large sport stadiums which were built by previous regimes, mostly for football games, were primarily used by the Islamic Republic for their political rallies and promotion of their ideologies. The

regime silenced their critics, by arguing it was unjustifiable to invest in the training of an elite group of athletes when the “Islamic” ideal of sport was to promote public health, not to produce a few heroes and champions.

Despite these political pressures, sport generally, and football particularly, emerged as a national passion and the regime was forced to open the space for these games. At the same time it tried to impose much control over the management of the game (Gerhardt 2002, Chehabi 2002). They also agreed to send a small all-male athletic team to the 1988 Olympics and later in 1992 to Barcelona. However, despite considerable public pressure, no female team was sent, as the ideologues of the regime considered such a compromise as undermining their vision of Islamic society. The cornerstone of their vision was restricted Islamic dress code and gender segregation. Mixed sporting practices were deemed unacceptable and indeed many Iranian religious leaders continue to equate women's participation in sport with immorality and a European conspiracy to destroy Islamic mores. Some of the leaders went as far as announcing that Islam prohibits women's sport, which brought a surge of public criticism so strong that the regime had to take back this pronouncement and admit that Islam has recommended sport for all. They maintained, however, that sport had to be conducted within an “Islamic” environment (Hoodfar 2012).

Many urban women from all walks of life – even those who normally had no interest in sport – took issue with the regime's views, which essentially framed women's bodies as both obscene and erotic. Most women, whether they analyzed the attempt to exclude women from engaging in sport from within religious or secular perspectives, understood that the opposition to women's sport was symptomatic of a broader policy of excluding women from public life. They adopted various strategies to put pressure on the regime to revise its perspective.



These ranged from taking part in daily exercises in public parks to participating in mountaineering, which is quite popular among the rich and poor in many cities of Iran, particularly in Tehran, given it is surrounded with high mountains (Hoodfar 2012, Paidar 1995: 265-271). Many secular women, particularly those in diaspora, denounced this form of public exclusion as yet another manifestation of the regime's "backwardness" and the regime's systematic gender discrimination. However some women, including some of the Islamist women leaders faced with the uncompromising attitude of the ideologues, successfully pushed for the establishment of what became publicly known as the "Muslim Women's Olympics" (formally the *International Women's Islamic Games*).<sup>1</sup> Despite these games being successfully carried out during 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2005, the government of Ahmadinejad cancelled the 2009 games. The impact of these games on women's sport continues to be a source of debate among the proponents of the women's sport, in Iran and elsewhere.

While some assess the establishment of the Muslim Women's Olympics as a major gain for women across Muslim contexts and a workable strategy to bring women up to par for future participation in regional and international games, others argue that such an enterprise is a step towards institutionalizing and legitimizing the practice of gender segregation. They point out how such an institution would allow countries like Iran, Saudi

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed later in the chapter, the name of these games changed several times. *Muslim Women's Olympics*, after some compromise with International Olympic Committee changed to *Islamic Countries' Solidarity Games for Women*. Later in order to accommodate its evolving ideologies and the demands of its constituencies it changed to *Muslim Women's Solidarity Games*, and finally the *International Women's Islamic Games*. Nonetheless, the general public in Iran continue to refer to these games as the Muslim Women's Olympics. In this paper when I am talking about public perception I continue to use the title of Muslim Women's Olympics since most interviewees used the this name to refer to these games. However, when I am referring to the formal game I shall use the official title "Women's Islamic Games".

Arabia and Gulf states – who have the material resources to pay for such a gender segregated institution, to continue to exclude women from the public life of their nations.<sup>2</sup> Many are also worried that these games have in fact provided precedence for religious and conservative leaders in other countries such as Malaysia, where women previously enjoyed a fairly open degree of liberty in public sphere and sport, to attempt to divert women's sport behind the walls and ban them from public spaces. Others argue that these games have opened up sport to large segments of women in Muslim societies who were told/believed that participating in sport went against their religious doctrine/principles. They further argue that if Iran is an example of how these games may impact women's private and public lives as well as their sport achievements, indeed Iranian women have managed to upgrade their skills and participate in regional and international games with some success and push for serious physical education for female students.

This chapter outlines the various ways that a coalition of Iranian women from diverse backgrounds and political persuasions have managed to establish this considerable undertaking, despite all odds and increased restriction imposed on them, to successfully launch and host these games four times.<sup>3</sup> The question is what were the actual and potential

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<sup>2</sup>Indeed many of these Muslim countries had not sent women to any of the regional games or the Olympics until the 2012 London Olympics. Since the Atlanta summer Olympic in 1996 and in particular during preparation for the London Olympics in 2012, transnational women's organizations and some liberal Muslim organizations joined forces and created an effective campaign in support of the national women's demand to end the exclusion of women. Finally under intense pressure from international sources, a few women from the Muslim countries that had previously barred women from the games, were allowed to participate on behalf of their nation. This symbolically ended the exclusion of Saudi and Gulf state women from the Olympic games.

<sup>3</sup> The data presented here are based on two independent multi-country research projects carried out under the auspices of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML); one undertaken from 1991-2001 and the other from 2006-2010. The 1991-2001 Women and Law Program examined how customary, religious and codified laws shape

achievements of these games? Have these games hampered and silenced the participation of women in international games? Have they promoted sport for women? Have they provided opportunities for women to demand more national resources and a voice in the public sphere? Have they managed to use sport as a site of contestation to advance women's rights nationally and transnationally? In short this paper intends to provide an overall assessment of the Muslim Women's Olympics/International Women's Islamic Games, both the pros and cons for women's sport and women's claims to presence in public life and equal citizenship.

### **From the Muslim Women's Olympics to International Women's Islamic Games**

With the advent of the unwanted Iran-Iraq war (1981-1988), the public debates on sports inside Iran subsided to a large extent. Yet it was still prominent enough that officials publicly announced that they sent trainers to public bunkers to keep the public spirit up during the war. The Islamic regime rejected participation in the 1980 and 1984 Olympic games, emphasizing that the regime was against investing national resources in training for just a few elite athletes to compete internationally, as the idea of sport in the Islamic Republic was to promote public health. Thus various government departments, including physical education and local municipalities launched sport pro-

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women's lives, autonomy and sexuality. The second program, Women's Empowerment in Muslim Context (2006-2010) had a project focused on sport in Iran. The project looked at policy documents and newspaper articles, including interviews with women athletes and physical education officials, as well as with non-governmental organizations dealing with women's sport. There were also extensive interviews with activists involved in various campaigns concerning women and sport. Other data was gathered through informal conversations with everyday people, primarily in Tehran, Mashhad, and Kermanshah, as well as women in diaspora.

grams open to large groups of people, such as running, mountaineering, hiking and so on.

Under pressure from the athletic community, the regime revised its decision and sent a small all-male team for wrestling, cycling and taekwondo events to Korea for the 1988 Olympics. While the absence of women attracted public debate, it was not until the policy for the total exclusion of women from the Barcelona Olympics (1992) that the issue of women's participation in the Olympic games became a contentious issue between more pragmatic and hardline conservative religio-political leaders as well as the public at large. By then Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of revolution (1979-1989) had passed away, the Iran-Iraq war which had been used as a convenient justification for the regime's shortcomings had ended, and the government had adopted a more pragmatic view of politics, realizing that they need to re-join the international community in order to re-build their war torn industries. Many moderate leaders viewed the Olympic games as an opportunity to ease the way for opening Iran's relationship with the west. However, the hardliners continued to insist on the isolation of Iran and maintained that the Olympics and sport games are another channel of western cultural imperialism. Once again the compromise was reached at the cost of women. When an all-male team was sent to Barcelona in 1992, the IRI brushed off criticism by claiming that the conditions and atmosphere of the Olympics were unsuitable and immoral for Muslim women. Though this ruling affected only a few women, it once again created intense public debate, since the core issue at hand was using Islam as a justification for excluding women from public life in Iran.

Nonetheless, despite the intense public debates the regime was steadfast in its decision; no Iranian women athletes attended the Olympics. Aware of the keen interest of the inter-

national community on the question of women's rights and opportunities in Iran, Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of the Iranian president at the time and a major supporter of women's sports, used her political position to attend the Barcelona Olympics as a spectator. Enveloped in her black *chador*, she sat in the hot sun of Spain, under the gaze of hundreds of cameras which moved from her to the other female spectators sitting in their cool and comfortable summer gear.<sup>4</sup> In this way she made sure that Iranian women had a presence at the games in the public eye. She also succeeded to make the absence of Iranian women and the use of Islam as a justification an issue of international public debate. More importantly, it was also a reminder to more shrewd Iranian political leaders of the extent to which their exclusionary treatment of women and imposition of the particular form of hijab can reflect negatively on the country and its standing amongst the international community.

In fact, the debates surrounding the 1992 Barcelona Olympics catalyzed a whole chain of events for women and sports in Iran, but also drew the attention of proponents of gender equality to the low level of participation of women from Muslim societies. Some secular Iranian women, particularly those in exile had learnt that South Africa was prevented from participating in international rugby tournaments because they excluded the black population from playing on the official team. Given the popularity of rugby in South Africa and the political implications of being excluded internationally, the South African authorities had to give in and include some black players. This in many ways was the symbolic crumbling of the apartheid system (Black 1999, Hain 1982). Thus Iranian secular women, relying on this experience, wrote letters to the International Olympic Committee in 1992 and requested that countries like

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<sup>4</sup> Considerable efforts had been made by Iranian women in exile to ensure that the question of women's exclusion from the Olympics would be in international headlines.

Iran or other Muslim countries who denied women from participating in the Olympics and justified this discrimination against women on the basis of religion, should be excluded from the games.<sup>5</sup>

Given that this was long before the 1994 Brighton Conference and Declaration which envisaged global equality for women in sport,<sup>6</sup> and a subsequent international conference on Muslim women's sport in Egypt in 1995 (Hargreaves 2000:215-235, White 1997), indeed theirs was quite an impressive initiative.<sup>7</sup> What was particularly significant in this petition was the attention paid not just to the Iranian state but to all Muslim countries that used religion as a justification for excluding women. This indicates that women in Iran viewed their exclusion through a broader lens than simply their national context, and recognized the similar forms of exclusion and marginalization

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the concerns of Iranian women were somewhat overshadowed by the fact that the future of the International Olympics seemed rather uncertain when Samaranch became the president of the IOC (International Olympics Committee) in 1980. Some officials in the inner circle of the IOC were concerned that if the Olympic movement were to survive and remain relevant in the world, it would have to reinvent itself. The political boycotts of recent and near-term future Games (by many African nations in 1976, by the US and many of its allies in 1980 and by the USSR and a number of its allies in 1984) loomed as a major obstacle to the very principle of *universal quadrennial festivals*. In addition, the IOC was struggling financially, faced with a decreasing enthusiasm and number of cities lining up to host the Games (largely because of the cost), the future looked uncertain. Samaranch's answer to the political problem was to exercise his diplomatic skills and fight hard to have universal participation at Seoul in 1988 and then again in his native Barcelona in 1992; his answer to the near bankruptcy was to commercialize the "Olympic brand" (Peacock 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The Brighton Declaration was a statement of principles on global equality for women in sport, and envisioned a sporting culture that will "enable and value the full involvement of women in every aspect of sport" (see Appendix 1. Subsequently many sport organizations including the International Olympic Committee adopted the Declaration.

<sup>7</sup> Professor Nabila Abdelrahman, from Egypt, organized an International Scientific Conference for Arab Women and Sport (Abdelrahman 1998) in Alexandria. The conference resulted directly in the endorsement of the Brighton Declaration and the establishment of the Arab Women and Sport Association and the Egyptian Women and Sport Association. The Arab Women and Sport Association aimed to enhance women's participation in sport, prepare women for roles in sport leadership.

that women in other contexts were facing. As such they were appealing to forces beyond national boundaries to fight back against these collective exclusionary practices. On the other hand this made the price of positively reviewing their request much higher since its implication was also for countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, all of which in contrast to Iran were considered close allies of the western European and American governments; all of which also have major leverage with the International Olympics Committee, despite the claim that IOC is separate from international politics. To deprive these Gulf Muslim countries from participating in Olympics, even though they often sent just a few athletics, would have had serious political implications for the IOC and the political relations between these Muslim oil producing states and the west in general.

Nonetheless, though their request received serious consideration and attracted some international media attention, it was finally rejected on the grounds that the petition itself had used language that demonstrated disrespect for religion and nation-states' sovereignty, rather than objecting on the grounds of human rights and discrimination against women. Though the move did not succeed in part because of a technicality, which itself was an indication of a lack of experience in international political activism and civil society diplomacy on the part of Iranian activists, it nevertheless did send a signal to those moderate leaders who understood the price of being singled out in the international community in this manner. More importantly, this quite brilliant strategy linked women's exclusion in the name of religion to racial discrimination and for the first time drew attention to the similarity of the Iranian regime's gender segregation policy to that of the South African regime's racially apartheid society. Indeed since then many have referred to Iran as a gender apartheid society.

The intense criticism directed toward the Islamic Republic encouraged some of the more liberal leaders to respond by repeating their earlier claim that the Islamic Republic is an “anti-imperialism” and “anti-westernization” regime. In this new ideological reincarnation, the regime is critical of the kind of modernity that is based on western ideas of sport and women’s rights. They claimed that the regime can develop an Islamic model of women’s rights, in which women are active socially, politically and remain active in sport without being “sexualized” or “objectified”, as they are in western societies. It was in this context that the proponents of women’s sport, made of an informal alliance of highly educated secular women in the field of physical education, former top athletes, religiously informed women and politically well-connected women such as Faezeh Hashemi, used this line of argument to begin lobbying inside the country for more space for women’s sport and insisted on women’s presence in the international arena. The alliance indicated that Iranian women’s international participation would send a positive message to the rest of the world, who ‘assume’ that women are excluded and oppressed in Iran due to “Islamic” ideology. Furthermore, they also launched the idea that if women cannot participate in Olympic games because of their religion, Muslim countries should launch a Muslim Women’s Olympics. This was an idea that nobody took seriously at the time, given that considerable resources and expertise would be needed to coordinate and host such a women’s only event, especially as it would require cooperation with other Muslim nations/states, many of whom were weary of the Iranian state.

The national process of lobbying and negotiation for opening opportunities for women and sport took place at several levels, through various channels simultaneously. Firstly, at the level of public discourse, women mobilized publicly and sought to legitimize women's sport and their demands for the expansion of



sport facilities. They adopted several different and concurrent strategies. Those with religious knowledge focused on the issue of religion and established not only that Islam does not prohibit women from sport; but also successfully argued that Islam promotes sports as necessary for women. To this end they involved more open-minded religious leaders in the debates, as well as religiously informed public personalities to give public talks and interviews for radio, television, newspapers and women's magazines. Thus in the early 1990s several publications on Islam and sport were launched, some of which were even issued by the official physical education organization.<sup>8</sup>

A second strategy was developed in relation to the issue of sport in science and health, particularly for women. Making alliances with other like-minded forces, they encouraged the launching of several high profile scientific and policy related congresses and conferences. These involved prominent religious leaders who were invited to deliver keynote speeches on the subject of health, Islam, and sport – something that few, if any, theologians had paid attention to before women had turned the topic into a public discourse. The conclusion of many of the national and international research reports and papers stressed the importance of sport for women's health, particularly for mothers, both physically and psychologically (Hartmann-Tews & Pfister 2003). Similarly, debates that were grounded in religious discourse led to the conclusion that not only was sport permitted for women under Islam, it was actually promoted through Islam as a necessity for up keeping health for women and men alike.

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<sup>8</sup> Various departments of Physical Education Organization during the 1990s published, "*Jaygah-e-varzesh Zanan dar nezam jomhory islami Iran*" ("*The Status Of Sport For Women In The Islamic Republic Of Iran*"), as well as several issues of the *Journal of Women and Sport*, before dropping the publication from their program.

A third strategy used the constitution, indicating that women's rights to education and health as citizens are granted in the constitution, and hence the right to participate in sport was guaranteed. Advocates brought the religious understandings, scientific findings and legal framework together at the national level to lobby the authorities as well as the public at large. In many ways these debates were not unlike the kind of public debates that took place in western Europe and North America during the 1920s to 1940s that stressed the role of women's sport to improve health, strength, and to foster the "proper balance between the body and spirit" in order for women to "manage a healthy and robust family, help the country in the fight against all social disease and contribute to the preservation of world peace" (Miragaya & Dacosta 2002, Cohen 2001, Stewart 2001, Quintillan 2000, Pfister 2000, Howell 1982). In this way, the idea of the need for women's engagement in sport was established. Although many conservatives remained very much opposed to women's sport, few publicly expressed their views; rather their strategy was insisting on strict observations of "Islamic" values in women's sport.

While proponents of women's sport managed to establish its legitimacy and desirability, they could not fight against the claim that women's sport had to take place in segregated venues and with appropriate Islamic clothing. Conservative authorities remained steadfast that none of the competitive sports could be televised or photographed or have male spectators. Furthermore, this meant that women could not participate in sports like swimming and gymnastics at the international level. Thus in practice the conservatives managed to ensure the eradication of women from the public space and public sphere, despite the appearance that they accepted that women have the right to engage in sport. Clearly having used Islam and religion as a platform for their negotiations, it made

it difficult for proponents of women's sport to fight against the imposition of segregation and dress codes.

Proponents of women's sport lacked the authority to question such interpretations and none of the liberal religious leaders were either willing or able to champion their cause. In any case these were not battles, given the complex history of these debates and its link to the colonial past, that could be easily overcome (El Guindi 1999, Ahmad 1992). Yet, despite the limitations imposed by the religious/political authorities, this was considered a partial success on the part of most activists who were pushing to open sports for Muslim women. They understood the main goal of the regime ideologues as attempting to obliterate women from public life. However these quite lively debates had kept the question of women and their public rights a national focus, much to the annoyance of the conservative leaders.

It was in this context and with an awareness of conservative forces' hindering opposition to women's participation in international games that Faezeh Hashemi and her colleagues represented their earlier idea of the "Muslim Women Olympics", which could be organized based on Islamic values. They argued that since Muslim women should not be discriminated against nor denied any of their rights on the grounds that they are striving to live by their Muslim morality, hence it is the duty of Muslim governments to provide them with appropriate opportunities, one of which is to organize Muslim Women Olympics. Initially when this idea was launched during the 1988 Olympic debates, it was not taken seriously by Iranian authorities and even appeared farfetched to many proponents of women's sport. Yet others started systematic lobbying of diverse government and public actors, and though it took a while before it gathered momentum amidst public discourse, it finally became a reality in 1993.

In some ways, launching the Muslim Women's Olympics was the fourth significant strategy women used to ensure that women's sports remained in the public sphere. Proponents were very aware that such a move needed to be organized with the participation of other nations. They wanted to make the games a formal international event, in order to ensure that they would be beyond the control of the Iranian authorities, and that any cancellation of the events would have international implications. Thus Faezeh Hashemi used her high profile position and travelled to many Muslim countries to lobby for the idea and point out the advantages of organizing such an event. In an interview, she explained that she knew that there would be initial opposition from other Muslim countries, particularly those in the region who were worried about Iran's intention of "exporting its revolution". They were worried that Iran wanted to influence their nations through women's sport.<sup>9</sup> "...I had to tread very carefully and build trust and convince them of the significance of the suggested games for all Muslim women and Islamic nations" (interview with Faezeh Hashemi, Tehran 2007). She explained; "That was the reason we did not form such an association and only after go and invite other nations to join. We wanted to build this with their collaboration from day one". This meant she had to do much lobbying, not only with the Iranian authorities, but also with those of other Muslim countries. She made many trips to reach diverse governments, from Kuwait and Dubai to Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, to the Maldives and Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sudan.

The establishment of the suggested periodic Muslim Women's Olympics was half-heartedly approved by the Iranian government in 1991, in part because the conservatives who opposed

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<sup>9</sup> Initially after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that the regime intend to export the Islamic revolution to all Muslim countries. This interference for other sovereign nations created hostility and suspicion of the regime.

these developments had assumed that they would be able to null the program through its implementation process. Subsequently, to plan and build the institutions that would organize and oversee the planned Muslim Women's Olympics, Faezeh Hashemi and her colleagues organized a congress in which official representatives of 23 Muslim countries participated and decided to establish the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport (IFWS), and hashed out its constitution, the governing details and rules of the games. Faezeh Hashemi was appointed its chair and director. The establishment of the IFWS paved the way for further negotiations with the International Olympics Committee, the support of which was deemed essential for the advancement of this project given the strong opposition of many conservative religio-political leaders in Iran and elsewhere in Muslim societies.

The details emerging from interviews conducted with members of the informal coalition who worked to ensure that Muslim women are not excluded from national and international sport arenas, is reminiscent of the efforts of women in Europe and the opposition they had faced when they were demanding to be included in Olympic games in first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pfister 2000, Quintillan 2000, Kühn 1926).<sup>10</sup> European women were referred to as the weaker sex and most sport games, it was claimed, were not appropriate for women.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently

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<sup>10</sup>Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) was a French educationalist and a pacifist who lived during the devastating war against the Prussians (1870). He revived the idea of the ancient Greek Olympics in order to promote peace between nations. He and many other proponents of peace movements thought to promote peace in a modern and racialized world would require a certain worldview that prescribed and promoted a nationalism not based on chauvinism, but one which praised all nations for distinctive values and points of honour unique to each. He saw sport as a very unique sphere where nations can interact and compete in friendly games. However, he was steadfast against women participating in the games (MacAloon 1981). He saw women as a delicate sex whose job was to produce the next generation and take care of her family (Pfister 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed a member of IOC claimed in the 1920s that "Men were born to compete; competition is alien to a women's nature" (Kühn 1926, cited by Pfister 2000).

women worked to organize the International Women's Olympics (the *Jeux Olympiques Feminine du Monde*) which took place in the 1920s and 1930s and attracted much attention, finally opening the way for women to be included in Olympic Games (Miragaya 2006, Kluka 2001, Quintillan 2000, Pfister 2000,).<sup>12</sup> However, while women in the west had to use science to remove their exclusion from the games, Iranian women had to deal with rules that were claimed to be divine. Thus they had to adapt different strategies to overcome the limitations placed on them in the name of religion.

Aware of the importance of international recognition of their proposed games, Faezeh Hashemi lobbied notable international support including Juan Antonio Samaranch who was the seventh President of the International Olympics Committee (IOC) from 1980 to 2001 as well as Sheikh Fahad Al-Sabah, the president of Olympics committee of Asia, to secure their support. The IOC lent its support to the initiative on the condition that they drop the name Olympics. They insisted that the Olympic Games were their monopoly and no other organization should use the name. The IOC had adopted a similar approach and objected to European and American women who had organized the Women's Olympics (the *Jeux Olympiques Feminine du Monde*) in response to their exclusion from the Olympic games in early twentieth century (Quintillan 2000), "encouraging" women to change the name of their games in exchange for lending international legitimacy to the event. Given that Iranian women needed the support of IOC in order to minimize the control and objection of their own state, they reluctantly settled on *Islamic Countries' Solidarity Games for Women*,

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<sup>12</sup> The Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) organized the Women's Olympic Games in 1922 in Paris, which was modeled after the modern Olympic Games (Kluka 2001). The next games happened in 1926 (Gothenburg), 1930 (Prague) and 1934 (London). However, with the insistence of the IOC in exchange for their support, FSFI agreed to drop "Olympics" from the title of their games.

which subsequently changed to *Muslim Women's Solidarity Games*, and finally to *International Women's Islamic Games*.<sup>13</sup> The public, at least in Iran, continues to refer to these games as the Muslim Women's Olympics. At the same time, Faezeh Hashemi was appointed by the IOC as the vice-president of the Iranian Olympics Committee, which along with her post as chair of Islamic Federation of Women's Sport, made it difficult for those Iranian authorities who did not support women's involvement in sports to bypass her.

Despite many obstacles and opposition, Faezeh Hashemi and her tireless collaborators managed to organize the first *Islamic Countries' Solidarity Games for Women* (as noted earlier the name changed to *International Women's Islamic Games*) in Tehran in 1993, in which eleven countries sent 46 athletics teams to compete in eight games. Men were totally barred from these games, and all 190 referees as well as trainers and technicians were women. The male president, the male head of the Iranian Physical Education Organization, and the male representatives of the International Olympic Committee were only present for the opening ceremonies and the first game. Despite the lack of presence of men, all women had to observe the hijab and play in complete "Islamic" clothing, even those women from countries without such strict dress codes. In Iran, conservative forces who were in control of the media ensured that except for a cursory announcement, the *Islamic Countries' Solidarity Games for Women* were not announced via radio, and were certainly not televised, under the pretext that to show women in sport was contrary to Islamic values. This was rather a weak argument considering all women athletes had observed the Islamic dress code as defined by the Iranian government. Except for certain women's magazines, few newspapers reported these events fully, in part because no pictures

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<sup>13</sup> See footnote 1.

were allowed, and also because there existed few female sports journalists who could attend and write the reports.

The organizing committee, aware of strong resistance by conservative forces to promote these games as an important public event, had coordinated a spectacular opening ceremony in which young women wearing a variety of very colourful regional and ethnic costumes, all fully covered in accordance with Islamic dress codes, carried torches from one of the central squares in the city to the sports stadium, several kilometres in distance through one of the busiest streets of Tehran – appropriately called Revolution Street. This strategy of attracting wide public attention to the games infuriated the opposition, who stormed the conservative papers with articles denouncing such “un-Islamic events” as an affront to the martyrs of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>14</sup> As one of the event volunteers explained to us,:

...their denouncement was the best advertisement for our events because more people, and particularly women, even those not interested, in sport came in our support. (interview, Tehran 1994).

As a result, many heated public debates on women’s right to sport and having a venue of their own took place, which was precisely what the conservatives had been trying to avoid.

Although the idea of the periodic *Islamic Countries’ Solidarity Games for Women* had come about as a strategy to combat the exclusion of women from the Olympics and to resist their exclusion from a global public space, clearly the need for such a game was felt beyond Iranian national borders. Once the Islamic Countries Games for Women (the official name in the first round of these games) became known internationally, many Muslim women from non-Muslim countries also became

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<sup>14</sup> “Martyrs of the revolution” refers to those who died during the up-rising against the Shah. According to the IRI these martyrs all supported the idea of a restrictive Islamic regime, even though many of those who died had leftist and socialist tendencies.



interested in participating. They pointed out that not all Muslim women live in Muslim majority countries and not all countries/national states would identify themselves as Muslim countries even if the majority of their populations were Muslims. In fact it was due to this interest and accommodating the demands of Muslim women from outside Muslim majority states that during the seventh meeting of the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport in Damascus, the organizers changed the name to Muslim Women's Solidarity Games, which in some way removed the stress from state and placed it on women.

A further concern that arose was that while many supported the idea of these games, they also felt it set Muslim women apart from other women. This certainly was not the intention of the games' initiators. Secondly others pointed out if these games are to acquire ranking by the International Olympic Committee and other international sports federations they should not discriminate against other women on grounds of religion. Strategically international recognition was one of the key concerns of the games' original initiators since it would make it more difficult for Iranian authorities to close down the games. Furthermore acquiring ranking and opening the games to other women interested in participating would improve the quality of the games given that many women in Muslim contexts have had less opportunities and resources to improve their skills. Additionally, it was pointed out that many non-Muslim women live in Muslim societies and are an integral part of these nations. So the games should be open to all those who are interested in participation as long as the basic condition of gender segregation and other requirements such as dress codes are observed. Thus once again the federation met to revise its name to the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport (IFWS), and the name of the games were changed to the International Women's Islamic Games. Successfully, out of 17

games that were part of the Islamic Women's Games, 15 acquired international ranking (Afzali 2010:105).

Despite these achievements the conservative forces who then occupied (and still do) key state positions, continued to insist that women's sport generally, and competitive sport particularly, was a western ploy intended to disrupt and ruin Muslim cultures. In this context, proponent of women's sport have carried out national and archival research and identified various indigenous women's sports in Iran. In some cases they took steps to revive and foster them as much as possible. One interesting example that attracted much national attention to the dismay of conservatives, is the riding competitions among certain nomadic groups. The interesting aspect of this sport is that males and females compete together and spectators are also of both sexes. Since this is a centuries old custom few can object to it or call it a western influence. Thus, it has become much harder for the opponents to claim women's sport represents an importation of western values.

A major drawback, however, which limited the ability of the IFWS to influence pro-women's sport sentiments more broadly was having to hold these events only inside Iran. No other member countries of the IFWS had segregated facilities in such a way that would satisfy the Iranian government for hosting these games. They often used male coaches and male technicians and so on. The only country that could potentially have had such facilities at the time was Pakistan, whose Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (1993-1996), had agreed to host the second *Islamic Countries' Solidarity Games for Women*. However before the games commenced Benazir Bhutto was removed from office and her male replacement failed to provide enough resources to meet the gender-segregation regulations imposed by the Iranian government and thus failed to host these

games.<sup>15</sup> As such the second games (1997) and indeed the third (2001) and fourth (2005) were again held in Iran. The fifth was scheduled for 2009, however due to the political upheaval over the disputed June presidential elections in Iran, they did not take place. Partly because proponents of the games were reformists and opposition supporters, sub-sequently the 2009 regime cut all funding to the games, arrested Faezeh Hashemi for her open support of the oppositional presidential candidate, and the IFWS was closed down, leaving organized and international recognized Muslim women's games with a very uncertain future.<sup>16</sup>

### **Did the Games Work For Women?**

Clearly these games and discourse around them helped focus the attention of Iranian men and women alike on the question of women's sport as a right. Furthermore, it has encouraged many young women to pick up sport both as leisure and also as politics and contestation with conservative forces, in ways that would not have happened without these efforts which led to the creation of such spaces for women. Since football has emerged as a national passion, as well as a major site of struggle for control over public spaces between civil society and the Iranian regime (Gerhardt 2002, Chehabi 2002), it is not surprising that women too, much to the dislike of the regime, have also been attracted to this game in large numbers to this game

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<sup>15</sup> On the other hand the Iranian committee was worried about the security of guests since Pakistan's chaotic politics at the time also meant less security. The organizers were extra careful to prevent any incidents that could have had a negative impact on the continuation of these games.

<sup>16</sup> The closure was in part due to a denial of funding, but also because Faezeh Hashemi emerged as one of the leaders supporting the reformist presidential candidacy and participated openly in post-election protest rallies. As I am finalizing this work (December 2012), she is in the infamous Evin Prison of Iran on the dubious charges of endangering the state.

and have organized their teams. The existence of these games helped to legitimize women's efforts and also provide them with facilities to advance in the increasingly internationally politicized sporting arena. Generally, the public demand for sport has led to a renewed importance of physical education for both men and women, and the regime now has to channel more resources to the very areas that they had intended to eradicate, particularly for women. The educational institutions now regularly organize national and regional competitive games in various fields of sport for both men and women.

In Iran, universities in particular organize solidarity games as well as games for various political occasions, such as the anniversary of the revolution or other religious occasions. Since late 1997, when the reformists were in control of state machinery, many of these games also include women's teams from other Muslim countries. It is an open secret that organizing these games under the pretext of celebrating important political occasions is intended in large part to reduce opposition to women's games on the part of the conservatives, and increase the channelling of government funds and resources. In fact, the demand for sport has become significant enough that a new teacher-training program is being sponsored by the state, with the goal of creating more physical education teachers and trainers. Also somewhat more attention is being paid to cultivate talented women athletes for the competitive sports.<sup>17</sup> Indeed insistence on all female staff and trainers was an important strategy through which conservative religious leaders continuously hampered the expansion of women's sport in Iran. One of the significant unintended consequences of the International

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<sup>17</sup> The logic of giving more opportunities to women today, it could be argued, stems largely from the idea, "if you cannot defeat them, join them". Since the authorities are unable to stop women from regional and national participation, they may as well have them perform well so that they reap the credit while also exercising more subtle forms of control over them.

Women's Islamic Games was the training of hundreds of Iranian and other Muslim women as referees and judges with the help of International Olympic Committee. Some also obtained international certificates, which meant that they could participate as a referee in sports games outside Iran. Many other women were trained as event managers, coaches, and technicians who needed to deal with equipment, from lighting to sound systems. For the first time, women could claim self-sufficiency in sporting events. This unintended consequence of conservative insistence to complete gender segregation has greatly expanded the development of competitive games within Iran since they now had many female coaches who could help advance teams under completely gender segregated conditions. This also made it easier for many women from more conservative backgrounds to join sport activities, which is not what the conservative forces had in mind.

In short these discourses on the right to sport have helped to put physical education for Iranian women on the agenda for national education as well as giving much more attention to women's sport in general. Women have learned to mobilize their indigenous resources, to create and mobilize their pools of knowledge, and to articulate collective demands as citizens equal to their male counterparts. They have embarked on building their capacity and skills at the national level and created a global network of institutional support for women's sport in Muslim communities across the world. The change and revision of the names of the games, from the Islamic Countries' Solidarity Games for Women, to the International Women's Islamic Games, and the change in the overseeing body's title to the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport is also indicative of the expansion of the committee's political horizon and their sensitivity to the complexities of working and reaching out to the global community to avert exclusionary practices. By reach-

ing out to Muslim and non-Muslim women, they have inveterate their membership in the global community.

### **Accommodating Subversion: Islamic Sport Gears and Olympic Participation**

Another gain for Iranian women was how all but one of the various reasons presented by the Iranian authorities as an explanation behind the exclusion of women from participation in the International Olympics was effectively countered during the public debates around the games. The IRI insisted on the full observation of its imposed dress code and hijab, because it claimed these were divine rules. The underlining assumption was that these rules would automatically prevent women from participating in the International Olympics. Among various strategies adopted to counter this obstacle was the development of “Islamic sport gear” which would allow the necessary movement possible and yet women would remain fully covered. While the ideas were initiated by individuals, soon several young designers had joined the ranks and by the mid-1990s various forms of sport gear for women were offered for sale in all major sport shops in Tehran. The IFWS, in trying to encourage this trend, decided to announce prizes for those who could develop the best “appropriate” Islamic design for sport gear. Indeed major sport companies such as Nike, who saw a new market in this area, joined in and presented their designs to Muslim markets.<sup>18</sup> The development of the Islamic sport gear for women meant that conservatives now had lost their last pretext and under pressure from the public agreed to

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<sup>18</sup> See for example “Nike Islamic Head Gear” under “Culturally sensitive sport wear” on the following site:

[http://www.springwise.com/fashion\\_beauty/culturally\\_sensitive\\_sportswear/](http://www.springwise.com/fashion_beauty/culturally_sensitive_sportswear/).

send women to the subsequent Olympics and regional competitive games. Some women came back with medals.

Many female Iranian athletes also focused on building their skills in those sports that they had higher chances of participating in internationally, such as shooting, riding, skiing, and so on (due to less dress restrictions) – even if these were not their favoured sport. In the words of one of the interviewees:

...the conservative's goal is to prevent us [women] from participating in competitive sport internationally and from being seen as active agents. Therefore our goal is to make sure they do not succeed. I may have loved swimming, but my higher goal is to insure that not only me but other women and the next generation can take their rightful position in sport....

Reading through the interviews and public debates it is clear that both the proponents and opponents of women's sport were aware of their main goals (struggles over access to public space and public sphere), and they express it off-the-record, but in formal platforms both sides use Islam to justify their position. In reality women are competing in two arenas; one of national politics and one of the Olympics and other international games.

Some of the interviewees were convinced that religion happened to be a convenient and legitimate excuse to focus on because it is the ideology of the state, but that the real problem is the overarching culture that has been used to socialize women as slaves to male desire and control. While some in Iran feel that Muslim women face particularly difficult battles to secure their rightful position in sport and public life, European women's history tells a different tale. While politicized Islam may have given Iranian women's struggle a particular form and angle in recent decades, women in Europe and North America – where Christianity was the dominant religion – also

had to fight long and hard to open opportunities for women in various sports (Barratt in this volume, Pfister 2000, Howell 1982). European men including Pierre de Coubertin, who initiated the modern Olympics modelled after the ancient Greek games, found various excuses such as morality and modesty, and pseudo-scientific reasons as to why women should be excluded from competitive sport and the Olympics (MacAloon 1981). Clearly, it is an overarching culture and ideology of male dominance that is the main obstacle to women's participation in public life whether it is politics, sport, jobs, etc. It is not surprising that many observant Muslim women, including Faezeh Hashemi in Iran, have taken sport as their "battle" for gender equality and social justice. Sports activists inside and outside the country made sure that Iranian female athletics attracted the attention of the international media and kept Muslim women's participation in sport as a lively public discourse.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The debates about the effectiveness and long-term impact of launching an exclusive Islamic sport tournament for women continue to be engaged among feminist, women's rights activists, and proponents of women's sport across Muslim contexts. Yet the issue has not received serious attention outside these milieus, even though sport during the last several decades has emerged as a new frontier of development and empowerment for youth and women, thanks to the present director of the IOC, Jacques Rogge (since 2001 to present) as well as previous director Antonio Samaranch (from 1980-2001) in re-envisioning the sport and the Olympic institution (Donnelly et.al 2011, Coalter 2010). As outlined above, clearly sport had emerged as a field of contestation for democracy and gender justice long before it became part of the development lexicon. The absences of in-depth analyses of these developments in



Iran and diverse Muslim contexts are indicative of a disinterest for indigenous initiatives, which continue to plague official international development approaches. While it is important to make a note of this observation here, the in-depth discussion of the issue at hand demands a space of its own.

From the history and evolution of discourse on women's sport, leading to the launching of the games that evolved to become International Women's Islamic Games, it is clear the IFWS initiative successfully put women's sport on the public agenda, not only in Iran but across Muslim contexts, and turned it into a popular basic rights discourse with many different views. Secularists in Iran, while supporting women's sport as a right, criticize these games as facilitating the institutionalization of the hijab and segregation as requirement of being Muslim, even though historically neither hijab nor segregation had been considered pillars of Islam, a fact that political Islamists conveniently ignore, one might add. Furthermore secularists argue that these games help to set Muslim women apart from other women and confine them to a segregated quasi-public sphere which renders their presence ineffective for the promotion of gender justice and gender equality.

Proponents of the games argue that while they appreciate the concerns, the fact is that male-dominated societies, Muslim or not, have long tried to exclude women from public life. They point out that it was not Islam but pseudo-science and medical assertions about the delicate body of women and the 'concern' about preserving women's femininity that resulted in women's exclusion from sport in Europe and North America. In that context, women used science to refute "scientific" claims and remove the barriers to their entry into public sport competitive games. Iranian women were denied access to sport and participation in competitive games nationally or internationally based on religion and rules that were claimed to be divine.

Thus they had to develop a different strategy to overcome the limitations placed on them in the name of religion.

They also point out that through these Islamic games – which women activists had effectively imposed on the regime – the government was forced to allocate financial resources to women's sport. Though the sums allocated were less than ideal, they were more than previously imagined. Women's sport in Iran, like in most countries, cannot survive and blossom without the support of the state. To change the reality on the ground requires skillful pragmatism and strategic activism. As a result of these games, they pointed out, Iran now has many skilled female coaches and referees as well as women athletes who have taken sport as their career and/or pre-occupation. In large part it was through the public debates they launched that questioned Islam as the root of exclusion of women from sport and public life, that they forced the regime to allow women to participate at least in some Olympic and international games. One can say that by using Islam, the proponents of the International Women's Islamic Games have managed to defy the policy of exclusion from the world of sport and physical education, which was justified in the name of religion.

Under present circumstances these games can serve as a platform and space to prepare women to compete on the world stage should the circumstances occur. In a way the proponents of the International Women's Islamic Games are looking at women's participation in national and international stages more like a process, rather than a legal right, and feel that they have provided opportunities for women to not only push for the expansion of their rights but also to be ready to take advantage of it when they succeed in getting further restrictions removed. Having the Islamic games does not mean women cannot go to the international Olympics or other regional sporting events, just as having socialist games, European

games or workers' and trade unions' games does not mean the athletes and their nations are excluded from participating in other regional and international venues.

Yet it does remain a fact that having used Islam and religion as a platform for resistance and their negotiations has made it difficult to fight against the imposition of restrictions, segregation and dress codes – which are being framed as essential “Islamic” markers. As well, even the goal of creating an alternative public sphere has been hampered by the censorship of the game, and the prohibition of the games being televised or photographed for reporting on the games, either in Iran or other countries. This effectively hinders effort to reach out and present women athletes as role models for other young women, and to question the image of the women that conservatives have created with their monopoly of the mass media.

Although the proponents have developed these rather convincing counter arguments for the benefits of these games, it is clear that their success in negating these games and expanding resources for women's sport also heavily relies on secular women's activism, both on the ground and in diaspora. It is very questionable that without such pressure on the part of women who took (and continue to take) the policies of the Islamic Republic ideologues to task from a framework of human rights, gender equality, scientific knowledge, and demands for democracy and public participation, the proponents of the Islamic games would not have enjoyed the successes they had until 2009. Through activism and building bridges with transnational proponents of women's sport and gender equality, activists have managed to bring global attention to the use of Islam as a justification of exclusion of women, not only in Iran but also in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and elsewhere. This has finally paid off and these countries for the first time agreed, under the threat of being banned from the International

Olympics, to send a few token women to the 2012 Olympics in London (see Shaheed in this volume). As long as secular activists frame their articulated criticism in a way that challenges the overarching religious ideology and reaches the youth and women both inside and outside the country, women who push for the minimal demand of women's only sport facilities that adhere to "Islamic" conditions will appear as moderate. Giving into their demands has often been viewed as means of saving face for many conservatives, though it does not mean a genuine change of heart. Regardless, these lively debates have definitely kept the question of women and their public participation in the nation and global community an important focus internationally, much to the annoyance of the conservative leaders.

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## Chapter 3

# Female Bodies and State Power: Women-Only Sport Centers in Istanbul

Sertaç Sehlikođlu

It is still possible to see people surprised when they hear about a veiled<sup>1</sup> woman doing aerobics or even training aerobics in a gym” says Ayşe Akbaş, the aerobics trainer of Altunizade Cultural Center (...) As a woman who has chosen to wear the headscarf herself, Akbaş started sports with kung-fu and currently holds a black belt. After working as a trainer in Judo and step aerobics classes for a while, she realized that there is a need for a trainer in aerobics for the veiled women and eventually decided to stick to training aerobics. Having a veiled or non-veiled customer does not make a difference for her, she trains every woman. She has 185 students and classes where she trains three times a week. Thus, trainer Ayşe’s mission is to open up space at the most ‘impossible’ margins of social life for the women who are observing their religion. (...) Most of these course participants are working as housewives throughout the day. This one-hour aerobics course means more than just sports for these women. It represents a social activity and gather-

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<sup>1</sup> *Tesettürlü* is the word used in the article, which means “veiled”. There are various ways to refer to the veiling in Turkey: *Türbanlı* (turban-wearing), *başörtülü* (headdress), *örtülü* (scarved), etc. Just similar to the way *hijab* is used in Arabic-speaking contexts, I will be referring to those who wear headscarf as *başörtülü*, throughout the paper, faithful to the terminology my interlocutors prefer to use.

ing. It also represents a colorful and enjoyable break from rather mundane housekeeping tasks. Women participants experience a fresh feeling of balance, health and freedom for one hour every day. They also feel more productive and active. Although most of the course participants have not yet reached their ideal weights, they seem very eager and inspired to continue their aerobics courses. They experience a renewed sense of joy, and positive energy in their lives; and they experience less stress. They altogether seem more hopeful.<sup>2</sup>

Since Yılmaz authored the article “Aerobics for *everyone*”<sup>3</sup> in 1997, the number of women-only sports centers, aerobics (and now *pilates*<sup>4</sup> is added as the new trend) classes and swimming pools rose in the metropolis of Istanbul where approximately

18 million people manage to live together.<sup>5</sup> Women from all different ages (from 16 – 60+), social backgrounds, and economic classes in Turkey demonstrate an ever-increasing interest and participation in physical exercise, in women-only spaces. Reflecting on this emerging trend and interest, a number of private chains of women-only gyms (such as B-Fit, Portakal Spor, Curves, Okyanus, etc.) were opened in Istanbul in the last ten years and the number of franchises of women-only gyms and fitness centers have increased ten-fold from 2005 to 2010. This social change is taken into account not only in the private sector, but also by the local governors of Istanbul, and the municipal government. All municipal sports centers in Is-

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<sup>2</sup> Meral Yılmaz, Aksiyon, quoted in article entitled “Aerobics for everyone” (1997). Translated by Sertaç Sehliskođlu.

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added, Sertaç Sehliskođlu.

<sup>4</sup> *Pilates* is a fitness system developed to promote strengthening by using the proper movements, muscle contractions, body mechanics, and coordinated breathing.

<sup>5</sup> According to the latest census (2009), the population of Istanbul is 12,782,960. However, together with tourists, temporary workers, students and unregistered resident, the number is estimated to increase to 15 to 20 million people, depending on the season.



Istanbul now have been offering women-only hours and courses, during which no male staff can enter the dedicated space or see the women inside. Such segregation regulations allowed several women who believe in modesty in public to get even more involved into fitness and exercise classes. Most of the participants were, therefore, wearing one form of Islamic veiling. In municipally-owned sports centers, and by several projects promoted by them, approximately 1.5 million women were accommodated in 2010, which is another indicator of women's interest in physical exercise.

This research aims to understand the particular exercise of state power in women-only sport facilities and the ways in which it operates over women's bodies through recreational sporting activities. In order to do this, it is necessary to historicize the idealization of women's bodies in Turkish history. Then, I will use ethnographic data gathered from one of the municipally-owned (referred to as "public" during the paper) women-only sport centers and its participants. Based on published data and ethnographic fieldwork in public sport centers in Istanbul, my study focuses on how veiled Muslim women are redefining the ideal body in spaces provided by state apparatuses. In this study, "nationalist, religious, medical, or aesthetic" characteristics, which often operate over women's bodies simultaneously – and also idealize certain forms of female bodies over others – will be analysed as *multiple* patriarchal ideologies (Mahmood 2005: 158). Indeed, any characteristics that "work by objectifying women's bodies and subjecting them to patriarchal systems of representation, thereby negating and distorting women's own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity" (2005: 158) are and will be understood as another form of patriarchal ideology. This paper looks at whether and how these women negotiate the multiple patriarchies that operate over them. I focus on the recreation practices of pious Muslim women in homosocial spaces as part of

defining and redefining their new identity that is 'Islamic' and in a sense 'traditional' as well as modern. How do the dominant discourses on modernity materialize through women's bodies and sports? How should female bodies be physically cultivated in public/secular/religious/male/female spaces, or should they be cultivated in 'private'? I also explore whether and how women are participating in these debates while taking advantage of existing political and economic conditions to open up a space to build and reshape their subjectivities.

## Context

There are currently 36 sports and recreation centers in İstanbul that are run by municipal governments under the rule of AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party); the party that is known for its neo-Islamist background.<sup>6</sup> All of these centers provide fitness; aerobics and/or pilates classes for women where veiled women can take off their headscarf or ensure they would not be watched or seen by any man. The prices in all of these centers are affordable, ranging between 8 to 30 US dollars per course. During the summer of 2008, I did

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<sup>6</sup> The neo-Islamist movement in Turkey revives Islamic tradition while adapting Euro-American models of political systems and capitalist market economies. The neo-Islamist movement reflected changing class dynamics in Turkey. These developments have been a direct result of the rise of Islamist politics in Turkey, the expansion of the middle class, and migration from rural to urban areas of the country. In 1970, under what is referred to as National Vision, *Milli Görüş* (MG) – a series of pro-Islamist parties led or supported by Necmettin Erbakan – began actively asserting its place on the stage of Turkish politics. In 1994 municipal elections brought members of one MG offshoot, the Refah Party, to mayoral power in 6 out of 15 metropolitan municipalities (Patton 2009: 442) and in the following year, December 1995 parliamentary elections, the Refah Party formed a coalition government with Tansu Çiller's DYP Party. Although most of these early MG parties were later closed by the state due to alleged anti-secularist activities, they laid the groundwork for the emergence of the neo-Islamic AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) and a new generation of Islamist activists. For further readings on political approach to Islam and neo-liberal economy, you can refer to Yavuz (2003, 2006).

preliminary fieldwork research in a public women-only recreation center of Istanbul that is owned by the municipal government, named Cemal Kamacı (CK) Sports Center in Zeytinburnu. CK was one of the largest sports centers in Istanbul and is run by SPOR AŞ (Sports Inc), a municipal government-owned company established in 1994 to “improve physical and mental health”<sup>7</sup> of the citizens of Istanbul. I was collecting data as part of the “Muslim Women in Sports” project sponsored by *Women Living under Muslim Laws*<sup>8</sup> and had a chance to speak with one administrator and two trainers (I will refer them as Trainer A and Trainer B) from CK, as well as 12 customers over three weeks. I paid five visits to the center, each one of which was very fruitful and the staff members were more than helpful in providing information and full access to the center for me.

CK is equipped with a tennis court, a volleyball/basketball court, a soccer field, three training rooms for martial arts, an Olympic-size swimming pool and a fitness room with cardio and other training machines for exercise. Although there is not a separate “women-only” swimming pool, the common pool is closed to men during the noon hour on weekdays, from 18:30 to 21:30 on Wednesdays and Fridays, and from 15:00 to 18:00 on weekends. CK began accommodating the demands of women for segregated facilities and hours in 2001. While I was first collecting the data, the center had women-only aerobics, *pilates*, karate and swimming training sessions and a separate gym for women with two female trainers, who are professional sportswomen. Amongst thousands of members of the sports center, around 600 of them are registered for women-only facilities. In karate and kick-boxing, participants had a chance to

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<sup>7</sup>See <http://www.ibb.gov.tr/en-US/Organization/Companies/Pages/SPORAS.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLURL) is an international feminist solidarity network formed in 1986 that provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam ([www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)).

professionalize and advance by receiving higher belts. Although I was told that CK had customers who do not wear headscarves, all of the customers who agreed to participate in my research were wearing a headscarf.

Before I begin my analysis, it is necessary to clarify certain concepts and why an ethnography is needed in order to develop an insightful understanding about the “local dynamics of what has been variously called ‘Islamization,’ ‘Islamic fundamentalism,’ and so on” (Deeb 2006: 5). I agree with the former anthropologists’ definitions of Islamism and Islamists in the context of Turkey that identifies the area of *Islamic* (motivated by locally specific interpretation of Islam) *Politics*. As for the case in Turkey, Jenny White has offered an encompassing and evolving definition of Islamists as “Muslims who, rather than accept an inherited Muslim tradition, have developed their own self-conscious vision of Islam, which is then brought to bear on social and political events within a particular political context” (2000: 23). In an attempt to be faithful to my interlocutors, I prefer not to refer to them as *Islamic* or *Islamist*, but rather as *bařörtülü*<sup>9</sup> (veiled, or more precisely, headscarved) Muslim women – who don’t necessarily cover themselves solely because of their religious belief, but also to due to certain dress codes inherited with tradition. Since I asked questions significantly about their religion and religious visibility, the reader has an opportunity to gain insight about their point of view concerning the compatibility of modernity and religion as Muslims. Ethnographic work is also crucial in understanding particularly their modernity and modern-ness. The term modern-ness was first used by Lara Deeb (2006) in the anthropology of Islam in order to point out the state of being “modern” as an enchanting quality in

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<sup>9</sup> Veil in the case of my interlocutors is the Islamic veil (usually referred as *hijab* in the literature), that is commonly referred as *bařörtüsü*(headscarf) in Turkish. *Bařörtülü* simply means headscarved, similar to *hijabi* in popular language.

and of itself; which is not very different from the situation of my interlocutors.

The existing literature about Muslim women looks at them as if they form a homogeneous organic unity. Such studies are, therefore, quite weak in developing deep and detailed analyses of them. However, as we look closer, the collective identity of these alternative recreation sites is like a secure shell; we must break through it to find that these recreation centers provide spaces for women of diverse worldviews and lifestyles. Accordingly, the leisure sites in municipal recreation centers are rich resources to be analyzed as spaces to create and enable the heterogeneity and individuation of the members. The emotions of Muslim women attending these recreation centers should not be interpreted as coherent entities that can be isolated from their socio-cultural contexts, but as culturally embedded and socially constructed phenomena that bring together realms that are usually set apart, such as 'intimate' vs. 'public'; 'individualist' vs. 'collectivist'; or 'tangible' vs. 'symbolic.'

### **Sports and Women's Bodies from a Historical Perspective**

Before analyzing how *başörtülü* Muslim women are redefining the ideal body, it is necessary to have further insight by historicizing the ways in which republican ideologies aimed to shape women's bodies and to form the ideal female body; which, in turn, marginalized certain women at discourse level who were not "shaped" according to republican ideals.

It is argued that the production of an imaginary *ideal Turkish woman* took place in tandem with the creation of the Turkish nation-state as modern (Sirman 2005). This preoccupation with modernity is what Sirman identifies as the post-colonial condi-

tion (2005: 148). Focusing on the production of nation-state, Sirman argues that “women were made part of the nation through the control of their bodies and through cultural elaborations of femininity, the definition and control of the cultural boundaries of the nation” (2005: 149). Indeed, while Navaro-Yashin was depicting the disagreement between a black-veiled and short-haired Turkish women over the content of “Turkishness” taking place in mid-1990s, she also argued that “the debates centered especially around the question of women’s dress” (2002: 19). Both of the anthropologists share the perspective that these debates surrounding modernity, nationalism and/or nativeness are based on defining, shaping and re-shaping women’s appearance and bodies and using the body as a stage for representation. Similarly, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) were problematizing the role of the nation-state and the ways in which it produces women as second-class citizens. Therefore, it is necessary to historicize the relationship between Turkish Republican ideologies looking at women's bodies.

As part of its political project, the Turkish Republic focused on modernization, civilization and secularism through discourses and definitions attached to women’s liberated, modernized and *eugenized* bodies (Alemdarođlu 2005) since 1930s (Atalay 2007, Amman 2005, Dereli 2005). Perceiving sports as an important element of his modernist nation-building project, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Turkish Republic, employed elderly officers (veterans of the Independence War) to establish local sports clubs to replace British and American versions, which were considered to be imperialistic.<sup>10</sup> He established a governmental institute, Türkiye İdman Cemiyetleri İttifâkı (The Alliance of Exercise Association of Turkey) that was

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<sup>10</sup> The first sports club, *Muhafız Gücü* (Guard Force), was founded by ex-soldiers and veterans in 1920 (Talmiciler 2006, Yıldız 2002, Fişek 1985).

and still is responsible for spreading, managing and funding sports activities in the country (Yıldız 2002, Fişek 1980). Atatürk considered sport as “a patriotic duty”<sup>11</sup> (Tuzcuoğulları 2001: 57) and a tool to improve and develop the race.

The life and the world of sport is considered to be crucial globally. There is no need to explain it to connoisseurs like you. Such a crucial issue is indeed more crucial for us because it concerns race. Because, it concerns the improvement and development of the race. It is also a matter of civilization”.<sup>12</sup> (From a speech by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the opening ceremony of The Alliance of Exercise Association of Turkey, quoted in Tuzcuoğulları 2001: 55, 57 – 58).

Ataturk was influenced by the eugenics discourse of the contemporary leaders at his time, as well as the dichotomous mind/body cosmology of the Enlightenment philosophy (Alem-daroğlu, 2005:64). In her article on eugenics in Turkey, Alem-daroğlu (2005) analyzes Republican understanding of sport and the ways in which the Nationalist project of Turkey institutionalized sport, perceiving it as a tool to transform and ‘purify’ the race, theoretically in parallel to Hitler’s approach. According to Alem-daroğlu, the Kemalist Republican ideology perceived physical strength of a trained body as a pride of the nation and defined it as a fundamental characteristic of “Turkishness”. Thus, it not only contributed to re-definition of Turkishness but also invested in the development of physical strength as part of a nation-building project: “Indeed, the goal of national sports was to create ‘hundreds of thousands of sturdy bodies’, rather

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<sup>11</sup> “Spor vatanî bir vazifedir”.

<sup>12</sup> “Dünyada spor hayatı ve spor dünyası çok mühimdir. Bunu sizin gibi mütehasıs kişilere izaha lüzum yoktur. Bu kada mühim olan spor hayatı, bizim için daha mühimdir. Çünkü ırk meselesidir. İrkın ıslahı ve kişayışı meselesidir. Ve hatta biraz da medeniyet meselesidir”.

than merely win international sporting acclaim” (Alemdarođlu 2005: 65). According to Atatürk, bodies of Turkish people “remained in the East while their thoughts inclined towards the West” (Cantek 2003: 33). Hence, the body had to be transformed into a better shape, in accordance with European standards in order to complete the project of creating a western nation.

The transformation of men was limited to creating strong bodies; while that of women was also concerned about changing the image of Turkish women in the European minds. Women’s participation in sports was also perceived as a way to represent and demonstrate to the global (especially Western) gaze that the Turkish nation was succeeding in modernization (Atalay 2007, Talimciler 2006, Yazar 2005). Women’s sporting bodies were perceived as a reflection of the national changes that the newborn country was experiencing, and thus turned into both the stage and the subject of identity propaganda of the newly established country (Göle 1996).

The 1936 Olympics, for instance, is perceived as a crucial event in the history of Turkish sportswomen, where the first female Olympians from Turkey (also from any Muslim majority states) took place in the Olympic Games. In Turkish resources, the event is presented as the success of Turkish modernization and its nation-building project, where the fruits of the project were presented to a wide international audience. A closer look at the representations of female Olympians in the 1936 Games is helpful in understanding the ways in which both women’s sporting bodies and national pride is defined:

Turkish Republic which proceeds on the pathway of modernization with giant steps should have shown the world that the Turkish woman now is no longer under



black veil (çarşaf) or behind the *kafes*<sup>13</sup> (cage/ wooden curtain)<sup>14</sup> (Arıpınar, Atabeyoğlu & Cebecioğlu 2000: 7).

Most Turkish publications hold a parallel approach in depicting female sportswomen's participation in international games in the early republican period; that national pride was where the Western gaze was astonished by the modernized physicality of Turkish women who, the sportswomen proved, were no longer living in cages or under the veil. The ideal *eugenized* body of women, therefore, was also a stage where the state performed and represented its ideology to the global, usually Western world.

After the 1920s, a very limited number of women from elite families began to be involved in western sports, both as professionals and as amateurs. Managers of the national sports clubs were encouraged to have female members by Atatürk himself (Hergüner 1993: 42). Eventually, the women who were first involved in sports in Turkey were elite women who could afford the membership fees of the clubs and usually happened to be female relatives of the men who were either managerial board members of the clubs, or regular members (Hergüner 1993: 40). Elitism amongst the first sportswomen pioneers was not a surprise, since the membership fees of the sports clubs were not easily affordable for the majority. Many of the medal-winner sportswomen later became the first women to receive higher-education in Turkey. For instance, Sabiha Rifat, the first female player on the men's volleyball team Fenerbahçe (1929),<sup>15</sup> was also one of the first female engineers who took

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<sup>13</sup> *Kafes* can be translated as a "wooden curtain", or "cage", to provide an environment where women can watch the public sphere from segregated spaces. It ensures that women would not be seen by men, even while women were watching the men, such as in mosques, palaces, and higher-class urban households.

<sup>14</sup> "Çağdaşlık yolunda dev adımlarla ilerleyen Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, Türk kadınının da artık çarşaf altından ve kafes arkasından çıkmış olduğunu dünyaya göstermeliydi".

<sup>15</sup> Fenerbahçe Men's Volleyball is one of the oldest sports teams based in İstanbul which was established in 1927 and continues to exist despite several intermittences.

part in the establishment of the most important republican monument, the tomb of Atatürk; namely Anıtkabir. Similarly, Halet Çambel, one of the first female participants in the 1936 Olympics, became one of the first professors of archaeology in Turkey (Hergüner 1993: 42).

Despite the fact that Turkish sportswomen received several medals between 1930 and 1950, the total number of women involved in sports was considerably low (Amman 2005). The number of women who are registered in clubs for the mentioned sports activities was not more than twenty, according to the records of early republican sports clubs throughout 1930s (Amman 2005, Harani 2001, Fişek 1980). Women's involvement in sports had been supported by the state elite, but not by the public. Although state initiatives resulted in tremendous progress for women's involvement in sports during the first fifteen years of the republican period, the middle and lower class citizens kept perceiving sports as a masculine activity (Baydar 2002, Hergüner 1993). The majority of the population was resisting allowing their daughters to join sports teams and compulsory physical education classes at public schools (Fasting & Pfister 1997, Amman 2005).<sup>16</sup> Public resistance prevented the development of female participation in sports. It is possible to link the public resistance to two major factors. The first factor is that, according to popular belief, women who are involved in sports will lose their womanhood and start adapting masculine behaviour (Amman 2005). The second factor, however, is very much related to the fact that the bodily movements required in order to do exercise are culturally coded as 'heterosex' for

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<sup>16</sup> While agreeing that women's level of involvement in sports varies depending on the class and geographical area, both Amman (2005) and Fasting (1997) argued that women were expected to gain permission from their husbands or fathers to do sport. Moreover, despite the fact that state ideology has been promoting women's involvement in sports since the 1920s, sport was still not being perceived by the public as a "womanly" (*kadınsı*) activity even in the early 1980s.

women, which refers to a particular form of sexual appeal, including but not limited to the organization of outlook, outfit, make up, based on the taste of males as the opposite sex and therefore designed within the local codes of heteroerotics. A heterosexual appeal is highly problematic for the majority of the public simply due to control over such sexuality.

In 2000, Firdevs Hoşer (from Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi (Library of The Women's Works) published a document about sports and women in Republican Turkey. According to her, teenage girls attending compulsory physical education classes in high school were still facing sexual harassment from their male classmates in 1980 as the bodily movements performed during physical exercise are coded as "sexual" (2000: 42). In the same resource, Hoşer provides examples of women's volleyball teams whose players were violently harassed by male spectators (2000: 43-45). Hoşer gives another striking example while referring to the gap between the elites' participation of sports and that of the public: *"In 1970, in one of the most prestigious schools of İstanbul a total of 3 out of 25 girls is doing sports in the gymnastics class; two Germans and a Turkish girl, the rest of them have fake medical excuse reports. The boys of the same class are fully attending..."* (Hoşer 2000: 3). Apparently, families preferred not to allow their daughters' participation and provided medical reports instead. It is hard to discern whether girls were willing to attend the classes or not, as young students did not have the chance to request medical reports without the consent of their families and there is not any research available conducted with the young female students themselves. However, looking at the collective resistance of female students against gymnastics class, it is possible to recognize the social resistance against the state project.

Nevertheless, this social resistance seems to be rapidly fading away today. An increasing level of participation of women in

sports in Turkey is observed recently and documented above. One of the significant new elements is the opening up of new spaces and possibilities that accommodate and welcome women in segregated<sup>17</sup> or mixed spaces into the world of physical education, exercise, fitness and sports.

### **Women's Changing Public Visibilities in Urban Turkey After 1980**

As the Turkish economy entered the era of liberalization and internationalization in the 1980s, wider segments of Turkish society started to actively participate in social, cultural, and economic life in the public realm (White 2002). After a massive wave of migration from villages and small towns towards big cities,<sup>18</sup> the emerging middle class pursued economic opportunities with a successful entrepreneurial mentality; enjoying greater wealth and better access to high quality education. Due to increased mobility, for the first time, conservative and traditional segments of Turkish society entered in contact with capitalism, modernity, and globalization – moving from the periphery to the core (Göle 2002). With the rise of a new middle class in Turkey, which identifies itself with Islam, Muslim women have acquired new visibilities in public spaces in Turkish cities (Göle 2002, Navaro-Yashin 2002, White 2002). Facing strong resistance and rejection from the secularist elites of the core, a new Anatolian middle class started creating new strategies to engage with modern developmentalism that would differentiate themselves from exclusive secularism and elitism (Yavuz 2006, Yavuz & Esposito 2003) since the presidency of Turgut Özal during the 1980s. The model takes

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout the paper, the word segregated refers to gender segregation, unless otherwise explained.

<sup>18</sup> The population of Istanbul more than tripled during the 25 years between 1980 and 2005.

advantage of neo-liberal economy and supports Özal's neoliberal economic revolution that also stimulates wealth creation and luxurious consumption for a wider population.

As areas of contestation in Özal's mission in contemporary Turkey, the political views of neo-Islamist AKP received the strongest support from the new emerging Anatolian bourgeoisie and the middle class, which was also composed of observant Muslims (Yavuz 2006).<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is possible to observe the reflections of the synthesis of the urban lifestyles with Islamic and traditional symbolisms and sensitivities in every day practices and habits of women in urban spaces in Turkey, especially by paying attention to the changes in metropolitans landscape and consumption practices: women wearing colorful headscarves and fashionable long skirts are enjoying life across universities, coffee shops, or cinemas in high class neighborhoods. The rise of Islamic fashion is visible, and Islamic holiday resorts, *tesettür* hotels,<sup>20</sup> and women-only private gyms also reflect the blending of the modern and the religious in Turkey – a country where people feel comfortable with multiple and shifting identities at the crossroads of East-West, or Europe-Asia.

With the increase in number of young *başörtülü* women in Turkey since the 1980s (Göle 1993), more women demand gender-segregated spaces in sports facilities, gyms and swimming pools. New Islamist capitalists (Navaro-Yashin 2002), as well as secularist capitalists in Turkey are aware of the demand and are fast at work in creating segregated spaces to gain profits. However, as cultural Islam becomes more visible and expressed in public spaces that were previously monopolized

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<sup>19</sup> By observant Muslim I am referring to people who try to obey certain rules of Islam which are popularly assumed to be central to their religion.

<sup>20</sup> *Tesettür* Hotel literally means “veiled” hotel. It refers to the hotels with separate swimming pools, beaches and other facilities tailored particularly for women with religious sensitivities so that they can attract pious families as customers.

by a secularist minority, the devoted followers of republican ideologies feel great discomfort as they interpret these signs as a slippery slide away from modern values and toward traditionalism, if not Islamic fundamentalism.

Since the Turkish secular nationalist project has been performed through the transformation of women's bodies, production and representation of new Turkish women as healthy, disciplined, civilized and liberated individuals was one of the targets of that very project during early Republican period (1930s to mid-1950s). The conventional dichotomous definition of the ideal female body regards veiling as concurrent with an old-fashioned, unhealthy body in the Turkish context. The paradox of being *bařörtülü* (and accordingly "outmoded" based on early Republican ideals<sup>21</sup>) and being fit as a result of being involved in sports at the same time proposes new possibilities and multiple paths of liberation for Turkish women. There seems to be multiple "ideal" female bodies, which are contested with each other in different parts of the public realm in Turkey.

### **Recreation Centers as Contested Spaces of Defining the Ideal Women's Body**

The rise in the number of young *bařörtülü* women in urban areas of Turkey has been discussed in popular politics, media and by academics (Özkan 2005, Özdalga 1998, Göle 1996) as a deviation from, resistance to, or failure of secularist republican projects. The combination of the rise in number of *bařörtülü*

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<sup>21</sup> There are several resources indicating women's involvement in sports intertwined with unveiling which will make the women's bodies liberated accordingly: "Cumhuriyetin temel amacı zihinleri kör karanlıktan, akıl dışı hurafelerden, körü körüne bağlanılan dogmalardan kurtarmak kadar, kadın-erkek ayırd etmeden bedenleri de özgür kılmaktı".

women and their tendency to develop urban lifestyles resulted in an overt change in urban visibilities; many of them are related to different consumption practices. Capitalist entrepreneurs in the Middle East have not overlooked Muslim women's interest in and desire for leisure activities. The market dimension of this new space created and tailored for *başörtülü* women (together with the textile, tourism and entertainment industries) constitutes a rich source for anthropological inquiry. In Turkey, the market has swiftly adapted to social changes by finding ways to fulfill the new demands of their customers. To illustrate this point, the number of vacation villages which offer a wide variety of women-only beaches, pools and entertainment centers for families with *başörtülü* female members has increased in the last ten years. In Istanbul, for instance, around 12 pools, some of which are run by municipal governments, observe women-only hours specifically for *başörtülü* customers – a response to the demands of citizens who voted for these local authorities.

The recreation centers of AKP-run municipal governments are easily accessible by members of the public as fees for membership and classes are relatively cheap compared to that of private ones. The rise of the neo-Islamic political party AKP in metropolitan cities of Turkey has transformed the public sphere and women's participation in it in complex and often controversial ways. As the political tide continues to turn toward neo-liberal policies, women have gained new public visibilities by activating their power of demand in the market-oriented political scene. There have been private centers where pious Muslim women used to go because of their women-only facilities. However, municipal governments started to rearrange segregated spaces or hours for women very recently, only after 2000. Eventually, swimming pools and fitness classes became available to low-income women as well. Women have energetically participated in the reproduction of

male-oriented space regulations while simultaneously making their voices heard and claiming agency to change and shape their lives.

During my visits, I realized a tension regarding particular buzzwords. “Veil” was one of them as the concept has been overloaded with political tension for the last decade (Özkan 2005, Göle 1996). Being aware of the political debates, they are very careful in not using religious terminology while providing *halal* (Islamically permitted) entertainment, recreation opportunities, and food in the centers. The manager of CK immediately and kindly corrected me when I asked him about “*sports facilities for başörtülüwomen at their center*” by explaining that “*we do not intend to specifically accommodate başörtülü women. It is true that we have başörtülüas well as başörtüsüz [unveiled] customers but women-only hours were not arranged for başörtülüwomen only. As I said, we have several unveiled customers using the same facilities*”. The risk of being perceived as fundamentalist and demonstrating favouritism was the underlying reason behind these “precautions”. Nevertheless, following their secularist republican predecessors, AKP municipalities kept perceiving women’s bodies and sports as a political stage to perform their ideologies. Therefore, while creating a counter formation of ideal Turkish woman, they too are regarding women’s bodies as objects of the state politics. The content of their *ideal* needs to be further analysed and researched, and requires extensive interviews with the ruling elite. The content and focus of this research, however, is about the ways in which women relate themselves, their bodies and their subjectivities through physical exercise in segregated spaces.



## A Closer Lens on Women Who Prefer Women-only Recreation Centers

According to the information provided by the trainers,<sup>22</sup> although the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants vary, the wealthy customers demand private classes. Trainer A said that approximately 80% of the women aim to lose weight, while the majority of the rest are coming to fitness classes to reduce health problems such as backaches. Trainers criticized their customers for understanding physical exercise in a limited narrow sense and not taking stretching, endurance or body posture and balance into consideration as part of fitness. Indeed, I did not see anyone stretching or using exercise balls during my visits. While some women engage in recreation activities to socialize and meet new friends, many others prefer sports activities to entertain themselves and to go outside of their daily domestic routines. What is common among these women is a preference to engage in recreation activities in women-only facilities. They have broken boundaries of daily domestic life by entering into modern spaces of recreation centers and by expressing their demands.

Although all of my interlocutors were *başörtülü*, 12 out of 87 customers whom I met during my visits were not sporting headscarves. Indeed, both Trainer A and Trainer B of CK told me that an important portion of the customers are *başörtülü*. In both of the centers, one can easily recognize sensitivities of the customers related to modesty. Being aware of this, the sports centers allow all kinds of swimsuits from bikinis to *burkinis* (a type of swimsuit that covers the whole body except feet, hands and face, usually referred as *haşema*<sup>23</sup> in Turkish), as

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<sup>22</sup> Trainers of *pilates* and aerobics classes in Cemal Kamacı. The same people were responsible for providing guidance to the customers using fitness and exercise machines.

<sup>23</sup> *Haşema* is the brand that sells shari'a-compliant swimsuits both for men and women (as well as children). The word is abbreviation of "hakiki şeriat mayosu" (the real shari'a-compliant swimsuit) and today the brand name is used for all shari'a-compliant swimuits.

long as the texture of the swimsuit does not contain cotton or linen.<sup>24</sup> In swimming pools, for instance, there are several women covering their upper legs with long swimming shorts. While some women prefer to go to women-only pools so that they can wear less covered swimsuits, some of them still wear burkinis. I saw only one woman wearing burkini and when I asked why, the response of the woman was that she feels more comfortable with modest dresses. I then asked “So why don’t you go to any other pools and come to this one?” She responded, “Well, they look to you as if you were an alien over there”<sup>25</sup> (casual conversation, July 2008). She was trying to tell me that she would be regarded as strange or odd with her swimsuit that covers her body if she tries to swim side-by-side people with shorts and bikinis. She would become the *queer* in a pool or beach full of people in regular swimsuits. Coming to women-only pools is also a movement away from being estranged, and find a space where she will be familiar.

The struggle with the secular mind that estranges new *bařörtülü* bodies seems to be one of the factors that lie behind women’s demand for a segregated space. While continuing to keep traditional/religious codes of female modesty, they want to be part of the life style that is defined as “modern” in daily life. Contrary to the secular perception, they insist that it is possible to “be modern” and religious at the same time. Being modern includes – but is not limited to – having a fit, slim body and “taking care of” one’s own body.

Sertaç: “Why do you work out?”

Deniz: “When I work, I feel better. When my friend first recommended [the idea of working out], I kinda felt lazy.

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<sup>24</sup> These two materials can damage the equipment or produce harmful bacteria, according to the explanation of the receptionists in both of the centers.

<sup>25</sup> “E ama oralarda uzayli gibi bakarlar”.

Later on, I realized that I will not be able to lose weight in any other way; then I started coming here. But now, it is part of my life. I don't feel comfortable if I don't come."

Sertaç: "Earlier, you have identified yourself as pious. Would a pious person work out?"

Deniz: "(Surprised) What do you mean? Why not? We do everything else, why wouldn't we exercise? (She laughs.) I mean, Sertaç Hanım<sup>26</sup> (paused)... Well you yourself are *başörtülü* too (paused)... a Muslim is not disconnected from life, is she? The Prophet did everything including racing with his wife as well as trade. There is no such thing as to pray and fast all day and night"<sup>27</sup> (interview, August 2008).

Deniz's reaction to my question about piety and working out is loaded with criticism towards the stereotypical expectations of pious people. She expressed her surprise of hearing such a question from a "*başörtülü*" woman. Thirteen out of 18 customers mentioned certain struggles of balancing religious sensitivity and material progress, overcoming stereotypes, resisting gender inequality and patriarchy, establishing agency, and building "pious" and traditional yet "modern" identities that I found very similar to the Shi'i women of Lebanon. My interlocutors persistently stressed how being *başörtülü*, religious or even traditional does not deter them from being modern at

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<sup>26</sup> Salutation for women.

<sup>27</sup> Sertaç: "Neden spor yapıyorsunuz?"

Deniz: "Kendimi iyi hissediyorum spor yapınca. Arkadaşım ilk tavsiye ettiğinde üşenmiştim, gereksiz gelmişti.Sonra başka şekilde kilo veremeyeceğimi anlayınca gelmeye başladım.Fakat şimdi artık hayatımın parçası oldu.Spora gelmediğimde hiç rahat etmiyorum.

Sertaç: "Peki kendinizi dindar olarak nitelendirdiniz demin. Dindar insan spor yapar mı?"

Deniz: "Nasıl yani neden yapmasın? Her şeyi yapıyoruz spor mu yapmayacağız? (Gülüyor) Yani Sertaç Hanım...(duraklar) şimdi siz de örtülüsünüz de... (duraklar) müslüman hayattan kopuk değildir ki? Hz Peygamber eşiyle yarış da yapmış, ticaret de.. Yani yok öyle sabah aksam namaz kıl oruç tut.."

the same time. This delicate balance is expressed in their everyday lifestyles and choices as well. My interlocutors construct and re-fabricate their womanhood, individuality, and religious identity through articulating secular and modern choices in leisure and recreational activities. This is best described in the words of Asuman (interview, August 2008): “Nobody is surprised when men go out and do sports or play soccer. Why should any of those be weird when I do? I am sorry if it surprises anyone but I can cook and do ironing at home, then can come here and do aerobics”.<sup>28</sup> Asuman compares her situation with men to criticise the public estrangement and to illustrate how her situation is not different from religious men playing sports. I particularly liked her point since it also critically projects the gender bias of secularist-Islamist dichotomous discussions regarding public visibility. Since her veil is associated with tradition and back-wardness, her engagement in sports and fitness becomes unintelligible for the secular mind.

The patriarchal norms are recreated in these women-only recreation centers through physical segregation, a dress code oriented toward modesty, and valorization of women only activities. This should not be seen as simply a male imposition, however, as many women themselves prefer gender segregated spaces. The reasons underlying their choice of women-only spaces are multiple. Several of my interlocutors said that their husbands, fathers or brothers would not give them permission to do sports if the center was not gender segregated. With reference to Özyeđin (2002, 2001), it is important to notice the discursive power of referencing husbands’ demands: Almost all of them mentioned that they themselves feel more comfortable in women-only space while doing exercise since there is

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<sup>28</sup> “Erkekler çıkıp spor yaptığında, futbol oynadığında kimse garipsiyor mu? Ben yapınca neden garip olsun? Evimde yemeđimi ütümü de yaparım, burada aerobiđimi de valla kimse kusura bakmasın.”

not anyone around to stare at them. This is particularly important for the interviewees. As 34 year old Sevgi said “*Bakanımız edenimiz yok*” (There is no one to look at us and disturb us here). They feel more liberated, freed from a limiting male gaze that controls female bodies by continuous surveillance.

In the Turkish context, male gaze is one of the most common ways of sexual harassment that forces women to dress and act in certain way in order not to attract it. When we look at the state as a major source of legitimation, the secular state here is not confronting or challenging the masculinist behavior of surveillance over female bodies, but normalizing and legitimizing it. Hence, it becomes more and more common (and normal) for a man to stare at a woman’s body if it is in tight exercise suits and performing “attractive” movements. When Deniz explains her choice with her scarf and religious sensitivities, the discomfort over male gaze is always there, between the lines, taken for granted:

Sertaç: “Why did you choose here?”

Deniz: “It’s close to my home. Sena, this friend of mine that I mentioned earlier used to come here regularly and used to tell me how clean and inexpensive here is. There weren’t many places for *başörtülü* women at that time anyway”.

Sertaç: “So, this place (CK) corresponds to some of your expectations as a *başörtülü* woman yourself”.

Deniz: “Of course, that’s what I’m saying. They designed the women’s section very well. When I take off my scarf, nobody from the outside can see me. I can do the exercises outdoors as well, but I wouldn’t move off with comfort. Plus, I wouldn’t be able to take off my scarf.

Sertaç: “When you say you wouldn’t move off....”

Deniz: “Well I wouldn’t leap, jump... I don’t know...”<sup>29</sup>  
(interview, August 2008).

Again, with reference to the cultural context, the bodily movements of women are coded as sexual; therefore these codes limit women’s public behaviours and movements. Deniz, as a *başörtülü* woman, controls her public sexuality in accordance with her understanding of “Turkish definitions” that is not even discussed in detail by any of the interlocutors but nevertheless existed as a strong subtext. A woman is expected to stay within the “modesty realm” and behave like a well-mannered lady (“*hanım*” – the word itself denotes politeness and appropriateness). This social pressure is usually stronger for a *başörtülü* woman since, by putting the headscarf on, she silently declares to limit her public sexuality. Therefore, she should watch her posture and bodily movements when she is in public spaces: You should not bend down or jump, sit tightly and be observant of others when she is in the bus on the street, in a public park, etc. Each one of these and much more are coded as sexual actions – which should be limited in public.

The heavy presence of all these expectations in the air puts *başörtülü* women who are involved in sports in a rather awkward position. When a *başörtülü* woman dares to do fitness exercises in a public space, it will probably get raised eyebrows and negative reactions from the crowds or the audience

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<sup>29</sup> Sertaç: “Burayı neden seçtiniz?”

Deniz: “Evime yakın. Sena, demin bahsettiğim arkadaşım düzenli geliyordu, çok temiz, hesaplı filan derdi. Zaten ben başladığımda örtülülerin gidebileceği çok fazla da yer yoktu”.

Sertaç: “Örtülü bir kadın olarak burada bazı ihtiyaçların karşılanıyor”.

Deniz: “Tabi canım onu diyorum. Kadınlara ait bolunu çok güzel düzenlemişler. Burada örtümü çıkarttığımda dışarıdan hiç kimse göremiyor. Yani ben dışarıda da egzersiz yapardım belki ama bu kadar rahat hareket edemezdim. Üstelik örtümü hiç çıkartamazdım”.

Sertaç: “Rahat hareket edemezdim derken?”

Deniz: “Canım hoplayamam, zıplayamam.. Ne bileyim...”

(whether male or female). A very recent and visible example which both reflects (*başörtülü* and *başörtüsüz*) women's increasing interest in fitness and the public amusement and discomfort surrounding their interest can be demonstrated by the new sports equipments in public parks. The equipment is made with heavy metal, very similar to the materials of swings or slides in public parks, but used as treadmills, elliptical trainers or exercise bikes in very primitive form. The initiative was started in 2008 and many public parks in Istanbul now have sports equipment ready for the usage of families. This social innovation was welcomed by the public, and especially well embraced by women. One can observe women of all ages and backgrounds in public parks in Istanbul using these equipments for physical exercise and to lose weight.

One is very likely to come across women who work out using these equipments while wearing long robes, headscarves and sneakers. Aside from the public excitement and fascination with the new toys in town, there is also an increasing public amusement and sometimes a degree of social class tension and denigration surrounding these equipment and the women who are using them. I came across a *Youtube* video of an exercising *başörtülü* woman wearing robe and sneakers that was captured by a pedestrian and broadcasted for public amusement. The clip has been watched over 40,000 times with over 200 comments underneath by June 2010.<sup>30</sup> Both of the highest rating comments ("liked" 51 and 46 times) were calling the *başörtülü* over-weight woman – who was secretly captured – a "bitch", assuming that she should have a naughty reason to "tighten her hips".

On the other hand, while women are working out to have healthy and fit but still *başörtülü* bodies, they are actually chal-

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<sup>30</sup>See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5TH2kD6Fdw> (retrieved 30 June 2010).

lenging the conventional dichotomous definition of the ideal female body, while also denying the male gaze which takes pleasure in watching them and tantalizing their sexual imagination. Since the veil itself has long been propagated as a symbol of rural, backward, lower-class traditionalism, its contemporary carriers appear to have an aggressive struggle to prove otherwise: that they are modern, urban, progressive and higher-class. One of the ways these women can prove themselves is through their consumption of certain “Islamic” modes of recreation and experience in the modern, capitalist system. According to Göle (1996: 24), *bařörtülü* women are left at the margins of the state for generations, and are in struggle to reach the core. Indeed, one recreation center participant – Melahat (age 32) – says that *“they like to see us ugly and fat. It doesn’t mean that I will not look after my body since I’m covering it. We do stuff like swimming, exercise or aerobics just like they do and we can have a beautiful outfit”* (interview, August 2008). What she refers as “they” is the upper-middle-class secularist elites of Turkey who are at the core, according to Göle’s definition. Here, women are defining and claiming to be the carriers of a different modernism challenging the conventional assumptions about modernity. They feel empowered to construct and express their modern identities by re-building their bodies through sport and of course other avenues as well. This sense of empowerment may become more assertive as these women feel a sense of rebellion while demanding and struggling for more egalitarian and liberated spaces.

Melahat was taking advantage of the blind spots of both the neo-Islamist government and elitist discourses when expressing her critiques. When Melahat says “we”, she refers, in fact, to other *bařörtülü* women who make modern demands of Islam in political, economic and cultural life. What Melahat refers to as “they” is the upper-middle-class secularist elites of Turkey who are at the core, according to Göle’s definition.



Thus through her performance in women-only spaces that also expands to the public sphere, through her interest to become fit, she challenges the republican Kemalist “ideal woman”, yet weakens the Islamist “ideal woman” by developing a self-confident body language acquired through sports and physical strength. Melahat, like her *başörtülü* sisters, is in continuous struggle with multiple patriarchies working to objectify women’s body in constructing their discourses at the state level: that of Turkish republican secularism, and of neo-Islamism that has been represented by AKP during the last decade. In working to open up space against secularist pressures imposed by the state elite, women mobilize and reinforce new masculinist neo-Islamism, but perhaps with a twist. These women, as both subjects of Islamist ideology and consumers of its capitalist enterprise, are both obedient and disobedient to the state ideologies. So my interlocutors are in demand to be the carriers of modern-ness, and feel more empowered to construct and express their modern identities through re-building their bodies. This sense of empowerment may become more assertive, and subversive, as these women feel a sense of rebellion in their demand and struggle for more egalitarian and liberated spaces.

What kind of a female body is appropriated and legitimized is the core question of the secularists who are suspicious about the AKP government's agenda. Indeed, trainers I interviewed mentioned the secularist criticisms about the women-only gyms that they are working in. Those who bring secularist criticisms are aware that the former modern image of the female body has been challenged. According to secularist concerns, AKP is taking Turkey backwards by providing alternative spaces for the veil. In other words, their concern is about the assimilation of the former idealized woman image that was created during the early republican time. Through its apparatuses, the state is using its capacity to gently build bodies of its citizens

since it can govern them in the most intimate ways (Althusser 1971). Melahat is “hailed” during the hours she spent in women-only fitness clubs as her presence and performance is an exercise of the state, the new state that aims to construct an alternative woman. Within its capacity to operate, the new state suggests that the female body is still expected to be fit, with reduced body fat and cellulite. Also perceived as sexual, the female body has to be operated in spaces where it will not be harassed.

## Conclusion

The case of municipal recreation centers opening up to accommodate religious women can be viewed just like any other entertainment industry with different customers. Nevertheless, when we look closer, the story gets complicated; because of the interaction of global capitalist trends shaping women’s relationship with their bodies, along with Islamist and Kemalist ideals on women’s bodies; all three of which are patriarchal ideologies. Working out to have a healthy and fit but still modest (if not *bařörtülü*) outlook physically embodies modern and traditional symbols which is also a challenge to the conventional dichotomous definition of the ideal female body in the Turkish context. The transformation of women’s rural-looking, veiled and so-called “unhealthy”, therefore uncivilized bodies, to civilized, disciplined and liberated bodies was perceived not only as an indicator of westernization and modernization of the country, but also as a way to create and define the new ideal Turkish woman since the 1930s. On the one hand these centers may also offer new areas of investigation for the women’s movement and democratic forces, particularly by those interested in women as both subjects and actors in these new and alternative public realms for women and gender equality. On the other hand, few have yet looked at the con-

tradictory manner in which neoliberal ideology may have opened an unintended sphere of resistance for women and other oppressed social forces.<sup>31</sup>

Women seem to be in continuous struggle with multiple patriarchal systems: that of Turkish secularism, and of Islamism, and at the global level, of the Western-oriented beauty industry. In working to open up space against secularist pressures imposed by the state elite, they mobilize and reinforce new, male-dominant Islamist capitalism. These women, as both subjects of Islamist ideology and consumers of its capitalist enterprise, are both obedient and disobedient to the ideology. Women in this context are expected to embody an image of modernism, and feel more empowered to construct and express their modern identities through re-building their bodies. One of the contributions of this study is to develop a closer understanding of the particularities of the context that the *başörtülü* women in Turkey are negotiating in indirect ways by using segregated spaces and their very own bodies. In time, this area of inquiry can become an important part of a larger body of knowledge about the relationships between culture, gender, identity, religion, capitalism and politics in the public sphere in the context of Turkey. This body of knowledge has important implications for our understanding of forms of resistance and challenges to the dominant republican ideologies that have monopolized the definition of the ideal female body.

Nonetheless, there are a couple of significant points that need further attention. One of these implications concerns women's role in reproducing the existing "patriarchal" structure in Turkey. According to Özyeğin (2001), women are the ultimate actors in shaping and maintaining gender dynamics in Turkey.

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, the consumer boycott movement in Egypt has given power to the ordinary people to express their opposition to their government and its international support of the government of Israel (see Djerdjarian 2009).

Although they seem to have developed a creative and somewhat disturbing resistance through their struggle with multiple patriarchies, they need the subsistence of the neo-liberal economy that is represented by current AKP rule for the survival of their victory. Ironically, it looks like women contribute to the existing patriarchies. While they simultaneously develop a creative and somewhat disturbing resistance which eventually turns into a performance drama begun in women-only spaces, their performance expands to the public areas with their styles on the street and with their physical exercises in public parks. Although none of my interlocutors directly confront any of the multiple patriarchies, they successfully develop responses and daily tactics that challenge those forces which are continuously objectifying them and regulating their bodies, including the masculinist aesthetic expectations of women's bodies.

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## Female Bodies and the State Power

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## Chapter 4

### Muslim Women's Football: A Contested Frontier for Gender Politics

Hana Askren

#### Nothing and Everything Is Possible

The documentary film *Football Under Cover* documents the year-long collaboration between a German football team and an Iranian football team in organizing a friendly women-only match.<sup>1</sup> Iranian director Ayat Najafi said of the endeavor, “officially, in Iran nothing is possible – but almost everything is possible”.<sup>2</sup>

Muslim women's football is a point at which conditions of possibility and impossibility in women's sport intersect. While men

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<sup>1</sup>*Football Under Cover* (2008) was directed by David Assmann, Ayat Najafi, starring Niloofar Basir, Narmila Fathi and Sanna El-Agha. This film documents an amateur fe-male soccer team from Berlin on a nerve-wracking journey trying to carry out the first female soccer match in the history of Iran. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1160008/> (accessed 12 December 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://en.qantara.de/Soccer-under-the-Veil/8932c173/index.html> (accessed 4 December 2012). *Qantara.de* (in Arabic: *qantara* means bridge) is an Internet portal in German, English, Arabic and Turkish, designed to promote intercultural dialogue between the Western and the Islamic World which had been at a record low with widespread Islamophobia after the September 11 attack in the USA. The portal was initiated by the German Foreign Office in 2003 and has emerged as a space where civil society and various public intellectuals and activists as well as various media establishments participate in debates on intercultural dialogues across Muslim majority and various European nation.

from the US to Malaysia have said that football is a men's game and have put barriers in the way of women's participation, women and girls by the hundreds of thousands are playing the game on local, national and international levels. While international matches like the FIFA Women's World Cup receive attention from the media, FIFA – despite demands made by women's football teams – up to 2011 had declined to allow more than 16 teams to compete (while the Men's World Cup hosts 32 teams). The discrepancy in media coverage of men's and women's football is well documented, and yet because teams rely heavily on advertisers and corporate sponsors, women's coverage simply does not draw the dollars that men's coverage does (Vincent et al. 2012). Cultural conditions vary, so that women's experience of the sport is different in every place, and yet there is a common thread in discourses on Muslim women's sport.

What can we learn from these discrepancies, the media coverage, and the various uses to which Muslim women have put the game of football? What meanings can be taken from women-only tournaments in Muslim provinces<sup>3</sup> in Malaysia or Pakistan, or women's demands to be spectators at Iranian men's football matches? Where do those meanings intersect? These are the questions and some of the possible answers and their complexities that I will outline in the following pages. My research indicates that football is a medium by which women from various countries and cultures have fashioned identities for themselves and have postured for or against some idea of what womanhood is and what sport is as well. Football and indeed women's sport generally is a medium, and does not determine the message itself, as Hoodfar has argued in the introduction of this volume. It has been used as a tool of con-

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<sup>3</sup>For more information on women's tournaments, visit <http://www.futsal.com.my/>.

formity as much as one of revolution. It has been framed as a political issue as well as an issue of personal choice.

In this chapter, I present a few representative examples in order to argue that football is a versatile tool beyond simply having an inherent value and meaning through sport. I will discuss how women have used football to create an alternative, women-only public sphere in places where they are denied a place in the mainstream public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Indeed as I will discuss, women's football has been a major and effective tool of direct opposition to the state and to cultural gender roles. I will briefly touch on the arguments sometimes presented by those ambivalent to the changing gender roles: those who are in favour of women's football but portray it as a necessary evil in modern society, a by-product of contact with the West and its specific brand of feminism.

## **Football in the Middle East**

Football in many Muslim contexts is well established, and tends to be the most popular sport and often a national passion. Thus not surprisingly it has become a pivotal point in the overt and covert debates over women's sport and its entanglement with politics, power, and resources and Middle East. Women of various Muslim contexts have used football to increase women's visibility and demands for more resources and recognition, often in much the same way as American or British women have. Football has been the first frontier, the popular site at which women contest their status in many different spheres, in some cases using it to create their own separate sphere. In countries as diverse as Kuwait, Malaysia, Nigeria,

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<sup>4</sup> The creation of a separate public sphere has been a controversial development where proponents of women's sport have debated on both sides since the establishment of the first Women's Game in Paris in the 1920s.

Iran and Egypt, football has been many things: a site of religious contest, a challenge to traditional femininity, an expression of class exuberance, and it is a meeting-place at which feminists collaborate on an international level. It has been used as a political tool by modernists, Islamists, feminists and women's rights activists as well as states to promote their goals and perspectives.

Women in Muslim contexts are joining a global movement to use football to advance their agenda of expanding women's sport. In a previous success, women in the US used football as a showcase to demand continuation of the implementation of the 1972 Title IX amendment; a law mandating equal budgeting and efforts directed to male and female students in educational institutes and beyond. The goal was requiring educational and sports institutions to bring up the participation of their female athletes on par with that of their male counterparts.<sup>5</sup> In 1999, when the US Women's Soccer Team won the World Cup, *Time* magazine hailed the players as the "daughters of Title IX". In fact the Title IX law was barely enforced until the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the effects not really showing until the late 1990s; so the women of the winning football team, having grown up and developed their skills in a pre-Title IX atmosphere, did not actually benefit from the law. Title IX primarily benefitted those younger school students in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless the football victory was used as a power-

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<sup>5</sup> Women's movements in the 1960s focused on gender equality and lobbied around various forms of discrimination and inadequate resources for women. One of the fields that received much attention was the treatment of women in sport where only meager resources were allocated for women's sport. After long public debates and persistent government lobbying, the Education Amendments of 1972 were introduced. The most significant of these was referred to as Title IX, which ensured equal access for both girls and boys in educational institutions to training, resources, but most of all opportunity in sport (see Brake 2010, Blumenthal 2005, Gavora 2003, Howel1982:258-261).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that not all scholars agree that Title IX has always been positive for women (see for instance, Gavora 2003). Thus it is important for those interested in this debate or intending to bring about similar legal strategies to learn about its short-

ful tool for women in their arguments for continued enforcement and extension of the law that brought more resources to women's university sport.<sup>7</sup>

Football has likewise been used as a tool to divert resources away from women by those who argue that football is a man's game. Mangan writes in *Women's Football in England* that "women's football remains a minority activity in comparison with men's football" (2004: 116). Fasting writes in *Small Country – Big Results: Women's Football in Norway* that "the fact that football with its 'toughness' and 'body contact' was very popular among men, and accordingly was characterized as a masculine sport, made it less suitable for girls and women" (2004: 150). This characterization produced a cultural assumption that took legitimacy away from women's football; this loss of cultural legitimacy translated into a loss of real resources and opportunities.

Most countries in the world now have women's football teams in one form or another, but they are not all the same and they are not all described with the same rhetoric. They don't all serve the same cultural or social purpose, and they subscribe to many competing master narratives. The Women's Sports Foundation narrative of progress and its focus on participation numbers may be the most visible because it comes from a place of cultural power and has had many years to solidify.<sup>8</sup> There is a neat timeline on the Foundation's 'History' page that

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comings, particularly its operation and implementation, so that they can bypass these inadequacies in their specific contexts.

<sup>7</sup> Football, being a well established sport has formed an arena from which many of these studies draw their research and data. Thus it becomes an integral point of focus in the debates over politics, power and resources for women's sport.

<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1974 by tennis legend, Billie Jean King, the Women's Sports Foundation is dedicated to advancing the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. It is one of the most established women's sport foundation today. See <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/home/about-us/foundation-history>.

shows that women's participation, in numbers, is gradually increasing. While this timeline is designed to say something specific about women and sport and the achievements of the Foundation itself, it is nonetheless clear that the number of women engaging in sport, regardless of their political and social intention, has increased.

The documentary *Football Under Cover* reveals a fact that contradicts the narrative of chronological progress that portrays women's football as a thoroughly contemporary invention in Iran and elsewhere: Iran had a national women's team back in 1968.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between historical progress and women's participation is, in reality, complex and nonlinear. Football has come in and out of favour as a women's sport, depending on the political and cultural meanings attached to it, and there is a reason that it has become recently popular as a women's sport specifically in Muslim circles. Standards of modesty have been interpreted in different ways, and the current resurgence in popularity of various types of veiling has helped to propel football to the forefront of the argument. That, along with the sport's immense international popularity, has made it a focal point for debates about women's inclusion both as players and as spectators, but also concerning the cultural imposition of western values on others.<sup>10</sup>

Football is a game that can be played without overtly violating strict religious restrictions on the female body's movement and

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://en.qantara.de/Soccer-under-the-Veil/8932c173/index.html> (accessed 4 December 2011)

<sup>10</sup> A heated debate over whether women should be allowed to play football when they are wearing the veil has been happening since 2001 and came to a head in June 2011 when Iranian women were prevented from playing a qualifying final match with their Jordanian counterparts by FIFA. This high profile incident brought state authorities in the debates and finally in June 2012, FIFA accepted that a safe hijab can be worn by the players. See <http://www.insidethegames.biz/sports/summer/football/14737-fifa-vice-president-al-hussein-moves-to-allow-hijabs-in-the-game>.

appearance. There is not a great deal of physical contact between players, it can be played in long pants, sleeves and even with a head-covering, and the movements cannot be interpreted as sexual or exciting in the same way as the movements of aerobics or some calisthenics. Women can use football to fulfill the Qur'anic command to keep the body healthy, without violating any other restrictions or conservative rules of modesty that Muslim women are expected to observe in some contexts.

Kristin Walseth and Kari Fasting, in their article *Islam's View on Physical Activity and Sport*, discuss the interpretations of Islam's health concerns that women use to justify their sports activities. One of their interlocutors says that she plays football with her brothers because she feels that Islam's command to take care of the body amounts to an order from God to participate in sport (2006: 54). However, there is a limit to the kinds of sports that the more religiously conservative participants of this research said they will do – the women say that they are comfortable with basketball because its movements are not “exciting” but aerobics would not be appropriate, especially in front of men (Walseth & Fasting 2006: 54). Thus religious observance has been used to support and rationalize Muslim women's participation up to a point.

Kelantan, a predominantly Muslim province in Malaysia, has organized a series of UNICEF-sponsored All Women's Futsal Playoffs. Futsal, also known as “five-a-side”, is an indoor version of football played with a smaller ball, with four players and a goalie to each team. The aim of the tournament was, in UNICEF's words, to provide “a chance to meet and share stories [and] build self-esteem” as well as participate in sport<sup>11</sup> Clerical authority Nik Aziz Nik Mat – who has been cited speaking against women and men mixing together, even in such in-

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<sup>11</sup> More information is available at [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malaysia\\_43089.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malaysia_43089.html).

nocuous places as the supermarket checkout counter, saying that segregation is necessary to prevent open displays of sexuality<sup>12</sup> approved the tournaments, under pressure by women who were demanding the right to play sports. Of course his approval was on the condition that all of the tournaments would be strictly segregated with only women players and spectators being allowed, and thus did not challenge the cleric's stringent restrictions on women's public presence.

On the one hand, this is clearly a compromise that clerics and other conservative leaders feel they have to make if they are going to stay relevant to the lives of many Muslim women. Yet on the other, women's demands to play football combine with sanctions against a mixed-gender society to create a situation in which neither one is greatly challenged, and the force of women's demands creates not revolution but accommodation. Their demands have created change, but not necessarily in the shape envisioned by the proponents of women's sport in many Muslim contexts or within the Women's Sports Foundation. The futsal tournaments do not address larger social questions of gender roles and religious gender divisions, but rather form a separate state-sanctioned semi-public space where women can play sport and be physical without being seen or becoming part of public memories. Such space can be considered an alternative and "genuine" public sphere, however even if there is political will behind it, their display would likely remain a lesser and ephemeral public sphere as women's games are not televised or photographed to the extent, if at all, of male competitions. Thus they can easily be wiped out of the public sphere and public memory. In other words, women gain access to

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<sup>12</sup> Nik Aziz Nik Mat is one of the most controversial religious figures on the question of gender segregation in Kelantan; for more details see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nik\\_Abdul\\_Aziz\\_Nik\\_Mat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nik_Abdul_Aziz_Nik_Mat). Such debates are being waged in various provinces of Malaysia. For further information on this subject, see Hoodfar and Ghoreishian (2012).



something previously restricted without challenging the status quo. While this appears unacceptable to many Malaysian secular feminists and those promoting liberal interpretations of Islam, as well as to many feminists in the 'West' and 'East', many other women who adhere to or are bound by their families and social relations to a more restricted rule of modesty and hijab express relief that they can have the opportunity to play and expand their sphere of activities and networks (Walseth 2006: 55). Some see this opening of sport and by definition other aspects of life as a first step for women from conservative backgrounds. Others wonder if this can be attributed to how women consciously or not have embarked on modernizing understanding of the public place of women within Muslim cultures.

By and large, the persistence of the ideology of a singular definition of femininity and appropriate gender roles among the establishment play a major part in the sequestration of women's sport into a completely separate sphere. The development of a separate sphere may stem from reluctance to challenge cultural assumptions about femininity and masculinity, which conservative Muslims present as fundamental truths. Yet concern about femininity in women's football in the west has also been at the forefront of discussion by many who felt the need to remind the public explicitly or tacitly that female athletes had not given up their prescribed feminine roles. There is an assumption that competitive games are masculine, and that they contradict femininity. The proponents of games then tend to describe women athletes in a hyper-feminized manner, particularly when they are off the field. Media reports repeatedly cited the femininity of the 1999 US soccer players as proof that they had not renounced or lost their womanhood by playing such a sport. The women in the All American Girls' Baseball League in the 1940s were actually required to apply makeup before they played a game and to play wearing skirts,

even though this caused more injury than if they had worn pants (Macy 1993, Lukas & Smith 1982). Women's soccer players posed in a nude calendar, which both alleviated fear of gender-bending by portraying the athletes as female sex objects, yet also increased the perception that women athletes were "showing too much", and that they were displaying their bodies inappropriately in the public sphere. It nonetheless established their femininity based on conventional assumptions.<sup>13</sup> While femininity remains a rallying point among conservative forces in Muslim contexts, criticism of becoming a sexual object forces women to adopt a reverse strategy of donning more conservative outfits while playing the game even when it is not legally required, such as in the case of Iran or Saudi Arabia.

The women-only teams and tournaments that some Muslim countries have sponsored, such as the Islamic Women's Games and the Kelantan futsal tournaments, have a similar effect on cultural concerns about femininity. By separating women and only allowing female spectators, traditional Islamists are reassured that sex-segregation remains intact and that women's bodies are not made public. Just as the lipstick worn by the All-American Girls team counterbalanced their perceived challenges to male sports hegemony, the separation and modest Muslim dress of many female football players counterbalances their perceived challenge to religiously prescribed gender roles. The implication of segregation for women and women's sport, as Hoodfar (in this volume) discusses, is complicated. While at best it creates a hierarchical public sphere at the same

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<sup>13</sup> After several decades many athletes still feel they need to appear feminine in order to change the perception that women who play sport are not feminine, thus the practice of posing nude or in sexualized photos takes place from time to time. See for example <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1248605-ronda-rousey-and-30-athletes-who-have-posed-nude> and <http://coedmagazine.com/2012/07/27/naked-olympians-nude-olympics-london-2012/> (accessed 4 December 2012).

time as it expands opportunities in sport for women, it also reinforces assumed and legally imposed gender roles. Indeed the creation of a completely segregated arena of sport for women, where women cannot be televised or publicized like their male counterparts, undermines much of the positive impact sport can have on women in opening their opportunities and breaking away from limitations that traditional cultures have imposed on them.

Clearly having lost the debates in prohibiting women from participating in sport on the grounds of religion, the Islamists and conservative religious leaders often frame Muslim women's rights to play sport as an extension of tradition and explained by the Qur'anic commands to keep the body healthy (Walseth & Fasting 2006: 49). While this re-discovered Qur'anic command and re-invention of tradition has at least provided opportunities for many women to engage in sport, it may also have many unforeseen consequences on women's sport and society at large that deserve closer attention from scholars.

Women athletes in Muslim countries and elsewhere have pushed gender boundaries in every way, becoming muscular, playing a "man's game" and playing it well. They have fashioned themselves into aggressive, strong athletes, while putting on the feminine apologetic, to mask their breaking of tradition. This apologetic can also be an unconscious action and integral to their sense of themselves as women as well as athletes. Muslim women engage in a kind of apologetic when they express their demands for financial support, state sponsorship for tournaments, space to play, and often the simple right to play, in religious terms. The term "apologetic" is something of a pejorative, but in reality it is the best way they have found to get their demands met. They practice hard and train women to coach them, cultivate a female fan base and become as skilled as possible, bringing in German, Chinese and other foreign

coaches. While wearing the religious clothing of modesty and many accept segregating their sports events they also present themselves as strong athletes. Though this is often an unconscious choice and integral to their sense of themselves as pious Muslim women, it also masks their challenge to a tradition in which organized international women's football matches would have been unthinkable.

Ultimately, this is neither the breaking of an old tradition nor the creation of something completely new. It is a re-engineering of the relationship between gender roles, religion and sport in order to reinterpret older traditions that no longer suffice. Much of the old tradition is kept, while new values (such as the value of sport for women's physical as well as mental health) are added in. The Islamists who demand women's right to play are constructing a new point of intersection where religion, sport and women meet in a way that can still be considered traditional enough. The creation of a separate public sphere preserves the segregation of the sexes while providing women with opportunities to transgress feminine gender roles in other ways – and perhaps most importantly, away from the male gaze.

What does this say about football as an agent of change? Does sport have the power to go head to head with the most entrenched of cultural values, those of gender? I have already argued here, based on readings of existing literature, sport is not automatically an agent of freedom or openness, but depends on its practitioners for cultural interpretation. Thus it is important to examine the various ways that football has been used as a tool of direct opposition to current values and cultural change by various social forces.

## Direct Opposition

There are strong class and social dimensions to football as a major sport. Football has been used as an equally powerful tool of direct confrontation between lower and upper classes, as it has been considered a sport of the lower classes (Messner 1992: 82). Cricket, meanwhile, was a more upper-class colonial pursuit. Riots and racial disturbance have been connected with football in the United Kingdom,<sup>14</sup> and during times of particular upheaval, the authorities in various countries have cancelled games in order to prevent large public gatherings, which plays witness to the power of football as a covert political sphere. Such curfews are presented as an attempt to curb violence and public disturbances that may result from large numbers of people gathering in the same place. The football game is their reason for gathering, and their collective complaints become clearer and more actionable in the public sphere (Chehabi 2002, Gerhardt 2002).

Babak Fozooni, in his article 'Iranian Women and Football', portrays women's resistance in the context of football as a class issue in which participants' physical actions are assertive against the prudish "mullah-bourgeoisie" (2007: 118) who are in control of state and legislative institutions. Fozooni discusses women's participation as both athletes and spectators as a carnival spectacle that emphasizes the extreme (and to some, erotic) bodily movements. This includes celebratory behaviours that may violate central Islamic laws such as the prohibition against alcohol. It also unites women in a common cause, playing "a pivotal role in the process of self-organization of working women and their fight against religious *and* secular forms of patriarchy" (2007: 118). Football is a public arena, and there-

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<sup>14</sup> C. Marsden, 'Race-related Riot Sparked by Football', *Asian News*, 4 November 2007, at [http://www.theasiannews.co.uk/news/526324\\_racerelated\\_riot\\_sparked\\_by\\_football](http://www.theasiannews.co.uk/news/526324_racerelated_riot_sparked_by_football) (accessed 4 March 2008).

fore a good staging ground for such self-organization and resistance.

The public arena of a football game has focused Iranian society on questions of women's visibility and presence in public, as women have mounted an organized campaign to be allowed into football games as spectators (see Afzali in this volume, Hoodfar 2012). Their demands to be allowed to simply participate in a leisure activity are inextricable from their contestation of their exclusion from public view; the slogans written on their white headscarves cannot be erased except by removing the scarves themselves, which goes against the compulsory hijab law in Iran (Afzali in this volume). Football is the point of entry that brings up larger questions of femininity, citizenship and access to the public sphere. Perhaps the reason the Iranian government has still not allowed women to be spectators is that the authorities understand that this concession to their innocuous demand may lead to other demands that go against the grain of their gender ideology.

For example, the Malaysian Sports Minister Azalina Othman Said advocates for more women and girls to participate in sports – without a headscarf. She holds a black belt in tae kwon do, has completed her training without a headscarf and appears in public without one. Although she merely states that women and girls should have unhindered access to sport, her statement puts her “against conservative Islam”.<sup>15</sup> Seen in this light, her views and advocacy for women's sport are not merely with the Muslim status quo in sport, but with an entire belief system dictating how women should dress and behave. Thus there is a much larger, perhaps under current challenge that women's sport presents to the conservative forces who

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<sup>15</sup> M. Bendeich, 'Muslim Sportswomen Need Not Cover Up', *Reuters*, 12 July 2007, at <http://politics101malaysia.blogspot.com/2007/07/12/muslim-sportswomen-need-not-cover-up/> (accessed 6 November 2007).

view gender roles as given and defined by religion for Muslim communities.

Martha Saavedra, in her article 'Football feminine – development of the African game: Senegal, Nigeria and South Africa' suggests that football's popularity and challenge to gender roles has brought sharper condemnation from Islamic authorities in Nigerian states with large Muslim populations (2003: 239). At least two states in northern Nigeria have barred women from football, with the northern Nigerian state governor saying that women playing is "not in conformity with our culture" (2003: 238). Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have also banned women's football, although now that they sent women to the London Olympics in 2012 they might revise their policies given that women already are playing the game. Just as in Iran, as with the authorities in Nigerian states and elsewhere, football appears to be the tip of the iceberg in these debates. The government is not prepared to accept cultural debates and changes that may follow if women are allowed to play. In the US, women's inclusion in elite-level sports has been associated, at least chronologically, with women leaving the home and working in ever greater numbers, with women holding greater positions of status and power and participating in previously male-only activities (Howel 1982).

There is another aspect of struggle when breaking with tradition that comes to play in some contexts when set against an international backdrop and the rhetoric of colonialism and nationalism. Tunisia once held the prestigious Africa Nations Cup, which made football even more popular in this particular country. Although many women were interested in football and some were playing it when Tunisia – with the blessing of the government – initiated its first formal women's football program in 2004, a new controversy broke out. What made the women's football program both interesting and controversial

was that the initiator of the program, a male university lecturer, Mohammed Moussbehi, “felt that Tunisia ought to keep pace with other ‘developed’ nations such as the United States and its former colonial ruler, France” and should “develop” given that there was a demand on the part of women.<sup>16</sup> In this context, football as a women’s game – and by extension the Tunisian female roles, rights, and body – becomes an explicit postcolonial arena representing the imperative for Tunisia to “catch up” with the West and prove its worth and capabilities. Simultaneously, regardless of its motives, this development opened opportunities to many women interested in football while it also caused some to reject the game as it represented the interest of the rulers rather than the women of the nation. Rejecting women’s – though not men’s – football was interpreted as symbolizing the country’s disavowal of the state and its appraisal of imperialist values rather than the nation’s interest. Given that the state invested so much more in male football, what logic makes the rejection of women’s football an anti-imperialist act while male football remains a national pre-occupation?

This idea of having to “catch up” to the West in terms of women’s rights, or else be seen as pre-modern and backwards, puts the US in focus as a global superpower. It takes the emphasis away from gender issues *per se* and places it instead on political issues of global superiority and inferiority. This attitude is not limited to football but spread to various fields of sports. When in 2007 I asked a male Azari spectator at the World Championships of Wrestling, held in Baku, Azerbaijan (where I was a contestant), how he felt about women playing sports, he said that it was inevitable that they demand to play,

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<sup>16</sup> S. Smith, ‘Tunisian women join ‘the beautiful game’, *CNN Online*, 19 December 2005, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/SPORT/football/12/19/tunisia.women/index.html> (accessed 6 November 2007).



because they have seen the Americans do it.<sup>17</sup> He did not exhibit any consciousness that the events that he was participating in were also organized based on a western model of sports. He added that he would be highly unlikely to go to a women's game as a spectator. His disgust came from a dual source: on the one hand, he rejected women's entry into a sphere in which he thought they did not belong, and on the other hand he rejected any cultural change that signified Western power. Indeed during this instance in 2007, the stadium first filled with fans waving, cheering and urging on the national male athletes, but when the women's tournament began, the stadium emptied. It did not matter to the fans that three Azari female wrestlers placed in the top ten in the world and qualified for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Taken without the layers of political meaning, this achievement put Azerbaijan ahead of, or on par with, the US and many other Western countries. Instead, global and gender tensions made it difficult or impossible for this achievement to be regarded by most Azaris as something to pay attention to, much less to celebrate. In the same way, other Muslim countries like Egypt and Tunisia had brought full women's teams to this event, but the teams were given little or no media coverage either by their national or host media outlets.

It is difficult for an outsider to find information about women's football, and other sports in Muslim countries, even though many of them have formal or informal leagues and national teams, and most of them have women's tournaments in some form or other.<sup>18</sup> Many of them exist in separate women-only spheres and are hidden from public view, or else are regarded

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<sup>17</sup> For more detail on this issue, see Askren (2010).

<sup>18</sup> It was something of a frustration in writing this paper that the internet, normally a good resource for sports information, carried little information that I knew of, either in Arabic or English, on many issues and debates on women's football in the Arab countries.

as political movements. At times women's sports are seen as an American/western intrusion that has no place in Muslim culture; without a trace of irony it can be said that football and indeed many other games that are played today in the Muslim context are also imports of the west and legacies of colonialism. As many of these games including football were only invented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a response to the need for social organization in industrialist societies, they are not in and of themselves "traditional institutions" of western cultures (Guttman 1995, Young 1973). Indeed many female athletes and proponents of women's sport have pointed out that the framework of anti-imperialism and nationalism are used by actors to legitimize discrimination against women and the lack of resources directed to women's sport.

By presenting three broad encounters between football and cultural and/or religious constructs, I have drawn attention to the interface between traditional or resurgent Islam and women who claim a gender-segregated sphere as their "right to play". Yet proponents of women's rights and gender equality view football as a site of explicit resistance and a point of entry that allows them to claim other, non-athletic, rights for women and further their demands to gender equality. Yet others view women's participation in football and sport as a modern necessity that women have already obtained in the west, placing "other" women behind or in a position of inferiority.

Each use has very specific and definite limitations that keep it separate from the other uses. Each use has different aims, making it difficult to posit a universal female athlete with universal desires and demands. Each is a portal from which Muslim women can enter the world of sport in one capacity or another, and each has achieved its own limited success. This is not to say they do not have successes as a group; part of the

success of all these strategies lies in the number of women who have discovered an intense affinity for a game that they didn't know they could play. Their successes also lie in the collaboration, organization and unity that women have achieved in pursuing their goals.

However, women athletes worldwide share one overwhelming problem: a lack of legitimacy. It was apparent in media interviews of the 1999 US soccer players – interviews which focused on the nude calendar – and it is apparent in Azerbaijan, with the apathy directed toward its world class wrestlers.<sup>19</sup> Everywhere, this lack of legitimacy translates into a lack of spectators, media coverage, and financial support. In Mangan's (2004) edited volume *Soccer, Women, Sexual Liberation*, almost every article states the lack of legitimacy as one of the major obstacles to women's freedom to play football.

The traditionalists lack legitimacy because they have positioned themselves as completely separate, which results in fewer resources and the perpetuation of the stereotype of women as physically weak and needing a separate sphere in order to be protected. In Iran, parts of Malaysia and other very religious environments, the mandate for complete segregation has insulated female players, referees and coaches from having to compete with men for positions or for power within that circle of women's sport. The prohibition on mixed spectatorship makes it impossible for these athletes to gain any media coverage or a significant fan base, and most travel and training opportunities are closed to them. This, in turn, prevents them from achieving a high level of skill and they do not do well in international competitions, when they can go: not one Arab

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<sup>19</sup> For detailed discussions of the public debates on the evolution of female football athletes and their ascendance to world championships, see Mangan and Fan Hong (2004), as well as the documentary *The World at Their Feet - The Legendary Story of the U.S. Women's Soccer Team* (2005). Associate producer Andrew Seigman. Marketed by Bombo Sports and Entertainment.

country qualified for the last World Cup in 2011.<sup>20</sup> Finally, they find themselves in a position of weakness vis-à-vis their male counterparts within their own country when requesting funds and sponsorship from public and private sources.

Women who position themselves as the outright opposition can perhaps negotiate more aggressively because they are already transgressing traditional boundaries. However, direct antagonism against, and challenges to, accepted cultural roles provoke resistance from the centers of power, as we have seen in the case of Iran's prohibition of women spectators at men's matches and in continuing opposition to women's football (see Afzali in this volume). Kuwaiti women still are not permitted to have a national football team, although universities often organize matches – which are always surrounded by controversy. In Saudi Arabia women are permitted even less, and many Saudi women who are interested in sport choose to leave for other countries such as Egypt rather than face such harsh opposition.

There is a wide spread tendency to regard women's participation in sport as a necessary criteria for advancement and to label any country that rejects such arbitrary criteria as “backward”. This creates political divisions and can lead to hostility towards women's sport, as I saw in Azerbaijan and what was witnessed in the case of Tunisia in 2004 as it was presented above. It is necessary for women in their local contexts to organize and develop their own strategies to promote women's sport, particularly in various competitive games. When women's sport is seen as a necessary evil brought in by intrusive global powers and values and their domestic proponents, it can still survive, but without the same legitimacy accorded to men's sport – most of which is also a colonial legacy – it will always be the weaker counterpart. Even in the supposedly

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on qualifying teams, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011\\_FIFA\\_Women's\\_World\\_Cup#Teams\\_and\\_qualification](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_FIFA_Women's_World_Cup#Teams_and_qualification)

more receptive US context, where women have managed to prove themselves in many sporting fields including soccer/football, there is a great deal of antagonism from male athletes when women demand equal access to resources, a right they won in the 1970s. Many American men still openly say that while they will tolerate women wanting to play the game, they tend not support them as spectators.

## **Conclusion**

Muslim women's football represents not a crossroads, but a branching and twisting set of paths that women's sport can take. Women all over the world are doing sports and fighting for the right to do more. The greatest question for women's football now is perhaps that which faces all of feminists and proponents of gender equality, one that some resist: how can women sport gain mainstream legitimacy – and what would be gained and lost through achieving it? Women can achieve different things in an all-women context in comparison to a mixed context; doing away with either one would limit their opportunities.

Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories have football teams. FIFA has a special section on its website devoted to women's football, and finally in June 2012 after years of haggling and making excuses, FIFA accepted that women can play football wearing a safe hijab. This opened the way for many women to compete while wearing hijab, either by their personal choice or the formal and informal rules of their nations. Clearly the sport has passed some important hurdles. However, all progress is reversible, as we have seen with the rise and fall of government support, along with public support represented by the media coverage, economic support and attendance of women's sport events by spectators. The

methods that women choose to challenge these restrictions will be determined by their assessment of the possibilities in their social and political contexts. Their strategies have been and will continue to emerge as the context and possibilities evolve. Rhetoric and perceptions of football, religion and gender are not static, but rather represent a constantly shifting and evolving field; particularly since in recent decades larger groups of women have taken an active role in negotiating these often restrictive spheres in words and action for themselves, against all odds but in many cases, with some success.

And finally the above accounts indicate that sport generally, and in this case football alone, does not have inherent meaning, nor does it have the force to overcome cultural and religious assumptions. When backed by the force of a social movement or religious truths, it can be a powerful agent in service of those forces. Thus how proponents of women's sport frame their demands and mobilize those forces has a major impact on the extent of their achievements.

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## Chapter 5

# Gaze Reversed: Iranian Women's Campaign to be Football Spectators<sup>1</sup>

Nasrin Afzali

Iranian women played a significant role in the protest movement against the Pahlavi regime (1925 - 1979) during the Iranian Revolution (1979) in the hopes that they would gain more freedom and dignity as equal citizens with the new regime. Both secular and religious leaders and ideologues, such as Ali Shariati (1933-1977), Morteza Motahhari (1920 -1979), and especially Ayatollah Khomeini (1902 -1989) who emerged as the undisputed leader of revolution, confirmed and reaffirmed these aspirations. However once in power, these same leaders announced that Iran would become an 'Islamic' society based on an archaic sharia legal system which treated women as

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<sup>1</sup> The data presented in this paper was collected between 2006-2009 as part of the multi-country research action project Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC), coordinated by Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) under the supervision of Professor Hoodfar (Concordia University, Montreal). I expanded this research during my Masters project; a first draft of this paper was presented at the conference 'The Role of Sport in Resisting, Accommodating and Remaking Muslim Women', 28 March 2008, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. I am indebted to Professor Hoodfar's extensive comments and subsequent discussion and suggestions for revision. I would also thank Hana Askern for her comments and suggestions on the first draft, Rima Athar for her skillful editing and Aisling Barratt for her support and patience.

worth only half as much as men (Hoodfar 1999, Paidar 1995). They made it clear that they sought to create a segregated society where women to be confined to the realm of private and family life, and do not participate in public life – which remains the realm of men. In effect, as many other researchers have argued, these ideologues set out to create a gender-apartheid society (Hoodfar & Sadeghi 2008, Moallem 2005), under the banner of ‘Islamization’.

The process of Islamization began even before the regime was formally established and a constitution formulated. Within the first two weeks of the new regime, Ayatollah Khomeini annulled the Family Protection Law, which had brought about a modest progressive reform for women’s position in the institution of marriage under the Shah (Paidar 1995). Khomeini also barred women from becoming judges in accordance with Shi’a tradition and their testimony was valued as half of that of a man. A restrictive Islamic dress code was introduced, though not without resistance.<sup>2</sup> Even areas normally considered outside the realm of politics and state interest, such as music and sport, were not left untouched. Sport and competitive games in particular were heralded as a western phenomenon, and sport for women was claimed to be contradictory to Islam. Whatever few sporting facilities existed were immediately segregated, as were beaches. In line with the expanding policy of gender-segregation, women were barred from even being spectators at male football matches, with the flimsy excuse that under Islam it was not permitted for women to see men who were not fully covered.

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<sup>2</sup> The announcement of compulsory hijab was made by Ayatollah Khomeini on March 7<sup>th</sup>, and the next day on March 8<sup>th</sup> – which was incidentally international women’s day – a spontaneous demonstration of 20,000 women poured into the streets rejecting the ruling (see:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxGYLk92edY&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxGYLk92edY&feature=player_embedded)).

This resulted in temporary withdrawal of the compulsory hijab law, but it was merely re-instated with gradual reforms over the following two years.

All such rules were enforced while the post-revolution state system was not yet formalized, and the many social and economic problems underlying the revolution were not addressed at all. As Hoodfar and Sadr have pointed out, “Clearly the regime was preoccupied with their gender ideology and were well aware that during the euphoria of revolution they could introduce laws that later might not be feasible. Ironically, as the regime was introducing these limitations, it insisted Islam is just and has given more rights to women than any other religion or secular system” (2011: 891). It was in this ideological context that women’s sport became a site of women’s activism, one which is important to grasp in developing a deeper understanding of the nature of public politics, especially gender politics, in Iran (Hoodfar in this volume). Part of this activism has been women’s attempts to re-open sport stadiums to women as spectators, and both their individual and collective strategies are explored in this chapter. I also provide an overview of public debates on the topic, as well as some of the wider implications that their struggles may have for the evolution of gender ideologies of both the state and various social strata of the Iranian public.

### **Sport, Nationalism and Civil Society**

The post-revolutionary state very quickly moved to control the public sphere to a much larger extent than the Pahlavi regime had ever managed. The long and devastating Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) provided the new regime with a legitimate pretext to stifle public dissent and limit the freedom of expression with much less opposition, since the nation was pre-occupied with war efforts and basic security. Demonstrations, street carnivals and public celebrations in the streets were not allowed, except for religious rituals that were strongly controlled by the regime. Freedom Stadium, the largest sport/football stadium in

the country, was adopted as a venue for state propaganda and manipulation of public opinion (Hoodfar 2012, Gerhardt 2002). However football continued to be a national passion in Iran despite the disapproval of many regime ideologues, and the stadiums continued to be a contested space subject to claim by the general public (Chehabi 2006, 2002, 2001). In the post war years the regime reluctantly had to accommodate this public claim to football games held in public stadiums, despite the wariness that such a gathering could be used by the opposition to destabilize the Islamic state.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the possible political threat, the ideologues of the regime were also pre-occupied with the mixing of the sexes in public space, which to them was contradictory to their Islamic gender norms. As well, many of the more conservative ideologues who viewed women as inherently belonging to the domestic sphere had difficulty even fathoming the possibility of women wanting to be football spectators. Together these perspectives largely give shape to the authorities' insistence on banning women from attending football stadiums. Ironically this dogmatic insistence also provided an arena for the general public to contest the regime's gender ideology and heavy handedness when it comes to control of public space. For instance, during the Asian Volleyball Championship (September 1999), some 1,000 women stormed the sports hall hosting the event and occupied nearly one fifth of the spectator seats. They entered into an intricate dialogue of singing and chanting with the male spectators. They also began to chant for their favorite player, "We love you" (Gerhardt 2002). Such verbal interactions – or 'flirting' between men and women, as conser-

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<sup>3</sup> During one game, when members of the Islamic Propaganda Unit tried to get spectators to chant Islamic slogans (i.e. "Allaho Akabr, God is Great") at the beginning of the match, spectators had made fun of them (Gerhardt 2002). Stadiums are not like schools or garrisons in which students or soldiers have to obey the orders or else be punished. Thus the authorities have to tread their control very carefully.

vatives framed it – is forbidden under the regime’s rigid vision of Islam. Any expression of interest and attachment outside of immediate family bonds is construed as a sin, even if it is innocently expressed for a favorite player. Many religio–political authorities continue to consider such a ‘sinful’ act a punishable crime. Given the popularity of football with the public, many conservative religious authorities have been concerned that the presence of a large crowd of women attending the stadium to watch men’s football would lead to ‘social disorder’ and ‘immorality’. More clearly significant however is the potential political danger of such huge public gatherings to contest the state’s ideology and legal boundaries. Tehran’s Freedom Stadium, with its 100,000 person capacity, remains the most important sport complex and the largest public space in Iran in which high profile games take place. In the words of Christian Bromberger “the stadium, ... the stadium is a space of fear for the authorities, in particular those imbued with a puritan ethic” (1998, cited by Gerhardt 2002: 46).

Nonetheless, as with the Asian Volleyball Championships, the public has been able on occasion to break these tight controls. Another instance occurred in 1997, when the Iranian football team won the Asian Games and thereby qualified to compete in international football matches. Iranians used the occasion to pour into the streets in the hundreds and thousands and in the course of celebrations they broke the gender segregation rules as well as compulsory hijab; many women took off their scarves and waved them in the air as an expression of joy and danced with other women and men. These spontaneous public celebrations were repeated on a number of occasions, varying in scale, and such images were caught and published the day after on the internet and broadcast on foreign TV channels. Of course this worried the authorities; the celebrations added to football’s national popularity as the public recognized and assessed its potential as a political opportunity to take the op-

pressive state to task. On the other hand after 1997, football games have become the most widely acknowledged vehicle for renewing national identity and a sense of belonging, whether they were in the stadium or watching the game on TV.

Although the government tries to control the movement and actions of people in public space, at least in greater Tehran with a population of more than 12 million, it is quite impossible to enforce rules on everyone. Thus in a space such as a stadium, which can be closely monitored – and which remains a desired public space – the regime expends extra energy to enforce its ideology of control. Surely many mullahs and authorities fear that if women enter stadiums they will disobey the hijab rule in the same way as they have on the streets, and with the many cameras screening live games, this would amount to an unacceptable flouting of one of the regime's primary rules.

Yet even beyond the stadium walls, the regime repeatedly demonstrated a concern about 'non-Islamic' behavior and mingling between women and men in the context of football. In 2006, the Tehran municipality decided to screen football matches on big LCD televisions in public places, but soon after they abruptly cancelled the planned screenings, with no explanation. In 2010 there was a new initiative to screen some of the South Africa Football World Cup games in cinemas – which both men and women can attend – again these screenings were cancelled, under the pretext of preventing 'non-Islamic' behaviors. After intense negotiation it was agreed that only men could attend such screenings, although cinemas are not segregated when they show films. Clearly, above other sports and social activities, it is football that has raised the ire of the regime's ideologues – but to what end? What do the ideologues of the regime see in football that they go to such lengths to stop women from publicly participating as spectators?

This question became a prominent concern of many women particularly during the early 2000s, with football having established itself as something of a symbol of Iranian nationalism. As Chaney says, sport “is an activity for spectators” (1978:61, cited by Gerhardt 2002: 36). Women could see clearly that thousands of dollars are spent on sport facilities and training national teams, yet they were being denied the right to use these facilities or even enjoy watching the games and cheering on their favorite teams. What angered many women even beyond being banned from stadiums was their obliteration from the photographs and television and other Iranian mass media reports of football victory celebrations scenes that had taken place in public streets, as if women are not part of the “people”.

Not all women who objected to their exclusion from the stadium were necessarily interested in football or other sport games. Many women that felt their exclusion from such national events was a denial of their citizenship rights and a clear message that women have no right to participate in public events or in the public sphere. The restrictions on sport were also seen in the context of restrictions women experienced in the labour market and in certain academic fields that were proclaimed “masculine”. As well, even within the family and private sphere women had lost many of the rights they enjoyed before the establishment of Islamic Republic. Thus women sought ways of resisting their exclusion from broader public life.

Given the extreme oppression and lack of democracy in Iran, women could not organize collective actions to demand their rights without paying a very high price. As Hoodfar (2012) has argued, the politicization of a sphere such as sport that hitherto was not considered political, was one of the strategies that made the contestation of the state ideology a politically



less-costly possibility. Thus whenever there was an important football game and tens of thousands of men were pouring into the stadium, women could safely demand to be present as spectators and symbolically take their seats among the nation.

### **Women's Strategies to Resist Their Exclusion**

What is clear about Iran is that the state has little problem with women's presence in public space when it is in support of the regime; indeed regime forces have gone through considerable efforts to encourage and mobilize women to participate in public pro-regime demonstrations and campaigns (Hoodfar & Sadr 2011, Paidar1995). Thus as many citizens pointed out, to ban women from being sport spectators in the name of 'Islamic morality' is a flimsy and baseless excuse. The real issues lie in the regime's desire to control the public. Women proved to be active political agents who could galvanize oppositional forces against a regime during the 1979 revolution; thus controlling such a force is an important focal point for the regime. Women continue to resist this control in various ways. Many women initially turned to writing and involving the public and religious leaders in open debates in an attempt to find ways of opening stadiums to women. While these debates went a long way to mobilize many more segments of the public to support women's struggle, it did not result in removing the ban. It was in this context that women adopted different strategies.

**Individual Strategies:** Observing the regime's illogical position, some women attempted to enter the stadium by disguising themselves as men and wearing male clothes. They did this with or without support of their families. Many were arrested, but since no punishment existed for this exact crime, they were let free. However, to make it difficult for particularly

younger women or those from more conventional backgrounds, the authorities would involve the families before letting them free.

The significance of these strategies was not simply their being able to enter the stadiums, but rather the telling of the story of their adventures. These stories could be published in newspapers and blogs that would be read by hundreds or thousands of others, hopefully encouraging them to do the same. Simultaneously, these stories made absolutely clear the senseless exclusion of women as spectators of games that were televised and watched by millions of women across the nation. By becoming the subject of media articles and jokes, individual women helped create a public discourse through which many men and women, regardless of how they felt about football, became supporters of opening stadiums to women.

**Collective Strategies:** Women also engaged in several collective strategies; the best known are the campaigns by the White Scarf Women and the petitioning of international organizations such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) for their cause.

**a) The White Scarf Women** is a name given to a group of women who initially planned to try to break into the stadium collectively. The organizers hoped that this strategy would attract and mobilize many younger women, who could help spread the story on diverse media platforms. Gradually this group became a collective who developed various strategies to mobilize women particularly younger ones, to demand their rights as equal citizens. As a symbol of unity as well as their peaceful objection, the women protestors adopted white

scarves and were nicknamed “The White Scarf Women” by the media; a name that they subsequently they adopted for themselves. Their first attempt to break into the stadium was for a very high profile game between Iran and Bahrain (2005), the result of which would decide if Iran would go to Germany for the World Cup of 2006. Taking place one week before the 2005 presidential election, the game presented a solid opportunity to raise the demand with very little cost to the participants, since the regime tended to be much more tolerant of citizens actions during the few weeks of election campaigning. Thus an open letter signed by some 200 well-known activists was sent to the state authorities, demanding that the police forces provide security for the White Scarf Women entering the stadium.<sup>4</sup> Despite some clashes and an injury to one of the more well-known participants, many of the women succeeded in entering the stadium.

Unfortunately the success was short lived, and women have not been able to enter since. Nonetheless protests continue. The fact that the sport complex is called ‘Freedom Stadium’ provides an ideal venue for the women’s campaign, who are demanding their share of freedom. The word was used in a variety of ways on various placards in subsequent protest gatherings outside the stadium, creating engaging snapshots of their struggle for inclusion. For example, one slogan read “How many steps before Freedom?”, referring to the distance between the protestors and the stadium entrance. Other slogans included: “My share, women share half of the Freedom” (referring to half the seats of the stadium, but also reminding the public of how the regime legally values and treats women with

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<sup>4</sup> N. Afzali, 2008/09/12), Meydan-e- Zanan website, “Iranian Women’s Campaign to be Football Spectators”, *Meydaan*, 12 September 2008, at <http://meydaan.net/english/showarticle.aspx?arid=662> (accessed 29 November 2011).

half the worth of men); "Freedom is my right, Iran is my home"; and "We are here to demand our half of the stadium".

In this way women's rights activists reiterated their demands for larger social, economic and political freedoms in Iran. Such a direct articulation in a protest beyond the sport complex would likely result in arrest and possible charge of "action against state security", which normally carries serious punishment. However meting out a similar punishment around the demand to access the stadium would appear as excessive and would damage the credibility of the regime even among many forces that support the regime.

Soon enough the police had made a habit of confiscating and tearing up the protestors' placards, which forced them to come up with another quite brilliant strategy. They decided to write their slogans on their white scarves. Thus if the police removed the scarves, they would have intentionally violated compulsory hijab and the regime's mandated dress code. As the women were not allowed to remove their scarves, everyone passing by could read the slogans. On another occasion, the group also brought a portable TV and gathered a large audience outside the stadium to watch the game; the men entering the stadium watched them in amazement and curiosity. Some men engaged in conversation to find out more about their demands, and others encouraged them to insist for their right to be spectators. The police were already frustrated as they could not pull off the women's scarves, and the large crowd gathering around them showed no signs of abating, so they threatened to collectively arrest them and forced women to leave. Still, the success was palpable. The story appeared in more blogs and print media than previous actions, and attracted even more attention to the cause.



Source: <http://www.iran-resist.org/article4348.html>

**b) The Launching of the Petition and Engaging International Organizations** was another rather significant strategy which also indicated women's understanding of global influences on the national politics. While the campaign gained increasing momentum amongst the general public, it appeared that the key state authorities remained oblivious, or were simply ignoring their demands. Both campaigners and the state authorities knew well that the issue at hand was far more significant than having a couple thousand women go to the stadium to watch the game. It was the presence of women in that very public space that was at stake. The future of segregated society would, in the regime's view, be at risk if they allowed women to enter the stadium. At this stage, women who wanted to keep the momentum decided to reach out to the international public sphere by launching a petition articulating their demands and involving the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). They knew that in the current era, states cannot easily ignore powerful global actors.

Their research indicated that the constitution of both of these organizations technically denounces discrimination, and FIFA members are obliged to apply this law in all competitions and any disobedience may cause suspension or expulsion.<sup>5</sup> They wrote a petition<sup>6</sup> demanding that the discrimination against women in Iran be stopped, or else Iran's membership in both of these organizations should be suspended according to the principles of their constitution. Within a short few days more than 100,000 men and women signed the petition, increasing to a total of 152,000 at the time the petition was forwarded to FIFA and AFC. Given the popularity of football in Iran, the suspension or even threat of it would have considerable implications for the regime inside and outside the country. Authorities of physical education even took a more active role in seeking a solution for the "women problem", in an effort to pre-empt any fines or sanctions that FIFA and AFC might impose on Iran. Given that there are minimum rules and standards to prevent discrimination on the basis of ethnic, race or gender for those countries who wish to be part of the Asian League and National Asian Cup, the campaign succeeded in convincing the AFC committee that the ban on women entering Iranian sport stadiums constituted gender-discrimination in sport. The committee asked the Iranian National Football Federation to solve this problem in a timely fashion, to prevent further possible consequences.

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<sup>5</sup> As a campaigner noted in their letter to Mohammed Bin Hamm the president of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and Joseph S. Blatter, President of FIFA, "according to article 3 of the FIFA statutes, 'discrimination of any kind against a private person or groups of people on account of gender is strictly prohibited'. FIFA members are obliged to apply this law in all competitions and any disobedience may cause suspension or expulsion". Also according to Article 6 of FIFA's Codes of Ethics, 'Officials, players and players' agents may not act in a discriminatory manner, especially with regard to ethnicity, race, culture, politics, religion, gender or language.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.petitiononline.com/petitions/AZAD2006/signatures> (accessed 15 November 2011).

Concerned about the consequences of possible suspension from the game, the Iranian authorities began an intense lobbying campaign with both FIFA and AFC behind the scenes. They argued that the question of women's access to stadiums is a 'cultural' matter and that the regime needed more time to find an appropriate way to solve the issue. Once the threat of sanction was removed, the regime of course did little to deal with the matter.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, by launching the public petition and publicizing the news of negotiations, the Open Stadiums campaign succeeded in provoking unprecedented national public debates that questioned the logic of the ban. Thanks to these campaigners' initiatives, what was for a long while treated as a non-issue by the authorities, many members of the public and even some feminists, the ban now became a prominent public concern.

### **State and Public Dialogues on the Ban**

Publicly, the Islamic regime has argued that excluding women from public life is a way of "restoring women's dignity"; the regime touts that women's natural place is in the private sphere. They claim that 'modernization' and the improper mingling of the sexes results in social disorder, and must be contained. To justify excluding women from sport stadiums, they offer up a series of weak and often absurd excuses, that women continue to challenge. For example, they claimed that in such a male-dominated atmosphere men tend to be rowdy and use improper language, unsuitable for women's eyes and ears. Yet at the same time the regime has done little to prevent the constant physical and sexual harassment that women face

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<sup>7</sup> It was said that Mohammed Bin Hamam, the president of time of AFC from Qatar who had two wives, supported Iran in this matter, otherwise Iran should be sanctioned.

daily on the street. Religious leaders argued that the mixing of men and women “is religiously forbidden” (*haram*). In response, women pointed out that women can go to the cinema or the circus, ride public buses, and access many other public places where men are present. They ask what makes the stadium so different, that women cannot even go along with their male family members? They offer another solution; the authorities can allocate a special section for women to sit, separated from men.

Conservative religious leaders then raised the issue that women looking at naked men’s bodies is prohibited, as it can be a source of sexual pleasure.<sup>8</sup> Women and other members of the public responded that firstly the same games are being televised and it is no secret that women watch the games at home. Secondly they pointed out the absurdly obvious point that men are not naked during football, but rather are dressed in sport gear, with shorts usually to their knees. Some women activists to support their counter-argument, examined the Islamic rule of male dress codes, and yet others went as far as obtaining religious rulings (*fatwas*) from religious leaders to show that footballers’ clothes adhere to Islamic requirements. With the goal of breaking this impasse, other religious leaders who supported women’s participation in stadiums argued that spectators’ seats are far enough that this would prevent any sexualization of the players, and that women cannot see much more than the players’ jersey numbers and the color of their clothes.

Women also used the opportunity to point out the irony of compulsory hijab for women. They highlighted that the regime’s

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<sup>8</sup> A fatwa by Khomeini in 1988 supported the broadcasting of sport under condition that it was ‘not watched with lust’. One consequence of the fatwa was that sport became the central focus of entertainment, which consequently increased its significance (Chehabi 2006, Gerhardt 2002).



most important reason for making hijab compulsory is to prevent men from getting sexually excited by looking at women. Therefore, using the same logic, the answer to the stadium problem would be forcing men to play in long pants so as to prevent women from indulging in sexual fantasies while watching football!

Developing these counter arguments continues to be a way of publicly ridiculing the regime leaders who attempt to impose a completely faulty and contradictory logic and sensibility to restrict women's rights in Iran today. These rather unconventional public dialogues and popular satires have increasingly damaged the credibility of the regime and religious authorities. Thus some of the more shrewd political authorities have felt it is time to put an end to this story by removing the ban. Yet few had enough conviction to stand up to the powerful conservative religious leaders in the country.

### **A New Phase: Freedom Stadium Almost Within Reach**

In a surprise announcement, after winning the 2005 elections, president Ahmadinejad proclaimed that women could go to the stadium as spectators; a section of seats would be allocated for their use. He had hoped to secure political mileage in this way, both by saving football from international sanctions and also gaining more support from women and the middle classes whom he had ignored during his election. This presidential decree generated intense debates among different political and religious factions of the regime. Conservative forces were so displeased and political tensions so high that the Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, made a rare direct intervention to remove the ban until further notice. Still, Ahmadinejad's move in the politically repressive context of Iran was a significant success for the Open Stadiums

campaign that forced even the highest authority in the country to publicly engage with the issue – raising even more public awareness about objections to policies which excluded women.

**Offside:** The concern around the ban had become so public that it found its way to Iranian cinema, an arena which has remained the most significant source of social and political criticism in the Iranian context (Tapper 2006, Dabashi 2006). Jafar Panahi, one of the most renowned Iranian directors produced the film *Offside* (2006) – a bitter comedy telling the story of a number of young women who had dressed as men in order to watch a football game in Freedom Stadium. Although the director had obtained all necessary permissions for shooting the movie, the government nevertheless banned it from being screened once it was completed. While the lack of public screening meant that the film could not be nominated for the Oscars, despite the high hope that many had expressed, it became an underground ‘must-see’ film.<sup>9</sup> With Iran’s very lively underground movie distribution network, most Iranians viewed the film. Many reckon that it is probably the most viewed movie in post revolutionary Iran. In the international art scenes it was also highly praised, receiving glowing reviews at international festivals and even winning the prestigious Silver Bear prize at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival. Jafar Panahi dedicated his prize to the White Scarf Women for their continued efforts to end to the ban and claim their rightful place in Freedom Stadium as citizens.

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<sup>9</sup> In order for a film to be nominated for an Oscar, it has to be shown at least once in the home country.

## **Assessing the Campaign and its Impacts**

The Open Stadiums campaign managed to transform the issue of the exclusion of women as spectators from a concern of a relatively small number of younger women in Tehran to a widespread national political issue, taken up by both women and men. At first many people, including activists, were critical of the campaign because they believed that women were facing so many more pressing problems in Iran, such as family law, unemployment, and sexual harassment. These early critics however had missed the central concern of the campaign, which has little to do with “watching football”. Rather it is about claiming women’s place in the most visible public space in the country. It is also a way of forcing the regime to test the arguments behind its gender ideology in the court of public opinion (Hoodfar 2012). One might argue that the campaign’s importance stems from its ability to politicize young Iranian women, and to raise awareness of an issue that is dismissed and viewed as non-political. It is precisely the apparent “non-political” nature of the protest that has lent a hand to mobilizing many people who previously may not have wanted to enter into contestation given the repressive political sphere and possible consequences for their safety and freedom.

In many ways the campaign is similar in nature to the protests against the prohibition of driving for women in Saudi Arabia. Such a law is a very evident and tangible symbol of discrimination and exclusion of women from public and social life; fighting against it means fighting against all other discrimination and exclusion of women (Shaheed in this volume, Hoodfar & Ghoreishian 2012). As Hoodfar emphasizes in this volume, sport has emerged as “an important arena where women of all ages, classes, religious and political backgrounds challenge the regime’s gender ideology and reiterate their claim to public space” – a challenge which has cost the regime its legitimacy.

Apart from creative public protests, the campaign helped raise public awareness partly by commissioning three major research projects in order to assess public opinion on issue of women's access to the stadium; the increased public discourse was probably the basis for Ahmadinejad's unsuccessful attempt to repeal the ban. The "non-political" nature of this campaign has also encouraged contestation between political factions, thus forcing the regime to be somewhat more transparent. They can no longer roll out policies and claim 'unanimous agreement', which opens the way for more lobbying and negotiations by women's rights activists.

Another significant strategy of the campaign lies in exposing the hypocrisy of the government's excuses, one after the other. This includes highlighting the minimal resources the government would need to fulfill the demand to let women access existing stadiums, in contrast to the resources needed to fulfill women's demand for jobs or increased sport facilities, etc. These latter demands the government continues to refuse, due to 'lack of resources'. Thus the regime's resistance to deliver the women's demands makes the regime's real intentions to exclude women from public life and public spaces bare and naked to the public eye.

It is important to highlight as well how existing struggles over family law, marriage and divorce rights, etc., have not yet galvanized the same numbers of younger women followers. Today the White Scarves Women appeal to many teenage girls, who have grown up in a different era and learned to reject oppressive rules and argue for their equality with their male counterparts from a young age. "Gender equality, much like democracy, is a process that has to be learned and claimed, and as such the campaign has contributed much to the creation of an inclusive democratic culture in Iran".<sup>10</sup> The campaign

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Homa Hoodfar, Montreal 2010.

has brought to focus issues of women's citizenship rights, women's right to access public space, the government's unequal treatment of women, and dress code regulations, to be discussed in a seemingly apolitical framework, making resistance less costly for advocates in the extremely politically repressive context of Iran.

### **To Sum-up**

Despite the Iranian regime's disapproval of 'modern games', football has emerged as a national passion. The games are televised across the country, and draw hundreds of thousands of viewers and spectators to the stadiums. However despite much objection, women have been denied the right to enter football stadiums and be spectators. Their exclusion has been justified in the name of Islam, in order to 'prevent sexual immorality' and to 'protect women's dignity'. Yet women view their exclusion in this context as symptomatic of their exclusion from broader Iranian public space and public life, and thus a denial of their citizenry rights.

The detailed discussion here clearly indicates that football and public space has become a major venue of contestation between the public and the regime. Every win is a national excuse for the population to pour into streets in celebration, disregarding state imposed rules on street gatherings and demonstrations. Women of all ages, especially young ones, join in these carnival-like celebrations in their tens of thousands and, in the process of expressing their joy, they symbolically break the strict gender segregation prescribed by the regime.

Women have engaged in various forms of resistance to the ban, including launching a lively public dialogue with the authorities and religious leaders. Women have countered their flimsy religious 'justifications' for the ban and have taken them

to task in such ways that has caused major splits between various powerful ideologues. Yet these public dialogues failed to force the regime to remove the restriction, and women thus initiated the Open Stadiums campaign and adopted various strategies including launching a petition signed by over 100,000 people demanding FIFA and the Asian Games suspend Iran if it continues to discriminate against women. They pointed out that both organizations' constitutions prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity or gender by member countries. Campaigners were well aware that in today's global world the Iranian regime could not afford to disregard transnational forces. Although the ban continues to be in place, the campaign brought much pressure on the regime and transformed the issue that was often presented by the authorities and some male public figures from a concern of "a few women" to a broadly discussed politicized matter about gender relations and access to public spaces, rather than the 'right to be spectators' in football matches. Indeed the issue of women's access to public space that includes sport venues has evolved to be a very politicized issue in many Muslim societies.

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## Chapter 6

# Claiming Public Space: Women's Sports in Bangladesh

Anannya Shila Shamsuddin

### **Sport and the Quest for Gender Equality**

Women have learned through centuries of being excluded in varieties of ways from public life that visibility is pivotal to the realization of gender equality and fulfillment of the democratic society that all citizens of Bangladesh were promised after long years of bitter anti-colonial struggles.<sup>1</sup> In the past, women focused on getting access to the parliament and the higher levels of decision-making positions to fulfill their dream of equality. There has been some success; indeed women have occupied the highest position of the country, Prime Minister. However, not much has changed in the lives of ordinary women, who have little clout to master influence in directing resources to

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am referring to anti-colonial struggles against the British, which resulted in establishment of East (presently Bangladesh) and West Pakistan in 1947. Being excluded from corridors of power and decision-making processes in favour of West Pakistan, Bangladesh nationalists voted for independence from West Pakistan. After a rather bloody national liberation movement that resulted in rapes of thousands of women by Pakistan military personnel and their supporters, they established their independence in 1971 (see Zaheer 1994, Salik 1977).

improve women's conditions and reformulate unfavorable gender relations and gender ideologies. In this context, women have initiated their own strategies to improve women's lots in life. While some have focused on improving women's economic opportunities, others have focused on women's rights to public spaces and increased visibility. It is in this socio-political context that women's sport has emerged as a major avenue of discourse. Not only does sport have an inherent value but it is also viewed as a versatile tool to break away from exclusionary traditions and practices towards women. In recent years, the United Nations' (UN) re-evaluation of sport as a tool of development and empowerment has made women's sport more prominent as a development strategy (Cornelissen 2011, Darnell & Black 2011, Hayhurst 2011, Harcourt 2009). On the other hand, the various Islamist groups that have in recent years gained much more prominence in Bangladesh have to the detriment of the country and women in particular, thrown their weight and used their influence to prevent women's access to public spaces. In this paper I briefly review the context, measures, and strategies that women have adopted in order to make women's sport accessible to a wide range of young women who can through their everyday actions and participation in sport change the existing gender role equation in favor of women and girls and open the way for others to do so.

## **Gender Relations and Public Space**

The socially constructed gender roles and relations between women and men in a particular community or society is probably the most significant variable that determines the degree of inequalities that exist between them. These degrees of inequality are reflected, among other things, in the use of and access to space and often to the disadvantage of women and girls. The word 'space' is generally used in the sense of place,

location, area, time and freedom to think, to do, to operate, to play sports and games in groups or alone, or just be oneself. To claim space as a woman is to have free access to public space, open or covered, and be accepted by society as having the right to such access as a matter of course and not as a special privilege. This is true for women as sport performers as well as women as spectators. Women and girls using public space for sports and games also have a symbolic value re-presenting flexibility, openness, “tolerance” and democratization of public space, which in most societies is assumed to be primarily a male space. Such an assumption is even stronger in many Muslim contexts, including Bangladesh. Ideally, space for sports for women should mean equitable distribution of opportunities, resources and incentives to learn, practice and participate in sports and games both indoors and outdoors, before spectators, singly or in a team, for financial gain or simply for health and enjoyment. However, the reality is far from ideal.

Women and girls in Bangladesh are expected to access public space only under certain conditions which include being accompanied by responsible male or female guardians or family members and using a specific time of the day. However, despite this ideological assumption, in practice the degree to which women’s use of public space is taken as normal is the degree to which women have established claim to the public space by engaging in it frequently and reaffirming a kind of practical normalcy; for instance, women participating as vendors in local markets or many working as factory workers (Phadke, Ranade & Khan 2009). Women in Bangladesh have been trying to push the boundaries and increase their access to public spaces through multiple strategies, and various fields of sport have offered them a legitimate venue to establish their public presence nationally and beyond. Proponents of gender equality regard women’s sports not only as an element of culture or entertainment, but also a demonstration and promo-

tion of women's physical and psychological health and strength from an early age, which can be an effective means for women's empowerment leading to gradual eradication of social and legal gender discriminations. UN development agencies have also recently identified sport as a major venue to address social progress (Darnell & Black 2011), as sport becomes a means of building the citizen's confidence as well as their health from an early age and helping them to expand their network and negotiate their way in public spaces and public life. This would go a long way to enable them to demand their rightful place in society and family institutions.

In this paper I will examine the various strategies that Bangladeshi women have adopted to enter the field of sport and in the process establish claim to the public space. Given that in Bangladesh public resources are limited and the government simply does not have adequate provisions in the budget for sport, women's sport has faced trying circumstances. I provide a brief overview of various strategies women have adopted to overcome these shortcomings in the diverse field of sports.

### **History of Women's Sports in Bangladesh**

The history of women's sports in Bangladesh is not a long one. Initially only a few women with a strong passion for sports contributed to the sports sector and spearheaded the expansion of the field for women in general. The reasons for this lack of attention to women's sport are thought to be family tradition, a generally conservative socio-religious climate, women's economic dependency, a life style fashioned out of neglected basic rights and insecurity associated with a long discriminatory attitude at the government level, where limited resources went to support male sport. Such discriminatory attitudes would reach from playing grounds to sports teaching institutes. Even at the

top administrative level, the history of negligence and discrimination against women's sport is long. Thus improvement of women's sport was primarily left to individual dedicated female citizens who appreciated the significant social, political and health value of sport for women. The advancement of women's sport in Bangladesh owes much to these leaders and advocates of women's sport. Their uninterrupted dedication, bravery and perseverance have earned them several international awards. Lutfunnessa Haque Bakul (1941-2011), known as Bakul *Apa* (a respectful term for elder sister) in Bangladesh's sports circle, is one such legendary figure. During the mid-1950s she twice won a gold medal in the 80-metre hurdle, in the 1956 and 1958 National Olympic Games, held in Lahore and Peshawar respectively. Determined to improve women's access to sport, she turned her attention to establishing the infrastructure for women's sport and establishing the Bangladesh Mohila Krira Sangstha (BMKS) organization, with exclusive sports complexes for women.<sup>2</sup> She was the founding general secretary of Bangladesh Women Sports Federation, a member of Bangladesh Olympic Association and Bangladesh Athletics Federation. Her efforts were nationally recognized and she received the National Sports Award in 1978.

Despite such recognition and paying lip service to the importance of women's sport, the government policy of promoting women's sport has remained extremely limited and controversial as many people in decision making positions feel women's sport is a luxury that Bangladesh can not afford. Ironically, such an argument is rarely ever used for men's sport. In recent years however, in part due to the UN's recognition of sport as a tool of development and building citizenry skills, interna-

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<sup>2</sup> For more details and the history of this organization see <http://www.eicra.info/bmks/>. For information on their national activities, see 'Get Sporty' by Tehreen Islam, available at <http://newagebd.com/supliment.php?sid=130&id=952> (accessed 27 September 2012).

tional agencies who provide substantial budgets for development programs in Bangladesh have been paying more attention to the issue. This is helping to create a more supportive atmosphere for establishing the promotion of women's sport as a means of development (Darnell & Black 2011, Harcourt 2009).

Of course proponents of women's rights and women's sport are very aware that development can be defined in very different ways, including the simplistic calculation of gross national product (GNP). They are, however, interested in a more holistic definition of development, including being free from social, economical and political discrimination – a condition under which gender justice is an integral part of the development policies promoted by government. They have identified that promoting access to public spaces for large numbers of women and normalizing women's presence would be an effective channel through which women can feel empowered to develop their own strategies and promote both their individual and community's interests in various domains of their lives (WEMC 2008). They are aware that women's access to sport facilities should not automatically be considered as access to public space and ultimately the public sphere.

To follow some of the controversies regarding women's sport and their access to public spaces it is imperative that we define what is meant by "public space". A public space may be a social place, a town square, or a park or open space – a space that is not roofed or walled-off, generally open and accessible without any fee or charge. However, sports grounds and stadiums owned and operated by public/government bodies are often restricted to all but ticket holders. On the other hand, privately owned malls and other shopping centers are open to the public during business hours. Most sports and games spaces, both public and private, are restricted in terms of access. In these

circumstances the term public and private basically refer to the mode of ownership rather than mode of access. Therefore, claiming space for women would in this context mean claiming equal access for both female and male under equal conditions and not to be discriminated against because of gender. What is of more practical importance is the access to performance in front of general or mixed spectators.

It is this aspect, performance in front of general spectators, that has proven a more controversial issue. With the rise of political Islamists, Bangladesh society, like many other Muslim countries, has moved more toward conservatism justified by religion and more restricted gender roles and gender segregation. Interestingly, political Islamists have not convinced the public that women's sport is a tool of imperialism, in part because Bangladesh, like the rest of the Indian sub-continent, has developed an extreme passion for cricket (a colonial game imported by the British). Instead they insist that women's sport should take place in segregated spaces with women spectators only, so that the game remains 'Islamic'. This of course counters the goals of proponents of women's sport, who seek to increase women's access to public space beyond the sports field itself.

**Gender Segregated Public Space:** When sport attracted attention as a venue of claiming public space and gender equality, its adversaries advocated designated public spaces for girls and women only. They promoted the idea of sports complexes for women and playing grounds inside girls/ women's educational and sports institutions that are walled-off. The players/participants are all women. Creating such a gendered apartheid public space does little to promote gender equality; it merely results in the creation of a hierarchal public space where women remain apart from the primary public domains.

Furthermore, given that sport resources are very limited, such segregation in practice means even less funds will be available for women's sport, particularly since none of the developing countries have a legislation resembling Title IX in the US, which requires that an equal amount of resources be invested in sports for boys and girls.<sup>3</sup> In any case as we discuss below, two women-only sports complexes were developed, albeit with a very inefficient and uneconomical use of limited resources. Those in favour have argued that such segregation will allow women to engage in sport without being objectified, while still expanding the opportunities for women to engage in sport. On the other hand, opposing views have argued that such segregation in itself is an extreme form of sexualization and objectification of women's bodies. Studies of segregated societies indicate that segregation is usually a means of exclusion. For example in Iran, it is precisely this point that has turned sport into a major field of contestation between women and the government since the 1990s; the government has limited women's sport to single-sex arenas, and even placed a ban on women's access to football stadiums as spectators (see Afzali and Hoodfar in this volume).

While promoting single-sex teams has emerged as the most common form of sport internationally, spectators at sporting events are generally allowed to be mixed. In the context of Bangladesh sports and games, places that are open to men are generally also open to women as spectators; the opposite is not necessarily true. Sports and games, both indoors and out-

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<sup>3</sup> American women's movements in the 1960s focused on gender equality and lobbied against various forms of discrimination and inadequate resources for women. One of the fields that received much attention was the treatment of women in sport where only meager resources were allocated. After long public debates and persistent government lobbying, the Education Amendments of 1972 were introduced. The most significant of these was referred to as Title IX, which ensured equal access for both girls and boys in educational institutions to training, resources, but most of all opportunity in sport (see Brake 2010, Blumenthal 2005, Gavora 2003, Howell 1982: 258-261).



doors, require infrastructure and financial support. Where infrastructures and facilities are common, a single financing may suffice. Viewing women's sports complexes and women's/girls' institutions as the exception, most infrastructure and resources are built for women and men, both as performers and spectators. To ensure equity of use and in planning, women's participation in decision-making is important; yet such participation is rarely considered in Bangladesh. The presence of women in decision-making influences their access to infrastructure and resources as well as their active participation.

Without the presence of both formal and informal women's leadership roles, the promotion of women's advancement in sport and the legitimization of their public presence is limited. An organizational structure should be designed such that it would allow free vertical movement to top leadership positions by those committed to sport and women's advancement, rather than allocating these positions to a few well connected individuals. This is essential for democratizing sport space, decision-making and policy planning. Such a structure is an important factor in bringing sustainable change in the field of women's sport and facilitating a more equitable distribution of resources between the sexes, leading to an increase in the self-confidence of women in demanding a fairer share of public space and legitimacy for their claims.

The problem for Bangladesh and many developing countries is their limited resources; generally sport is not on the list of top priorities, although often governments will pay lip service to it. In these contexts male citizens often take advantage of their access to public spaces and take over streets and empty lots to play sport. Girls rarely have this opportunity, particularly after puberty when they are supposed to observe the rules of femininity, and in Bangladesh particularly cultural and religious traditions of staying out of the gaze of men. Clearly trends of seg-

regated public spaces remain a major obstacle for women who are interested in sport and view it as an avenue to voice their objection to discrimination against women.

## **Bangladesh State Policy and Organizations on Sport and Physical Education**

Sports in Bangladesh receive support from the government of Bangladesh through the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Established in 1984, the development of sports and games is the responsibility of this Ministry. Prior to 1984, the Ministry of Sports and Culture used to look after the Sports sector. According to the website of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, following are the major activities of the Ministry relating to sports:

- ❖ Promotion and development of sports and games.
- ❖ Administering national sports awards, pride of performance awards, merit awards, etc.
- ❖ Receive and utilize aid from foreign and international bodies.
- ❖ Provide grants-in-aid to sport organizations.
- ❖ Collaborate with international organizations and programmes.
- ❖ Organize participation in national and international games and athletics.
- ❖ Promote sports related publications.
- ❖ Collaborate with various national bodies relating to sports.
- ❖ Exchange of sports team with foreign countries.
- ❖ Provide pension to sportsmen.

The Ministry is guided by a National Sports Policy approved in 1998. The policy has specific sections on the provision of facilities and training, and ensuring social honour and prestige for women's sports. The policy also requires women's greater role in various sports organizations of the country that are supported by the Ministry, outlined in the national strategies and programs for development of sports. These strategies and programs include:

- ❖ Development of selected sports and games that are less costly for wider mass participation especially in rural areas;
- ❖ Encouraging female participation at all levels of games and sports through the Bangladesh Mohila Krida Sangstha<sup>4</sup>;
- ❖ Consolidation and better utilization of existing sports facilities;
- ❖ Strengthening the existing College of Physical Education and establishment of additional colleges;
- ❖ Construction of more women's sports complexes, in order to facilitate participation of women in more conventional sectors of society;
- ❖ Regular training sessions and workshops on sports;
- ❖ Holding of national and regional sports competitions regularly, both for men and women;
- ❖ Intensive training programs for sports talents in order to participate in international games;

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<sup>4</sup> BMKS is "The first organization in Bangladesh to deal with women sports providing both indoor and outdoor facilities with a dream to take the women sports to the world" (see <http://www.eicra.info/bmks/>, accessed 14 September 2012).

- ❖ Provision of sufficient numbers of playgrounds, indoor stadiums and other sports facilities in each district and *Upazillas* (i.e. local administrative units);
- ❖ Budget allocation specifically for sports equipment to facilitate sports activities in less 'well to do' sections of the country.

There is a Directorate of Sports entrusted to undertake and implement different sports activities for children and the youth of various educational institutions as well as sports organizations throughout Bangladesh.

The National Sports Council has the responsibility to help the development of excellence in sports and games by promoting and coordinating sports activities in Bangladesh. The National Sports Council has representations in all recognized National Games Federations and Sports Associations and coordinates and organizes games and sports. The recognized federations and associations number as many as seven, out of which one is the Bangladesh Women Sports Federation, also known as the *Bangladesh Mohila Krira Sangstha*. However, their link and influence regarding other general federations is not quite clear. Other federations and associations support participation in activities such as football, hockey, swimming, athletics, badminton, basketball, gymnastics, rifle shooting, volleyball, table tennis, cricket, Olympic events, handball, golf, and *kabadi*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kabadi is played by two teams of seven players on each side. The teams take turns sending a 'raider' across to the opposite team to touch a member and return to the home half while holding breath and constantly chanting. The defender team must physically stop the 'raider' from returning to the home half before taking a breath. This last part could be quite rough, involving considerable physical contact. Kabadi is generally recognized as a national sport. Bangladesh sent a team the first year that women's kabadi was introduced to the Asian Games in 2010.

**Bangladesh Mohila Krira Shongstha (BMKS):** The first organization in Bangladesh to deal with women's sports, providing both indoor and outdoor facilities, is the *Bangladesh Mohila Krira Shongstha* (translated as Bangladesh Women's Sports Organization). The organizers realized that due to social and religious restrictions, parents and guardians would not be interested in bringing their female children into sports programs if a male managed them. For this reason, in the year 1967, the *East Pakistan Non-professional Women's Sports Association* was founded with Mrs. Rabeya Khatun Talukder as the General Secretary. After the war of independence and establishment of Bangladesh, Mrs. Lutfunnesa Haque Bakul, a famous athlete, came forward with completely new strategies for encouraging women to participate in sport. She founded *Bangladesh National Women Sports Development and Control Association* in 1972 and remained as its general secretary up to July 1975. After 1976, its name was changed to *Sports Development and Controlling Authority* for the women before it assumed its present name of *Bangladesh Mohila Krira Shongstha*, dropping the word "control" altogether. It may be mentioned that the word 'control' is a legacy of when Bangladesh was united with Pakistan. The present *Pakistan Cricket Board* used to be known as the *Cricket Control Board of Pakistan* until 1994. In this context, 'control' generally implies overseeing, yet it also speaks to the desire of the authorities to make sure that sport events and development remain under their jurisdiction.

BMKS is the only formal organization that facilitates skill-building of female sports personnel through systematic training of female athletes. With efficient utilization of limited facilities and resources, the BMKS is working very hard to catch up to the international standard and has had some success in doing so. In order to facilitate young women's training from across Bangladesh, they opened a women-only hostel for women with dining facilities, as well as gymnasium and a

swimming pool. They now have a lawn tennis ground, basketball ground, badminton court, football and handball grounds, a practice field, and coaching facilities focusing on training talented and dedicated women athletes to become role models for other Bangladeshi women. To raise funds for their activities, the BKMS also offers commercial training facilities to those able and willing to pay fees, particularly in the fields of swimming, taekwondo, gymnastics and aerobics training, basketball, badminton and cricket, which are popular amongst women.

**Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protisthan (BKSP-Bangladesh Institute of Sports):** The institute was established by the government in 1976 as a project under the National Sports Council, and in 1983 it became an autonomous statutory organization. The institute has regular coaching and academic programmes to produce sports graduates. The BKSP has 103 reserved seats for girls/women, out of a total of 500 seats. In addition to the central campus near Dhaka – the national capital – the government has established six regional training centers.

Sports and games are generally capital-intensive and require high degrees of organizational efficiency. That requires access to money, power, hierarchy and social privilege. In developing countries all four generally come from the government, at least until the time sports and games become money-earning enterprises, or sufficiently commercial to attract private sector sponsorship. Bangladesh is no exception, as described above. The most common sports in Bangladesh are soccer, cricket, kabadi, rifle shooting, swimming, handball, chess and carom.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Carom (also known as Karrom) is a "strike and pocket" table game of Eastern origin similar to billiards. It is played under different names throughout the East, and is particularly popular in Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It is often played on various national holidays.

Of these, shooting, chess, handball and carom are more popular with women and have successes, both nationally and internationally.

Financing of sports and games in Bangladesh comes from both public and private sources. Public financing is through the Ministry of Youth and Sports, as the apex body. Private financing is encouraged by means of tax exemptions of donations up to 1 million *taka* (roughly equivalent to USD 13,000) from individuals and organizations to recognized sports organizations. In recent years, following the promotion of neoliberal policies, sport has become commercialized and attracts private sponsorships for its advertisement value. This has alarmed the proponents of women's sport, since it means the women's sport sector may not receive the same attention as the male sport, which is a noticeable pattern even in contexts where women's sport is much more developed, such as in the US. Thus they feel it is important to be vigilant on what the consequences may be for women's sport. One way of addressing the potential problem is to demand a greater share of public funds to be allocated to women's sport until such a time that women's sport could muster similar interest to the male counterpart on the part of the commercial sports sector.

### **Bangladesh, Formal Sports Association for Women**

Apart from the BMKS, there are no other formal sport associations for women in particular. However, some of the private sports clubs have a women's team playing for the club. Some public and autonomous organizations, such as *Bangladesh Ansar* (civil defense organization), *Bangladesh Biman* (Bangladesh Airlines), *Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation* (BTMC) and *Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation* (BJMC) sponsor sports teams in this context. The *Bangladesh Cricket Board* (BCB) also

has a women's wing that supports the national women's cricket team.

The policy, the structure, and the institutions described above give women's sports and games the formal recognition required for national and international participation, financing, training, management of events and so on in the public sphere. Such associations may be at club level, which are basically private, or national associations supported by government and sponsored by public funds. Such formal bodies often act as ladders for women to access and obtain leading positions in the national sports and games systems. The level of development of women's sports in the country is a determining factor in the development of such formal organizations. In mixed membership organizations, which most national organizations are, the social and economic position of women is very important in boosting self-confidence while seeking a leading position in the organization. Besides the women's wing of the *Bangladesh Cricket Board*, the Bangladesh Women Sports Federation (another name for BKMS), with its 16-member, all-women executive body, is the only women-only organization that has the mandate of advancing the women's sports in Bangladesh.

### **Choice of Sports and Games**

The perception of what are 'male'/masculine sports and games and what are 'female'/feminine sports and games varies in different societies and influences the kind of strategies and politics that the proponents of women's sport decide to adopt. However, particular to Bangladesh is the legitimacy of women's sport and public participation under question by the majority, save for a small minority of the population. In the context of Bangladesh, as in most Muslim societies, a major consideration is to assess which games would draw the least



social resistance and lend themselves to public acceptability. A significant factor seems to be sports that can be performed indoors, to attract less criticism and resistance. Socially, sports that necessitate the least bodily contact tend to be more acceptable for women. Given the considerable degree of gender segregation outside the family, whether the games are played as single-sex events or mixed effects the level of acceptance. Tennis may be more acceptable, since hardly any physical contact is necessary. Basketball, in contrast to the context of Senegal where it is considered a feminine sport (see Saavedra in this volume), is not very acceptable in Bangladesh because it requires some level of physical contact. Kabadi, a traditional South Asian game, and wrestling, would require a high degree of physical contact, and thus are considered unsuitable for women. There are no formal rules barring women from any particular sports and games in Bangladesh, but traditionally hammer throw, pole vault and hop-step-and-jump are three athletic games that are not encouraged for women.

### **Current Status**

As stated earlier, the popular games in Bangladesh are football, cricket, hockey, swimming, rowing, kabadi, rifle shooting, handball, carom, volleyball, badminton, basketball, tennis, table tennis, and chess. Out of these, the most popular among women are handball, carom, chess, swimming and rifle shooting. Although sport has not been the nation's top priority, and given the limited resources, a long view of women's sports and games activities in Bangladesh would not present a particularly discouraging picture, as Table 1 (below) indicates.

**Table 1: Sample of Women Participation in Sports and Games, 1979 - 2012**

Sports Category	Type of Event	Year/s	Level
Archery	Individual (a 12 member-team participated)	2006	South Asian Archery Championship
Athletics*	Individual and group	1986, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2008	National Games, Asiad, SAF Games, Asian Games, Various games organized by Germany, USA, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India.
Badminton	Singles and doubles	2008	International, against Thailand
Chess	Singles ( A Four-member tem represented Bangladesh)	1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004	National and Chess Olympiads in Dubai, Greece, Yugoslavia, Philippines, Russia, Armenia, Turkey, Slovenia, Spain
Cricket	Groups and teams	1983, 2007, 2008, 2010	National leagues, International matches against India, Hong Kong, Pakistan
Cycling	Individual	2000, 2002, 2010	National Games, SAARC games, India, SAF Games
Handball	Groups and teams	2012	National Hand ball league
Judo	Individual	1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 2010	National Games, SAF Games
Karate	Individual	2010	SAF Games
Kabadi	Groups and teams	2010	SAF Games
Lawn Tennis	Single and double	1993, 1993,	National games
Shooting	Individual and group	1992,1994,1995, 2000, 2009, 2012	Olympic Games, Asiad and SAF Games, South Asian Shooting
Swimming	Individual and group	1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008,	National Games, Olympic Games
Table tennis	Single and double	1979,1980, 2002	National Games
Wrestling	Individual	2012	National Games
* <b>Athletics:</b> Running, Jumping, Throwing, Walking <b>Source:</b> <i>Krira Jagat</i> (Sports World), bi-weekly sports magazine published by National Sports Council, Dhaka, Bangladesh. <sup>7</sup>			

<sup>7</sup> The table above has been prepared from a sample of reporting in the biweekly sports magazine *Krira Jagat* (Sports World) published since 1976 by the Jatio Krira Parishad

There are also other events reported in some of the sport magazines which have not been included in the above table, since either I could not verify them in more than one source or because they were not organized nationally. These included women's weight lifting, karate training in girl's schools located in outlying areas, a girl's school football league among Dhaka city schools, and participation of a newly formed women's volleyball team in the World Volleyball Championship in Thailand in 2009, among others.

At a national level, women competitors participated as individuals, but more commonly as women members of a club or organization. There are a number of such organizations that support women's teams. Those reported are mostly semi-governmental and autonomous organizations. Examples include the previously mentioned Banglaesh Ansar, Bangladesh Biman, Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC), and Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC). Major clubs reported include *Abahoni Krira Chakra* and *Mohammedan Sporting Club*; two of the leading clubs in Bangladesh. At an international level, or any games played outside Bangladesh regardless of whether these are men's or women's games, individuals and groups participate as members of national teams sponsored by the government of Bangladesh.

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(National Sports Council). Other sports publications, such as that published by Bangladesh Handball Federation, Bangladesh Archery Association and Bangladesh Cricket Board were consulted. There was one glossy number brought out by Bangladesh Cricket Board on the occasion of the first women's cricket championship in 2007. The *Krira Jagat* copies were available from 1979 onwards, but some numbers were missing. The reporting is on participation of women individuals, groups and teams in special events such as national championship games played with other nations, and in such international events as the Olympic Games including chess Olympiad, Asiad games, SAF games, and SAARC games. The reporting included the names of participants, the games in which they took part, and the prizes won or not. The table gives the number and types of games played by women that at least reached the national level.

Participation at a particular level would depend on a number of factors, such as degree of individual skill as well as team performance, and a minimum threshold number of individuals and teams available for organizing a meaningful competition. Chess would seem to attract a steady number of skilled individuals to compete in Olympiads. Shooting is another, as is swimming.

Cricket on the other hand is a game that requires a large number of players and teams to organize a national level league match. The first ever 2007 women's cricket championship was organized by the women's wing of the Bangladesh Cricket Board, involving 10 teams coming from all over Bangladesh. There were two teams from the coastal regions, and one team from the hilly region comprising entirely of tribal women members. Two teams came from the northern region. One team came from the port city of Chittagong, known to be a conservative area. There was also one team from Jahangirnagar University, where I studied as an undergraduate and where women's sport was encouraged. Altogether there were 139 players. This event was quite an achievement for the organizers. It involved a lot of commitment and practice on the part of women athletes, as well as in the effort to generate local support and raise adequate funding through government and other available channels. This led to the formation of the first Bangladesh national women's cricket team in 2007, who made their international debut in the same year against Thailand, winning that match. The team also played in the ACC Women's Tournament in Malaysia in July 2007.

Cricket is a national passion and women's cricket in Bangladesh is strong. The national team has participated in regional and international venues with some success stories. With a string of positive performances in the last couple of years (e.g., the International Cricket Council women's cricket World Cup qualifier and One Day International (ODI) status in 2011) including a

silver medal in the Asian Games, women's cricket in Bangladesh has traveled a long way, despite the fact that the team was only formed in 2007.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore not a surprise to see them dominating the limelight when it comes to women's sports in the country. Indeed they are treated by many young women and advocates of women's gender equality as celebrities and role models for younger women.

Football is very popular across a large part of Asia, yet national women's football is not an area that has developed much in Bangladesh. A league was set up in 2003, encouraging several female players to compete in a professional manner, yet the standard of some of the games was low. One of the clubs for instance, conceded 28 goals in two matches. The team coach explained that this was partly due to the fact that most of the players came from sports other than football and were competing just for the sake of participation. This indicates the high interest of women in sport, even if it is not so focused on football. However in the final of the football tournament, the players became much more engaged and competitive, and played more skillfully. Given the increase in women's skills and interest in football, the organizers believe that arranging the leagues was a positive step. Football is less costly than many other sports to organize and thus more schools now encourage and organize inter-school and inter-college competitions. These tournaments can provide opportunities for women to engage in the sport and nurture the talent of budding athletes. Many pioneers of women's rights and women's sport in Bangladesh realize that there is a need for the establishment of sport leagues at national levels, and that the spread of regularly scheduled sports events that would draw girls from schools and colleges to compete would help break social barriers and increase women's access to public spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> A One Day International (ODI) is a form of limited overs cricket, played between two teams with international status. ODI games have become popular since the 1970s.

The above examples show that the demand to take up sports at a professional level amongst women in Bangladesh has increased since liberation. With regular domestic tournaments organized by different sporting federations, women now routinely participate in both team games and individual events. After their inspirational victory in the gymnastic championship where they ranked as the ninth best One Day International (ODI) team in the world, female athletes are now much more competitive at the international stage. Their victories have led to a new found confidence that has inspired women from various backgrounds to take up sports at a professional level. On the whole, the trend is encouraging for female sports in Bangladesh. However, there is still a long way to go.

### **National Role Models**

Role models are important for setting examples for young women who are interested in pursuing their dreams through sport. Media can and should play an important role in celebrating and exposing those women who have achieved important success despite the obstacles they were facing, particularly at this era where religious fundamentalists have taken a decidedly hostile position against women in sport. It is unfortunate that media in Bangladesh has paid little attention to women in this respect.

Nonetheless a few young women have emerged as national heroines and role models. Among those highly celebrated national figures are Ayesha Akhter and Jahanara Alam. Ayesha Akhter (born in 1985) is a confident batswoman for the Bangladesh women's national cricket team and is one of the most recognized stars of woman's cricket. She is a favorite role model for young women in the region, as she defied all of the restrictions of her conservative town and followed her interest

in sport. While studying in Dewanganj Girl's School in Jamalpur, a rather conservative northern district, she was always involved in sporting activities and secured many small victories at various school and local sportive events. These victories gave her the self-confidence and the courage to dream of becoming a national athlete. She also felt they gave her the moral strength to resist the attempt to force her into a pre-defined traditional woman's role, even though she has always maintained that she is proud of being a woman. She rides her own motorcycle in the city, which is very unusual and most women would feel uncomfortable to do so in public. She has redefined what is possible for a woman athlete and many young women hope to one day follow in her footsteps.

Jahanra Alam, bowler and batswoman for the Bangladesh national cricket team, is another highly known and respected player from Khulna, a coastal city and the second major port town of Bangladesh. Born in 1993 to a rather large family, she followed her passion for cricket. She played for many teams including the Khulna District Team, Abahoni Krira Chakra and in 2008 was invited to join the national women's team. Her incredible performance – particularly at international events that are televised – has brought much fame and admiration for her. She collected the highest wickets in the open cricket tournament and made a name for herself; her achievement and her common background have made her an ideal role model for many young women in Bangladesh.

### **International Achievements**

In addition to excelling in cricket, Bangladeshi women have also bagged medals in kabadi. They received bronze in the recently held Asian Games and silver in the South Asian Games hosted in 2010. The South Asian games in 2010 saw Bangladesh

achieve its highest ever medal tally in any international tournament with 18 gold medals – eight of which came through female athletes in events like shooting, taekwondo, karate and wushu.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps one of the more surprising victories came from the Central South Asian Artistic Gymnastics Championships, where the Bangladesh women's team bagged the silver medal, finishing second only to India. This was Bangladesh's first silver medal in gymnastics at the international level since 1995. See Table 2 for the details of women's achievement in the South Asian Games in 2010.

**Table 2: Bangladesh Achievements in the South Asian games in 2010**

Sport	Male	Female	Total
Boxing		2	2
Cricket		1	1
Football		1	1
Golf		2	2
Karate		1	1
Karate	3		3
Shooting	2	1	3
Taekwondo	2		2
Weightlifting		1	1
Wushu	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18</b>

**Source:** Compiled from the website:

<http://www.11sagdhaka2010.com.bd/Pages/Medals/Default.aspx?medal=GOLD&country=Bangladesh> (accessed 4 December 2012).

In addition, Bangladesh women earned 5 silver and 15 bronze medals in different events, both individually and in teams. These achievements, despite the lack of support, indicate that there is an undeniable passion for sport already in the public space.

<sup>9</sup> Wushu is a full-contact sport derived from traditional Chinese martial arts that has become very popular particularly with women in Asia. The International Federation of Wushu (IFW) set up in 1990s with the goal of promoting the sport.



## **Religion and Politics of Women's Exclusion**

Women's attempts to enter into sport and the public space that is marked primarily as a male space has been the subject of protests by conservatives and political Islamists and a heated public discourse between the various social forces who support sport for women and those who oppose it. Some religious conservative political groups have viewed women's sport as a means of political gain by claiming that women's sport is not sanctioned in Islam, a strategy common to many political Islamist groups, not just in Bangladesh but also in other Muslim societies (see Hoodfar in this volume). The Islamists organized protests against the first ever women's wrestling event in 2004. The protesters claimed that female wrestling is nothing but showing off women's bodies in front of a male audience and thus totally immoral and against the teachings of Islam. While a few might sincerely believe that such sport is against Islam, the real points were to put pressure on the state officials who are at least theoretically governed by secular rule. The pressure built to such a point that the tournament had to be cancelled. Similar protests were also organized against the first ever women's football tournament in same year, though they did not succeed in cancelling the games. In other instances, they exerted enough pressure that the government intervened and stopped women from taking part in a swimming competition held in a small town outside Dhaka.

It is unfortunate that the government is so easily ready to sacrifice women's rights and their rights to sport for political gain, even though this contradicts the constitution of Bangladesh and in a serious way undermines the legitimacy of the state among its most sincere supporters. It is in this context that many supporters of women's sport began mobilizing transnationally, and with some success put pressure on their governments not to sacrifice women's right for political gain. Simultaneously Mus-

lim women have engaged in various platforms to develop strategies to discuss the imposition on them of sport uniforms developed within the more advanced industrial societies (see the introduction to this volume). It is in this context that mobilization to push the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) to remove the restriction on wearing head coverings was considered a success. Nonetheless it is important to note that many women from Muslim majority contexts express concern that this development may result in the uniform imposition of head covering on Muslim women athletes by their national governments, or general increased social pressure on women to observe head cover (Hoodfar 2013). Still, these developments and discourses also promote the power for political mobilization on the rights of women to access public space and to govern their own bodies.

### **Looking Ahead**

The effort to claim and establish a space (cultural and otherwise) for women in the sports arena in Bangladesh, despite some success, has faced serious challenges from a combination of factors. The wide spread poverty at the family and community level on the one hand, and the lack of public facilities and dearth of public funds for organized efforts on the other, has made the expansion of sport for women rather slow. Yet the lack of cultural environment and the deep-seated gender discrimination at all social and political levels are probably the most significant barriers to the development of sport. It is in this context that those who faced the challenges and have been successful tell stories of a brave, uphill and often lonely struggle. Thanks to their efforts, as discussed earlier, the government has come forward with policies and programs, but only half-heartedly at best. To create a real space for the development of sport for women demands a lot more commit-

ment and political will on the part of the state, which goes beyond providing lip-service or even providing funds and programs.

Presently, sports facilities for girls in schools, colleges and universities are severely limited. This is a major constraint to development of a general climate favourable for women sport in Bangladesh. Ensuring adequate sports facilities and making sports a major co-curricular activity in all educational institutions would produce the kind of ground swell necessary for women to have their rightful space and place in Bangladesh. However, despite these insufficiencies, Bangladeshi women on the whole have demonstrated considerable talent in sports such as athletics (i.e. track and field events broadly, including such categories as running, jumping and throwing), shooting, swimming, basketball, handball and cricket. Other sports such as football need more support to catch up with other teams in the region.

Thanks to the dedication of some leaders in women's sport, now a reasonable government organization is in place and funding, though meagre, is available for promoting sport for women at an early age. Indeed the trend over the past 32 years in Bangladesh indicates that women's sports are actively, if not universally, encouraged from a school level upwards – a trend which must be maintained and increased. There is appropriate policy and institutional support through the national sports council, the BKSP and women's sports organizations, and through private sporting clubs. Teams are financially supported by autonomous bodies as well as some commercial/corporate bodies. The number of sports and games in which women are participating and the participants themselves are increasing in numbers. All of this encourages a more optimistic outlook.

The major challenge remains the Islamist political parties who have, like their counterparts in other Muslim contexts, discovered women's sport as an area to mobilize the conservatives and traditionalists against women's sport to exert pressure on the government and score political points in their own favour. Having failed to establish that Islam prohibits sport for women, thanks to much research and intervention of liberal men and women scholars of Islamic studies, they are focusing on segregation and covering women's bodies. They and their counterparts in other Muslim countries have (as is discussed in other essays in this volume) disingenuously used women's body and religion to advance their political goals. Facing the Islamists' opposition, proponents of women's sport have also mobilized, not always successfully, to remind the authorities that Bangladesh is a secular state and that it is the right of citizens themselves to decide to engage in the sport of their choice. In this context, international organizations, NGOs and women's rights organizations have their role to play in creating awareness and appropriate public opinion, and also reminding their governments of their international and constitutional commitments.

Other leaders, aware of the generally conservative attitudes of the public, have tried to promote those sports for women that present less conflict with gender norms of segregation. They have also created women-only environments in order to reduce the criticism and ambivalence of family and society towards women's sport. They mostly view this strategy as a step for young women to gain skills and expand their networks and worldviews to enable them to access the public space later in life, in both political and social contexts. Others have pointed out that while this strategy does open up a new terrain for women and expands their social roles, it continues to build on traditional gender ideology and may not yield the result that proponents of sport have hoped for, a point Askren discusses in her contribution to this volume.

In this context, women's rights activists and proponents of women's sport are in agreement that the underlying problems which play in favour of Islamist political parties lie elsewhere. Poverty and lack of economic opportunities fuels and aggravates general conservatism of the society at large. Although Bangladesh, with its large population and limited natural resources, with a consistent GDP growth rate of around 6.0%, is doing relatively well, the economic growth is not benefiting the majority of the nation, and income distribution has worsened in recent decades. These major problems, in the era of neoliberalism and globalization of economy, remain hard to address nationally, even if the intention were there. The increased inequality and lack of real economic opportunities for a large segment of the population has played in favour of Islamists who preach the vague slogan of Islamic social justice and promote gender roles which exclude women from public life and public spaces in favour of men in general.

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## Chapter 7

### ***Fin de Siècle?* Commanding the Court in Senegalese Women's Basketball<sup>1</sup>**

Martha Saavedra

At the beginning of 2012, an Olympic Year, it is not groundbreaking to assert that the human endeavour of sport is commoditized, globalized and politicized, albeit with tremendous variation across sport, space and particular participants. Long global threads connect, constrain and tug on humans' experience of sport whether in impromptu playground games using new, second-hand or knock-off branded goods or in the constructed, televised, blogged and tweeted pageantry of mega-events. With its ability to mobilize bodies and sentiments on a relatively large scale, sport also allows for control and for subversion. The commodification, politicization and globalization of sport are not actually new but the forms these phenomena take, as well as the mobility and circulation of people and ideas involved, constantly shift. At times these shifts can offer opportunities to women, who are not always considered a top priority by the decision-makers, regardless of whether they represent state or non-state sectors. While pursuing their

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<sup>1</sup> The field research on which this article is based was made possible by a grant from the West African Research Association (<http://www.bu.edu/wara/>). AbdouKarim Sylla assisted ably in the research.

sporting ambitions, these athletes can produce favorable change, commanding public space and attention for themselves and sometimes for the generations that follow them.

One way to appreciate what may have changed and what endures is to consider 'snap-shots' of the practice of a sport at different points in time. This chapter offers this with respect to women's basketball in Senegal, a country on the western edge of the Sahel and eastern side of the Atlantic. I present observations from field notes gathered during the 1998-99 winter season in Dakar and contrast those with sketches of the state of the women's game a decade into the twenty-first century gathered from the internet and library, including news sites, blogs, federations and sports clubs sites. The work here is suggestive – looking at two moments and hinting at how the interplay of factors such as Islam, gender, local cultural dynamics, colonial and post-colonial engagements, and contemporary transnational currents have shaped the points and the line between. Certainly, a more complete study is warranted, one that would complement, for instance, Michael Ralph's (2007) ethnography of men's basketball in Senegal. In the meantime, this contribution begins with these questions: What makes women's basketball in Senegal significant? What factors have contributed to its popularity?

## **Le Basket**

**20 November 1998, Dakar:** Several men read from the Qur'an for two hours at the mosque on the campus of the University of Cheikh Anta Diop. Only men are visible in the mosque, but the reading as well as an exhibition of memorabilia and a two day international basketball tournament that follow are in honour of a woman, Adama Diop, a 29 year-old wife and mother, *La Reine du Basketball (Queen of Basketball)*, who died



of natural causes a year earlier. Diop was a long time member of the successful national team as well as the leader of the champion Dakar Université Club (DUC) team. Only a month before her death, Dakar hosted the 7<sup>th</sup> African Women's Basketball Club Championships at which she and her club team triumphed. A month before that, with the national team, she won gold at the Francophone games in Madagascar. Those at the mosque remember the grace and dignity with which she won not only games, but also the admiration of many Senegalese.<sup>2</sup>

Sport is a visible element of everyday life in Dakar. The media – old and new – devote a significant amount of time and space to the coverage of sports. Men's football matches, the televised international leagues and local leagues, had been most popular. In recent years, the hybridized Senegalese form of wrestling (*laamb* or *lutte avec frappe*<sup>3</sup>) has become more popular, drawing crowds larger than local football matches.<sup>4</sup> Other sports such as handball, track and field, volleyball, judo, and tennis are widely practiced. There are over forty sport federations in Senegal active in organizing and promoting their par-

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<sup>2</sup> Field Notes of author, 1998. Diop was crowned “Queen of Basketball” in the 1991 season (see also, Franc 1998). This 1998 article was re-posted on the Seneweb site in February 2007. Le Soleil ran an article about the first tournament, which Jeanne d’Arc won (see M. Diouf, ‘Un beau bouquet de fleurs: Premier Memorial Adama Diop’, *Le Soleil*, p.14).

<sup>3</sup> The Senegalese form traditionally allows blows with the hands (*frappe*). Different styles developed along with its popularity. Senegalese fighters now engage in two common forms, called officially *Lutte Traditionnelle sans frappe* (for the international version) and *Lutte Traditionnelle avec frappe* for the striking version based on traditional games.

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Wrestling as a solution to poverty in Senegal’ at <http://www.theworld.org/2011/06/wrestling-as-a-solution-to-poverty-in-senegal/>; ‘Wrestling Boom Sweeps Senegal’, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/8617738.stm>; and ‘Senegalese wrestling bouts without and arena’, at <http://www.afriqueavenir.org/en/2011/09/10/senegalese-wrestling-bouts-without-an-arena/> (accessed 19 December 2011).

ticular sport.<sup>5</sup> After wrestling and football, basketball – especially the women’s game – is probably the most popular sport in Senegal, drawing attention through success and international exposure.

Indeed, on a continental level, women’s basketball is one of the most accomplished of any Senegalese sport, male or female.<sup>6</sup> *Les Lionnes*, the national team, have won the African Women’s Championships ten times, more than any other team on the continent. They have won gold seven times at the All-Africa Games, including at the 2011 Games in Maputo (see Tables 1 and 2). The men’s side has done well (five successful Africa Championships, and one gold at the All Africa Games), but not nearly as well as the women.<sup>7</sup>

Women’s basketball has found a comfortable niche in the Senegalese sports panoply with the federation procuring important corporate and government sponsorships, and top players gaining national notoriety and an enviable livelihood. This is in stark contrast with developments in women’s football in Senegal. Despite and because of the popularity of men’s football, the women’s game has had to struggle stubbornly against the odds to build and maintain a tenuous foothold (Saavedra 2003). At the end of the twentieth century, young Senegalese female athletes who pursued basketball found a much more encouraging climate than girls whose passion and talent was football. Football was at the extreme, but even rela-

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<sup>5</sup> A list is available at the sport ministry website:

[http://www.sports.gouv.sn/article.php3?id\\_article=143](http://www.sports.gouv.sn/article.php3?id_article=143) (accessed 4 December 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Yet the men’s national football team defeat of France in the 2002 World Cup Group Stage still looms large in the nation’s sporting triumphs.

<sup>7</sup> For details see the statistics at the Basketball Africa National Teams Archive at <http://www.todor66.com/basketball/Africa/index.html>. The Senegalese women’s team has also won one gold and three silvers medals in basketball at the six editions of *Les Jeux de la Francophonie*. At those games, only women compete in basketball, while only men compete in football. See <http://www.jeux.francophonie.org/-Les-medailles-par-edition-.html> (both websites accessed 14 December 2011).

tive to other sporting codes where women have opportunities to compete in Senegal – e.g., handball, volleyball, track and field – basketball reigned supreme for women. The success of Senegalese women in club and national team competitions on the continent translated into excitement and respect for the women's game. Women's matches were suffused with a sense of social prestige and regard – a place to see and be seen.

**Table 1: African FIBA Champions Rankings, 1966-2011 Women and 1962-2011, Men**

Women					Men				
Medals	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total	Medals	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1. Senegal	10	6	2	18	1. Angola	10	3	2	15
2. Congo DR	3	4	1	8	2. Senegal	5	6	3	14
3. Egypt	2	2	1	5	3. Egypt	5	5	6	16
4. Nigeria	2		1	3	4. Ivory Coast	2	3		5
5. Mali	1	2	1	4	5. Centr. Africa	2		1	3
6. Angola	1		5	6	6. Morocco	1	2	2	5
7. Madagascar	1			1	7. Tunisia	1	1	3	5
8. Mozambique		2	3	5	8. Nigeria		3	3	6
9. Tunisia		2		2	9. Algeria		1	1	2
10. Guinea		1		1	9. Sudan		1	1	2
10. Kenya		1		1	11. Cameroon		1		1
10. Somalia		1		1	12. Cabo Verde			1	1
13. Cameroon			2	2	12. Mali			1	1
14. Centr. Africa			1	1	12. Palestine			1	1
14. Ghana			1	1	12. Somalia			1	1
14. Togo			1	1					

From Basketball Africa National Teams Archive,  
<http://www.todor66.com/basketball/Africa> (accessed 6 December 2011).



**Table 2: All-Africa Games Rankings Medalist, 1965-2011  
Women and Men**

Women					Men				
Known Medals	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total	Medals	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
<b>1. Senegal</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	1. Egypt	4	1	1	6
2. Congo DR	1	2		3	2. Angola	3	1	1	5
3. Nigeria	1	1	2	4	<b>3. Senegal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>4</b>
4. Mozambique	1	1		2	4. Nigeria	1		3	4
5. Angola		2	1	3	5. Tunisia	1			1
6. Cameroon		1		1	6. Ivory Coast		1	1	2
7. Egypt			2	3	7. Mali		1	1	2
- (Country not recorded)		2	2	4	8. Cameroon		1		1
					9. Central Africa		1		1
					10. Mozambique		1		1
					11. Congo			1	1
					- (Country not recorded)			2	2

Source: Basketball Africa National Teams Archive, <http://www.todor66.com/basketball/Africa> (accessed 6 December 2011).

### The Game (1998)

28 November 1998, *Marius Ndiaye Stadium, Rue 11 environs Boulevard de Habib Bourguiba, SICAP Liberte 2, Dakar*. It is 1500h on a sunny Saturday afternoon. SIBAC (SICAP Basketball Club)<sup>8</sup> squares off against ASCC BOPP (Association Sportive et

<sup>8</sup> SICAP refers to *Société Immobilière du Cap-Vert*, a property company with public participation founded in 1950 in Dakar to help build housing. Several neighborhoods now bear the names such as SICAP Liberte 1, where the author resided during the

Culturelle Club Bopp).<sup>9</sup> There are about 70 spectators – mostly men, less than 10 women. A few soldiers are in the crowd. There are one or two journalists. Scattered in the stands are two *toubobs* (Western foreigners). The women are warming up on the court while the coaches and the referees – all men – prepare. The game starts. Intensity is initially lacking on the court, but evidence of the players' ball skills and athleticism picks up as the game proceeds and the numbers in crowd increase. Someone murmurs that #5 on SIBAC has played with junior national team. Her teammate, # 4, moves inside well, creating plays under the basket. She gets immediately back down the floor to intercept a pass. At halftime the game is tied 22-22. The crowd swells to about 300 spectators with 11:08 left in the second half. Player #15 on SIBAC has a fast break and scores. The final score: SIBAC 55, BOPP 44. There is an interlude. Four hundred people are in the stadium; now 500, the number keeps growing. The next game starts: Jaraaf (also spelled 'Diaraf', established in 1933 as *Foyer France Sénégal*),<sup>10</sup> versus DUC. Again all the coaches and referees are men. Player #12 from DUC plays well – she has two steals and break-aways to score. But at half-time, Jaraaf is leading DUC, 40-36. In the stands, young children, mostly girls, in worn and faded second-hand clothes are peddling peanuts, water and frozen-treats in plastic bags. They dodge stadium officials who are only half trying to intercept them. On the court, despite more heart-thumping break-away plays by DUC, Jaraaf wins, 70-66. During another interlude, a *toubob* from the French *Fonds d'Aide et de*

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fieldwork for this project. See <http://www.sicap.sn/> for more information on the history and activities of SICAP.

<sup>9</sup> Bopp is a middle class neighborhood in Dakar that was one of the first to start an ASC. 'Bopp' means 'head' in Wolof.

<sup>10</sup> Jaaraf was the title for a 'royal agent' of the king in Wolof. The 'Grand Jaaraf' came to be seen as a protector of the people against the whims of the king and nobles (Daff et al. 2006).

*Cooperation (FAC)*<sup>11</sup> steps onto the court to present basketballs, cones, nets, and mini baskets to the league. The next game between *Jeanne d'Arc (JA)* and *l'Association sportive des Fonctionnaires (ASFO)* begins with at least 600 spectators, 90% men, mostly over the age of 20. Older men dressed in grand *boubous* (wide-sleeved robes) enter with a crowd of followers in their wake. Women in the audience are mostly young and dressed casually. They are or were basketball players and intently discuss the play. Player #9 from ASFO does a turnaround jump shot. At half-time, it is JA 32: ASFO 29. Play resumes, it is a close match. A male fan shouts: "Don't be afraid to fight for the ball. You are all women out there". The score is 54 each – with 50 seconds to go. It is close to the end. The final score: JA 55, ASFO 54. But it is not over. The coaches start to fight. The assistant ASFO coach goes to the JA coach and pulls him back. He backs off when he realizes it is her, Marthe Ndiaye, a member of the Senegal basketball squad who played in the 1990 Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA)<sup>12</sup> World Championships for Women.

Most girls and women in Senegal do not engage in organized sport. Especially in rural areas, women are occupied with enough daily physical domestic, agricultural and commercial chores that time and energy to devote to sport is limited. For girls attending school, physical education is theoretically required. However, facilities and coaches are limited, and like in most other parts of the world, boys tend to dominate what is available. Attitudes towards women's participation in sport also form obstacles. In the 1980s, the scholar Ka Diaw (1984)

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<sup>11</sup> A program of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since replaced by *Fonds de solidarité prioritaire*.

<sup>12</sup> FIBA is the world governing body for basketball, composed of 213 National federations of basketball. The acronym stands for 'Fédération Internationale de Basketball Amateur'. Established on 18th June 1932 in Geneva, the organisation dropped 'Amateur' from their title officially in 1986, but retained the 'A' out of tradition.

reported that many girls themselves avoided sport in school, seeking medical releases from physical education classes.

In the late 1990s, I encountered similar stories. While Senegalese women can and do inhabit a powerful and public physical presence, hence the *drianke* (women of physical, economic, and social substance who commands public and private respect (Buggenhagen 2011, Saavedra 2003, Biaya 2000), muscles can be problematic. Muscularity challenges femininity (Saavedra 2006, 2005). When women do engage in sport, if it is to be acceptable for the woman, her family and cohort and society at large, there is a tendency among observers to code that particular sport as feminine. In surveys of students, Manga (1994) found that handball ranked as the most feminine of sports practiced in Senegalese schools followed by basketball. Football and wrestling (girls did traditionally wrestle in some parts of the Casamance region) ranked nine and ten (Manga 1994). In this way, women's basketball had become a 'glamour' sport, drawing fans and making *étoiles* (stars) of the most successful players. Basketball players appear in the media with their exploits on and off the court subject to discussion. Indeed, in the late 1990s, Mborika Fall, a player for DUC and her husband, Aziz Samb, a former footballer and one of the most famous television personalities in Senegal, were a golden couple in the media. Later their divorce became tabloid news.

Beyond the media, the success that came to women basketball players opened the way for more girls to come into the sport. It was marked as feminine – graceful and elegant – no matter how hard and tough the women played on the court. In a time and place where youth unemployment was high and opportunities for women were limited, basketball became a way to earn a living. Though, like all sport in Senegal, it was technically amateur, good players on a team of one of the 'grand clubs' – the oldest and/or most successful omnisport clubs – could ex-

pect at least some pocket change for transportation and food. Some clubs also provided room and board to senior players and found part-time jobs for players so they could afford stay in the city. Those that won might even end up with their own flat, as members of the 1997 African champions did – a gift bestowed on them by Madame Elisabeth Diouf, the president's wife. Players and coaches told me that parents who initially may have been reluctant to see their daughters involved in the sport became supportive when they became aware of the rewards possible. Whatever physicality, body contact and aggression there was on the court, fame, fortune (of a sort), and political access helped to 'feminize' the sport for many girls and their families and make it acceptable for them to become a *basketteuse* (female basketball player).

### **The Sport Clubs**

*27 November 1998. Dakar.* At 1700h as the sun is setting, the DUC women's senior basketball team begins practice on two outdoor courts nestled between Pavilion A and the gymnasium on the campus of the University of Cheikh Anta Diop. The asphalt has some potholes and the backboards are worn and without nets. Their coach, Lamine Diakhate, puts the team through their routine. As daylight disappears, they play in the dark for a while until finally the lights around the court flash on. After two hours of drills, they finish, cool down, talking, laughing and then walking into the dark towards to their homes, leaving *leterrain* for the senior men's team.

On the other side of the building in another wing, Pape Ndiaye, an employee of the university's central administration, *le Centre des oeuvres universitaires de Dakar* (COUD), sits back in his chair in a small office – really a foyer leading to other rooms. The office is lit by a long single florescent bulb on the wall. A



stream of visitors, mostly young men, moves in and out of the darkness outside. They bring papers, reports, questions, and maybe a few answers. Others seem to just watch the action. Whatever Ndiaye's role in the administrative routines of the university during the day, his time now is consumed by his role as the Secretary General for Basketball for Dakar Université Club (DUC). This work, a volunteer position, keeps him so busy, that he remarks with a smile that he does not have time to visit his own family. DUC is a *grand club*, and basketball, especially the senior women's team, stands as one of its premier accomplishments. With five levels of competition for both girls and boys, men and women, the Secretary General must attend to many details, from equipment, transportation, training, recruiting, coaching, and medical needs to weekly meetings with the 24 volunteer staffers involved with DUC basketball, as well as relations with sponsors, the league, the federation, and the *rectorat* of the university, which provides 80% of the funds for the club. It is a labor of love, but also one of prestige and satisfaction.

### **State and Organized Sports**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *associations sportive et culturelle* (ASC) were the locus of Senegalese basketball. These clubs evolved under a system first introduced by the French to govern colonial society. To some extent, this system mirrored the development of sport in the colonies, the state asserted control more directly by tightly governing and regulating the ASCs, keeping them tied closely to the sport federations based in the metropole. Reforms in the post-colonial Senegal (1961, 1969 and 1976) saw significant changes, but the state maintained a strong presence via the registering and regulating of ASCs through the Ministry of Interior and governing sport through the Ministry of Youth and Sport (*Ministere de la*

*Jeunesse et des Sports*, MJS) (Bouchet & Kaach 2004, Mignon 1987).<sup>13</sup>

Football, the king of sports, was initially introduced into Senegal by the French. It has been and remains central to most sports clubs, including the oldest ones such as Jeanne d'Arc (established in 1921), Diaraf and Dakar Université Club (1956), though swimming was the spark for Union Sportive Goréenne (1933). However, in the post-war period basketball began to grow in popularity in Senegal and, in 1960, the Senegalese Basketball Federation was established (Niang 2008). A Canadian priest, Révérend Frère Emmanuel Quintal, also helped to popularize the game at the *Collège Saint Michel* in Dakar.<sup>14</sup> For the women's game, the break point was the hosting in Dakar of the 1963 *Jeux de l'Amitié* (Friendship Games) which began in 1960 between France and its former colonies, but later included other nations (Combeau-Mari 2006). Women's basketball and athletics were among sports which were contested. For many, this was the first time seeing African women competing internationally. By 1965 however, the women's national team was competitive across the continent (first at Congo-Brazzaville All-Africa Games) and the draw to the women's game began (Sambou 2008, Seye 1997).

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<sup>13</sup> In April 2000, the Ministry was split into *le Ministère de la Jeunesse* and *le Ministère des Sports et des loisirs*. In May 2001, recreation went to *le Ministère de la Culture*. In 2002, the Minister of Sport became for the first time a Minister of State. See [http://www.sports.gouv.sn/article.php3?id\\_article=11](http://www.sports.gouv.sn/article.php3?id_article=11) (accessed 12 February 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Brother Quintal, a Canadian, died April 11, year? and was buried in Quebec. He was headmaster of St. Michel de Dakar from 1962 to 1988. He contributed much to Senegalese basketball, including the founding of the Saint Michel Cup (with a first edition in 1974) and the introduction of the annual coronation of a king and queen of basketball. Also see [http://www.st-michel.sn/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1156&Itemid=498](http://www.st-michel.sn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1156&Itemid=498) (accessed 12 February 2012).

Influenced by new regulations and by reputations, several became 'omnisport' or 'grand' clubs offering football, at least one other team sport, athletics and one other individual sport. DUC for instance offered ten sports – including football, basketball, handball, athletics, volleyball, Scrabble, judo, karate, kung fu, and tennis – at multiple levels: mini, minim, cadet, junior and senior. By 1974, MJS regulations spelled out that first category clubs should have for each sport section in the club one senior [men's] team, one junior team, a youth training program and one women's team "if the sport permits" (Ndiaye 1984: 10).

Though it would take future research to confirm, I surmise that the central state control of sport in general and the dominance of men's football, in particular, provided the space where women's basketball could thrive in Senegal. Football has been central, but neither the national football team nor club teams have found regular success outside of Senegal, and particularly through the 1980s and 1990s provided much national heartache and soul-searching, with regular recriminations circulated about the football establishment (Baller 2010, Cisse 1995, Ndoye & Sakho 1994).<sup>15</sup> Young men nevertheless were drawn very much to football, including dreams of careers in Europe, as football evolved into a global juggernaut (Darby 2003). The ASCs, partially propelled by football, as well as pushed by the central government to provide broader sporting opportunities conforming to specific regulations, developed other 'niche' sports, including basketball. Indeed, the involvement of the state in shaping the early development of sport, particularly for women, often proves essential for its progress and possibilities for flourishing into a successful endeavor.

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<sup>15</sup> See also the results tables of the The Rec.Sport.Soccer Statistics Foundation: International Country results <http://www.rsssf.com/intland.html#afr> and International Club results: <http://www.rsssf.com/intclub.html#afr>. Senegal's 1-0 defeat of France, the defending World Champions and Euro Champions, in the opening match of the 2002 World Cup is perhaps the high point for *LesLions de la Terenga*.

## Basketball as Women's Terrain

Combining aspirations of organizers to become a first category ASCs, the growing popularity of basketball, and the need to have a women's team in some sports helped to make basketball one of the premier choices for ASCs. Clubs, established or aspiring, certainly did not venture into women's football – that would have been breaking football taboos that were nearly global save for the United States – whereas basketball provided respectable opportunities for the aspiring club. An analysis of Table 3 (below): *Etude comparative du nombre de licenciés des clubs affiliés* (Comparative study of the number of licensees affiliated to clubs) from the 1997/1998 annual report of the *Fédération Sénégalaise de Basketball* (FSBB) shows that of the 38 ASCs with an active basketball section, 29% had more girls or women licensed than men, with four almost exclusively women's sections (ASCM Dakar,<sup>16</sup> Sonacos, Stade Mbour, and CNEPS EBC<sup>17</sup>). The female licensees of another 29% of the ASCs comprised at least 40% of all those registered in the clubs basketball sections. Seventy-one percent of the clubs had some number of females playing basketball. And 22 of the 38 ASCs (57.8%) had enough players to field a senior women's team – the focus of league play. Women's basketball comprised a serious part of a club's basketball identity.

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<sup>16</sup> As of 2012, this club does not appear in the Senegalese women's basketball listings. I believe the initials stand for Association Sportive et Culturelle – Marine. It might have also referred to Association Sportive de Cheminots et Marine.

<sup>17</sup> The basketball club for the Centre National d'Education Populaire et Sportive, which is located in Thies, Senegal.

**Table 3: Presence of Women in ASC Basketball Sections in 1997/1998. "Comparative Study of the Number of licensees Affiliated to Clubs"**

Female % of Club's Basketball Licensees	# ASC	of Total ASC
50% or more	11	29%
40 to 49.9%	11	29%
30 to 39.9%	2	5%
20 to 29.9%	3	8%
10 to 19.9%	0	0%
0 female licensees	11	29%
Teams with at least some female licensees	27	71%
Total Number ASCs with Basketball Programs	38	100%
<i>Source: Extracted from Sommaire 1997/1998 Season, Fédération Sénégalaise de Basketball, p. 69.</i>		

Organizing the basketball section within an ASC took a lot of work. In 1998, 24 people were involved in the DUC Basketball section and they meet once per week. The Directors meet one time per month, and the Grand DUC once every three months. The section stays active all year as the teams practiced all throughout the year, with frequency increasing before the start of the season. Because of the intensity of the volunteer commitment, Pape Ndiaye, the Secretary General of DUC explained that there are no women involved in the administration of the section. With their family responsibilities it was not possible; it would be *"au detriment de les enfants"*.<sup>18</sup> Outside of the players, very few women were involved in the game. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, a few women were coaches and a handful became referees.

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<sup>18</sup> *"To the detriment of the children"*

## The Basketball Referee

21 November 1998, Adama Diop Memorial Tournament, Marius N'Diaye Stadium, Dakar. During a lull between games, a spectator hailed someone standing a few rows away dressed in black pants and a striped black and white shirt, "Madame Arbitre!" The referee, Henriette Dior, turned to him and said curtly "Arbitrice!" and they both smiled.

The neologism, *arbitrice*, a feminized version of the French noun for referee which Dior introduced, could be the subject of intense analysis with layers of debate about feminism, colonialism, ideology, and linguistic authority. Indeed, the feminization of nouns describing professions has led to heated debate in halls claiming influence over the French language (van Compernelle 2009, Fleischman 1997). Dior's use of the term certainly reflected her own experiences. On one hand she asserts, with a twist of humor, the surprising notion that a woman can inhabit a respected position of authority in an arena that previously was assumed to be intrinsically male. It may also have reflected her years of study in Francophone Canada, where in 1979, Québec made job-title feminization official. At the end of the twentieth century in Senegal, her comment and the smiles shared, also suggested a moment where the official rhetoric insisted that there was no discrimination against women, but there was widespread recognition that it was unusual for a woman to succeed where only men had tread previously.

In 1998, there were at least three female referees active in basketball: Henrietta Dior Diouf, Aminata Diop and Katy Diatara. They were quite visible in the federation and leagues, refereeing both men's and women's games, and were well respected by all involved in basketball. Their career paths also suggested the possibility that no systematic discrimination ex-

isted alongside deep structural impediments to women's pursuit of the game of basketball.

Each made a life out of sports. All three played basketball with one of the ASCs. Dior and Diattara both played with Jeanne d'Arc, Diattara after six years with CASA Sport<sup>19</sup> in Ziguinchor, her home town. She also practiced judo and wrestling, liking contact sports. Diop played basketball with ASC Theis. Henrietta Dior was the ground breaker, being on the first Senegalese team to win the African Women's Basketball championship in 1974 in Tunis. In the following year, she was also on the first Senegalese team to compete in the FIBA World Championships in Columbia where they unfortunately placed last of 13.<sup>20</sup> Dior pursued a Physical Education teaching degree in France and an MA at Laval University in Canada. She contemplated pursuing a PhD, but, despite a very supportive and understanding husband – who is also a referee – she decided another degree was too much with her five children – four boys and a girl. She became a physical education teacher at *Centre National d'Education Populaire et Sportive* (CNEPS).<sup>21</sup> CNEPS, along with *Institut National Supérieur de l'Education Populaire et du Sport* (INSEPS) at the *Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar* (UCAD) in Dakar,<sup>22</sup> is a major center of sport and physical education in Senegal. Dior qualified as an international referee in April 1998. Her success encouraged Diattara and Diop, who came up 10-15

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<sup>19</sup> According to the French Wikipedia page ([http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casa\\_Sport](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casa_Sport), accessed 6 May 2012) CASA Sport was founded in 1960 with the name *Foyer-Casamance*, after the province in which it is located. In 1970, the name was changed to Casamance-Sporting Football Club, and later shortened to CASA Sport.

<sup>20</sup> The men's team did make it to the Olympics in 1968 and 1972, but did not make it to a FIBA World Championship until 1978, where they also placed last. See FIBA Archives: [http://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/lid\\_38138\\_cp/1/rpp/100/tid/358/\\_/teams.html](http://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/p/lid_38138_cp/1/rpp/100/tid/358/_/teams.html) (accessed 26 February 2012).

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.sports.gouv.sn/breve.php?id\\_breve=4](http://www.sports.gouv.sn/breve.php?id_breve=4) (accessed 26 February 2012).

<sup>22</sup> For more information see INSEPS' website: <http://inseps.ucad.sn/> (accessed 30 November 2011).

years after Dior. Like Dior, they both had to have other jobs, as one could not live solely from refereeing. At most the league provided transportation allowance (maybe 3000 CFA at a championship match, 500-1500 CFA at regional championships),<sup>23</sup> but referees – both male and female – had to fund their own training and purchase their own uniforms. Katy Diatara earned her master’s degree in Physical Education, and worked as a PE teacher at St. Michel College in Dakar. She also coached basketball and football, for both boys and girls. Her love of sport also led her to work closely with Eliot Khouma in developing women’s football in Dakar.<sup>24</sup> Aminata Diop, based in Theis like Dior, worked at the national railway office before opening her own import/export business. All three referees officiated at both men’s and women’s games.

In separate interviews, they each expressed how they had to prove themselves, like all referees, but found that outside of a few instances, more so at the ‘beginning’, they have been able to assert their authority at matches with little problem. Diatara also refereed football matches, including in the somewhat notorious *navetene* leagues.<sup>25</sup> In her career, she was not afraid of making a mistake, but rather was eager to get feedback and

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<sup>23</sup> The league is run by the Federation, which gets funding from dues paid by clubs, a portion of fines, gate receipts, support from the state via the Ministry of Youth and Sport and international support from FIBA. The Federation, leagues and teams may also receive support in cash and kinds from multilateral and bilateral international agencies and NGOs. Government officials, including the head of state and other politicians, have also made grants to the Federation for specific endeavors. The media has put the Federation’s finances under scrutiny in recent years. (For example see D. Ndebeka, ‘Gestion des 50 millions du président de la république: Baba Tandian refuse de s’expliquer’, *Wal Fadiri*, 12 December 2011).

<sup>24</sup> For more on women’s football in Senegal see Saavedra (2003).

<sup>25</sup> The *navetenes* or *nawetenes* are popular sport leagues, mainly football, for youth that take place during the school break, which occurs during the rainy season. The name of the league is derived from the Wolof word for rainy season, *nawet*. Teams are very much identified with neighborhoods. The league has sometimes had a problem with violence (Baller 2002, A. Mbaye 1997, Tine 1996).



constructive criticism so as to do better next time. For her, this was part of the responsibility of refereeing and necessary to advance. They all mentioned other women they knew who officiated at men's football and wrestling matches. Though the numbers of female officials were still small across the major sports, the three were very optimistic about the opportunities, noting that it was up to women to push ahead and not be timid. Combining the desire to become a referee or coach with courage and education was central to achieving the goal.

The potential negative impact of sports on their femininity did not faze these three women at all. Gender systems in Senegal are nuanced and complex, and are not simply about fertility, even though bearing children serves as a central marker of femininity. By that measure, as a mother of five children, Dior was 'feminine.' Athleticism and a lean, muscular body still was suspect for some. Diop commented that she jogged in the bush several times a week, sometimes with friends, sometimes not. Periodic hecklers did not deter her. In fact, she would joke with her friends that those who do not engage in sport become older faster, and that they would be jealous of her. Diattara recalled that before she lost some weight and braided her hair, some used to think she was a man when she was playing on the court, but it did not concern her. In our interview, she said: "If you love sport, it doesn't matter".

For all three, family and neighborhood support was central in their own careers. Dior's supportive husband has already been mentioned. Neither Diop or Diattara were married at the time of the interviews, but parents, brothers and neighbors figured largely in supporting them. Neither indicated that marriage was an issue for them one way or the other. Diop acknowledged that it would be difficult for some women with families because of obligations including the social networking required of women in attending various family and community ceremo-

nies. Diattara noted how she tried to encourage other women in her neighborhood to play sport, but the women's husbands resisted their participation and the women left claiming they could not find uniforms, or that their child rearing duties consumed their time. Were she to marry, she knew she could not continue unless she had a supportive husband. Dior noted that some ethnic groups or families that were 'traditional' were not likely to allow girls to participate in sport. She observed that many in her generation ended their sports careers when they began their families. Given the schedule of an ambitious referee - two to three matches per week during the league's season, apprenticing, trainings, study courses, exams and meetings of the leagues and referees' association - and echoing Pape Ndiaye's observations, they know that it is hard for many women to find the time for sport. Yet, their optimism even in the face of obstacles was clear. They viewed basketball as a sport that provided opportunities for women.

### **Progress Since the Turn of the Century?**

Over the last dozen years, Senegalese sport has experienced change both for those directly participating and for spectators. As the growing popularity of wrestling indicates, there are new ways of monetizing and broadcasting sport. There also continues to be debates around gender relations, both in secular and religious circles. In particular, there has been an on-going debate about the existing Family Code and the merits of Islamic law in a secular state. Have these currents impacted women's basketball? Has the trajectory of women's basketball in Senegal continued? Has the sport remained popular? Successful? Does it still provide opportunities for women? A full study of this waits. However, some observations can be made.

With respect to female referees, Senegal's contemporary record remains comparatively good. This is important to consider since referees occupy a very visible and authoritative role. It can be viewed as an indicator that not only women can play sport but they can advance like their male counterparts, despite the social and family responsibilities. In November 2011, FIBA listed on its website 165 referees from the Africa zone eligible to be nominated by FIBA, by the FIBA Zone, or by the national federation to an international official or friendly game. Of those 165, only 18 of the African referees, or 11% of the total eligible to be nominated, are women. Senegal has two women on the list, Ms. Ndeye Aissatou Diagne, and Mrs. Mame Geye Ep Diagne.<sup>26</sup> Mali, Cote d'Ivoire and Tunisia also have two female referees. Senegal, like Mali, only has a total of seven FIBA-eligible international referees. Yet even with small numbers, they are nevertheless at the top of the African table for referees (see Table 4). Of further interest, of the 12 countries with at least one female referee, six are majority Muslim populations (over 95% of the population). The ranking of Senegal and Mali just behind Morocco also suggests the special place of women's basketball in both these countries is such that women are not only able to play, but also have opportunities to participate in other ways in the sport.

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<sup>26</sup> The names, license numbers and birthdates for the seven international referees are listed here:

<http://www.fiba.com/pages/eng/fc/FIBA/fibaOffi/resu.asp?eventid=&langid=1&langlc=en&roundid=&personType=&zoneFIBA=&nationIOCCode=SEN&searchStr=> (accessed 4 December 2011).

**Table 4: 2011 FIBA African Zone Countries with Internationally Qualified Female Basketball Referees**

Country	Total Officials	Male	Female	%Female	% Pop. Muslim 2010
Morocco	17	14	3	18%	99.9%
Senegal	7	5	2	29%	95.9%
Mali	7	5	2	29%	92.4%
Cote d'Ivoire	10	8	2	20%	36.9%
Tunisia	15	13	2	13%	99.8%
Rwanda	3	2	1	33%	1.8%
Zimbabwe	3	2	1	33%	0.9%
Gabon	5	4	1	20%	9.7%
Madagascar	5	4	1	20%	1.1%
Algeria	8	7	1	13%	98.2%
Cameroon	8	7	1	13%	18.0%
Egypt	20	19	1	5%	94.7%*

**Source:** "Inside FIBA: FIBA Officials", available at:

<http://www.fiba.com/pages/eng/fc/FIBA/fibaOffi/p/eventid//langid/1/langlc/en/roundid//persontype/R/zonefiba/A/nationiocode//searchstr//resu.html> -

(accessed 4 December 2011), and Grim & Karim (2011), available at:

<http://pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>

(accessed 5 December 2011).

\*Other sources estimate the non-Muslim population in Egypt as much higher, at 10 to 20% of the population.

This is a small marker of their achievement – the number of female international referees from Senegal did double since 1998/1999 from one to two. Henrietta Dior had planned to

retire so it is not surprising she is no longer on that list. Both Aminata Diop and Katy Diattara wanted to qualify at the international level. Perhaps Diop did too, at one point. I have lost track of her career from afar. Katy Diattara's fate is known, however. She died on the Joola, a passenger ferry, when it sunk on 26 September 2002 off the coast of Gambia on its journey from Ziguinchor to Dakar. This tragedy was the world's second largest non-military maritime disaster in terms of loss of life ever, with at least 1863 dead. Every year on the anniversary, memorials to Katy Diattara can be found on Facebook pages and in the comments on Senegalese basketball themed web pages: "*Femme courageuse, juste et serviable*" ("A courageous, just and helpful person").<sup>27</sup> Symbolically, the Joola disaster represents the loss of a certain hopefulness that was evident at the turn of the century with the election of opposition party candidate Abdoulaye Wade, and peaceful transition from Abdou Diouf's twenty-year rule in 2000. Some have argued that the tragedy was not just the result of bad governance, official neglect and a state crime, but also a symptom of globalization and the power wielded by international institutions (Rothe, Muzzatti & Mullins 2006, Sahabana 2003). A full analysis is outside the scope of this chapter, but the loss of faith and globalization are two themes of note that impact basketball.<sup>28</sup>

While the fortunes of basketball in Senegal always had international connections, the main focus had been on the continent. But the globalization of the American National Basketball Association (NBA) – including more systematic recruitment overseas – has changed the Senegalese basketball scene significantly. Whereas one could argue that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Written by "Le Grand", Mercredi 29 September 2010: [http://www.senebasket.com/forum/26-septembre-2002-26-Septembre-2010-Senebasket-se-souvient-de-Cathy-Diattara\\_m97079.html](http://www.senebasket.com/forum/26-septembre-2002-26-Septembre-2010-Senebasket-se-souvient-de-Cathy-Diattara_m97079.html) (accessed 12 Feb 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Abdoulaye Wade lost his bid for a third term as president in the second round of voting on 25 March 2012 to Macky Sall.

century, women's basketball garnered the most accolades in Senegal, this has shifted as local and foreign gender dynamics interact. Namely, the women are much less likely than the men to find foreign opportunities to play, and the influx of cash notoriety and migration possibilities have raised the profile of the men's game. Of the 181 Senegalese players abroad in late 2011 tracked by the website *Africabasket.com*, only 38 or 21% are women. Ralph reports that "Senegal has produced more NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) basketball [male] players than any country besides the U.S. and Canada, but the nation's female players have yet to attract a comparable level of interest from international scouts" (Ralph 2009: 96). As Ralph suggests in his work on men's basketball in Senegal, the imbalance is not simply due to the lack of opportunities elsewhere (mainly the US and Europe). It also has to do with how specific push/pull factors operate differently for men and women. He argues that male basketball migration fits well within the Senegalese economic matrix where young men are pushed to emigrate, find income and send home remittances. Women on the other hand must figuratively and literally reproduce the nation at home (Ralph 2007).

As a pull factor, Ralph (2007) explores the presumption on the part of at least some Senegalese agents, coaches and players that there is a desire on the American-side for a 'prototypical' male basketball player with physique, skills and attitude similar to Michael Jordan (widely acclaimed as the greatest basketball player of all times). Ralph argues that performing this aesthetic for agents and sport writers feeds into American desires to find noble savages in Africa to contrast with uppity African Americans at home. There are not as many opportunities to go abroad for women; for those few who do go abroad, it seems an increasing necessity to play at the highest level.

During my sojourn in Senegal, on 22 December 1998, the American Basketball League, a women's professional basketball league, folded after three seasons. Many of the Senegalese players had hoped to play in the United States. In the 1990s, some Senegalese women did manage to play ball at American colleges, a few made it to the American Basketball League (ABL) (Astou Ndiaye), and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). For most though, playing overseas was not possible. They played for local clubs in Senegal, mostly in Dakar. Today, the tide has shifted ever so slightly. Members of the 2011 National Team all seem to have contracts playing overseas. Out-migration is ticking up.

Performance of and expectations for the women's national team are still high. However, Senegalese club teams do not seem as competitive on the continent as they once were, but statistics are hard to find. The local league is still active and there are regular postings on the Senebasket<sup>29</sup> website. A new factor is the overseas play. One question is whether a player must now prove herself overseas before she gets an invitation to the national team. If this is the case, it represents a sad state of affairs in Senegalese women's basketball, creating another barrier to success in the form of reaching high levels of play, including the national team. However, it is the same pattern in men's football across most of Africa – success and thus options to play on the national team can only be earned by playing outside of the African continent.

Not all is well with the women's national team however. On 12 September 2011 in Maputo, Mozambique, they did win the gold medal at the All-Africa Games, beating Angola 64-57. However, on 2 October 2011, they lost to Angola, 62-54, in the 2011 FIBA Africa Championships Finals, hosted in Bamako, Mali

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<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.senebasket.com/> (accessed 20 March 2012).

(a bitter rival – the Malian team reportedly booed and whistled to distract Senegal during the final game which raised a few eyebrows regarding the loss of civility amongst teams (Biteye 2011). In order to secure, one of the five remaining spots in the 2012 London Olympics.<sup>30</sup> Basketball tournament, *Les Lionnes* had to battle 11 other teams in a June 2012 qualifying tournament.<sup>31</sup>

To punctuate the difficulties of the team, in November 2011, the coach of the team, Moustapha Gaye, was fired and indicted despite support from the players. Headlines touted a *crises* in women's basketball. Tabloid-like articles talked of team members pressing for playing bonuses at 3:00 AM instead of resting for the final match in Bamako. There were reports of former players feeling slighted for being left out of ceremonies and overlooked for accolades.<sup>32</sup> Is this a profound moment perhaps? Has a taint felt in other sports in Senegal, most especially football, seeped into women's basketball?

Nonetheless, at the same time, new programs are emerging, drawing on the academy model aimed at female basketball players. Following the surge in sport and development pro-

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<sup>30</sup>See 'Sénégal: Mame Diodio Diouf (Meneuse des "lionnes"), 'La gestion du basket sénégalais manque de professionnalisme', at <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201110070815.html> (accessed 20 March 2012)

<sup>31</sup>FIBA: London 2012, Women's Olympic Basketball Tournament: [http://www.fiba.com/pages/eng/fe/12/olymp/who\\_is\\_in/p/women.html](http://www.fiba.com/pages/eng/fe/12/olymp/who_is_in/p/women.html), (accessed 5 December 2011).

<sup>32</sup> See for instance: Anon., 'Le coach des Lionnes du Basket, Moustapha Gaye, a été suspendu pour 5 ans par la Fédération Sénégalaise de Basketball', *SENEBASKET*, 15 November 2011.

APS., 'Moustapha Gaye refuse toute comparaison avec sa première sanction', *Se-nweb*, 18 November 2011.

C.M. Coly, 'Basket, Moustapha GAYE sanctionné par la fédération : « Je n'utiliserai aucune voie de recours »', *Le Soleil*, 17 November 2011.

A. Mbaye, 'Les navétanes : une nouvelle forme de culture et du lien social au Sénégal and 'Mborika Fall « Tant que les anciennes gloires ne sont pas incluses au sein du staff de l'équipe nationale... »', *Rewmi*, 4 October 2011.



grams over the past decade especially in Africa, these promise to open opportunities for more young female players, raise the level of play and professionalism and contribute to overall progress for girls through education. One program that has received some attention is run by a former player, Anne Marie Dioh, who captained the national team in the early 1990s. She runs an after school program for girls from ages 8-18, teaching them basketball and encouraging them to stay in school (Stearns 2010).<sup>33</sup> Another more ambitious program is currently in the fundraising phase. It is a project of the Babac'Ards Association,<sup>34</sup> a French ASC. It is the dream of Boris Diaw, a French male player with Senegalese roots, who plays for the Charlotte Bobcats (an American professional basketball team based in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA), is captain of the French national basketball team, and is a former Junior European champion. His foundation already runs programs in France for disabled players and collaborates with another organization, which runs eight basketball camps for underprivileged children in Lima, Peru. In Senegal, Babac'Ards is collaborating with Diambars, the famed football academy for boys, to focus on a project for girls. On page 3 of their business plan, they lay out their goals:

The Association's goal for the Center is to assist in the athletic and educational development of young women, and would thus primarily cater towards the female public. Within four years, the Association hopes to house, train, and educate, under the same conditions as the Diambars Institute, approximately 20 female basketball players. To fully integrate this project into its surrounding environment, the infrastructure of

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<sup>33</sup> 'Senegalese Basketball Legend Helps Motivate Girls', at <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/east/Senegalese-Basketball-Legend-Helps-Motivate-Girls-96580819.html> (accessed 27 February 2012).

<sup>34</sup> In French <http://www.babacards.fr/?Projet-de-creation-d-un-centre-de>; in English: <http://www.babacards.fr/?Female-Training-Center> (accessed 30 November 2011).

this center would also be used to host local girls associations for their operating needs. For this project to commence, the Association needs to raise enough money to build all basketball related facilities and provide operating capital for its first four years of operations.

While the NBA's Basketball Without Borders program largely ignores women's games on the continent, seeing a project develop in Senegal specifically for girls around basketball can be read as encouraging. Still, as Kate Manzo (2011) argues, it may be the leading edge of a neo-liberal pattern found in many sport and development projects, which sometimes produce more change for the NGO and donors than for the youth participants in the program. If other globalized sports are any indicator, the 'crisis' may be a signal that Senegalese women's basketball is going global. The end of the 1990s was truly a *fin de siècle* for women's basketball in Senegal.

## Conclusion

Basketball may not be considered a feminine sport in other parts of the world but in Senegal it has developed as a preferred game for women. While football remains marked as a masculine venture, Senegalese women have commanded space both in the physical realm and in the public imaginary through their success in basketball. This indicates the extent that culture and history of a game and how it is packaged play an important role in making sport a culturally acceptable game for women in a given society.

The success of Senegalese women's basketball also is evidence that Islam in a predominately Muslim country is not a necessarily a limiting factor in women's sport. Islam certainly did not discourage women from advancing in basketball in Senegal. Indeed, the two are comfortably joined as the reading of the

Qur'an in honor of Adama Diop, known as *La Reine du Basketball (Queen of Basketball)*, in her memorial a year after her death illustrates. As indicated by Tables 3 and 4, which compare female referees in Muslim and non-Muslim countries in Africa, at least some Muslim Sahelian and North African societies are very open and accepting of women athletes.

The French-influenced legal and civil codes also may have helped. The ASCs were legally developed such that the 'grand clubs' had to have at least one sport in which women participated in. Government support of sport may have encouraged women to engage in sport by providing a safe space ideologically (and often physically) and legitimacy for women's sport.

With a legal baseline of 'no discrimination' within organizations, women who were motivated – e.g. the referees – were able to take advantage of opportunities even as it was not the norm for women to take on those roles of control and authority in sport. It may have struck some as odd, but in the milieu of Dakar in the late twentieth century, there was a social openness to having at least a few women in these roles.

This does not mean that there are not limitations on sport for women, however. Societal concerns about femininity impinge on what is acceptable for whom. On one hand not all sports are equal options – football for instance. And there are hesitations about becoming too muscular even within sports considered feminine. Beyond perceptions and social norms, though, a practical matter stands out. One of the biggest obstacles for many women is the lack of leisure time. The division of labour in the household and domestic expectations mean that women simply have too many daily chores and social responsibilities toward their networks. And rural and poor women may very well have even greater time constraints, let alone monetary resources for equipment, shoes, clothes and transportation.

With increasing globalization, women may have more chances to advance their sport careers abroad if they can reconcile their family responsibility with requirements of working abroad. Individually, these will provide great opportunities. Yet on a national level it is likely going to mean less interest in the local clubs and leagues and result in fewer opportunities for a broader range of young women. Without opportunities at home to challenge and improve themselves, the numbers of women who can reach higher levels or even be drawn in to play on a more recreational level may diminish. Into the twenty-first century, Senegalese women's basketball may begin to reflect more the needs of those abroad rather than those at home.

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## Chapter 8

### **Saudi Arabian Women and Sport: Bodies, rights and public spaces**

Aisha Lee Shaheed

#### **The 2012 Olympics**

In March 1896 Stamata Revithi arrived in Marathon, a small town in Greece, where she was welcomed by the mayor and garnered the keen attention of the reporters milling about. The town was appropriately named, as the following day it was from there that Stamata planned to commence a 25-mile race to Athens along with the men who were entered into the competition. Met with refusals from the organizing committee, and without the prayers of the local priest who had refused to bless her, Stamata remained behind until the following day when she ensured her time of departure was recorded and proceeded to run alone for over five hours to Athens. Upon arrival she was prevented by officials from entering the Panathinaiko Stadium to register her race time. 1896 was the first year in which the Olympics were revived for the modern era, and they had preserved the Ancient Greek policy of formally excluding women from competing in the Games. The second modern Games four years later saw the inclusion of women athletes for the first time, though for most of the twentieth century female

athletes had not been equally represented by all participating countries, and had been banned from specific events, such as boxing.

The 2012 Olympic Games marked the historic first occasion that female athletes from all participating countries were permitted to compete. Delegates were selected to represent the final three countries which had not yet sent women athletes to previous Olympics: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei. The decision came after a great deal of debate, certainly within the countries as well as international journalists and rights-groups roundly calling for women's universal inclusion in the Games. The state of Qatar has been increasingly keen to promote their support of women's rights vis-à-vis sports, with the Qatar Olympic Committee declaring in 2010 that it intended to send four female athletes to the 2012 Games. The women selected competed in shooting, swimming, athletics, and table tennis. The International Olympics Committee (IOC) – itself only including female representatives from 1981 – decreed that at the 2010 Summer Youth Olympics women must be allowed to compete from all entering countries. At these Games even Saudi Arabia was represented, by an American-born female equestrian. The IOC, which had been for many years subject to intense lobbying by proponents of gender equality, followed suit, stepping up pressure as the Chair of the Women and Sports Commission suggested that countries be banned from participating in the London 2012 Games until they included female athletes.

Officials from the IOC were reported to have been in discussions with the Saudi government for months prior to the Games, pressuring them to join Qatar and Brunei in sending women to the 2012 Olympics. The outcomes of these negotiations were uncertain until weeks before the opening of the Games, though this uncertainty was not surprising, given that

the Saudi state had been closing down a number of private women's gyms since 2009, while conversely publicly announcing intentions to introduce physical education for girls in state schools and colleges. While gender restrictions and segregation remains widespread, a reforming tendency has been noticeable in recent years, often attributed to the leadership of King Abdullah under whom women have received identification cards and the first woman minister was appointed in 2009. From outside official power centres, this reform is propelled by initiatives of individuals and collective groups of women, ordinary women and those with political connections. Efforts include the highly publicized driving protests in 1990 and the renewed campaigning efforts, which not only advocated women's right to drive cars, but also sought to highlight wider issues of restricted mobility and institutionalized guardianship.

In 2008, activists collected around 1000 signatures in a petition to allow women to drive. When this was unsuccessful, Wajeha al-Huwaider posted a video of herself driving on the internet. Underlining that this was part of a broader call for women's rights in the Kingdom, this was posted on International Women's Day. In 2011 al-Huwaider teamed up with Manal al-Sharif to film her driving and the video was posted widely, including on YouTube and Facebook. Al-Sharif's campaigning strategy did not focus upon her own civil disobedience, but attempted to build an online platform for women to act collectively around their right to mobility. It is important to note, perhaps, that there is still a lack of clarity over whether al-Sharif and her supporters position themselves as politicized activists calling for state change or as social reformers. When accepting the Havel Prize for Creative Dissent at the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2012, al-Sharif told the press she did not view herself as a dissident or as a protestor against the state, but rather that women's driving was fundamentally a social taboo

to be broken.<sup>1</sup> One could argue this positioning is strategic, in a context where women are structurally infantilized by the state and therefore the discourses of negotiation, incremental change and social reform are more likely to be effective. The political nature of the driving campaign was heightened through the collective support of women, for example when the *Women2Drive Campaign* supported al-Sharif in filing a lawsuit against the Saudi Traffic Department for denying women the right to drive despite there being no written law to the contrary.<sup>2</sup>

Saudi women's collective organizing is clearly situated in its political and social context, and requires a degree of deference to the state, clandestine and largely anonymous organizing (especially on the internet) and claiming rights from within discourses of religion and nationhood rather than invoking international standards of women's rights. In a similar vein to calls for increased mobility, as the government clamped down on private women's gymnasiums, Saudi women bloggers and journalists took up the slogan "Let Her Get Fat!" highlighting the health issues women and girls face from not being allowed to participate in sport, while the use of sarcasm also emphasizes the relative banality of the women's demands. Indeed, the issue of health is a crucial part of the debate in Saudi Arabia, with significant increases in the rates of obesity and diabetes, where an estimated two-thirds to three-quarters of adults and 25-40% of children and adolescents are estimated to be overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup> Women's rights campaigner Fouziah Alouni

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<sup>1</sup> See Nora Albulkarim, "Saudi Feminism: Between Mama Amreeka and Baba Abdul-lah", at [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5516/saudi-feminism\\_between-mama-amreeka-and-baba-abdul](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5516/saudi-feminism_between-mama-amreeka-and-baba-abdul) (9 May, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See the Right2Dignity / Women2Drive campaign blog here: <http://right2dignity.wordpress.com/> (accessed 5 November ,2012).

<sup>3</sup> "steps of the Devil": *Denial of Women's and Girls' Rights to Sport in Saudi Arabia*, Human Rights Watch report, Feb. 2012, p.3, at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/02/15/steps-devil> (accessed 15 July ,2012).

stated, “The idea of female fitness is non-existent within our government. Depriving women of this is yet another way of marginalizing them. Give us a justifiable reason or leave women alone. This is unbearable.”<sup>4</sup> Before it was announced that Saudi women athletes would be participating, Reema Abdullah, a coach and player from a private women’s soccer team in Jeddah, asserted, “We will watch the London Olympics and we will cheer for our men competing there, hoping that someday we can root for our women as well.”<sup>5</sup>

Presumably due to these various internal and external pressures to include women, along with incremental reformist tendencies occurring within the country, Saudi Arabia acceded and announced women would represent the Kingdom in the 2012 Olympics. At these Games, the Kingdom was represented by judo blue-belt Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhani (16) and American-born runner Sarah Attar (19). Though neither contestant survived the qualifying rounds, the presence of the Saudi women athletes at the Olympic Games, including their appearance in the Opening Ceremony with (though instructed to walk behind) their male counterparts, was a source of much attention and acclaim.

While many welcomed the decision to include women in the Olympics, others argued that it was a largely symbolic gesture which may not translate into tangible reform for women and girls in Saudi Arabia. For example, Manal Al Sharif, who had been jailed in 2011 for posting her driving video, referred to the decision as designed to “make people happy out there, not for us” and that while women’s participation in the international Olympics was a positive matter, “it isn’t one of those things we

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Asma Al Sharif, “Let her get fat, Saudis protest”, *Brunei Times*, 2 May 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Minky Worden, “Saudi Arabia’s unacceptable failure to field female athletes for the Olympics”, *Guardian*, 10 July 2012.

are crying out for, Saudi women want basic rights”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed many have questioned the extent to which the inclusion of women in the Olympics may be useful in a context where women continue to be deprived of very basic citizenship rights in their families and society. Incremental concessions by the Saudi Arabia state may appease the international media and the Kingdom’s Western political allies, though it may also undervalue the linkages women in Saudi Arabia have made with transnational movements in their struggle to achieve their rights of citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Women in Saudi Arabia are claiming rights they feel entitled to, and the danger may be that ‘soft’ concessions are granted by a paternalistic state while fundamental rights are pushed further down the agenda.

## **Beyond the Olympics**

Human rights groups, supported by journalists and academics, have been calling for women’s equal participation in international events for decades, and use the opportunity to raise broader issues of barriers to women’s full and equal participation in public life. In few contexts is this structural inequality more evident than in the case of Saudi Arabia, where women are notoriously prevented from driving, must adhere to a strict dress code, and require the permission of a male guardian to travel. Less apparent perhaps to outside observers are the less visible forms of gender equality that lead to unequal cultural, educational and professional opportunities. This manifests in a non-codified judicial system that relies upon the judge’s indi-

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ellen Knickmeyer, “Activists Press Saudis on Women in Olympics”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Given the limited channels open to women to pressure the state, Saudi women have established linkages with transnational women’s rights movements in order to place pressure through international institutions and countries that have close trade and political links with Saudi Arabia (see Hoodfar & Ghoreishian 2012).

vidual interpretations of Sharia and *fiqh*<sup>8</sup>, and barriers to accessing all forms of education, including physical education. That the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has delayed in sending women athletes to international forums is an extension of resistance to encouraging sport for women and girls. Physical education classes for girls are prohibited in Saudi state schools (though permitted in some private schools) and given the additional imposition of a legal dress code for women that requires covering in public spaces, it is not likely that physical activity for leisure purposes would be tolerated in the public sphere. Women and girls who do play sports in the Kingdom largely do so in gymnasiums within private institutions and in clandestine groups. The restrictions on the seemingly innocuous pastime of playing sports are policies merely indicative of wider socio-political notions of women's bodies, sexuality and participation in public life.

Interventions therefore need to be comprehensive and far-reaching, encompassing a codification of family laws and regulations of employers and private companies that conform to the international standards that Saudi Arabia has signed and ratified, including the UN Conventions on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Rights of the Child (CRC). A report on women and sport in Saudi Arabia issued by Human Rights Watch in 2011 locates restrictions on sport as part of a broader framework of discrimination under the Saudi system of guardianship, which renders even adult women dependent upon their husbands and male relatives for basic services, such as health care, and mobility, including permission to travel. Though Human Rights Watch (HRW) has not been allowed to conduct research inside the Kingdom since 2006, they based their report and recom-

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<sup>8</sup> *Sharia*, literally 'the way', is Muslim laws as based on the Qur'an and exegetical traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah*). *Fiqh* refers to Muslim jurisprudence.

recommendations on interviews with Saudi women connected to the campaigns for inclusion in sports and other aspects of public life, as well as media reports.<sup>9</sup> Some respondents reported that physical education was a component of their studies, however this was dependent upon whether their school was private or public, and where classes were offered, they were not always compulsory and given unequal resources in comparison to boys' physical education classes. The short-term recommendations in this report urge the state to continue to implement the policies which have been mentioned by the Saudi Ministry of Education but not yet widely put into practice, including: issuing a clear strategy and timeline for rolling out physical education for girls in state and private schools, launching a public outreach campaign on girls' rights to sport, building sports facilities, developing a sports curriculum, and offer training to teachers of physical education for girls.<sup>10</sup> These calls of the international human rights community echo Saudi women's calls to lift the ban on licensing women's gyms, which are increasingly permitted only in private companies or secretly operating under the guise of 'beauty salons,' and their calls to develop more national competitions for women to develop participation in regional and international sporting events.

The rigid system of separation of the sexes is an extension of a political, economic, and social structure that has regulated the subjects (who have yet to obtain the status of citizens) of the kingdom since the formation of Saudi Arabia as a nation state in 1932, and which has created policies predicated on, and which actively promote, gender inequality. This structure grows from a complex interplay of factors, including selective religious interpretations being invoked in law-making and the

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<sup>9</sup>See <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/26/olympics-saudi-women-only-starting-line> and <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/02/15/steps-devil>

<sup>10</sup> "Steps of the Devil", p.9.



application of justice, and long-standing cultural norms that isolate women's reproductive functions as their most significant contribution to society. Such cultural values are widespread and extend, in various forms, far beyond the Arab region and Muslim-majority contexts.

It is telling that the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee, when faced with Saudi-born Wojdan Shahrkhani's participation in the Games, issued the requirements that she "dress modestly, be accompanied by a male guardian and not mix with men" while in London for the 2012 Games. This emphasis on dressing modestly focuses a sexualized attention upon the bodies of women athletes, which need not have been a primary focus. By enforcing a headcovering, Saudi Arabia, along with Iran, are unlike other Muslim-majority countries entering female athletes in the Olympics, including Tunisia and Turkey, and by doing so the Saudi Olympic committee sends a message of the potential danger associated with woman's bodies in the public sphere, to be looked at without an *abaya* (a full body covering overall) or a guardian. Shahrkhani was reported to have been distracted by the media attention concerning what she would wear in order to conform to acceptable codes of *hijab* (in the end she wore a cap and standard judo outfit).

That control of the female body is central to the restriction on sports is evident in the arguments put forward by some conservative clerics. In 2009 a representative of the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, Sheikh Abdullah al-Maneea, stated that the excessive "movement and jumping" required in football and basketball might cause girls to lose their virginity.<sup>11</sup> Also a member of this Council, Sheikh Dr. Abd al-Karim al-Khudair has since 2010 sat on its subsidiary 'Permanent Commission for Research and Religious Rulings', which has the re-

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Asma Alsharif, "Saudi Women Push for the Rights to Play Sports", Reuters, 29 Feb 2012.

mit of pronouncing on the correct interpretation of Muslim laws in Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Al-Khudair wrote that calls to open women's sport clubs are "steps of the devil," that is, a slippery slope in which women would refute more and more social norms until there would be "no more difference between us and others, until we gradually get rid of all distinguishing differences" between men and women.<sup>12</sup> Parallels could be drawn with the discourse around women in the West riding bicycles in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, where popular tracts spoke out against the introduction of new clothing to accommodate cycling, such as bloomers, and suggestions that cycling would make women more "mannish," threaten their virginity, and overturn accepted gender relations.<sup>13</sup>

### **After the Olympics**

The results of culturally-conservative states conceding to permit women's participation in the Olympics have yet to be ascertained. It is clear however that momentum must be maintained for this achievement to lead to increased opportunities for sports and physical activity outside the home for girls and women within Saudi Arabia, including at state educational institutions. At worst, it could result in a backlash against clandestine and nascent sports groups, such as those that allow women to practice sports in private domestic properties. Nonetheless, it is an opportunity to continue debates that look toward policy-change to addresses systematic gender discrimination in Saudi Arabia, and in all countries that equate public participation with a violation of prescribed gender roles.

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in "Steps of the Devil", p.32.

<sup>13</sup> See Sue Macy, *Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way)*, (National Geographic & Random House, 2011) and Dr Lisa S Strange "The Bicycle, Women's Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton" in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, v31, issue 5, 2002.

At the time of writing, the mood is largely optimistic in the international community that this inclusion of women on the international sporting stage may help to knock down further barriers faced by girls and women in Saudi Arabia. Maysan Mamoun, co-captain of The Green Team, an amateur Saudi women's basketball team that practices in a private garden, proclaimed, "I don't think this will last forever, we are pioneers. We will open doors."<sup>14</sup>

While it is not clear what the effect may be of women's increased access to international sporting competitions on the legal, cultural, and economic barriers that women in Saudi Arabia face, it is encouraging to note the solidarity expressed by the female athletes. Unlike the mainstream rhetoric of the Olympic Games which marries a twin celebration of nationalism and individual achievement, these athletes refer to their participation in collective terms that express solidarity with other women. By doing so they promote a recognition that their presence is part of a larger conversation around women's rights in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim-majority countries, and their presence highlights the systematic discrimination of women that must be overcome in order for the full attainment of their fundamental human rights.

On her participation in the 2010 Summer Olympics, equestrian Dalma Rushdi Malhas told reporters, "This just opens so many doors for women," and the regional press published her statement that she wanted her achievements to "trigger hope for a lot of Arab girls – not just Saudi girls – but all Arab girls."<sup>15</sup> Likewise, after competing in the 2012 Games, teenager Wo-

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Huma Qureshi, "Arab women in sport: 'There will be no more barriers for us'", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/27/arab-women-sport-no-more-barriers> (accessed 14 August 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Huma Qureshi, "Female Arab athletes: Lives through a lens", *The National*, 28 July 2012. <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/film/female-arab-athletes-lives-through-a-lens> (accessed 14 August 2012).

Idan Shahrkhani told the Associated Press, “Unfortunately we did not win a medal, but in the future we will and I will be a star for women’s participation.”<sup>16</sup>

Underscoring their support of women in sports, the state-affiliated Qatar Museums Authority commissioned an exhibition of photography and video, “Hey ‘Ya: Arab Women in Sport”. Alongside photographic portraits that highlight the athleticism, cultural diversity, and determination of the subjects, a video installation projects the images and voices of women athletes from various Muslim contexts, including from non-Arab communities in Somalia, Sudan, Brunei and the Comoros Islands. The documentary filmmaker commented about the athletes interviewed during the Arab Games in 2011, “The thing that struck me the most was that they do not compete for individual performance – they compete to help each other and inspire other women. There’s a real sense of responsibility of opening doors for girls who are younger than them.”<sup>17</sup>

Responding to questions about not placing in the qualifying race, Saudi-American runner Sarah Attar expressed her solidarity in well-intentioned terms: “it was really about the cause, being here, it wasn’t about if I won or not, it was about representing the women over there.”<sup>18</sup> While it seems unlikely that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei could easily roll-back women’s participation in future Olympics after this hurdle has now been surpassed, what it may mean for the access to sport for the majority of girls and women in Saudi Arabia is unclear. Saudi women commentators argue that this achievement is linked to a larger move towards reform of gender restrictions, such as

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in Associated Press (3 August 2012). “Saudi women’s Olympic judo bout over in 82 seconds”. *ESPN*.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Huma Qureshi, “Female Arab athletes: Lives through a lens”, *The National*, 28 July 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Attar, uncredited interview posted on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8JzQj-SZpk> (accessed 28 August 2012).

the decision in 2011 that women could vote and run in future municipal elections, and a new university near Jeddah which allows men and women to study together. Professor and women's rights advocate Hatoon al-Fassi remarked that these developments are part of wider social and political trends: "There is the element of the Arab Spring, there is the element of the strength of Saudi social media, and there is the element of Saudi women themselves, who are not silent...Plus, the fact that the issue of women has turned Saudi Arabia into an international joke is another thing that brought the decision now."<sup>19</sup> While the decision to send female delegates to the Olympic Games may not be the highest priority of Saudi women, one hopes that the move to allow women to engage more fully in the public sphere is part of a larger trend that moves away from equating participating in sports with sexuality, immorality, or an exhibitionist desire to seduce men.

So far, Saudi women's visibility in other spheres of cultural life has been sustained with the milestone of Haifaa Al Mansour directing the first film to be shot in Saudi Arabia, let alone by a woman. In September 2012 *Wadjda* became widely publicized upon its release in international film festivals, with its portrayal of an eleven year-old girl who enters a Quran-reading competition, hoping to use the prize money to buy a bicycle. That the film addresses issues of cultural restrictions to girls' mobility and access to sports reminds us that the debate is about daily life, rather than extraordinary events like international competitions. That this is being broached in a women-directed movie in a country where films are not publicly shown is a signal of

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Neil MacFarquhar, "Saudi Monarch Grants Women Right to Vote", The New York Times, 25 September 2011. (NB: It is important to note that the promise of women's right to vote was for future elections, not for the immediate election that was due after this announcement in 2011. In practice, the promise of the right to vote can be seen as appeasing international allies and the press in the wake of publicity surrounding the arrest of Manal al-Sharif for posting the video of herself driving and encouraging others to join her).

broader cultural shifts in the region. Though Stamata Revithi's determination to participate in the 1896 Olympics was motivated by individual circumstances, the example was set of women persevering to fulfil their potential and pursue their desires. Hopefully the doors to the stadium will no longer be closed to women from conservative contexts like Saudi Arabia, either in international spaces or in everyday access to the health, socialization and leadership skills that sport can instil.

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/27/arab-women-sport-no-more-barriers> (accessed 14 August 2012).

## Chapter 9

# Muslim Women and Sport in the United Kingdom: Breaking With Tradition Or Re-Inventing Gender Segregation?<sup>1</sup>

Ayesha S. Kariapper and Homa Hoodfar

### Islam, Gender and Identity Politics in the UK

Considerable numbers of Muslim women in Britain have adopted veiling, which has come to be one of the most potent Islamic symbols, thus publicly communicating their Muslimness. This development, at least in part, has been a strategy to rid themselves of some of the *cultural* practices imposed on them in the name of Islam (Kariapper 2009, Hoodfar 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> The bulk of the data presented in this chapter was collected as part of a larger multi-country project entitled “Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: Gender, Poverty and Democratization from the Inside Out” (WEMC – <http://www.wemc.com.hk>), in which Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) was one of the four partners. Homa Hoodfar acted as principal investigator for WLUML’s overall participation in the project, both for work conducted in Iran as well as its cross-border components. Ayesha Kariapper was the lead researcher for the UK section of the project, “Examining women’s strategies for empowerment among Muslim communities of Pakistani origin”. The fieldwork was carried out in 2007 and 2008. Funding from Network for Social Change to WLUML facilitated the analysis and preparation of the research finding into a book in 2009 by Ayesha Kariapper, entitled *Walking A Tightrope: Women And Veiling In The United Kingdom* (see <http://www.wluml.org/node/5756>). The core of research for this chapter is a part of this book by Kariapper, which Hoodfar has substantially expanded, revised and updated for the inclusion in this book on sport.

They are separating culture from religion in their struggles for empowerment and a new possibility for gender roles, while also focusing on a woman-centered interpretation of Islamic texts and asserting their rights in making key life choices. Working within a religious framework has enabled them to retain the respect and support of the community despite breaking away from many of the cultural practices that they find to be limiting (Ahmed 2011- Kariapper 2009, Wadud 2006, 1999, Barlas 2005, 2002, Hoodfar 2003). In fact, there is a growing worldwide movement engaging in re-readings of Islamic and religious texts, and developing women-friendly arguments derived from the centrality of human dignity in Islam and an increasingly accepted universal human rights framework to claim gender equality and expand options for Muslim women. In this manner, large numbers of women have managed to modify rigid patriarchal norms and expand the choices available to them, as is evident by their presence in educational facilities and the labour market in the UK.

However, adopting such a strategy based on religious convictions has placed more emphasis on gender modesty and covering women's bodies, which simultaneously has made it difficult for women to enter into fields such as sports, particularly in the face of the increasing influence of political Islamists, Islamophobia, and the fierce assertion of ethnic and Muslim identities (Kariapper 2009). Ironically this unintended consequence has furthered the sexualisation of the female body even more than conventional practices, presenting even more rigid barriers for Muslim girls and women participating in sport in schools and beyond. Games and sport are not just sites of entertainment but are, rather, major sites for building leadership qualities and cooperation, which are necessary skills for successful integration into public life. Furthermore, as Hoodfar has outlined in the introduction of this volume, women's sport has emerged as a major site of contestation for gender equality



on one hand (Darnell et.al 2011, Hayhurst 2011, Harcourt 2009) and peace building and social integration on the other (Keim 2006, Walseth & Fasting 2004). In this context, Muslim community leaders in Britain have initiated various projects including creating womens only spaces to promote Muslim women's sport in Britain.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on one of the most successful initiatives of this kind, and outlines its achievements, while also looking ahead for possible unintended consequences. The analysis of the data indicates that organizers and leaders of such well-intended initiatives have to be extremely vigilant and watchful that while promoting participation of Muslim women in these segregated spaces, they do not unintentionally undermine wider alliances with secular groups, feminists and proponents of gender equality, and anti-racism campaigners. The chapter suggests that the question for community members, leaders and actors is to consider how they may continue to engage and negotiate with the commu-

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<sup>2</sup>We are using 'the Muslim community' here in its loose sense as we are keenly aware that such community in Britain but also elsewhere in the Europe and North America is a political construct (Afshar & Aitken 2005; Mamdani 2002). In the UK, Muslim community as it is commonly understood today has in many ways been the creation of British policies. Until early 1980, ethnic and racial minorities were not categorized under their religion, rather they were referred to by their countries of origin, such as Pakistani, Turkish, Greek, Chinese, etc. These groups usually collaborated through anti-racist and anti-discrimination organizations. It was during Margaret Thatcher's rule (1979-1990) that the government cut funding to these groups and took away their legitimacy and influence by marginalizing them and not inviting them for consultations regarding government policies on ethnic and racial concerns. Moreover, Cold War influences shifted foreign policies in both the UK (under Thatcher, 1979-1990) and the US (under Reagan, 1981-1989), who began to use Islam as a way of mobilizing against Russia in the Afghan war. Accordingly in the UK there was a deliberate policy of promoting religion as a major symbol of Muslim community and allowing the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Religion to fund mosques and import religious clerics to the UK, despite the fact that few if any Muslims in UK belonged to the very restrictive and peculiar Wahabi school that has been practiced in Saudi Arabia since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This combined with the glorification of the so-called 'Freedom Fighters' (terrorists of today) against the Russians in Afghanistan, expanded religious leaders' roles from mostly performing religious rituals, marriages and funerals, to assuming wide-reaching social and political leadership.

nity through British multiculturalism, if we don't want to live in a world fragmented by identity politics.

## **Muslim Women and Sport in UK**

In 2001, Britain became the first non-Muslim majority country to attend the (fourth) Women's Islamic Games in Tehran, Iran.<sup>3</sup> The British team participated for the second time in *futsal* (five-a-side football) at the September 2005 event under the sponsorship of the Muslim News<sup>4</sup> which set up the Muslim Women's Sport Foundation (MWSF) in London. The MWSF is a response to the extremely low level of Muslim women's participation in a variety of sports in the UK. Some 39% of women in Britain do sport as opposed to only 19% of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women.<sup>5</sup> The Foundation provides an acceptable and conducive space to those young girls who may not be able to realise their sports ambitions in conventional settings due to parental opposition since many of the sport facilities are mixed and hence not acceptable to conventional Muslim parents. On the other hand, it provides a platform to those ambitious women athletes to pursue their dreams, especially while facing barriers or rejections by the mainstream women's national teams on account of their dress code preference. For instance, one member of the British Muslim Women's squad joined the team after being rejected

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<sup>3</sup> When Iranian women were deprived from attending the Olympic Games and other international and regional sport competitions on the grounds that the sports and the sport uniforms were un-Islamic, women demanded to have a Muslim Women's Olympics which led to the launching of the Women's Islamic Games" in the 1990s. For more details see Hoodfar in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> The Muslim News, established in 1989, is the most widely read Muslim community newspaper in the UK. It is a monthly publication which can be accessed at [www.muslimnews.co.uk](http://www.muslimnews.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Active People's Survey 2 (2008-2009), Sport England (<http://www.sportengland.org/research>, accessed 22 October 2009)

from her university's football team which had asked her to remove her headscarf when playing for the team. According to Elham Buaras of the Muslim News:

A girl should not have to decide whether to follow her religion or the sport she loves. If a Muslim girl wants to wear a *hijab*, because she believes it is a religious prescription, she should be free to do so.<sup>6</sup>

The MWSF was established in 2001 by Ahmed Versi (editor of the Muslim News) to encourage Muslim women's participation in sports without compromising their religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Versi recounted his motivation for setting up the Foundation as follows<sup>8</sup>:

I once went to Iran when Faezeh Hashmi had just won the Parliamentary elections in 1996 and so I interviewed 3 women in that trip: one was the Advisor on women's issues, another was Shahla Shirkat editor of the Zanan Magazine (the most widely read Iranian Feminist magazine 1991-2008) and the third was of course Faezeh Hashmi herself.

He provided a detailed account of how he evaluated the importance of Women's Islamic Games (see Hoodfar's in this volume) for opening the opportunities for Muslim women:

Faezeh Hashmi was involved in women in sports at the time - they had organized Muslim women from Muslim countries games. So I asked her: what about Muslim

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<sup>6</sup> (September 21, 2005), Islamic Games Give British Women the Option, (The Muslim News 2006, Youth and Policy (2006 Issue 92).

<http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/news.php?article=9902>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mwsf.org.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> All interviews and personal communications with various members and managements of the foundation took place between July and August 2008. The data was augmented by subsequent review of their newsletters, the website and other community publications.

women from non-Muslim countries? So in their Annual General Meeting in 2001 in London, they changed their constitution to allow Muslim women from non-Muslim countries to participate as well...

After the ratification of the constitution of these games, it was our turn to now organize British Muslim teams to participate in these games... So we advertised heavily in the papers, through our own paper (the Muslim News), that here are the International Women's Islamic Games now open to British Muslim women – it's all female, everything takes place in an all-women environment.

Ahmed Versi received an overwhelming response from the Muslim community to the advertisements which showed him that (veiled) British Muslim women indeed wanted to come out and have the space to play and get ready for the games:

We only had 2 – 3 months to prepare teams for the International Games (International Islamic Women's Games) so we didn't obviously have much time. We took the *futsal* and badminton [teams]. We didn't have good enough players for other games.

You must keep in mind that the International Games at that time were very political as well – 9/11 had just happened, there was talk of bombing Afghanistan... We went to Iran against the advice of the Foreign Office. Of course we lost badly - but that was expected. I mean the oldest person in our badminton team was 50 years and the youngest in the *futsal* team was 15. So you can imagine the age difference on the team.

Although both teams secured only a fair play award, the British players thoroughly enjoyed their experience.

Ahamd Versi proudly explained :

It was such an honour you know because when we entered the stadium, three countries got a standing applause: Iran (the host), Afghanistan and the UK. Can you imagine the British flag getting such a response in Iran?

Rimla Akhtar, Chairperson of the Foundation led the *futsal* team at the Games and fondly remembers the “friendly atmosphere” which gave Muslim women from all over the world the chance to get to know each other.”

After returning from the International Games, Ahmad Versi decided to set up the Muslim Women’s Sports Foundation as a non-profit organisation with the aim of encouraging British Muslim women to participate in sports. Ten years on, the Foundation is quite well established and although it has some paid staff, it is primarily run by volunteers, all of whom have a passion for sports but are also pursuing other careers.<sup>9</sup> The Foundation acts as the official representative of the International Women’s Islamic Games for Britain.<sup>10</sup> Ahmad Versi, now the prominent and imaginative editor of *Muslim Times*, who was determined to promote Muslim’s profile away from the sensationalism of the British media - particularly post 9/11, is now an Advisor to the Foundation and is encouraging the young women and girls to take the lead in looking after its day-to-day management. Due to his interest and commitment, he was nominated to be a member of the International Islamic Women’s Games’ Executive Committee representing the only non-Muslim country, and holding the UK’s vote.

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<sup>9</sup> See more on <http://www.kickitout.org/1331.php> ( accessed 12 Aug. 2012)

<sup>10</sup> The International Women’s Islamic Games is left in a state of limbo because its head office in Tehran is closed down and its chair Faezeh Hashmi continues to be under political surveillance after the controversial presidential election in Iran in June 2009 (see Hoodfar in this volume) and the future of these games is unclear even after the election of a more liberal president in 2013.

In our interview with Ahmad Versi, he emphasized that he is very keen to promote Muslim women's participation in sports in other non-Muslim countries, in Europe and elsewhere. However, he complained that none of his letters to any Muslim organizations across Europe got any response. This indicated the lack of interest on the part of these organizations in both valuing and promoting Muslim women's expressed need for more active participation in sport. Explaining the need for the Foundation in Britain, he said:

In this country, because there's a problem due to the requirements of observing *hijab* and Muslim dress code, and since all the referees are usually male, many Muslim girls don't want to play sports. I tell you one example: there was a girl – a very bright student – who played football wearing *hijab* and sport tracks. The referee asked her to leave the grounds because she was wearing *hijab*. We did a campaign then that universities should let women who observe Muslim dress-codes play.

He emphasized that as most coaches tend to be male, it is very difficult to build the calibre of Muslim women's teams to compete at the national level, for they often do not want to get trained by men. In response, the Foundation is undertaking to train a number of Muslim women to be coaches. Indeed as Hoodfar (chapter 2 in this volume) documents, a major achievement of the International Islamic Women's Games has been increasing the training of Muslim women's coaches and qualified referees. Thus conservative parents and religious leaders in the community have little excuse to prevent women from participating. Whether women agree with the limitations imposed on them or not, many of them just want to play rather than having to take on their family and entire community to change the rules of a Muslim society. Having an all female setting will allow them to expand their sphere of public

participation into a conventional arena without having to face multiple challenges.

The MWSF now has regular weekly training sessions for basketball and *futsal* in London and Birmingham as well as other cities. More importantly they support other initiatives that Muslim women and communities launch in different corners of the UK. However, probably the most significant of their activities consists of organizing many exclusively female tournaments and other events, which allow Muslim women's teams to face other all female teams from diverse ethnicities. This builds all the teams' experiences in competitive sport events, in an environment suitable to most. The two popular tournaments at present are basketball and *futsal*. The Foundation's goals in organizing these events are spelled out as:

- ❖ To provide competitive opportunities for teams who do not play in regular leagues and competitions
- ❖ To provide an all female environment to allow women of various cultures the opportunity to participate in *futsal*
- ❖ To encourage and provide a pathway for black and minority ethnic (BME) women to participate in sport at a competitive and structured level
- ❖ To celebrate diversity and promote understanding by bringing together women of different ages, abilities, faiths and cultural backgrounds through a love of *futsal*

Members (players) initially pay a token fee of £6 per month which helps to cover the cost of the coaches. At the beginning they held their training in a hall in Watford High School (further towards North West London). However, later the London training sessions were held in the indoor sports hall of the Harrow High School – the Foundation successfully negotiated with the Harrow Council (a district with considerable concentration of ethnic minorities and low-income communities) to allow them

to use the facilities free of cost. This location was more accessible to the Muslim community and thus facilitated their participation, explained Ayesha Abdeen, the Vice Chairperson of the Foundation and the person responsible for Sports Development and Regional Promotions. In an interview she cited mobility restrictions as a major barrier for Muslim women as their families “are not comfortable with them travelling long distances alone, or going to areas they are not familiar with, even if it is just half-an-hour away.” She emphasized that the goal of the Foundation was to attract new players from the community by removing barriers that prevent British Muslim women who observe the *hijab* as well as those from conservative backgrounds from participating in sports and enjoying a more active, healthier life style and expanded public life. “...we try to meet them on their terms.” Said the Vice Chairperson.

The other main barriers she cited are: dress codes, including *hijab* and full length track suits, accessing women-only facilities, and having female coaches. While not veiled herself, Abdeen was very sensitive to other women’s desires to retain their headscarf or wear tracks when playing and asserted that this requirement should not pose a barrier for them. Born to Sri Lankan parents, Abdeen is a trained physiotherapist and runs a small family business. She played for a sports academy in the Richmond area of South West London for several years before deciding to give it up. Explaining her motivation to leave the academy despite being such a successful player, she said:

To be honest with you, I never really fit in there. Sure, I played well and on the ground I enjoyed the game but then after every game, I had to go the pub with them. And if you don’t drink, you’re automatically excluded from the fun. So I thought that at this Foundation, here I can be myself. There is no pressure to engage in any



activity which I feel is not in line with my religion and I think many of the girls who come here feel the same thing. Their parents and families are also comfortable with the idea because they know they are hanging out with Muslims as opposed to being in a pub.

Rimla Akhtar, the Chairperson, is a qualified Chartered Accountant and held a full-time job as an Associate at Price Waterhouse Coopers at the time of the interview. Akhtar highlighted the great lengths that they have to go to in order to accommodate the needs of their fellow players. A particular area of difficulty was finding appropriate venues for practice. Apparently, most observant Muslim girls and women prefer to play sports in indoor halls without any windows to ensure that no men can see them. Akhtar said that in order to appease worried parents, they welcome them to visit the venue themselves. She believes in working closely with the community – not just the women, but also their mothers and fathers – to bring about a change in their perspectives.<sup>11</sup> She said that while she and many members of the MWSF Executive Committee may not have faced such barriers themselves, if they were to be successful in encouraging Muslim girls to dream of pursuing sports, they need to keep advocating for provision of appropriate facilities for women (personal communication, August 2, 2008).

While the goals of the Foundation are ambitious in that they are a pioneering organisation calling for women to participate in competitive sports, they face severe funding challenges. Akhtar remains hopeful:

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<sup>11</sup> This is a point that Manal Hamzeh (2012) also emphasizes in her work with Muslim women engaged in sport.

Going forward, I think if we have survived the first eight years which were the most difficult, we will be able to make it...it is difficult, but we are that crazy about sports!

Akhtar and Abdeen highlighted their plans of promoting sports for Muslim women by touring across the country and holding Fun Days (where women of various communities come together to play sport, a kind of mini tournament). They were cautious of the challenges they faced from within the community which severely de-prioritise women's sports:

Our mothers' generation only had the option of staying at home and raising a family. Our generation has more options but although we can have a career now, we are still not doing any sports. Hopefully the next generation will be able to have both. That is what we are trying to do – to sort of lay the foundation for them.

The Foundation plans to launch a health education project targeting Muslim students in schools to sensitize them about the need for exercise and a healthy lifestyle. Akhtar said that the Foundation recognised that for Muslim girls to believe that sport was something they can do; they had to be socialised from early childhood. Recalling her own experience, she says:

I was doing sports the minute I started walking. My mother really encouraged me to play sports from the beginning because she too was very sporty as a girl. In fact, she is the one who pushed me to try out for the International Women's Islamic Games trials in 2001! But if you look around, the vast majority of Muslim girls are not taught to catch the ball as a toddler...with the result that when they come to us, we have to start coaching them from a very basic level.

These two Executive Committee members were highly enthusiastic and ambitious about their plans for the Foundation and

for British Muslim women. They aimed to bring Muslim women into mainstream sports, to be able to compete at the national level and one day play in the Olympic Games. They saw themselves as role models for the next generation. Indeed the Olympic Games of 2012 – in which for the first time all Muslim nations had sent at least a few women – provided a good opportunity for the Foundation to promote and legitimate Muslim women’s participation in sport. This they did, along with several other blogs and organizations, both formal and informal.<sup>12</sup> For example, the home page of the MWSF website projected a slide show of the Muslim women (veiled and unveiled) who represented their countries in the 2012 Olympics, as a means to demonstrate the popularity of sport in diverse Muslim contexts and provide role models for young Muslim women in the UK and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite some advancement, participation of Muslim women in the UK particularly has run below that of their counterparts in the wider communities in Europe. Thus the role of organizations such as MWSF are important in enabling British Muslim women to take up sports as a professional career, as a healthy hobby or even to publicly advocate in the community in favour of Muslim girls’ participation in sports. Sport is an important avenue through which young people gain self-confidence and learn to develop collaborative skills and negotiate their positions with those outside their immediate family. Muslim women continue to face a tremendous amount of barriers from their families and community. Most parents and male family members discourage girls’ enthusiasm for sports. Often girls are only able to actively do sports while at

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<sup>12</sup> One blog of note is entitled “Muslim Women in Sports”, which acts as a network for news on Muslim women’s sports and scholarly debates on the topic. See: <http://muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.ca/2012>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://wsff.org.uk/category/category/insight-and-innovation/delivering-sport/fact> (accessed 20 August 2012) .

school when it is compulsory. These concerns are closely linked to notions of modesty and appropriate dress codes. The views of Shahed Saleh, a young male British Muslim with five sisters, represents a commonly held perspective across generations including by many young women. In explaining his view on women's sport, he said:

I wouldn't want them (his sisters) to play sports. You're not allowed to uncover yourself like wearing tracksuit bottoms and all that and play football or badminton, you have to cover yourself.<sup>14</sup>

These attitudes – along with their religious justifications – prevent girls from taking part in sports beyond puberty or late teens. In the same news item that reported Shahid Saleh's views quoted above, an eighteen-year-old girl, Raheema, from the Muslim majority Tower Hamlets of east London, said that she only played badminton in her backyard. She was not encouraged to do any sport by her family who would much rather see her doing household chores. She had not been allowed to go swimming after the age of twelve because "No Muslim girl can wear a revealing swimming costume."

Such obstacles are overcome by interaction with forums such as MWSF where Muslim girls can express their sports ambitions without violating their (or their families') religious beliefs about gender roles. The Foundation organizes women-only events such as Fun Games, where various teams will compete. At these competitions and the places where they practice and train for such events, they are free to observe 'modest' religious dress codes (often a *hijab* and loose t-shirt and tracks, not revealing anything except the face and the hands) even if there are no men present. For girls like Faiza

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<sup>14</sup> Robinson, N.(25 August 25, 2006), Muslims 'Face Barriers' Over Sport, BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/uk/5286568.stm>

Akmal, being part of the British Muslim Women's *futsal* squad has enabled her to play sport within an environment that did not contradict her religion, or go against the values of her family and community. In her words, "I am able to show the general British public that Muslim women are empowered."

As Samana Fazel, another member of team very clearly expressed:

These Games have given me the opportunity to represent who I am – a British Muslim – while playing a sport that I love. We all [the Squad] understand the importance of our roles and the way in which we can shape the future of sport in the lives of Muslim women all around the country. It's a great honour and a great responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

In many ways, the creation of the Muslim Women's Sports Foundation was a major breakthrough for giving visibility to the multiple barriers faced by British Muslim young women participating in sports. In part due to their efforts, several government and sport-governing bodies have recognised the barrier that Muslim women face in their published reports; some of which call for a greater sensitivity to Muslim dress codes. Rimla Akhtar and Ayesha Abdeen acknowledge that the efforts of the Foundation were paramount in generating this understanding through proactively networking with all major sport governing bodies in the UK and routinely making presentations to them about the needs of British Muslim women. To be better informed of the needs and obstacles that Muslim women face in the UK as well as collective ideas and grassroots initiatives in promoting sport for Muslim women, the Foundation has launched an ambitious research project

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<sup>15</sup>Minister, Mayor Backs British Muslim Football Team, The Muslim News (September 16, 2005): <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/index/press.php?pr=214>

engaging diverse Muslim communities across the UK. The first phase of this research included a very detailed survey of 800 Muslim women, completed in 2011, and the second phase is currently underway. Once completed, this research is expected to contribute greatly towards policies and initiatives that promote sport for Muslim women in the UK, as well as elsewhere in Europe and North America, where few large scale research projects focused on Muslim women's sport have been conducted.

Another important initiative the Foundation has launched is the Muslim Women's Sport Foundation Ambassador Awards, which every year hosts a public ceremony to award those personalities who, in various ways, have worked to promote sport among Muslim women. The nominees in various categories range from royalties and elite athletes to grassroots community organizations and volunteers. Over the years as the promotion of sport as a major tool of development, empowerment and integration in public life has received a new recognition, the MWSF Ambassador Awards have become very high profile. In 2012 this event was staged in Wembley Stadium and was inaugurated by the Football Association (FA) of the UK.<sup>16</sup>

Since then, and perhaps inspired by the MWSF, a number of smaller local level initiatives have been made by Muslim women to set up alternative facilities for themselves. One such initiative is the Sisters Games, located in Birmingham.<sup>17</sup> This group's goals are not as ambitious as the MWSF, but they represent a local initiative that has relied entirely on local resources and deservedly has been showcased in a report by

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<sup>16</sup> For details, see

<http://www.thefa.com/TheFA/WhatWeDo/Equality/NewsAndFeatures/2012/muslim-womens-sports-foundation-award>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?206778-Sisters-Games-Sports-in-Bir>; [http://www.islamicity.com/forum/printer\\_friendly\\_posts.asp?TID=14386](http://www.islamicity.com/forum/printer_friendly_posts.asp?TID=14386)

the Women's Sports Foundation. The Sisters Games was set up by Shalina and her husband, Amin, a medical doctor born and brought up in the UK. Their aims consist of advertising and facilitating sporting events for Muslim women in the Birmingham area. In an interview with the author, she said that the inspiration to set up the Sisters Games was spontaneous as she, a 25 year old mother of two who after completion of her A-level exams married and moved to the UK, one day discovered that she had nowhere suitable to exercise in her local area:

There was no gym where there's no cameras or windows and where I could take my *hijab* off. There isn't really much out there for Muslim women.

So with the support of her husband she distributed leaflets (in bookstores and door-to-door) and set up a website to advertise their initiative. Shalina said that for now, these games are very informal. They essentially rent a hall where women can play indoor badminton and football and also exercise. The age group of the regular members ranges from 22 to 30 years, comprising mothers, housewives, students and professionals, mainly of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin. Explaining the motivation of the members to join these games, Shalina said:

We provide a secure environment. Everyone who comes to my place wears a *hijab* or *niqab* – some even wear a *burqa* – they ask me ten times: is the door locked? People have a right to be strict, to follow their religion.

This comment denotes a certain level of anxiety on the part of the users of the exercise facilities about not wanting to be seen without a veil by *non-mahram* men (men who are not members of the first degree family) who may accidentally open the door. One of the other interesting and more talked about initiatives that has attracted the attention of the Muslim community as well as a wider social media is the creation of a

self-defence program called *Ninjabi*, which was launched in 2007 by Islamic Circles initially coordinated by a young woman Raja.<sup>18</sup> This program was devised after the 7/7 bombing of London in 2005 which increased Islamophobia against all Muslims and especially veiled women.<sup>19</sup> Many felt they should learn to defend themselves against mostly petty acts of harassment. Thus there was a surge of interest in self-defence. Given the commitment to observing hijab and gender segregation, there were few opportunities for women to learn any form of self defence.

It was at this historical juncture, along with popular demands from Muslim women that Raja devised the *Ninjabi* project, together with colleagues in Islamic Circles. The concept was that Muslim women who wear hijab (headscarf) and niqab (face veil) should be positive about their self-image and their ability to physically defend themselves. The name is a play on the words "hijabi" (veiled Muslim women) and "niqabi" (those who wear the face veil) but also "ninja" (Ninjutsu) – a form of Japanese martial art. This intended to turn the old stereotype of the submissive and timid Muslim women on its head not just

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<sup>18</sup> Islamic Circles, is a "non-profit" community-based network that has been running at the Froud Centre, East London since January 2001. They organise a wide range of Islamic events, projects and activities including short courses, seminars, workshops, social gatherings, etc. (<http://www.islamiccircles.org>).

<sup>19</sup> 7/7 refers to the series of coordinated suicide bombings on public transport that took place on 7 July 2005, a day after London was selected to host the 2012 Summer Olympics. Four British Muslims carried out the attacks, which resulted in many injuries and some deaths. According to Sara Wajid of the Guardian (15 June 2007) and Zahra Awaleh of Islam. Net, with the increase in Islamophobia after the bombings, there was also an increase in various forms of attacks on Muslims, particularly towards veiled Muslim women. These attacks took various forms, including pulling off women's head-scarves, spitting at them, and more. This was clearly documented in the three weeks following the 7/7 bombings. The Metropolitan Police recorded 269 Islamophobic crimes, compared with 40 in the same period of 2004. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jun/15/religion.gender>; and <http://onislam.net/english/culture-and-entertainment/fine-arts/409447.html> (accessed 14 August 2012).



for the wider community but for Muslim women themselves, particularly those observinghijab.<sup>20</sup>

The early classes were taught by a female instructor, Dee Terret, who while not a Muslim herself, supports the vision of the project and believes such a program increases women's self confidence. Dee Terret started martial arts at the age of six in her native South Africa and participated in many international self-defence tournaments for women. By the time she was a teenager she had trained in boxing, judo, and knife-defence. The interesting aspect of ninjab self-defence is that it is tailor-designed for the Muslim women who may be wearing hijab or various forms of *abaya* (a long and wide overall), so that they can practice defence in realistic situations. For instance, they learn how to deal with an incident of someone pulling off their veil. These classes have a considerable impact on the lives of many women, some of whom had grown uneasy venturing out in public due to fear of Islamophobic harassment of Muslims and had thus had become even more dependent on their male relatives. It would be interesting to see the kinds of changes that such *avant garde* and unconventional training would result in for the gender relations with their families and communities.

The classes were initially offered in the heart of a large East London Muslim community in Manor Park Bourough. The project had four levels, the titles of which reflected the influence of Hollywood Bruce Lee films on the present generation of British Muslims:

1. Enter the Ninjab
2. Return of the Ninjab
3. Way of the Ninjab
4. Fist of the Ninjab

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<sup>20</sup> Zahra Awaleh (2007). "'Get Back!' say the Ninjabis", <http://onislam.net/english/culture-and-entertainment/fine-arts/409447.html> (accessed 14 August 2012).

Today ninjabi is very popular and the demand for various forms of ninjabi defence programs runs not just in London, but in many Muslim communities across the UK, Europe and North America. Furthermore it has become very popular in many Muslim majority countries such as Iran and Egypt, where sexual harassment of women in public spaces is rampant and thus women are increasingly interested in learning to protect themselves. In Iran in particular, ninjabi self defence has become very popular with women in veiled outfits.<sup>21</sup>

Dress code presents a major obstacle in encouraging more Muslim women to join competitive games in regional, national, and international events, which can act as an important inspiration for the youth to engage in sport. Competitive sports in particular is viewed by the MWSF and other community leaders as a major means of promoting health but also socializing youth into promoting self-confidence, networking and developing their collaboration skills. However, the restricting dress codes which has been adopted by many sport associations excludes the possibility of Muslim women participating. In this cultural context the MWSF, along with several other women's sport associations from Muslim majority countries, took the lead in advocating for reform in the prescribed dress codes of the Football Association (FA) in the UK as well as *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA). This is significant because football is one of the most popular games, not just in the UK but also in many Muslim majority countries and given that it can be played with minimum infrastructure and investment, it is also known in some contexts of the Middle East as the "People's Game".

Until 2012, FA and FIFA had strict rules regarding uniform guidelines, not leaving room even for long track pants to be

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<sup>21</sup> Some 3500 women have been training. For interesting demonstrations, see video on Iran.

worn by the players. Citing health and safety reasons, it banned any head covering and as such neither the headscarf nor the turban were allowed on the court. MWSF protested against this, emphasizing that such prescriptions prevent Muslim women (who cover themselves) from participating in sports. The Foundation echoed the argument of many other interested parties that these rules and regulations are archaic and serve as a means of imposing a particularly male dominated western culture on people of other cultures. Many, including those not committed to any religious beliefs, have articulated their criticism of some of these regulations, a tool of exclusionary practices instead of a means of promoting the sport for all (Hamze Al samdi forthcoming). To be sure, at first FIFA officials argued against wearing the veil during the game for safety reasons. However when a 'safe' head-gear was developed, FIFA changed its argument from safety to prohibition of any religious symbol on the field (Hoodfar 2013). Yet, until then there was no objection to the crosses that some of the players wore during the game which could indeed also raise safety concerns. Finally in a long drawn negotiation between various interested parties, in July 2012 FIFA agreed that specially designed safe head gear can be worn by the players.<sup>22</sup>

This was a major victory for women's football organizations in the Muslim majority contexts, particularly Iran and Jordan as well as for the MWSF who publicly championed the Muslim women's case and ran a public campaign to bring about a change of heart on the part of FIFA (Hamzeh forthcoming(a), Hoodfar 2013).

However, the Foundation failed to make a connection to broader current arguments that examined the cultural and

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<sup>22</sup> For more details on this subject visit [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/07/05/fifa-hijab\\_n\\_1652398.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/07/05/fifa-hijab_n_1652398.html); <http://www.abawaba.com/editorchoice/fifa-muslim-veil-433011> .

sexual basis of many dress codes for women, not just in football but across various sports which continue to objectify women's bodies in ways that do not apply to men (Hamza forthcoming; Hoodfar 2013; McDonagh & Pappano 2008; Howell 1982). As Hoodfar explains in the introduction of this book, many Muslim women feel they have to struggle both against hyper sexualization of their bodies in their own communities, as well as objectification of their bodies as women in national and international contexts. For instance, there is no good reason why women should have to wear skirts when they play tennis or badminton tournaments, when men can wear shorts. These archaic rules have been subject to criticism not just by Muslim women but also by women's right movements and proponents of gender equality in sport (Hoodfar 2013; McDonagh & Pappano 2008).<sup>23</sup> Indeed the continuous existence of these kinds of dress codes have given opponents of Muslim women's participation in international sporting events a credible excuse to continue to exclude women. The justification comes from the thought that through these sports and uniforms, the games are intertwined with the objectification of women, creating an unsuitable portrayal of women for the Muslim community.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has canvassed some of the key initiatives of sport for Muslim women in the UK including the establishment of the Muslim Women Sport Foundation and various grassroots actions to expand sporting possibilities for young Muslim British women. The core of these initiatives is the creation of segregated sport facilities that make it possible for many young

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<sup>23</sup> Laura Gottesdiener (31 May 2011). "Badminton Skirts-Only Rule Abandoned in Face of Criticism", The Huffington Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/31/badminton-skirts-rule\\_n\\_869099.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/31/badminton-skirts-rule_n_869099.html) (accessed 14 August 2012).

Muslim women to expand their public life and engage in sport, without having to face opposition and criticism from their conservative parents and communities. Such innovations have already begun and will continue to expand young Muslim women's social networks and horizons, as well as improving their mental and physical health, leadership qualities and often their self confidence, particularly in the face of increased anti-Muslim sentiments in the UK and Europe. Furthermore, the foundation and its sister organisations have worked to bring to the attention of the wider society, community leaders, and policy makers, the need to address some of the cultural and religious concerns that have disadvantaged Muslim women from religious and conservative backgrounds. They have also participated in questioning some of the 'archaic' rules governing national and international sport that are based on patriarchal European sensibilities concerning women's dress codes. In short, their initiatives have made sport for Muslim women a public debate among the Muslim community that had not hitherto considered it important, while also encouraged the wider society to pay closer attention to their needs.

However, these segregating facilities, which are designed to meet the most restrictive interpretation of what is permitted for Muslim women, may also encourage or exert pressure on many women who would have previously joined non-gender segregated facilities to instead participate only in segregated spaces. Such unintended consequences of segregationist strategies may go against the aims of the initial advocates for these innovations, which were primarily to empower Muslim women to break away from restrictive community life and to claim their public citizenship rights. Promotion of such segregated sport spaces, particularly where Muslims are a minority, should be treated with caution as it may reduce the ability of women to negotiate their way in wider society and thus further disadvantage them. This is a very different trend

from women taking up the veil in order to more freely participate in educational institutions or the labour-market or even taking up politics, which empower them and other women in their communities by opening the possibility of new opportunities to them.

Thus while women's rights advocates and community organizers have reason to celebrate the expansion of Muslim women into public spaces, through segregated sport facilities, they should also be mindful of its potential negative consequences and adopt strategies to counteract the possibility of these less desirable outcomes. As some of the chapters in this volume argue and as other existing data from various societies indicate, the more a society practices gender segregation and sexual division of labour, the fewer rights and choices are open to women. There are many ways that such negative consequences can be averted, which need a separate space for discussion. However, as one of our research participants suggested, one possible strategy can be the formation of secular Muslim women's sport organizations that can engage in the promotion of sport for youth, and run women's sport camps and tournaments between various minorities and national women's teams. These organization could thus act as a bridge between the conservative Muslim sport organizations and the wider society in a much more coherent and purposeful manner than it has so far happened. Clearly there is a need to reflect on ways that sport becomes a vehicle of Muslim women's empowerment and furthers their inclusion in wider society. If we do not want our navigation through the treacherous roads of multiculturalism to lead us to a world fragmented by identity politics, we have to find ways and means of addressing the needs of the community, while also creating a society that promotes unity in diversity. This means that along with the community initiatives promoting sport for women, community leaders must be mindful of encouraging wider alliances with

secular groups, feminists, anti-racism campaigners and civil society actors to promote social development based on harmony and human rights for all.

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## **Part Two**

### **Beyond Muslim Contexts**



# Chapter 10

## **Women Defying Exclusion: The Struggle to Participate in Sport in Europe and North America**

Aisling H. Barratt

Sport, above all, is a social institution reflecting the cultural values of a given era – it is not surprising that throughout most documented history, sport and games involvement reflected and promoted male interests and solidarity, creating a seemingly unyielding social barrier between the masculine and feminine. By studying women's exclusion in sport in Europe and North America, I was able to investigate the overlap between my research and the battles that Muslim women are currently fighting for equality in sport. Arguments of morality are being regurgitated to provide false evidence against women's participation in sport. However, these arguments are being slowly drowned in the resonance of success within Muslim contexts where barrier after social barrier is being deconstructed to promote equality in sport.

Sport in Europe and North America has been discussed through 'masculine' or 'feminine' activities; 'male' and 'female' were concretely separated in this domain. However, attitudes began to change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when many women contested these divides – specifically through involvement in

the Olympics. This paper discusses some of the struggles women had to overcome to be involved in competitive sport and the mechanisms women athletes used to defy their exclusion, which provides insight into the methods presently adopted by women living in Muslim contexts who face marginalization in the sports sphere in the name of religion. The gender divide in sport will be expressed in this paper through the separation of activity – into ‘exercise’ and ‘competition/games’. This divide continues to have an impact on women in sport and by extension, the reproduction of gender roles and relations in society.

### **‘Femininity’ and Sport**

After the American Civil War (1865 onwards), both sides of the Atlantic used sport and physical activity as vehicles for defining masculinity. The War created a sense of the ‘super-masculine’ among males; the emergence of competitive sport as a facilitator for this image did not take long to root in society. Intense sporting activities turned boys into ‘manly’ men. Women were absent from the classification of competitive sport or games, in this way ostracized somewhat from the public domain and social discourse. Even when society accepted that sport was important for women’s health and began to include them in certain activities, the area reserved for women and young girls was mild/light exercise that could be undertaken inside the home, and thus away away from the public gaze. In this way sport for women became associated with turning girls into fit mothers and objects fit for the male gaze. While male games were designed to enhance masculinity and leadership, female exercise was alternately designed to enhance the ‘feminine appeal’ of woman, for example through dancing; ‘grace’ was a quality deemed necessary for a prospective wife in nineteenth century society. The definition of femininity and respectability

acted as a major social barrier for women-participating in sport. Women were assumed to be too delicate for strenuous activity, lacking the physical, mental and emotional capability needed to compete in competitive sport games beside men – constructing the female as incapable and inadequate in this sense. Men and women were socially assumed to be polar opposites in the public sphere during this era. Sport was, like most other social institutions, a means to solidify social values of gender identity. In contrast to women being defined by their exclusion from sport in society, men were socially expected to take part in competitive games in the public sphere, to affirm notions of masculinity.

‘Feminine’ had very concrete attributes – ‘leisured’ and ‘modest’ women marked the higher classes and the success of men and their families, while the poorer women of society had bodies that showed the physical strain and harshness of their lives. In this way, sport did not appeal to women who were trying to uphold a distinct social image as privileged in society. Woman’s biological differences, notably her reproductive abilities, became the leading offence in the debate against female participation in sport. Sport was discouraged on the grounds that such strenuous activity could cause reproductive problems such as sterility.<sup>1</sup> The newly fetishized ‘science’ of the time, which was nevertheless ideologically inclined to re-produce dominant values, introduced ‘pseudo-proof’ into the social order of the consequences of female involvement in sport and such a belief was widely accepted into public opinion.

However, women did not passively accept these assumptions about their bodies. Counter discourses were launched, using similar yet contradicting ‘scientific’ proofs condoning exercise

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<sup>1</sup> However it took quite a while before corsets and other clothing items were seen as a detriment to women’s health on a broad scale in the public domain; they were seen as important in the display of femininity.

for the good of women's overall health. Gradually, socially appropriate 'women's activities' expanded, encompassing horse-riding and dancing as well as previously approved 'exercise'. Towards the mid-1800s the *American Farmer* printed a "Ladies' Department" in their magazines, a section encouraging female participation in sporting activities for health reasons – challenging former validations for excluding women from the realm of sport through popular media discourse (Berryman & Brislin 1982). At this time, the publication had a very wide audience. This magazine continued to publish on issues related to women's health and also discouraged the wearing of fashionable tight corsets and binding clothes on health grounds, inadvertently perhaps striking a blow to the objectification and deformation of women's bodies with certain clothing. This publication portrayed women as equal work partners rather than sexual objects at the service of their male folk, a considerable divergence from conventions of the time.

These developments paved the way for women's rights advocates to promote sport participation on a wider scale for women, making notable progress before the turn of the century on an institutional level. Mount Holyoke, a girl's educational facility, was the pioneering example (Davenport 1982). Sport inequality was becoming a topical issue of confrontation, along with the discrepancies that existed in educational training for men and women. Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (Massachusetts, USA) became the first institution to offer sporting activities at a college level (in the form of gymnastics and calisthenics) in 1860, as well as through their educational programs. Although men and women were still separated within the spheres of sport, exercise and competition, condoning female participation in organized sports and activities was the first crack in society's gender barrier in sport. Female involvement in gymnastics and calisthenics in institutions like Mount Holyoke, however, did



not challenge patriarchal concepts; neither did the popularity of dancing for women, which was a social institution meant for introducing men to their possible future wives. Yet these activities, including social events such as dancing, and programs in colleges, were mechanisms for including a consciousness of the female in the public sphere – a stepping-stone towards gender equality.

Having established credibility in at least some areas of sport activity, women used the developing debates – like those found in the *American Farmer* – to introduce other innovations, particularly in relation to clothing. Social conventions around ‘acceptable’ dress code for women had played a major role in limiting women’s participation in sporting activities. Therefore, women began devising alternatives to the ‘norms’ regarding dress code. For example, a more practical attire (despite considerable antagonisms) was designed for horse riding, eliminating the ‘side-saddle’ technique as well as suitable clothing for riding a bicycle (Macy 2011, Crane 2000). This venture was a large undertaking in making horse riding a more equal sport for men and women riders. Similarly, they adapted tennis uniforms that were modest yet more practical than the corsets and skirts of the era. These modifications gradually evolved and gained much more popularity amongst female players as well as the general public towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In many ways similar strategies (modifications of sport uniforms) have been adopted by proponents of women’s sport in contemporary Muslim contexts, where religion and the idea of modesty have been used by conservatives to exclude women from the sporting sphere (Hoodfar 2013).

The topic of dress introduces another pressing argument against women’s participation in sport, concerning her sexuality and appearance in public. Indeed ‘modesty’ is not just an issue that arises for women in Muslim contexts. In the case of

Europe and North America, although historically many middle-class women objected to the social norms of attire that restricted their mobility, the cost of breaking these norms was often too heavy and few women were willing or could afford to go against their own culture. Despite some accepted changes to particular dress codes, for the most part any deviation from appropriate social attire would easily lead to a public audience questioning women's morality and social identity.



*Figure 1.  
'Moral  
Police' on a  
beach in the  
U.S.*

Taken from: <http://www.policestateusa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/swimsuit-police-washington-dc-1922.jpg> (accessed 25 September 2012).

In fact the social emphasis on morality and modesty was so extreme, particularly in Britain and the United States, that state law actively regulated and enforced modesty in clothing among women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is appropriate in this case to look at swimwear as a prime example.

Like in all other sporting activities for women at this time, uniforms were strictly regulated for public swimming, particularly in the United States. Swimwear consisted of an outfit that

## Women Defying exclusion

covered most of the skin, and was most commonly fabricated out of wool – a highly impractical, yet socially acceptable material. In one highly publicized instance, Annette Kellerman (1886–1975) – an Australian professional swimmer, diver and film star – was arrested in 1907 on a beach in Boston by US police officers. They waited for her as she got out of the water, condemning her for wearing 'inappropriate attire' in public – a form-fitting one piece that exposed her legs and her arms. Although this may have been an extreme case, it is important to recognize that 'moral police' were indeed a reality for the women of Britain and the US during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, creating a fear of both social and judicial punishment for challenging social regulations on dress codes.



Figure 2. Annette Kellerman, early 1900's. Taken from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annette\\_Kellerman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annette_Kellerman)

Kellerman was a vocal advocate for women's rights to wear one-piece suits. The 'scandal' of her public protest and arrest resulted in a legal trial. Pictures of her in one-piece suits were published in local newspapers as evidence for the prosecution and as a way of 'shaming' her in public – both to an American and European audience. However, as a successful athlete – one who had successfully swum the Boston Harbor, the Seine (Paris), and the Danube – this act helped spawn a revolution in women's swimwear, with Kellerman herself taking a lead role in advocating physical activity for women as well as women's rights (Leder 1996:12).

Simultaneous to the Kellerman-induced revolution, other major developments for the inclusion of women in the sporting sphere were encouraged by some very successful athletes, such as Margaret Abbott (golf), Madge Syers (figure skating) and Sarah "Fanny" Durack, who set a world record in swimming (Leder 1996).

Yet despite these achievements, it seemed that every time a barrier to women's participation fell, another one was erected. As the issue of appropriate dress codes was being deconstructed and tackled from various fronts, the media took up the task of negatively portraying women in sport, shaming them for their dress codes, and simply ignoring women athletes and games. Although some women's games were introduced and accepted in certain spheres, the public was not encouraged to support these competitions, a trend that largely continues even today. As Askren (in this volume) has indicated, women athletes were presented as overly masculine, taking part in games suitable solely for male competitors. This attitude on the one hand discouraged many young women from joining sport and on the other hand, female athletes were often encouraged to overemphasize the socially accepted feminine norms such as wearing make-up and highly feminine, fashionable clothing in

the public eye. Furthermore, female sport remained segregated from public spaces and spectacles due to modesty rules as well as cultural values that considered women as belonging to the private sphere.

In contemporary times, we see similar attempts by various states to enforce gender segregation. As Afzali (in this volume) outlines in the case of women being banned as spectators from Azadi Stadium in Iran, following the same logic of women's tournaments being completely closed to male spectators. The state-owned media in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and some other countries plays a major role in discouraging women's sport, claiming 'inappropriate dress' and mixing of sexes even as spectators leads to 'immorality'. They insist on the ideology that women belong in the private sphere of the home, away from men's eyes. We see by this comparison, as well as the recent controversy surrounding South African runner Caster Semenya (as discussed by Athar in this volume), that across time periods and diverse social contexts the female athlete is continually presented as a source of scandal – if recognized at all – in the light of the media. Indeed as I will discuss, media, along with funding opportunities and access to the Olympic games played pivotal roles in how women's sport and female athletes have been publicly perceived.

### **Funding as a Barrier for Female Athletes**

Funding has also remained a source of struggle for women's inclusion in competitive sports. Without monetary support equal to that of male games, female sport will not grow to the same level of popularity and cultural acceptance. Male control has and continues to dominate the distribution of both public and private funding sources, supported by a biased legal

system which does not enforce equality in terms of public funding allocations.

A prime example of this discrimination in the early twentieth century was the denial of funding Sarah “Fanny” Durack and her teammate Mina Wylie in their participation as swimmers in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics (Leder 1996: 16). Prior to 1912, swimming was a male-only event at the Olympics. In 1912, 93 men from 17 nations and 27 women from 8 nations competed in the swimming events. Nonetheless the overall number of women competing at was only 47, compared to 2,359 men. These Olympic Games would be the last for a number of decades that saw the inclusion of women. For these athletes, neither the Olympic Council nor the Australian government would assist them in funding their trip to Stockholm, despite their athletic successes (Leder 1996: 17), and despite the fact that their male counterparts did receive funding. It appears there was no other basis for denying them grants, apart from their status as women athletes.

Unfortunately, this is but one of many occasions where talented female competitors have been deprived of necessary funding to compete, unlike their male peers. Women's games in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were organized predominantly through institutions such as schools. These events attracted very specific and minimal financial support, and remained largely within the confines of physical education classes. Indeed the lion's share of public support came from family members. In contrast, sporting 'games' and competitions that were organized for male students were promoted not only by their academic institutions, but also by more autonomous and private organizations. Women had far fewer opportunities to participate and develop their skills in playing competitive games, leading to considerable consequences for their advancement in sport – as well as in society. Competitive sports,

particularly those played as a team, provide opportunities for individuals to learn to work collectively and cooperatively, and also help promote leadership qualities at a very young age. Public acknowledgement of athletes' performance provides a ground for the development of their self-confidence and individuality. These were precisely the qualities that women at the time were not encouraged to develop under strict patriarchal control in the social order.

### **The Olympic Games: Contesting Inequalities**

The Olympic Games can be viewed as an arena of inequality in sport as well as a contest of athleticism. As mentioned above, the funding discrepancies between male and female competitors were a major factor in pushing women's sport out of public light. The Games themselves were seen as inherently masculine, a competitive field in which women in most societies were not encouraged to enter. Since its place in ancient Greece, men were always encouraged to participate in the Olympic Games. Women, on the other hand, were thought of as spectators and barred from the games themselves. This did not stop some women from defying these regulations, by running around the stadium when races commenced, or indirectly participating by entering their horses in chariot races – according to sources such as Jane Leder (1996) in her book *Grace and Glory*. Women continued to be excluded when the Games were revived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1896. De Coubertin did not feel the Olympic Games were a place for women's competition. He judged women as physically inferior, as did the majority of society at this time. Thus women not only had to work hard to excel in their sport activities, but they also had to struggle against social, legal and institutional barriers in order to open these spaces to women. As various

chapters in this volume indicate, these struggles continue today in various parts of the world.

The few sports that came to be included for women were tennis, golf, and after 1912, swimming. This is another reason why Durack's name is important in the struggle for women's inclusion; she was the first to swim in a "ladies event" and come home with the gold. The 1920s saw more women and more events in the Olympics, yet the committee – including De Coubertin – rejected the entrance of women into the track and field competitions; justifying this action with claims of women's 'inadequate stamina' for such races.

In response to this exclusion, French women staged their own international games, the *Jeux Olympiques Feminines du Monde*, as well as the *Olympiades Feminines* being held in Monaco (Leder 1996: 21). The *Jeux Feminines* were so successful that three hundred women from five countries competed. They were held again in 1922 and 1923, including track and field events for competitors. These two events in particular were organized as an effective and very successful protest to the exclusion and unequal treatment of women in the Olympic Games. Noticing the success of these women's games, the Olympic Committee revised their ruling and entered negotiations with organizers of these games. In the 1928 Olympics, track and field events were introduced for women, including the 800-meter race. Yet women in these games were not only met by opposition from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), but their portrayal in the media fostered negative public opinion about the athletes. The athletes that competed were under tremendous pressure from all sides – seeing very little support for their efforts. In this environment several women athletes collapsed before the end of the 800m race – of the eleven starters, only six crossed the finish line. Rather than associating the limited success of women athletes



at this first trial with a lack of adequate training, resources and support as compared to their male counterparts, a media frenzy ensued grossly misrepresenting the race and women's 'sporting abilities', which resulted in the discontinuation of the 800m race for women until 1960. Nonetheless despite the portrayal of the female athletes' in the media, their participation in this race marked a victory for women's movements of the time.

### **The Role of the Media**

As mentioned, the media has always held a very influential position in the public eye regarding the perception of female athletes. Unfortunately, this influence has predominantly been used to slander and discourage women athletes, as one can see from the above example of the 1928 Olympics. Another prominent example of the media's power to tarnish women's images can be illustrated by the case of Mildred 'Babe' Didrikson. One cannot discuss female sporting legends who played a major role in breaking the social barriers and securing women's right to sport without including her name.<sup>2</sup> Mildred 'Babe' Didrikson excelled in many athletic fields – beginning with basketball when she was sixteen, bringing her team to second place in the American national basketball championships, and then moving onwards to include competitive solo-sports in her repertoire. She won five events in the 1932 Olympic trials for track and field, and came home with two gold medals in the Games for javelin and the 80m hurdles. By the end of her career, Didrikson held American, Olympic and World records for five different track and field events between 1930 and

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<sup>2</sup> For an informative piece on Mildred Didrikson, see <http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/features/00014147.html> (accessed 31 October 2012).

1932. She achieved success in swimming, golf and baseball, and continued to play basketball. In these respects, she excelled above the standard of many of her peers – either male or female.

However, rather than celebrating her achievements against the odds, chauvinistic allegations emerged in newspapers and other media outlets about her non-feminine appearance. The media created an image of her as ‘not a real woman’, criticizing her muscular appearance and circulating rumours that she had testosterone levels closer to that of men. Such negative portrayals were circulated, for no other reason it would appear, than Didrikson was a highly successful athletic female. Fortunately, these accusations did not deter her from being an outstanding sportswoman, nor an inspiring role model for younger female athletes. Negative media coverage did however exert pressure on her to publicly appear as ‘typically’ feminine when she wasn’t competing – wearing make-up, dresses, etc., and always being accompanied by her husband – to prove to the media they were wrong. Such efforts seemed to be needed at this time for female athletes – and one can argue are still at play for the female athletes competing in 2012 – acting as a deterrent for future women competitors; the price was too high for some women to sacrifice their social image for sport. The ‘conservative West’ of America valued ‘femininity’ more than the quality of athletic performance for women, as Lucas and Smith (1982) documented in their writings on public attitudes concerning female athletes in the twentieth century. Women in sports were classed as ‘misplaced’ outside of ‘feminine’ games, and continued to be portrayed and considered as lacking (society’s perception of) femininity. This type of portrayal was not only a social attack on the athletes themselves, but acted as a deterrent for other women to engage in the sporting community. Despite their blossoming world-wide involvement in sporting activities at the time, women athletes were not taken seriously in their place in the

world of games and sports – certainly not to the level of male participants.

### **The Struggle Continues: Sport and the Second Wave of the Women's Movement**

Gradually society's perception of suitable women's roles was altering, particularly after World War II. Through the war effort, women by taking on the industrial production and many other roles, had proved their competence in areas that were previously deemed 'unsuitable' for women. This helped women gain visibility in the public sphere and gain confidence to question many of the limitations they were facing which were often justified by the biological differences of men and women. In many ways this questioning facilitated the second wave of the women's movements in the US and Europe. In this social and political context, the 1960s became another important turning point in the struggle for equal sporting opportunities for women. Women's movements were already challenging the wider social order with regards to political and economic opportunities, as well as equality in the institution of family and the laws that governed it. During this decade the right to competitive sport as an arena to promote gender equality was much more systematically pursued, particularly in the US. Through research, historical documentation and public mobilization, women argued that the lesser public presence of female athletes was not due to a lack of women's interest or abilities, as demonstrated by the many separate women's games that were established even before the 1960s. Rather, they convincingly demonstrated that the rules and regulations of the majority of male-dominated sporting events largely prohibited female advancement in sports. Moreover, mainstream media had not taken an interest in promoting women's sport either, continuing to focus on men's games.

Despite the progress made up to that point, social resistance to women's inclusion in sports had remained considerable. "Where competitive sports existed for women in the early 1970's, it was often financed with a budget less than one percent of that of men's athletic programs" (Lucas & Smith 1982: 249).

Leading figures of the women's movement carried out research and ran campaigns to remove the barriers to women's participation in the mainstream public discourse and consciousness. They highlighted the lack of funding for women's sport and the vast discrimination that girls were facing – not only within the school systems, but also in broader public life. They demanded that the government act against inequality and pass legislation that would guarantee an equal playing field in sport for both male and female students in educational institutions. The result of the women's movements' campaigning was Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972, which legally ensured equal funding investments in both girls' and boys' sport.

This Act was one of the most important developments to further women's sport in the US in the twentieth century. Besides funding, Title IX required equality of coaching, practice time, budget, and most of all equal opportunity to both sexes. The legislation has had a huge impact on the women's sporting movement, despite occasional criticism raised by some scholars (Brake 2010, Blumenthal 2005, Gavora 2003). It has helped to define women athletes by what they do, rather than their expected gender roles. The impact of Title IX has been subject to several research projects, books and hundreds of articles. Yet even after 40 years, Title IX has not brought gender equality into sport. This is due to the fact that although this Act had a great impact on educational institutions, it does not have the same influence over private sport institutions – which are now powerful, multi-million dollar profitable businesses, which control the development of professional sport. Nonetheless, de-

spite some shortcomings, Title IX was one of the most major advancements to come out of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for women's sport (Brake 2010, Gavora 2003). It has drawn attention to sport as an arena for development broadly, and presented many women from outside the US with lessons and strategies for opening up women's participation in sport. Within America, Title IX helped create a large shift in public perception – towards expecting equality in sport. Intercollegiate games were now condoned for female institutions – and on top of that, were given the financial support of their male equivalents. Young female students especially were beginning to be recognized for their athletic ability, rather than be ostracized because of it.

As women's sport became more overt in the public sphere, there was an increasing pressure for male and female activities to have the same governance. Each side fought for their autonomy, thereby fueling what some referred to as 'the battle of the sexes' in sport itself. Perhaps it is only in hindsight that we can see the separation of male/female programs was more of a hindrance in sport equality – solidifying the separation of men and women in sport, just as society did in the past.

When one debates the evolution of equality in sport, it may be more accurate to describe the progression as a removal of mainstream dualist "essentialisms" (Rintala 2001) – what was deemed appropriate for the 'male' is not for the 'female', and femininity is defined by what is not masculine (i.e. not included in the realm of sport). Although women have overcome many barriers of participation in sport and have brought about the introduction of Title IX and similar legislations in other countries, the sphere of women's sport still remains separate from men's games in a lot of cases. The divide has shifted from exercise and 'the game', to 'his game' and 'her game'. It is a contest between the female and the social order, as the

women's US soccer (soccer/ football) team proved in their participation in the Chinese World Cup in 1991 and 1999.<sup>3</sup> Although not directly being banned from the male sphere of sports participation, they were covertly denied the same opportunities for success as their male counterparts. As 'the children of Title IX', they were part of a generation that entitled them to equal access to sport throughout their school lives. Afterwards, however, the playing field wasn't so level. Title IX allowed these athletes to develop a consciousness of equality – perhaps unlike some of their peers, the team knew they were as good as the male national team, and strove to prove this in all of their ventures – their first recognized success being at the Chinese World Cup. However, the women's team, initially at least, went virtually unnoticed compared to their male peers.<sup>4</sup>

National support was not encouraged to the same extent, the mass media ignored their progress; they were not offered coaches or uniforms like their male equivalent teams. The American National Women's team did not falter during their journey to be recognized – they, like Annette Kellerman (1886-1975), became pioneers for the movements against inequality in sport, even at a professional level. They became advocates for women's participation in sport, being the prime example that equal status could be achieved for male and female teams through persistence.

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<sup>3</sup> The women's American soccer team has also received four Olympic women's gold medals (1996, 2004, 2008 and 2012). The team is considered globally one of the best women's soccer teams, quite an achievement for a team that played its first match in 1985.

<sup>4</sup> See the HBO documentary *Dare To Dream* (2007) for an account of the rise of the U.S. women's soccer team and the story of the commitments and difficulties they had to overcome.

## **An Evolving Defiance**

The struggle for inclusion in sport is far from over for women's movements. Progress is being made by athletes in the competitive sphere constantly, with women defying social expectations and entering into a domain that has long since been thought of as 'male'. As society changes, so too does the public mindset. Although women are now a noticeable component in games and sport, the form of defiance must also evolve. There have been observations made on female involvement in co-ed sporting activities by Sabo and Messner (1993: 15), stating that this is the modern battlefield for sport equality. Like the Victorian women who fought for the autonomous developments that could be achieved through sport, the inclusion of women directly into the 'male' game is a modern protest towards equal treatment and status. This action, like its predecessors, is being virtually ignored by the media at best, and distorted into impropriety in worse cases. One sees the same struggles being faced by women all over again to alter public opinion and equalize the playing field. The barriers of sex segregation are weakening, however, as were the walls of sport division in the twentieth century and onwards. "Greater opportunities for co-ed athletics have emerged in recent decades, such as Little League teams, softball teams, school intramural programs, racket sports, health club memberships, running, weightlifting and volleyball" (Sabo & Messner 1993:15). Women's perseverance is just as necessary now as it was throughout the history in the struggle for an equal playing field.

Through small yet important victories, both women's movements and athletes from a variety of backgrounds are overcoming social barriers of competitive gender divisions that cultures do not need, and shouldn't value in today's sporting realm. Female competitors are changing the social order

through visibility and participation in spheres that have been deemed inaccessible for them, like the social values that past movements have been successfully challenged and modified. The cause for modification now, however, concerns competition itself. Gender has become the main division of sporting events. Many advocates believe that campaigning for the focus to be changed primarily to athletic ability, for example, above everything else, will be another step towards a level playing field (van den Brink, Loenen & Tigchelaar 2010, McDonagh & Pappano 2008, Williams 2006). Several barriers exist for this development, notably a claim of biological difference that makes men stronger and better athletes. Regardless, arguments exist for organizing the game based on the athletes' abilities and not their sex. Biological division closes options to many women who otherwise would qualify to play for a 'male' team. In many ways such public discourse and contestation are reminiscent of previous social objections and 'scientific' boundaries that were put in place to exclude women from acting in sport and the public sphere. It remains to be seen to what extent modern debates influence the segregations in sport, for better or for worse.

## **Conclusion**

Resistance to female inclusion in sport outside 'acceptable' activities is embedded into the cultural values of society. The place of women, although slowly appearing outside the confines of 'exercise' in the Victorian divisions of sport, is still not part of society's broader 'game' – thus making the full benefits of participation just out of reach for the majority of women. Indeed, sport continues to be an overt as well as covert arena for struggling towards gender equality and the creation of a culture that is less exclusionary in this domain. Until the last century sport has been a field constructed around



assumptions of masculinity in opposition to the female identity. However, in recent times women have broken many of the legal and social barriers and opened a diverse sporting field to women. Despite these achievements, gender segregation has persisted and continues to hinder female athletes. Sport has the potential to remove many of the assumed implications of gendered differences and presents both men and women as simply athletes whether they are competing in single-sex or mixed teams.

The reality of sport is that participation is a right of equality, not only a sphere of competition. The women's sport movement is not advocating the abolition of women-only teams – far from it. The movement is fighting to end male-exclusivity in sport and wants to see a more equitable investment of resources for developing both male and female sporting opportunities.

"Somewhere behind the athlete you've become and the hours of practice and the coaches who have pushed you, is a little girl who fell in love with the game and never looked back... play for her." (*Mia Hamm, born on March 17, 1972*)

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# Chapter 11

## The Politics of Gender Testing in International sport<sup>1</sup>

Rima Athar

Given the choice of “male”, “female”, “intersex”, I would unhesitatingly select “intersex. But society does not give me that option, so I select ‘female’... with deep reservations, gritting my teeth at a society which will not accept my right to *simply be who I am*. (Mairi McDonald)<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

The sports arena has long been heralded as an *a*-political public sphere. And yet, it has played a vital and prominent role in

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<sup>1</sup> **Editor’s note:** the chapter was written before the new and highly publicized controversy on gender testing in Iran and exclusion of several women who did not pass the test from the women’s football team and making their return subject to them under going a complete medical procedure to fit into the regime’s binary vision of sexuality. (<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/female-iranian-soccer-players-undergo-gender-testing-article-1.1607619>, also see <http://6rang.org/en/news/report-and-activities/english-islamic-republic-football-officials-gender-based-discrimination-female-athletes/> accessed 25 Feb 2014). This makes the discourse of gender testing and its implication for women even more relevant to the question of gender equality in sport and the general pre-occupation of fitting every one into the sexual

<sup>2</sup> N. Bhowmuck, ‘What’s the big deal about gender? - Female identity as Intersex’, Women’s News Network, <http://womennewsnetwork.net/2010/01/05/femidentity888/>, 5 January 2010.

creating a global society in which the body, gender, and sexuality are all tightly regulated and confined to a binary logic that asserts 'male' and 'female' the only acceptable options for individuals to identify as. Not questioning the insistence on such a binary means that across social contexts, and particularly where women and men are subject to strict segregation in public life, we as advocates for gender-equality and human rights are left shy of the very tools necessary to dismantle the limiting social structures that deny equality and bodily rights for all. Part and parcel of this binary logic has been the assertion as undeniable the supremacy and superiority of male bodies above female bodies, in terms of performance, ability and acceptability. These issues have been well documented in literature that contests the sports arena as a site for women's equality. Though it is a testament to women's activism that we see such leaps in women's participation in sports (for example in 2012 London Olympics approximately 43% of participants were women), we still have not reached parity of participation, pay, and media coverage in sport.

In terms of bodily freedoms as well, across the international sports arena women are marked as second-tier citizens and female bodies are subjected to much more intense scrutiny and regulation than male bodies. When women's boxing was introduced to the London 2012 Olympics, intense debates arose at the potential decision by the Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA) to mandate women boxers to compete in skirts. AIBA made the weak claim that it would help the public distinguish male competitors from female competitors. Critics argued that the effect of mandating women to wear skirts was to reinforce stereotyped gender-roles and the sexualization of women's bodies, and to subjugate women's freedom of choice on the sports field. Indeed such a ruling would be reminiscent of various compulsions to force veiling on women who play sports – a tactic used in many countries to

limit women's access to sports and public life. Thankfully, after public demands for accountability,<sup>3</sup> the AIBA created a policy that gives women the choice of competing in shorts or a skirt.<sup>4</sup> The Badminton World Federation (BWF), however, has ruled in the opposite direction, mandating that women must wear skirts to compete at the 'elite' level, and banning shorts, leggings or trousers as inappropriate dress. The logic?

We're not trying to use sex to promote the sport," said Paisan Rangsitkpho, an American who is deputy president of the Badminton World Federation, which is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. "We just want them to look feminine and have a nice presentation so women will be more popular.

Rangsitkpho added that women who play in shorts appear "*baggy, almost like men... .Hardly anybody is watching... TV ratings are down. We want to build them up to where they should be. They play quite well. We want them to look nicer on the court and have more marketing value for themselves. I'm surprised we got a lot of criticism*".<sup>5</sup>

Even as he made this statement, completely at a loss for why criticisms were being raised, it came to light that ironically the only women who would be exempt from the BWF's ruling would be those who do not want to wear skirts due to 'religious or cultural reasons'. This of course opens female bodies up to the other side of the double-edged sword of dress regu-

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the petition on Change.org which garnered over 55,000 signatures to oppose this policy: <http://www.change.org/petitions/tell-aiba-play-fair-dont-ask-female-boxers-to-wear-skirts>.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, 'Female boxers will not be forced to wear skirts at the Olympics', *BBC Sport*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/boxing/17229496>, 2 March 2012.

<sup>5</sup> J. Longman, 'Badminton's New Dress Code is Being Criticized as Sexist', *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/sports/badminton-dress-code-for-women-criticized-as-sexist.html>, 26 May 2011.

lation; countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, to name a few, bar female athletes from competing in sports unless they are 'fully' covered. What such culturally relativist policies obscure is the underlying problem that any mandated dress code – whether it forces women to un-cover and wear short skirts, or to cover-up their hair, arms, and legs to their ankles in order to participate in sports and public life – is an unjust exercise in marking and controlling female bodies. In certain contexts, this exercise of control leaps beyond participating in sports, to women's simple presence in the public arena. As discussed by Afzali in this volume, in Iran women are fighting to re-gain the right to enter football stadiums simply as spectators, because the government's gender-apartheid ideology has constructed women's bodies as inherently obscene and in need of discipline.<sup>6</sup>

Without detracting from the necessary and ongoing struggles of women around the world to gain access to the sports arenas and to achieve parity with men, I wish to raise the question here of how far a fight for 'equality' through inclusion of women can get us if we leave unchecked the overarching system of gender-segregation that international sports mandates. I argue here that we need to broaden our analysis and theorizing about the sports arena if we are to move towards a more holistic realization of gender-justice, both on the sport fields and outside stadium walls.

As discussed above, dress codes are but one means of enforcing a vision of an immutable gender-binary, and ahistorical 'truths' about the nature of the sexes and gender identity. Another and perhaps more pernicious means is the institution of gender-verification testing. The test has reentered the public sphere due to the recent controversy surrounding female

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<sup>6</sup> For more on women's strategies of resistance in the "Open Stadiums Campaign", see Afzali in this volume, and Hoodfar (2012).

South African runner Caster Semenya, whose victory in the 800m finals of the 2009 Berlin World Championships was completely overshadowed by demands from the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) that she submit to the gender-verification test.<sup>7</sup>

The regulation of 'non-normative' female bodies in the sports arena through 'gender-testing' is nothing new. Indeed female bodies that run too fast, jump too high, look too tough, and so on, have continuously been marked as 'abnormal' and subjected to intense public intimidation. Yet in *Sexing the Body*, Fausto-Sterling (2000) offered a strong critique of the institution of gender-verification testing at the level of international sports, arguing that testing fails to adequately determine what constitutes 'female' or 'male' bodies. It is this argument that I pick up here, reiterating the ways in which gender-verification has proven itself to fail at the very thing it was created for. If the institution of 'gender-verification' has proven to be a failure, what purpose does its continued existence in the sports arena serve?

In reviewing the case of Caster Semenya of South Africa, who won silver medals at the 2011 World Championships and the 2012 Summer Olympics in the 800 metres, I argue that gender-verification is far from a tool of scientific 'truth'. Rather, the test is merely a tool to reduce the diversity and breadth of human lived experiences in order to control and subjugate bodies that defy the 'norm'. I suggest further that through its continued use in the international sports industry, which commands billions of dollars a year, gender-testing proves itself to be an

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<sup>7</sup> Gender-testing in sports is a process whereby female athletes must be 'verified' as female, to confirm their eligibility to compete in women-only events. As discussed below, the procedure for testing and 'proof' of what constitutes female bodies has continually changed with new trends in science since the IAAF first mandated the test at the national level in 1950. The test has only ever been mandated for female athletes, and no similar test exists for male athletes.

extension of imperial capitalism and colonialist control that operates in pernicious but undeniable ways. What is inspiring about the case of Caster Semenya, I believe, is that in 2012 we finally witnessed a movement to denounce such testing in sports as unacceptable. How can we grow this movement and connect it to broader struggles to dismantle a false insistence and reliance on a gender-binary to dictate who has bodily rights and who does not?

Through a discourse analysis of the media reporting on the issue of gender-testing in the five months following Caster Semenya's victory, I seek to map out some of the theoretical and practical issues at stake in building this resistance. I take as my source two UK newspapers: the Daily Telegraph (notably conservative) and the Guardian (notably center-leftist). Here I am not interested in a comparative analysis of the representational practices, but rather exploring more broadly how the issue of gender-testing was framed, and what, if any challenges to its legitimacy were raised. Through their online circulation, the UK-based papers average a daily audience of 1.7 million and 2.3 million readers worldwide, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Hence the way they represent the issues has important implications for audiences and movements beyond the UK's national borders. Also, by working to lay the groundwork here for the UK context, further research can engage in a comparative analysis of which discourses of difference are circulated across borders, from within which national contexts, and the political implications of this.

Out of the sample of articles analyzed for this paper, while discussion of rights and equality were raised, by and large the main focus was on Caster Semenya as an individual. The most

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<sup>8</sup> J. Halliday, 'Guardian.co.uk passes 40m monthly browsers', The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/dec/21/november-abce-guardian-mail-online>, 21 December 2010.



pressing issues in the media were: Is Caster Semenya female, male, or intersex? How can we tell from examining her body and appearance? If Caster Semenya is deemed to be male or intersex, will she be allowed to keep her medal, or will she be barred from participating in future events? How has Caster Semenya's family responded to the controversy? How has South Africa responded to the controversy? How have Caster Semenya's rights been violated?

It was only in relation to the above questions that the practice of gender-testing as an institution in sports was critiqued at all. In this paper therefore I shift the focus away from Caster Semenya herself as much as possible, as she has already been subject to obscene scrutiny on the world stage. What is most significant here is how 'difference' is experienced by women on the world stage of sports, and the responses to it from social, political and legal institutions. How is physiological and social difference created and mediated through gender-testing? Whose interests does gender-testing serve? How is the resistance to Semenya's forced testing connected to other socio-economic issues? Finally, does this case provide us new opportunities for conceptualizing gender-justice in the sports arena and beyond?

I argue that it does, precisely because it brings to light the underlying logic of gender-testing, which rests on medicalization, quantification, intimidation through public scrutiny, discipline and punishment as the key mechanisms of control. It is these mechanisms that need to be challenged, both on and off the sports field, in order to move forward from a struggle for women's inclusion into a flawed system, towards movements for transformative gender-justice more broadly.

## Sports as a Form of Public Citizenship

Before turning to the question of gender-testing in sports specifically, I want to briefly re-iterate why international sports is such an important arena to re-engage as a site of contestation, even outside the walls of any sports stadium. Indeed the political economy of sports cannot be ignored as we agitate to democratize the sporting arena. As McLaughlin (2004) argues, the ascendancy of neoliberal economic orthodoxy is restructuring our global public sphere in diverse ways. This leads to an increasingly complex nexus through which communication is mediated, and also makes the nation-state an inadequate focal point from which to theorize global modes of exclusion. A prime example of this is the public sphere occupied and created by international sports competitions.

International games present themselves as the site of transnational unity and cooperation, celebrating a spirit of camaraderie and democratic competition, and they transmit these values to international audiences in the billions across the globe. The 2008 Beijing Olympics alone reportedly reached a television audience of a record-breaking 4.7 billion viewers across its ten day run.<sup>9</sup> Yet while the Olympics are apparently at the “service of humanity” and the promotion of peace,<sup>10</sup> in practice we see a very different story. With revenues averaging

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Olympic Audience Hist 4.7 Billion’, Sports Business, <http://www.sportbusiness.com/news/167799/olympic-audience-hits-4-7-billion>, 8 September 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The Olympic Charter is the document governing the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) conduct. It lists in its mission goals: (1) to encourage and support the promotion of ethics and good governance in sport as well as education of youth through sport and to dedicate its efforts to ensuring that, in sport, the spirit of fair play prevails and violence is banned; (4) to cooperate with the competent public or private organisations and authorities in the endeavour to place sport at the service of humanity and thereby to promote peace; (6) to act against any form of discrimination affecting the Olympic Movement; (7) to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women. For the full charter:

[www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic\\_charter\\_en.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf)

\$4,189,000,000 in the period from 2001-2004, the Olympics is a multi-billion dollar industry, whose top 12 sponsors are multinational corporations dedicated to the pursuit of profit, often at the direct expense of individual rights and equality. Approximately \$2 billion of that revenue is from broadcasting income alone, which raises the question of how much control the Olympics has in regulating democratic modes of communication and media circulation around its ethical conduct. Acting as a catalyst for economic development, trade and tourism, hosting the Olympics is often heralded as a prize to be won. Yet no Olympics have ever been hosted on the continent of Africa, or in Central Asia, the Middle East or South Asia. By 2016, only two will have been hosted in Latin America. Indeed the benefits of hosting the Olympics appear to be a jealously guarded privilege of monetarily rich or emerging economies.

Moreover those who do host the games notoriously strip people of many rights, and target the already economically marginalized in the process. In preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, close to 1,000 communities are being subjected to 'forced sales' of their homes, with no option to recourse. The houses themselves are being demolished to make way for new infrastructure to support the games.<sup>11</sup> But that number is paltry compared to the 720,000 people evicted in Seoul in 1998, or the staggering 1.25 million people displaced in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. When Atlanta hosted the games in 1996, it issued 9,000 arrest certificates for homeless and racial minorities in a campaign to "clean the streets".<sup>12</sup> In the lead-up to the London 2012 Olympics, unprecedented legislation was passed enhancing the London Metropolitan Police force's power to preemptively arrest and

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<sup>11</sup> AFP, 'Russians evicted from homes for Olympics', The Vancouver Sun, <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Russians+evicted+from+homes+Olympics/5351615/story.html>, ( accessed 5 September 2011).

<sup>12</sup>Centre on Housing and Rights Eviction, <http://www.cohre.org/topics/mega-events>, n.d.

detain individuals who voiced opposition to the undemocratic effects of the Games.<sup>13</sup> While other international sporting games such as the World Athletics and Soccer World Cup do not command the same level of resources, they none-the-less mirror the Olympics in the ideologies and values they promote.

During the lead-up to the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa, a huge concern was raised around the possible spread of HIV/AIDs, as it was predicted that the thousands of tourists flooding South Africa would lead to an increase in the demand and supply of sex-work. The solution proposed by health specialist Ian Sanne was that

Interim legalisation of prostitution would be best for the country, rather than leaving it uncontrolled...Sex workers need to register with a board that will regulate their practice and give certification to practise, but they have to go through a mandatory HIV testing process first, and only those who test negative will be allowed to practise.<sup>14</sup>

In the discussion, the only suggestion is that sex-workers present some kind of 'threat', and nothing is mentioned about increasing sex-workers' own ability to practice securely and with less risk to themselves. What is evidenced here is just how much material power international sporting events wield in being able to determine civil liberties. Which bodies, practices and norms are constructed as 'illegal' or 'legal' can switch at the drop of a hat, depending on whose interests are being served. In this case, sex-workers are not the ones benefiting from such a policy. Instead the proposed legislation requires

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<sup>13</sup> Anon. 'Olympic Crackdown: UK Govt Targets Protestors', *RT*, <http://rt.com/news/olympics-security-increase-fears-974/>, 11 May 2012.

<sup>14</sup> McVeigh and S. Kwinika, 'Call to Legalize World Cup Sex Trade', *The Observer*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/11/legalise-world-cup-sex-trade>, (11 October, 2009).

they be documented, monitored, and granted legal permission to practice only if they are not HIV+. Those who fail the tests would be barred from practice, criminalized and economically marginalized. Not only does such a policy further stigmatize individuals living with HIV, it encourages them to remain silent about their positive status rather than engage in healthy discussion and advocacy around living with HIV and safer sexual practices.

Brief as these examples are, I raise them to draw attention to how “discourse cannot be conceptualized outside of this institutional system of material relations that structure and constitute it” (Hennessy 1993:40). As the centre-point for transnational social and economic relations that sway domestic laws, norms and practices, international sports is far from apolitical. Rather, access to and participation in sporting games translates into a kind of public citizenship that is mediated at once within the frame of the nation-state, as well as across the international sphere. Whether determining the rights of those outside the sports arena, or regulating the rights of those on the field through gender-testing, we see the same overarching mechanisms of control at work. Any fight for gender-justice inside the realm of international sports should not lose sight of the connections between such struggles.

### **The 'Gender-Verification' Test**

The demand for 'gender-testing' was first raised by the US Olympic Committee during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, as a means of examining female athletes. The common claim behind the concern was to ensure fair competition for women, given suspicions that men were posing as women during the games. The test was first implemented at the international level for the European Athletic Championships in 1966 and for the Olympic Games in 1968. The test became a mandatory

procedure for all female athletes. There is not now, nor has there ever been, a similar test or requirement for male athletes. Gender-testing, it appears, is then first and foremost about exerting ownership and control over women's bodies, the process of which has become increasingly invasive since its introduction.

The initial test consisted of a (humiliating) visual examination of female genitalia. In 1968 the International Olympics Committee (IOC) introduced chromosome testing which was carried out on a swab taken from the mouth. If the test was positive, the athlete was declared female. If the test was negative, the athlete then had to undergo blood tests and a physical examination. In 1992 this was changed to DNA-based testing of the Y-chromosome. In 1991, the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) introduced the current governing policy, whereby athletes would have to undergo medical evaluation by any, or all, of the following: a gynecologist, an endocrinologist, a psychologist, an internal medicine specialist, and an expert on gender/transgender issues.<sup>15</sup> Though mandatory testing of all competing women athletes has been discontinued by both the IOC and IAAF, they reserve the right to ask (read: force) individual athletes to submit to the tests, if suspicions about their gender/sex are raised.

But who can raise such suspicions, and on what basis? In Caster Semenya's case, the IAAF argued that it demanded the test due to Semenya's record-breaking *increase* in time by 25 seconds in the 1500m race and 7 seconds in the 800m race. As pointed out by the African National Congress's (ANC) Women's League, the sexist ideology underpinning sports and designating female bodies as inferior to males is fully exposed by such a logic:

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<sup>15</sup>International Amateur Athletics Foundation, <http://www.iaaf.org/newsfiles/36983.pdf>, n.d.

We view these chauvinistic reports and rumours of a 'sex verification process' as a vicious attack on the dignity of Caster Semenya and all women athletes because they suggest that women can only perform to a certain level and that those who exceed this level should be men.

We condemn the motives of those who have made it their business to question her gender due to her physique and running style. Such comments can only serve to portray women as being weak.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately criticisms of sexism hold little weight against the logic of medicalization that is deployed in the sporting arena. The common counter-argument is one of 'following the rules', and 'ensuring fairness and safety'. But whose rules and fairness, and safety for whom? In the case of Caster Semenya, the IAAF acted with complete disregard for her emotional, psychological and physical well-being.

*We are talking about a child here, whose name has been dragged through the dirt by an organisation which should know better. If gender tests have to take place, they should have been done quietly. It is a taboo subject. How can a girl live with this stigma? By going public on the tests, the IAAF has let down this young child.*<sup>17</sup>

In fact a complaint was lodged with the UN Division for the Advancement of Women that Semenya's human rights to privacy

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<sup>16</sup> D. Smith, 'Caster Semenya sex row: 'She's my little girl,' says father', *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/aug/20/caster-semenya-sex-row-athletics>, (20 August, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> P. Sawyer and S. Berger, 'Gender row over Caster Semenya makes athlete into South African cause celebre', *The Daily Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/southafrica/6073980/Gender-row-over-Caster-Semenya-makes-athlete-into-a-South-African-cause-celebre.html>, (23 August 2009).

and human dignity had been violated. And they have been, to what end? So that tests could determine her gender and/or her sex? Was there any consideration of the potential violent harm and backlash she might face from such a public debate around what is still quite a taboo subject?

### **Constructing 'Normalcy' and the 'Appropriate Body'**

Being 'outside' the rigid, heteronormative gender-binary continuously results in threats, intimidation and bodily harm to individuals across the world. While Caster Semenya has the support of her family, community and much of the public behind her, there are other South African women, in sports and elsewhere, whose public identity as 'non-conforming' has made them the target of violent and deadly attacks. In 2008, Eudy Simelane, the captain of the South African women's football team was brutally murdered, being gang-raped, beaten and stabbed 25 times in the face, chest and legs.

Marlow Valentine of the Triangle project, a leading Southern African gay rights organisation, says:

It is mostly 'butch-presenting' women who are targeted and Eudy Simelane was seen as someone who challenged the normative ideas of what gender is. She was brutally murdered because she chose to live her life as a proud, visible and confident gay woman. Her life was taken because a group of men believed she was 'other'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>D. Smith, 'Caster Semenya is a hero – but in South Africa being different can be deadly for a woman', *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/aug/28/south-africa-prejudice-against-women?INTCMP=SRCH>, (28 August 2009).



The same week that Caster Semenya returned home and was greeted by a cheering crowd of over 1000 people, including South African president and MPs from the African National Congress, three men went on trial for the murder of Eudy Simelane, who is one of countless numbers of women who are subjected to homophobic violence because they transgress expected gender-roles. While international sports do not regulate sexual orientation, enforced sex-segregation and determination of what constitutes an 'acceptable' female body through 'gender-testing' does lend a legitimacy to homophobia and transphobia in society at large. This cannot go unchecked by our struggles to democratize the international sports arena.

Neither can the fact that despite mandating such complex procedures for gender-testing, the IAAF does not even have an official definition of what constitutes a female body. After Caster Semenya's results were in, IAAF spokesperson Nick Davies stated

We have received the results from Germany, but they now need to be examined by a group of experts and we will not be in a position to speak to the athlete about them for at least a few weeks.<sup>19</sup>

What is clear from his statement, and the continued delay in declaring the results, is that the scientific tests in and of themselves are inconclusive, and the actual verdict is a process of interpretation. But with no clear guidelines, what exactly is being interpreted? In Caster Semenya's case, the media story that broke the controversy focused on the potential absence of a womb in her body, leading to unproven claims she is intersex. The discourse here suggests that it is the sex organs and testosterone levels in bodies that determine who is male, and

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<sup>19</sup> David Smith. "Caster Semenya withdraws from race in South Africa," The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/sep/11/caster-semenya-withdraws-race-south-africa>, (11 September 2009).

who is female. Yet the very first instance of an athlete failing the 'gender-test' in 1967 paints a different picture of what constitutes 'male' and 'female'. Polish runner Ewa Klobukowska was declared to have failed the gender-test, labeled as 'not-female' and barred from sports in 1967, against her own insistence that she is a woman. In 1968 her claims were vindicated as she gave birth to a son. Clearly, in 1967 the presence of a womb was not considered the main signifier of what constitutes a 'female' by a Eurocentric scientific worldview. Rather being female hinged solely on the appearance of genitalia according to the tests.

Far from being neutral, understandings of the physical attributes that we ascribe to women and men are cultural and ideological phenomena.

Whether "womb" signifies hysterical excess or productive incubator of the race, whether "clitoris" signifies unproductive sexual pleasure (that which must be removed, controlled or censored), or feminine jouissance (subversive erotic power), the materiality of "womb", "clitoris" and "motherhood", like the materiality of the body in general, is inextricably bound to the discourse by which they are understood (Hennessy 1993:46).

What is evidenced by the changing process of interpretation in the institution of gender-testing is (a) the complexity, even from a scientific medical perspective, of determining someone's sex through the testing process, and (b) how what constitutes 'fact' in the realm of science shifts over time and is part and parcel of an ideological worldview.

Rather than revealing some immutable truth of what constitutes female and male bodies, cultural ideologies create and assume the definitions of these concepts, and then structure their processes of interpretation on that basis (Rudacille 2005, cited in Wamsley 2008). Moreover, "...the pressures to con-

form to a two-sex model of male and female have been so great in western civilization, that doctors introduced medical interventions to correct sex ambiguities to ensure that everyone conformed to the binary model of man and woman" (Hubbard 1998, cited in Wamsley 2008). When we think of imposed surgical interventions on genitalia, particularly on children's bodies, what normally springs to mind is the issue of female genital circumcision, as an incomprehensible practice completely foreign to Euro-American beliefs and ideals. The treatment of intersex bodies in the west highlights the fallacy of such claims. In a more recent development, imposing sexual reassignment surgery on individuals is a process that now Iran, with its insistence on a gender-binary, has adopted. While this is indeed a gain for those who wish to proceed with sex-reassignment surgery in Iran, there is also less-than-positive side to the story. Some argue that this is a thinly-veiled attempt to 'deal with' – or rather suppress – the freedom of expression of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer (LGBTTIQ) experiences in Iran.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of where it is practiced, imposed regulation of genitalia and sex-organs is an attempt to erase sexual difference and force people to conform to culturally constructed idea(l)s of 'normalcy', and must be challenged. Even if the expressed aim of gender-testing in sports is not to force people to undergo surgical intervention to correct sexual difference, it lends legitimacy to the medicalization, quantification and subsequent

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<sup>20</sup> While some hail Iran's state-sponsored sex-reassignment surgeries as a sign of 'progress', this is a simplistic portrayal of the situation. The coordinator of the Toronto-based Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees, for example, has explained that in many instances, the surgeries have been performed on people who simply identify as lesbian or gay, but "who submit to surgery simply to appease a family and a society that does not accept them". (David Graham, 'Iran's solution to the 'gay' problem? State-funded sex change surgery', *The Toronto Star*, [http://www.thestar.com/life/2010/11/13/irans\\_solution\\_to\\_gay\\_problem\\_statefunded\\_sex\\_change\\_surgery.html](http://www.thestar.com/life/2010/11/13/irans_solution_to_gay_problem_statefunded_sex_change_surgery.html), (13 November, 2010).

disciplining of 'abnormal' bodies as an acceptable practice, ignoring the injustices these practices continue to perpetuate.

Interestingly in the media interviews, IAAF officials, medical experts, Semenya's friends and community, and random commentators all used the words gender and sex interchangeably. Being indebted to mountains of feminist, queer and trans-literature that has theorized the distinctions between the two categories, I paused to reflect: how important is the distinction in a case like this?<sup>21</sup> Do we even need to make an argument for the distinction here? What would we lose by letting it slide? I came to the conclusion that whether intentional or not, obscuring the distinction between gender and sex serves to strategically uphold the exclusionary and segregationist model of citizenship in the sports world. When labeled 'gender-verification' while actually attempting to determine physiological attributes (sex), the meanings of both concepts are obscured. Indeed, gender is reduced to sex, i.e. male/female, which erases the possibility of even thinking outside the gender-binary and sex-segregation logic.

## **Logics of Control**

Even as the media stopped questioning the fact that Caster Semenya is indeed a woman, the debates about her body did not subside.

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<sup>21</sup>In 1990s, 'queer theory' emerged as a form of post-structuralist critical theory, which builds upon the feminist critiques of the idea of gender as an inherent and fixed part of one's identity. Queer theory rejects binary views of sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual acts or desires, and explores the multifaceted intersections and expressions of these aspects of social identity. Thus while the term 'queer' is often seen as interchangeable with lesbian or gay, in academia queer theory goes beyond exploring homosexuality. Prominent theorists that shaped the discipline include Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, amongst others.

No one doubts her gender anymore. Now the issue is of the percentages of her gender; this is as disgusting as it is unethical. - Makhenkesi Stofile, South Africa Sports Minister<sup>22</sup>

The process of quantifying bodies in terms of percentages as a categorical marker of identity will no doubt bring to mind the "blood quantum" concept legislated by the Canadian government with the passing of the 1876 Indian Act. Going against First Nations' own systems of determining community, with the introduction of the Indian Act Native status was suddenly determined based on the percentage of Native blood a body possessed, which in turn determined what rights such bodies were granted within the community (Furi and Wherrett 2003). Far from being arbitrary, the Indian Act was specifically crafted to tear down the Indigenous cultural system in place and reconstitute it by rules and hierarchy that suited the colonizing forces and legitimated their intervention into First Nations' affairs. Introducing new concepts of (in)authenticity amongst and between Native bodies, the Indian Act in turn legitimated a logic of 'purity' that placed white-settler bodies at the top of the social hierarchy, and imbued them with the authority to discipline and punish Native bodies. The discipline and punishment was carried out through the stealing of Native land, forced relocation of families, the disembodiment of Native language, the brutal incarceration, if not outright slavery, of Native children in Residential Schools, forced sterilization of Native bodies, and much more. The Indian Act also served as a direct model off of which Apartheid in South Africa was built. As such it is not surprising that the imposition and forced use of testing to determine Semenya's 'status' brings this historical

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<sup>22</sup> David Smith, "Caster Semenya withdraws from race in South Africa," The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2009/sep/11/caster-semenya-withdraws-race-south-africa>, accessed 11 September 2009.

legacy of violence to mind. Indeed as the incredibly strong language of South African officials condemning the IAAF enforcement of gender-testing demonstrates, the connection and implications are very palpable:<sup>23</sup>

Makhenkesi Stofile: “If the I.A.A.F. expels or excludes Semenya from competition or withdraws the medal, I think it would be the Third World War.”

Leonard Chuene, former ASA President: “For a long time in this country we let people set the agenda for us. Let us set the agenda for ourselves. We are not going to allow Europeans to describe and define our children.”

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, ANC MP: “To the world out there who conducted those pseudo-tests: test our gender? They can stuff their insults, this is our little girl and nobody is going to perform any tests on her.”

We've had difficult situations in the history of this country. Don't touch us, don't touch us because if you dare, we will repeat it again if those who want to challenge us continue to insult us using our own people.

Heeding off any arguments that quantifying people's sexual-identity through 'gender-testing' is in no way equivalent to the atrocities experienced by Native communities and black populations during Apartheid, let me clarify that the situations are not being equated. To do so would be naive, and erase the historical specificity and material weight of such histories. Rather, what South African critics are attending to is the ways in which the cultural identities of individuals around the world have been, and continue to be, subject to processes of colonization through our propensity to quantify and categorize fellow hu-

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<sup>23</sup> David Smith, “Caster Semenya comes home to defiant welcome,” The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/aug/25/caster-semenya-returns-home-hero>, 25 August 2009.

mans into a hierarchy of worth, based on ideological markers. The bodies located at the lower levels of the hierarchy are deemed to require discipline and regulation, hence constructed as inherently violable, and subjected to intervention and control by 'authorities', 'officials' and 'experts'.

I don't even know how they do this gender testing. I don't know what a chromosome is. This is all very painful for us. We live by simple rules in our culture. We do not intrude. This is not natural. - Jakob Semanya, Castor Semanya's father

The above quote highlights another lesson as to why the institution of gender-testing is an important site of struggle and transnational solidarity today. It highlights the culturally specific nature of understanding bodies, discourse, and practices. Medical intervention on such a scale as gender-testing not only represents an intrusion into the individual rights of Semanya, but it is also an intrusion into the very cultural logic of her home town. This is the insidious nature of racism and colonization at work today. Colonizers no longer need to physically occupy spaces to subject people to ideological battles. The norms and standards set and upheld at the international level have material effects across the macro, meso, and micro realms. Prior to Berlin, Athletics South Africa (ASA) also conducted gender-verification tests on Caster Semanya – despicably without her knowledge. It is completely just that the ASA president was fired for misconduct and for violating Semanya's rights.<sup>24</sup> However when the media uses this to destabilize the arguments around racism and colonialism perpetrated by the IAAF, they are ignoring the overarching structures that command

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel Berger, "South Africa government demands athletics chief be sacked," The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/southafrica/6211687/Caster-Semanya-South-African-government-demands-athletics-chief-be-sacked.html>, (20 September, 2009).

and mediate such practices. If the IAAF and Olympics promote medicalization as the cornerstone on which female citizenship to the sporting arena rests, then it is not necessarily surprising that ASA conducted its own tests. After all, this is the cost demanded by the IAAF for national women's teams and individual athletes to gain citizenship in the international public sphere of sports. As long as gender-verification testing remains an institution at the highest levels, then those countries who wish to send their athletes to compete on the world stage are pressured to conduct these fallible and arbitrary tests on their own athletes to ensure they can compete. In turn they are also pressured to create the 'norm' of the male/female binary in their own national contexts. Clearly we cannot conceptualize colonizing forces simply as expanding imperial nations directly imposing their will on others (though this still occurs). Rather we must complicate our analyses to recognize and account for the channels through which the ideologies that demand people conform to the gender/binary logic are proliferated. We must also recognize how those who do conform are rewarded, and those who don't are disciplined and punished.

### **Reading Outside of the Frame**

When asked whether Semenya's medal would be revoked, Nick Davies claimed

Our legal advice is that, if she proves to have an advantage because of the male hormones, then it will be extremely difficult to strip the medal off her, since she has not cheated. She was naturally made that way, and she was entered in Berlin by her team and accepted by the



IAAF. But let's wait and see once we have the final decision.<sup>25</sup>

To me this quote belies a desire to strip Semenya of her medal – a move thwarted only by the legal implications of such a decision in light of international uproar.

In fact only three years prior, in the absence of international scrutiny, this is exactly what happened to female distance runner Santhi Soundarajan, an Indian athlete. At the Asian Games in 2006, Soundarajan took the silver medal in the 800m finals. Despite having cleared the 'gender-test' during the Asian track and field championships the previous year, she was forced to re-take the test after her silver-medal win. This time she failed. Though the test results were not revealed, media reports suggested the reason was 'androgyn insensitivity syndrome', a condition marking bodies as intersex. Without any substance, and with complete disregard for her privacy and dignity, the media continued to scrutinize and put Santhi's potential difference on public display, never once thinking of the consequences of the public intimidation and social pressures. Santhi attempted suicide the following year, but thankfully she survived, and has re-established herself as a coach for young athletes.<sup>26</sup> The cases are exactly the same. Santhi did not cheat. She identifies as female, and chose to pursue a career as a talented athlete. Her skill qualified her for the games, and she passed one 'gender-test' already. She even ran the same event.

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<sup>25</sup> David Smith, "Caster Semenya 'hermaphrodite claim' should be treated with caution - IAAF," The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/sep/11/caster-semenya-hermaphrodite-reports-iaaf>, (11 September, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Nilanjana Bhowmuck, "What's the big deal about gender? - Female identity as Intersex," Women's News Network, <http://womennewsnetwork.net/2010/01/05/femidentity888/>, (5 January 2010).

And yet, in the absence of public demands for accountability and resistance to such a violation of rights, Soundarajan was stripped of her medal and her career ended. Was this necessary? There are many other options we could suggest in order to get around this issue. If testosterone levels provide certain women with unfair advantages, why not have them compete with men, where their advantage apparently presents no issue? Why not create a third category for those who identify in-between or outside female/male? Either option would ensure 'fairness' in competition, and yet stripping Soundarajan of her medal and barring her and other women deemed intersex from sports is heralded as the only choice. This betrays to me a troubling and twisted pleasure gained from marking, intimidating, and publicly denouncing ambiguous bodies.

The crux of the issue is therefore not simply about controlling women, or disciplining female bodies then, though that plays into it. The ultimate goal of the gender-test is to capture, examine, expose, and ultimately dispel sex-ambiguity from the public sphere. 'Difference' amongst women and men has been accommodated to the extent that it can. In 2004, the IOC ruled that transsexual athletes would be allowed to compete under their chosen sex, provided they have undergone surgery, been legally recognized as their chosen sex, and have undergone at least two years of hormone therapy (Teetzel 2006).<sup>27</sup> This is an undeniably important ruling, and one we should celebrate. But the fact remains, that transsexual athletes are only granted citizenship once they fit themselves neatly into the gender-binary of male/female as defined and approved by the highest scientific and legal authorities.

Because Caster Semanya is a woman, the struggle in her case is the right to participate as a woman, and of women's rights to

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<sup>27</sup> For those who transition prior to puberty, hormone therapy is not a requirement.

bodily autonomy, as it should be. But what about the rights of those who transcend completely the rigid demarcations of male/female, girl/boy, woman/man? What about intersex, gender-queers, and all those in-between? Is there a place for them in our movements to democratize international sports, and transnational public spheres beyond?

### **Towards a Transformative Vision of Gender-Justice**

Any critical theory that, like the French General Staff, prepares for future battles by planning to win the previous war may all too easily find itself outwitted by what apparently can still be characterized as the cunning of history (Postone 1992:176, in McLaughlin 2004).

In order to move towards a transformative vision of gender-justice, we should take heed of the way in which 'difference' is being inscribed as within the confines of the gender-binary. Today when we struggle to re-claim difference in the sports world, we are, perhaps unknowingly, still fighting an 'either/or' battle that rests on a logic of 'women's participation versus men's participation'. As much literature, including the various chapters in this book demonstrate, there are many contexts where such a framework still serves to bar women, either partially or completely, from competing in the same physical spaces as men. Struggles to overcome such discrimination are vital and deserve our support and attention, as do ongoing struggles for equal pay, participation and media coverage in sports across contexts. But what Caster Semenya and Santhi Soundjaran have shown us is that the end goal cannot be 'inclusion' into a sex-segregated world anymore. Rather we must be aiming for overarching ideological change, where happily ambiguous bodies are accepted for who they are. The regulation of female bodies through gender-testing is discriminatory

and sexist, but what is clear is that ‘females’ are not the greatest threat to the sports arena in 2012. Neither are LGBT peoples officially discriminated against in the international sports arena any longer. Rather what threatens the very foundations of international sports and the global public sphere to which it is connected, are intersex, gender-queer, and transcendent beings.

Feminist theorists and activists have much to offer in this realm. Predecessors hailing from queer science and post-modernist frameworks have provided valuable insights into the extent to which the “taken-for-granted gender binary is as much constituted by assumptions about its existence as by the existence of distinctive and natural differences between only two sexes” (Travers 2008: 82). The next step then becomes removing such assumptions. Indeed, throughout the world, and throughout history, there have never been only ‘two genders’. From fakaleiti in Tonga, to calabai, calalai, and bissu in Sulawesi (Indonesia), to guevedoche or machi-embra in the Dominican Republic, to chuckchi in Siberia, and beyond – third-gender, intersex and gender-queer beings exist and have a place in society.<sup>28</sup> In 2007, Nepal’s supreme court issued a ground-breaking verdict that LGBT people were to be treated as full and equal citizens, and also ordered the government to issue citizenship cards to all people according to their chosen identity. The May 2011 national census also officially included an option to identify as a third gender.<sup>29</sup> In 2009, Pakistan’s Supreme Court issued a similar verdict, ordering the federal government to begin allowing the hijra community to identify by the gender of their choice when registering for national

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<sup>28</sup> For an interactive map on people of varying genders, see <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/two-spirits/map.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Kathambi Kinoti, “Nepal looks set to recognize third gender,” AWID Friday Files, <http://awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/Nepal-Looks-Set-to-Officially-Recognize-Third-Gender>, (9 September 2011).

identity cards.<sup>30</sup> These rulings are an important effort to reclaim history that has been shunned and denied – quite often through the processes of colonization and the promotion of a Eurocentric ideology that has constructed the gender-binary as historical truth and legacy.<sup>31</sup>

Disrupting the ideologies that promote the gender-binary, through sports or elsewhere, requires recuperating and re-centering alternative ways of being. Part of that involves mapping out how alternative identities have been erased. What the resistance to gender-testing shows us is that in attempts to assimilate people to the norm, the common logics that reappear across contexts are medicalization, quantification, intimidation through public scrutiny, discipline and punishment. I do not wish to imply a linear teleology of use here, nor that these mechanisms function completely separately from each other. There is much overlap. They can be exerted individually or in tandem, or deployed in a shifting constellation. Mapping out the trajectory of their deployment in each specific instance is the task the lies ahead. I present them here simply as theoretical tools through which we may better understand how injustice is perpetuated, and importantly how we can create solidarity amongst movements that are working towards a transformative vision of gender-justice that encompasses rights for all. Perhaps in some contexts, working for the rights of trans, intersex, and queer bodies in the realm of sports (or more broadly) is seen as something that can wait, until we have at least reached parity for 'women'. But which women are we excluding by that attitude? And how many times have women

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<sup>30</sup> Ria Misra, "Pakistan Recognizes Third Gender," *Politics Daily*, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/12/25/pakistan-recognizes-third-gender/>, (25 December 2009.)

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed example of the changing constructions of gender and sexuality in Iran as a response to the 'modernization' and European intervention, see Nadjmabadi (2005).

had to wait while the anti-imperial, anti-colonial, and revolutionary struggles have taken precedent, as if women were not part of these struggles to begin with? We need to move towards new ways of thinking about our political struggles. We need to look at how our identities are created and mediated across supposedly predetermined markers, whether this is dress-codes such as veils or chadors, or the presence of particular sexual organs, or having certain levels of estrogen and testosterone pulsating through our blood. And we need to ask, how far can we really go if we continue to push for inclusion into a system that seeks to deny and erase the plurality of our identities?

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## **Resources**



## Trend Setters and Pioneers of Women's Sport in Muslim Contexts

Aisling Barratt



<http://im.ft-static.com/content/images/686da46c-aecd-11e1-a4e0-00144feabdc0.img>

**Nawal El Moutawakel of Morocco** (born on April 15, 1962 in [Casablanca](#)) is a former [Moroccan hurdler](#), who won the inaugural women's [400 m hurdles](#) event at the [1984 Summer Olympics](#), thereby becoming the first female [Muslim](#) born on the continent of [Africa](#) to become an Olympic champion. She was also the first Moroccan and the first woman from a Muslim majority country to win an Olympic [gold medal](#). She has been doing much to advance sport particularly for women. She has been an International Olympic

Committee (IOC) member since 1998, served on its Executive Board since 2008. She went on to become a Vice President of the IOC. In 2007, Nawal El Moutawakel was named the Minister of Sports in the upcoming cabinet of Morocco. Her position as a minister in part has been in recognition of her commitment to promote sport.

Sources: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nawal\\_El\\_Moutawakel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nawal_El_Moutawakel),  
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<http://blogs.20minutos.es/quefuede/files/boulmerka3.jpg>

### **Hassiba Boulmerka, Algeria**

(born July 10, 1968 in [Constantine](#) in the north east of [Algeria](#)) won the gold medal for the 1500m at the World Championships in 1991 and Olympic gold medal the following year in the Barcelona Olympics in 1992. This was at a time when Islamist militancy was on the rise in Algeria, and some radical Islamists thought the racetrack was not the right place for a Muslim woman. She received death threats and in the run-up to the Barcelona

Olympics it became too dangerous for her to train in her own country. She never repeated her Olympic victory. She moved to Cuba to escape the threat to her life, but later she returned to Algeria. Now a successful businesswoman, she remains an icon and role model for many women in Algeria and beyond.

Sources: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassiba\\_Boulmerka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassiba_Boulmerka);  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16962799>



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habiba\\_Ghribi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habiba_Ghribi)

### **Habiba Ghribi of Tunisia**

(born 9 April 1984 in [Kairouan](#)) is a [middle-](#) and [long-distance runner](#) who special-ises in the [3000 metres steeplechase](#). She is the [Tunisian record](#) holder in the event, having run 9:08.37 for second place at the 2012

[Summer Olympics](#) giving her country its first Olympic medal by a woman.

Sources: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habiba\\_Ghribi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habiba_Ghribi);  
<http://www.diamondleague.com/athletes/14303124.htm>



<http://mwf.com.pk/?p=486>

## **Kiran Khan of Pakistan**

(born December 21, 1990 in [Pakistan](#)) is an Olympic [swimmer](#), and one of the first international female swimmers for Pakistan, where she holds national records. She first came to national attention at the 28th Pakistan National Games in 2001, where

she won 7 gold medals, 3 silver medals and 3 bronze medals, although she was the youngest swimmer at the games. Following this, Khan has picked up as many as 16 medals in just two editions of the Asian Games.\*After this performance she was named "Golden Girl". The smoothness of her four swimming strokes is well known. Khan is a powerful back stroker and individual medley swimmer. She won gold medals at the third and fourth World Islamic Games and at the first South Asian Swimming Championship in 2007. She has been a role model for many women in Pakistan and beyond. With role models like her to look to for encouragement, Pakistani female swimmers are 'making a splash' despite the hurdles, which include "little government support", social conservatism and threats by fundamentalists who oppose women's achievements and public recognition in sport.

For further reading see: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/10/qa-we-refuse-to-be-held-to-ransom-by-terrorism/>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiran\\_Khan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiran_Khan) and <http://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/10-top-muslim-female-athletes-past-and-present>



<http://www.corbisimages.com>

**Sahar El-Hawary, Egypt** is the first African sportswoman to receive a second award from the International Olympic Committee (IOC). She is an avid promoter of [Women's football in Egypt](#). Dr. Sahar El Hawari became the first female member of the Egyptian

Football Federation, the first women's referee in Africa, and a member of FIFA. Her commitment to encourage women in sports was rewarded in the late nineties when the Egyptian women's national team qualified for the Women's African Cup of Nations. Another of her success stories has been training female referees. She was severely criticised by the media, fans, Islamic groups and even Egypt Football Association officials for daring to introduce the game to women.

Many Egyptians felt that the game was only to be played by men and Islamists raised their objection in the name of Islam and religion. When these were refuted with counter arguments, they raised objections based on women wearing sport shorts to play the game as a way of preventing women engaging in football. Knowing the real objection is to stop women from playing, Dr. Sahar El-Hawary made a concession by insisting that the women wear cycling shorts underneath their football kit. She refused to give in to the criticism and invested not only her time but some of her considerable family wealth into the game. She recruited several well-known former footballers as her coaching staff and then toured Egypt looking for talented women players. She accommodated the players in her own house and paid their salaries herself.

Sources: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/africa/3576573.stm>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahar\\_El\\_Hawari](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahar_El_Hawari)  
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photo: <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/42-34355076/egyptian-women-soccer-coach-sahar-alhawari>

**Professor Nabila Abdelrahman, Egypt**, has played a pioneering role in establishing organizations for Muslim women in sport. In 1995, she planned an International Scientific Conference for Arab Women and Sport (Abdelrahman 1998) in Alexandria. The conference resulted directly in the endorsement of the Brighton Declaration and the establishment of the Arab Women and Sport Association and the Egyptian Women and Sport Association (see Annex 1). The Arab Women and Sport Association aims 'to enhance women's participation in sport, prepare women for roles in sport leadership.

**Source:** Jenifer Hargreaves ( 2000) *heroin of sport: The politics of difference and identity*. Routledge: London: ( page 60-63).



<http://auspakconsultancy.com.au/images/testimonia14.jpg>

**Rubab Raza, Pakistan**, 20, was her country's first female Olympic swimmer, competing in the 50m freestyle at the 2004 Athens Games. Rubab won a wild card entry for the Olympics due to her performances in swimming championships around the world. She also became the youngest sportswoman to represent Pakistan in any Olympic event when she took part in the 2004 Olympics at the age of 13. She won two silver medals and one

bronze at the 2004 Islamabad South Asian Games. She also represented her country at the 2006 Asian Games and 2006 Commonwealth Games.

**Sources:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubab\\_Raza](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubab_Raza)  
<http://www.in.com/rubab-raza/biography-243203.html>



**Sheikha Maitha Bint  
Mohammed Bin Rashid Al  
Maktoum, [The United Arab  
Emirates](#) (UAE)**

[http://gulfnews.com/polopoly\\_fs/1.114794!/image/691312935\\_gen/derivatives/box\\_475/691312935](http://gulfnews.com/polopoly_fs/1.114794!/image/691312935_gen/derivatives/box_475/691312935).

Al Maktoum, 31, a martial arts champion, won the +60kg karate silver medal at the 2006 Doha Asian Games. She was a taekwondo competitor at the 2008 Olympics, and was the first Gulf woman to carry her nation's flag at the Olympics.

Source:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maitha\\_bint\\_Mohammed\\_bin\\_Rashid\\_Al\\_Maktoum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maitha_bint_Mohammed_bin_Rashid_Al_Maktoum)  
<http://www.nettyroyal.nl/maitha.html>



**Sheikha Latifa Bint Ahmed Al  
Maktoum, [The United Arab  
Emirates](#) (UAE)**

Having won numerous medals at regional equestrian championships, Al Maktoum, 25, competed in the 2008 Olympics and before that won a team bronze medal at the 2006 Doha Asian Games. More recently she won an individual silver medal at the 2010 Asian Games.

[http://farm6.staticflickr.com/5085/5209478575\\_fd98939528\\_z.jpg](http://farm6.staticflickr.com/5085/5209478575_fd98939528_z.jpg)

Source: <http://www.globalchampionstour.com/profiles/riders/3640/sheikha-latifa-bint-ahmed-al-maktoum>



<http://www.starcentralmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Kohistani-0M86C82F-473x264.jpg>

## **Tahmina Kohistani,** Afghanistan

Tahmina Kohistani (18 June 1989) is an [Afghan](#) runner at [100 metres](#). Kohistani competed at the [2012 Summer Olympics](#) in London representing Afghanistan where she made a new personal best of 14.42 seconds

in the Preliminaries of the 100 metres distance even though she did not advance to the first round. Her previous personal best at the 100 metres was 15.00 blank at a competition in [Bydgoszcz, Poland](#) in 2008. She defied her country's ideals and overcame harrassment to compete in international events. An interview reports she got thrown out of a taxi when the driver found out she was training for the Olympics. As much as she became a symbol of women's empowerment — as much as Brunei, Qatar and Saudi Arabia sending female athletes to the Olympics for the first time had finally made these a genuine gender-inclusive Games — Kohistani knew: change comes agonizingly slow in parts of the Muslim world. Despite all of the barriers set in her path, Kohistani became an inspiration and a role model for other female athletes facing opposition.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tahmina\\_Kohistani](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tahmina_Kohistani)



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## Using Web 2.0 for Research and Networking on Muslim Women in Sports:

### The Case of ‘Muslim Women in Sports’ Blog

Sertaç Sehliskoğlu

As stated on its description page, the blog *Muslim Women in Sports*<sup>1</sup> (MWIS) consists of a collection of news and articles on Muslim women and sports around the world. I decided to create the blog due to a lacuna of a central repository of collected materials about Muslim women's involvement in physical activities. Since I was asked to share the background story of the blog for this book, I need to go back to May 2008, two months after the exciting yet innovative symposium on Sports and Muslim women, which took place at Concordia University in Montreal. Although the blog isn't a by-product of the symposium, the idea was triggered after chains of events following the symposium.

#### Background Story

As an ambitious undergraduate student at the time, I assisted Professor Homa Hoodfar of the Anthropology/Sociology department at Concordia University in coordinating and hosting the

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<sup>1</sup><http://muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.ca/>



symposium. Professor Hoodfar, acting as a mentor, suggested I document the conference in a report.<sup>2</sup> While accumulating and sifting through the information available online about Muslim women's participation in sports, I realized that while there was a wealth of data available, it was scattered amongst a diversity of sources, and many of the articles were only accessible for a limited time. My initial thought was to save as much of the available data as I could in my own archive. In order to use the data for any future academic work, it was necessary to store all the pertinent links and retrieval dates, as part of proper academic citation guidelines. Once I started forming the archive, honestly, it turned into a somewhat tedious task. I was piling up all this written data, most of which it seemed would not likely be used by anyone else in the future. Plus, I, along with Professor Hoodfar and maybe a couple of other colleagues, would be the only ones with access to the archive. I then decided it would be a more worthwhile endeavor to publish all of this information on a blog, so anybody interested in the subject would be able to access easily, once they searched for the keywords.

In time, step-by-step, I realized that to widen the possible audience and interaction with the information, it would be beneficial to establish a broader range of social media platforms. This resulted in developing a contact email address for any possible queries on the blog, an appropriate URL, a Facebook fanpage, a Twitter account (@Mslmwomensports), a blog logo and finally business cards. In 2009, I designed a logo for the blog, composed of the colors purple and black – often associated with feminism – a footballer icon, and a crescent – a symbol of Is-

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<sup>2</sup> The full report is available on the Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) website:

<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/WLUML%20Sport%20&%20Muslim%20Women%20symposium%20report.pdf>

lam. I re-designed the original blog according to this color scheme as well.

Beginning in 2012, two authors joined the MWIS blog as regular contributors: Dr. Samaya Farooq from the University of Derby (UK), and Shireen Ahmed from Toronto. Dr. Farooq's current research interests extend to sport and its potential to operate as an agent for social, cultural, political, and ideological change(s). As an expert in sports sociology, Dr. Farooq specialized in British Muslim women's involvement in sports and is one of the co-founders of the research network *Sports, Islam and Muslim Communities*.<sup>3</sup> Her work draws attention to important academic and theoretical discussions on the topic. Ms. Ahmed on the other hand, as a sportswoman based in Toronto, nourishes the blog with her articles based in experiential perspectives, through an innovative, encouraging and positive lens.

When it was first launched, the MWIS blog almost exclusively re-published news, articles, videos and photos that had already been published elsewhere, providing the links to the original sources. Today, as part of a broader network focusing on women, sports and Muslim identity, the MWIS blog receives around 2000 visitors per week, and many more via a sister website, Women Talk Sports (<http://www.womentalksports.com>), where each and every entry to the MWIS blog is automatically uploaded and reaches a wider audience. From our feedback, we see that MWIS mainly attracts the attention of Muslim women who are seeking positive stories that encourage participation in sports, as well as of researchers, academics and journalists interested in the topics covered.

As a feminist initiative, MWIS gives voice to secular and pious Muslim women equally, providing a platform geared to those

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<sup>3</sup> <http://sportislammuslimcommunities.blogspot.co.uk>

facing barriers to participation in sport because of bans on wearing hijab on the field (e.g., rulings by FIFA and other sports organizations), as well as those whose participation is limited due to the regulations of their own country (e.g., in Iran). MWIS brings forward the less heard stories of Muslim women living both in Muslim and in non-Muslim contexts.

### **Blog Power and Becoming an Independent Actor**

With its balanced, continuous and diverse entries, MWIS received recognition by various international networks. *Ms Magazine* for example, invites MWIS to contribute to their well-known Feminisphere under the sports section.<sup>4</sup> According to research conducted by an independent media research company,<sup>5</sup> MWIS also appeared as one of the most reputable and relevant resources discussing Muslim women and sports during the 2012 London Olympics, and was also listed as the 7<sup>th</sup> most listened to resource discussing the 2012 Olympics in general, beating several prominent daily newspapers.

The MWIS blog's feminist tone is appreciated and perceived as 'objective' by many sports activists, researchers, feminists and journalists. For a couple of months before the 2012 Olympics, MWIS posted dozens of articles about FIFA's hijab ban and about Saudi Arabia's resistance to sending a female Olympian to the 2012 games; both were discussions central to reflecting upon important barriers towards Muslim women's participation at the Olympics. Once the FIFA ban was lifted in July 2012, and Saudi agreed to send women to the Games, MWIS took on an initiative to support Iranian feminists who had been demanding that Iranian female Olympians not to veil if they so choose

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<sup>4</sup> <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/08/31/femisphere-sports-bloggers-with-a-gender-lens/>

<sup>5</sup> Traackr.com

by launching the Right to Unveil Campaign.<sup>6</sup> The campaign was calling on the Iranian government to allow their players to unveil, if they want to, insisting that female players should not face with any charges if they play without a headscarf during 2012 Olympics. While the campaign spread and gained support amongst both Iranian and Turkish feminists, it did not result in any changes to regulations on the part of the Iranian government. Still, it was an important moment and initiative for building international solidarity for Muslim women's access to sport.

With the growth of MWIS and its supporting networks, it became clear that simply re-publishing the news from other sources was rather limiting our scope. A unique strength of the platform became providing a forum for original pieces. The Iranian campaign was a strong example of the ways in which the MWIS blog was becoming a prominent social actor. Especially during the Olympics, there were times where sports journalists or students authored articles inspired by the entries of the MWIS blog. I receive emails from students on a weekly basis who were seeking guidance for their research about Muslim women in sports, as inspired by the blog. Although many researchers and journalists interested in subject inevitably refer to MWIS, there are of course occasions where they do not do so, since it is only in academia where we make a point of referring to every little resource we draw from. Interestingly though, I discovered that on many such occasions, it is often readers who remind the author to refer to MWIS blog when

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<sup>6</sup> This is where I announced it:  
<http://www.muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/iranian-female-players-right-to-unveil.html>

This is the twitter campaign:  
<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23IranianFemaleOlympiansRighttoUnveil&src=hash>  
And, if your friends know Turkish, these are the news agents announced my campaign: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/planet/21011758.asp>  
<http://bianet.org/biamag/dunya/139987-londra-olimpiyatlarinda-neler-oluyor>

they comment under the news articles. By tracing the referring URLs on MWIS, I realized that a very important source of unique visitors on the blog come via comments sections of news and articles – some of whom then become regular followers of MWIS.

## **Statistics**

Keeping track of website traffic is a very important tool for both assessing who your audience is, as well as discovering avenues to engage new followers. I use three different types of resources for gathering internet statistics, partial results of which will be shared here. As of September 2012, the MWIS blog had received over 230,000 unique visitors since May 2008, of which 137,000 had visited during the last 12 months. Most of the visitors are from the US (65,000), followed by the UK (29,000), Germany (15,000), India (13,000) and Canada (12,000). The ranking list then continues with Australia, Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia and France. Although many of the visitors do not seem to come from Muslim-majority countries, the comments and emails I receive indicate that there are an important number of the followers from Western countries are especially younger Muslim women.

Overwhelmingly, unique visitors find the MWIS blog through Google, when they search for particular keywords. The most common search keywords that direct visitors to the blog include generic words like “Muslim women”, “Muslim Women Sport” or “hijab football”; names of particular people such as “Nawal el Moutawakel” or “Hayat Lambarki”; and keywords related to heated debates such as “Aliya Mustafina Muslim”, “Burkini”, or “Dinara Safina Muslim”.

We note that it is very rare for our readers to leave controversial comments on the blog, simply because many of the entries are

originally published by another resource and do not belong to MWIS. What the followers commonly appreciate is related to the fact that all of this diverse information is available together in a single source. The most popular post of all time on the MWIS blog is about Indian schoolgirls' practice of Chinese martial arts. The visitors for this article came largely from Western countries, as well as Malaysia, India and Pakistan. The article includes several photos of young girls who are wearing white scarves, white pants and long grey (knee-level) robes during their practice. Thus, they were embodying the possibility of empowerment with Islamic clothing, which is not generally tight sports suits combined with a headscarf, but rather very loose clothes overall. The readers' appreciation of the girls' stories in the article on Chinese martial arts is a symbol of the overall appreciation of the blog space; it is very much related to what I refer to as *Islamic pride*, inspired by young Muslim girls and women empowering themselves through sports. According to one of the comments on the article, the schoolgirls "prove one can exercise in decent Islamic clothing", all the while challenging stereotypes and carving out a space to affirm and express their unique identities. They are *proud* to see such inspirations for "Muslimah".

## **Selected Organizations Advocating Women's Sport**

### **International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW):**

<http://www.iapesgw.org/>

IAPESGW is an organisation set up to support and bring together professionals from around the world who are working in the fields of physical education, dance and sport. Founded over 60 years ago in 1949, it now has members in every continent of the world, in over 40 countries. IAPESGW also aims to represent and promote the interests of girls and women at all levels and in all areas of physical education, dance and sport.

### **UN Sport for Development:**

<https://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/sport/home/unplayers/memberstates/pid/14320>

Sport for Development and Peace' (SDP) refers to the intentional use of sport, physical activity and play as a tool to reach development and peace objectives, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is therefore used for social, humanitarian and developmental purposes and looks beyond the scope of elite sport. The definition of sport for the purpose of the SDP IWG's work leans on a definition by the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on SDP (2003): "all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social

interaction, such as play, recreation, organized or competitive sport, and indigenous sports and games.” SDP views Sport and physical activity as a mechanism that can contribute to the empowerment of girls and women and can therefore be a delivery mechanism for gender equality. The UN’s approach to women and sport is elaborated in their publication *Women, Gender Equality, and Sport* (2007) available at:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/Women%20and%20Sport.pdf>

### **Women’s Sport Foundation:**

<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/>

The Women’s Sports Foundation was established in 1974 by tennis legend Billie-Jean King to advance the lives of women and girls through sports and physical activity. Today they provide scholarships and grants to aspiring athletes. They fund groundbreaking research and public awareness campaigns. They educate, advocate and organize programs in cities across the country.

### **International Working Group on Women and Sport**

**(IWG):** [http://www.iwg-gti.org/iwg/#International Working Group on Women and Sport](http://www.iwg-gti.org/iwg/#International%20Working%20Group%20on%20Women%20and%20Sport)

The IWG are working to empower women through advocating sport. Their story began in 1994 with the [first World Conference on Women and Sport in Brighton, UK](#) and the debut of the [Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport](#) (see Appendix 1). Piece by piece they have continued their advocacy with the help of thousands of dedicated women and men the world over. Their independent coordinating body is currently located in Helsinki, Finland for the 2010 – 2014 quadrennial term and



led by [renowned international experts in the field](#) who contribute their unique expertise to achieving

the IWG's mission: [Empowering women – Advancing sport](#). On June 12, 2014, the IWG will open the [6<sup>th</sup> IWG World Conference on Women and Sport](#) in celebration of 20 years of sustained advocacy.

### **Women's Sport International (WSI):**

<http://www.sportsbiz.bz/womensportinternational/>

WSI was formed to meet the challenge of ensuring that sport and physical activity receive the attention and priority they deserve in the lives of girls and women and to meet the need for an international umbrella organization that can bring about positive change for girls and women in these important areas of their lives.

WSI is both an issues and action based organization. Their members are spread across 30 countries and a broad range of expertise and interest in the following areas: sports science medicine, health and fitness, nutrition, coaching, administration and education as well as athletes and girls and women who want the opportunity to make sport and physical activity an ongoing part of their lives. Their mission can be summarised as encouraging increased opportunities and positive changes for women and girls at all levels of involvement in sport and physical activity.

### **International Women's Sports Hall of Fame:**

<http://www.sportsheritage.org/organizations/international-womens-sports-hall-of-fame/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's\\_Sports\\_Foundation#International\\_Women.27s\\_Sports\\_Hall\\_of\\_Fame](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_Sports_Foundation#International_Women.27s_Sports_Hall_of_Fame)

The International Women's Sports Hall of Fame was established in 1980, to give recognition to female athletes who have made history in women's sports. The International Women's Sports Hall of Fame recognizes the athletic achievements of those who have competed at least 25 years prior to the present year in the Pioneer category. Athletes whose accomplishments came within the past 25 years are inducted into the Contemporary category. Selections are made worldwide and are based on achievements, breakthroughs, innovative style and ongoing commitment to the development of women's sports.

### **Atlanta Plus:**

Atlanta (Atlanta Plus) is an informal women's rights activist body, set up originally by three women - two from France, a human rights lawyer and a scientist (the former, Linda Weil-Curiel, is the coordinator), and one from Belgium, who is the past Secretary of State for European Affairs. The idea originated as a response to commentaries at the opening ceremony of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, which celebrated the ending of apartheid and the re-entry of South Africa into the Olympics but, were, with the exception of exiled Iranian women activists, silent about the 35 delegations that had no female competitors (because religion was politicized to serve political ends to the disadvantage of women; because of a lack of topcaliber women athletes; or because countries were poor and devoted their limited sports budgets mostly to men). The main concern of Atlanta is that by permitting countries that disallow women from taking part in sport to participate in the Games, the IOC (International Olympics Committee) is contravening its own Olympic Charter. Atlanta Plus has been therefore demanding an Olympic ban on those countries. Despite IOC antagonism Atlanta Plus has managed to mobilize a variety of the feminist organizations, activists and proponents of gender equality in

sport and have successfully lobbied for ICO to follow its charter and prevent countries that have no women in their Olympic team to be excluded from participating in Olympic. Their efforts finally obtained some positive results and in the London Olympics, all countries had women athletes even if they were token number. (for a more detailed history of this significant development, see Appendix 2)

# **Appendix 1**

## **The Brighton Declaration on Women And Sport**

### **Women Sport and the Challenge of Change**

The first international conference on women and sport, which brought together policy and decision makers in sport at both national and international level, took place in Brighton, UK from 5-8 May 1994. It was organised by the British Sports Council and supported by the International Olympic Committee. The conference specifically addressed the issue of how to accelerate the process of change that would redress the imbalances women face in their participation and involvement in sport.

The 280 delegates from 82 countries representing governmental and non-governmental organisations, national Olympic committees, international and national sport federations and educational and research institutions, endorsed the following Declaration. The Declaration provides the principles that should guide action intended to increase the involvement of women in sport at all levels and in all functions and roles.

In addition, the conference agreed to establish and develop and international women and sport strategy which encompasses all continents. This should be endorsed and supported by governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in sport development. Such an international strategic approach

will enable model programmes and successful developments to be shared among nations and sporting federations, so accelerating the change towards a more equitable sporting culture worldwide.

## **Background**

Sport is a cultural activity which, practiced fairly and equitably, enriches society and friendship between nations. Sport is an activity which offers the individual the opportunity of selfknowledge, self-expression and fulfilment; personal achievement, skill acquisition and demonstration of ability; social interaction, enjoyment, good health and well-being. Sport promotes involvement, integration and responsibility in society and contributes to the development of the community.

Sport and sporting activities are an integral aspect of the culture of every nation. However, while women and girls account for more than half of the world's population and although the percentage of their participation in sport varies between countries, in every case it is less than that of men and boys.

Despite growing participation of women in sport in recent years and increased opportunities for women to participate in domestic and international arenas, increased representation of women in decision making and leadership roles within sport has not followed. Women are significantly under-represented in management, coaching and officiating, particularly at the higher levels. Without women leaders, decision makers and role models within sport, equal opportunities for women and girls will not be achieved.

Women's experiences, values and attitudes can enrich, enhance and develop sport. Similarly, participation in sport can enrich, enhance and develop women's lives.

## **A. Scope And Aims Of The Declaration**

### **1. Scope**

This Declaration is addressed to all those governments, public authorities, organisations, businesses, educational and research establishments, women's organisations and individuals who are responsible for, or who directly or indirectly influence, the conduct, development or promotion of sport or who are in any way involved in the employment, education, management, training, development or care of women in sport. This Declaration is meant to complement all sporting, local, national and international charters, laws, codes, rules and regulations relating to women or sport.

### **2. Aims**

The overriding aim is to develop a sporting culture that enables and values the full involvement of women in every aspect of sport.

It is the interests of equality, development and peace that a commitment be made by governmental, non-governmental organisations and all those institutions involved in sport to apply the Principles set out in this Declaration by developing appropriate policies, structures and mechanisms which:

- ensure that all women and girls have opportunity to participate in sport in a safe and supportive environment which preserves the rights, dignity and respect of the individual;
- increase the involvement of women in sport at all levels and in all functions and roles;
- ensure that the knowledge, experiences and values of women contribute to the development of sport;
- promote the recognition of women's involvement in sport as a contribution to public life, community development and in

building a healthy nation;

- promote the recognition by women of the intrinsic value of sport and its contribution to personal development and healthy lifestyle.

## **B. The Principles**

### **1. Equity and Equality In Society and Sport**

**a.** Every effort should be made by state and government machineries to ensure that institutions and organisations responsible for sport comply with the equality provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

**b.** Equal opportunity to participate and be involved in sport whether for the purpose of leisure and recreation, health promotion or high performance, is the right of every woman, regardless of race, colour, language, religion, creed, sexual orientation, age, marital status, disability, political belief or affiliation, national or social origin.

**c.** Resources, power and responsibility should be allocated fairly and without discrimination on the basis of sex, but such allocation should redress any inequitable balance in the benefits available to women and men.

### **2. Facilities**

Women's participation in sport is influenced by the extent variety and accessibility of facilities. The planning, design and management of these should appropriately and equitably meet the particular needs of women in the community, with special attention given to the need for child care provision and safety.

### **3. School and Junior Sport**

Research demonstrates that girls and boys approach sport from markedly different perspectives. Those responsible for sport, education, recreation and physical education of young people should ensure that an equitable range of opportunities and learning experience, which accommodate the values, attitudes and aspirations of girls, is incorporated in programmes to develop physical fitness and basic sport skills of young people.

### **4. Developing Participation**

Women's participation in sport is influenced by the range of activities available. Those responsible for delivering sporting opportunities and programmes should provide and promote activities which meet women's needs and aspirations.

### **5. High Performance Sport**

a. Governments and sports organisations should provide equal opportunities to women to reach their sports performance potential by ensuring that all activities and programmes relating to performance improvements take account of the specific needs of female athletes.

b. Those supporting elite and/or professional athletes should ensure that competition opportunities, rewards, incentives, recognition, sponsorship, promotion and other forms of support are provided fairly and equitably to both women and men.

### **6. Leadership in Sport**

Women are under-represented in the leadership and decision making of all sport and sport-related organisations. Those responsible for these areas should develop policies and programmes and design structures which increase the number of women coaches, advisers, decision makers, officials, administrators and sports personnel at all levels with special attention given to recruitment, development and retention.



## **7. Education, Training and Development**

Those responsible for the education, training and development of coaches and other sports personnel should ensure that education processes and experiences address issues relating to gender equity and the needs of female athletes, equitably reflect women's role in sport and take account of women's leadership experiences, values and attitudes.

## **8. Sport Information and Research**

Those responsible for research and providing information on sport should develop policies and programmes to increase knowledge and understanding about women and sport and ensure that research norms and standards are based on research on women and men.

## **9. Resources**

Those responsible for the allocation of resources should ensure that support is available for sportswomen, women's programmes and special measures to advance this Declaration of Principles.

## **10. Domestic and International Cooperation**

Government and non-government organisations should incorporate the promotion of issues of gender equity and the sharing of examples of good practice in women and sport policies and programmes in their associations with other organisations, within both domestic and international arenas.

## Appendix 2

### Atlanta Plus<sup>1</sup>

Homa Hoodfar

Atlanta Plus is an informal women's rights activist body, set up by a group of transnational activist women from several different countries including Iran, where women's sport has been very politicized since the 1980s, to push for action against countries who exclude women from participation in the Olympic games before the Atlanta Olympics was held in 1996. The idea had been percolated among many transnational activist women since the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, which celebrated the ending of apartheid and the re-entry of South Africa into the Olympics. Yet with the exception of exiled Iranian women activists, the world seemed to be silent about the 35 delegations that had no female competitors in many cases because religion was politicized to serve political ends, to the disadvantage of women. Indeed a group of exiled Iranian women, without success, had tried to petition the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ban Iran and other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia that use religion as a justification to ban women from participation in the Olympics in the name of religion. Between the Barcelona (1992) and Atlanta (1996) Olympics', Brighton declaration was launched in 1994 (see appendix1)

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<sup>1</sup> This appendix is written based on the following sources: Jenifer Hargreaves (2000) *heroin of sport: The politics of difference and identity*. London: Routledge; Haider Rizvi OLYMPICS: Women's Rights Groups Seek Ban Against Male-Only Teams. (IPS.WASHINGTON, Jul 24 1996), and interviews with Iranian activists in exile who were involved in promoting Atlanta Plus demands.

which became subject to several international and regional conferences with the goal of expanding women's access to sport and extending their access to international games. An informal yet fairly organized group of women was formed under the name of Atlanta Plus to lobby the IOC and also mobilize and sensitize public opinion to the wide spread discriminatory practices against women which limited their access to sport and Olympic games and place pressure on the IOC to act to end such practices.

Atlanta Plus by design has been an informal network of women's right activists, with a few women as coordinators and spoke persons – two women from France, a human rights lawyer and a scientist (the former, Linda Weil-Curiel), and a third person from Belgium, who was the past Secretary of State for European Affairs. All three were quite high profile in the field and were individually very familiar with the International laws and treaties. They set to mobilize many national and transnational feminist and women's rights organizations in support of their demands. They pointed out that the IOC Charter states that "any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, sex, or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic movement." They asked if the IOC has taken steps since the 1970s to exclude south Africa on the grounds of racial discrimination, why should gender discrimination and gender apartheid be any different? They rejected the frequently quoted reasons that the absence of women was due to the lack of top-caliber women athletes; or that some countries were too poor to send women athletes. However, the IOC was to at pain to explain why poverty did not prevent sending the male athletes. Clearly it was because these countries devoted their limited sports budgets mostly to men which indicated their discriminatory attitudes toward women. The main concern of Atlanta Plus was that by permitting countries that disallow women from taking part in

sport to participate in the Games, the IOC was in fact contravening its own Olympic Charter. Atlanta Plus has therefore been demanding an Olympic ban on those countries similar to IOC actions against South Africa.

The IOC has been antagonistic and dismissive of Atlanta Plus whom had reached out to them, articulating their demands before the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. "Finally the IOC argue that the position of Atlanta Plus on 'gender apartheid' is 'an insult to Nelson Mandela, the South African people, and black people as a whole'; that they cannot agree to waging war against religion; that there is no global consensus for punishing such nations; and that they cannot make policy because the UN had taken no stance on the issue."<sup>2</sup> Atlanta's response was that the IOC is autonomous in this matter, that the rules of the Olympic Charter are their own and therefore can be enforced against governments that flaunt their opposition. Furthermore, they point out that in the past the IOC has given support to male demands - for example, when the Iranians campaigned for 'men only' to present medals and refused to walk behind a Spanish woman holding their country's placard. The IOC agreed to their demands without consulting with the UN or any other international bodies who could not lend support to such an action, which is blatantly anti-women and contravene the principle of gender equality. Furthermore they pointed out that the IOC's support of the Women's Islamic Solidarity Games without referring to any other international bodies or charters. Atlanta Plus pointed out that such a support in many ways can be read as a vehicle for the Iranian state to promote their political ideologies of gender apartheid and spread their way of life and beliefs beyond their national boundaries. Therefore they pointed out their justification for overlooking question of ex-

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<sup>2</sup>Jenifer Hargreaves ( 2000) *heroin of sport: The politics of difference and identity*. Routledge: London: ( page 72)

clusion of women from Olympic is baseless and is indicative of their own patriarchal perspectives.

Linda Weil-Curiel, one of the founders of Atlanta Plus said “This is ( *their demand*) neither a cultural issue nor a women-only issue... Our purpose is to ensure that women of all countries are allowed to compete in the Games.” Similarly Parvin Darabi, a well known Iranian women’s right activist asked; “If the Olympic Committee could ban South Africa for 28 years on the basis of racial discrimination, why can’t it do the same on the basis of gender?” In 1996 many pointed out the imbalances in the IOC which included only one token woman and that it was not surprising that an all male committee can not be sympathetic to gender discrimination. Thus the IOC itself was questioned. Many proponents of gender equality, particularly Iranians, have raised the question of why is it so difficult to view gender discrimination and even extreme cases of gender apartheid practices with the same lens as those of racial apartheid or racism. Why is it that international media down plays these wide spread discriminatory practices? Despite their active presence and courting the media Atlanta Plus did not receive the wide media coverage that they had expected in 1996 but they vowed to continue their struggle.

Those antagonistic to the Atlanta Plus including IOC and some of the Muslim states authorities had been accusing them as being anti-Islam and trying to agitate anti-Islam feeling , although in their demand they never mentioned religion. The proponents of Atlanta Plus continued their work and mobilization of public opinion and other feminist and sport organizations while preparing for the Sydney Olympic in 2000, which offered them an opportunity to refute some of the allegations and accusations of their anti-Islam stance. The organization was renamed 'Atlanta-Sydney Plus'. It lobbied and asserted pressure to attain equal access for men and women in respect

of the Olympic Ideal and the Olympic charter, regardless of religion or tradition. Atlanta-Sydney Plus called on the IOC to ban 25 countries from the Sydney Olympics including Afghanistan, Botswana, Iraq, Haiti, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Recognizing the different kind of justification for women's exclusion, they also demanded that the IOC allocates funds to promote women's sport for Olympic participation in the contexts that lack of female athletes were presented as economic and resource issue. This would then help to distinguish these countries from those that refused the participation of women from the Games for exclusively ideological reasons, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and some other oil rich countries. They also demanded that the IOC should condemn and sanction, without any ambiguity, all countries that ban women from certain sports or participation in the Olympic games as well as those countries who legally prohibit women and men from practicing sports together, since this often means women will not have the same access to resources or training. Therefore countries like Iran could not be excluded from condemnation by sending just a few token women.

Atlanta Plus support grew steadily over the years and they have had much to celebrate for their efforts during the two decades, including successful mobilization of public opinion, various sport organizations and national and international sport bodies as well as individuals. Indeed despite the antagonism and dismissive attitude of the IOC towards Atlanta Plus, to a large degree it has come to accommodate its vision, particularly after the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Atlanta Plus also managed to take advantage of the UN, identifying sport as major tool of development and peace making and included sport as part of

Millennium Goals for Development.<sup>3</sup> Ironically despite IOC antagonistic position to Atlanta Plus and their demand for gender equality inadvertently they supported their goals since the IOC had been lobbying for such a UN initiative as a means of boosting international sport and improving its rather delicate financial position since the 1980s. The IOC's success in their Goal of collaboration with UN then also promoted Atlanta Plus Goals. In Europe, Atlanta Plus also received cross-party support from the German and French parliaments, from the Parliamentary Council of Europe, and from the UN. The original French publicity material was translated into Arabic, English and Spanish, and sent to hundreds of organizations around the world and the movement gathered support from women and men in different parts of the world fighting gender discrimination. The objectives of Atlanta Plus were approved at the annual meeting of the (US) Women's Sports Foundation in 1995 and, in the same year, at the 'First World-Wide Forum on Physical Activity and Sport', which was organized under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Federation of the Sport Gear Industry (WFSGI).

Such a wide spread galvanization, in spite of the IOC's hostility and enmity from many Muslim states to Atlanta initiatives, claiming that they are politically inspired and their goal is to present Muslim countries as backwards and non-democratic, Atlanta Plus has attained major achievements. Atlanta Plus has emerged as a transnational movement. It can be credited in particular by the revision of the IOC charter to include provisions on gender. Iran, despite its criticism and accusation of cultural imperialism of the group, sent one woman to the At-

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<sup>3</sup> See UN 2007. Women Gender equality and Sport. (Women 2000 and Beyond: published to promote the Goals of Beijing Declaration (division of Advancement of women. Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Atlanta Olympics and she held the national Flag; since then it has sent more women athletes in some fields, though it continues to insist in its Islamic dress code for women. However, the highlight of Atlanta Plus's achievement is that by 2012 all countries including Saudi Arabia had at least a few token women included in their team. Perhaps even more significantly many pious Muslim Organizations have taken up their cause and have campaigned and demonstrated for women's access to Olympic Games and generally women's sport claiming that depriving women from sport in the name of Islam is un-Islamic.

It is also important to mention that some international women's sports groups, while they supported Atlanta Plus's goals in ending discriminatory attitude to women's sport, were also weary of the implication of some of their arguments. They pointed out that segregation in sport did not necessarily imply discrimination against women. They raised the issue that Atlanta Plus should demonstrate a greater sensitivity to the cultural conditions of each country and to those women trying to secure advances for themselves while facing huge constraints. They were specially worried that the Atlanta Plus stance may be perceived as anti-religion and in particular as anti-Islam. However, the proponents have responded by emphasizing that while in an ideal world segregation in sport may not result in disadvantage for women, in practice often it has meant an inferior status for women's sport and women athletes and more importantly, little resources allocated to them. In refuting this argument many have pointed out that segregation should not mean that women's teams be deprived from participating in the Olympics as most Olympic sports are single sex. Many proponents of women's sport continue to remind their audiences that many states in the name of religion or culture continue to deprive women from visibility in the national and international public sphere. Thus their existence and effort in sport and other aspects of public life is easily erased from social and po-



litical history. It is this significant aspect which represent the major pitfall of the segregation of sport particularly when it is done in the name of religion and morality. During the 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of various from of secularism, there was a tendency for religious beliefs and cultural practices to be considered private affairs. However, in recent times with the rise of various forms of politicization of religion and culture, there has been a marked shift to make religious, cultural values, and morality part of state politics and various social and economic policies - almost always to the detriment of women. Atlanta Plus as a transnational movement has 'exposed' and politicized these discriminatory attitudes and negative trends on women's sport opportunities.

Atlanta Plus's assertive stance and strategies has forced the IOC and many states to look seriously at the question of female participation in the Olympics. Furthermore, the marked success of Atlanta Plus has opened the door for other groups and organizations to lobby in different ways for the promotion of women's sport both nationally and internationally.

In any case Atlanta Plus has never claimed to speak for all Muslim women and does not wish to take issue with Muslim cultures in general, or the way in which sport is practiced in Muslim contexts. Their argument was that the IOC supported discrimination because it allowed those countries who refused to comply with the Olympic Charter to take part in the Games. Importantly, many women from Muslim contexts such as Iran and Saudi Arabia support Atlanta Plus because it does give them a voice -albeit a surrogate one – since they are living in the boundaries of theocratic Islamic states, they would otherwise not have a voice because gender relations of power are desperately uneven. Moreover, given the undemocratic and ideological position of state authorities, women who want free access to international competitions and who endorse a boy-

cott of states that ban women from the Olympics and other international competitions, cannot openly speak, for fear of reprisals. They feel Atlanta Plus and other similar organizations have provided them with a platform to air their objection to the national discriminatory gender policies.

Many proponents of Atlanta plus have argued that 'Demanding, through sports, an end to segregation or discrimination of which largely women (and to a lesser degree ethnic and racial groups) are victims is probably one of the most effective means of getting around neglecting the women's human rights and the abuse of notion of national sovereignty and cultural differences as justifications.

Although the Atlanta Plus as a movement has had considerable achievements, clearly there is still much to be done in order to open sport to all women who wish to engage in sport on equal par with their male counterparts.

Ironically despite much success of the Atlanta Plus as a movement, there is little documentation on their work and the various strategies, meetings and lobbying they have conducted. Proper documentation of this movement awaits future research.



# Index

- ACC 21, 219  
AFC 21, 182, 185, 186, 187  
Ahmadinejad 77, 189, 192  
All Women's Futsal Playoffs 153  
Anti-Westernism 45  
Apartheid 41, 60, 82, 85, 108,  
174, 205, 341, 387, 396, 397,  
398, 399  
Archery 60  
Asian Football Confederation 21,  
182, 185  
Asian Games 23, 177, 194, 210,  
219, 222, 361, 371, 374, 375  
Asian Volleyball Championship  
177  
Badminton 210, 211, 215, 288,  
289, 297, 300, 305, 341  
Barcelona Olympics 48, 80, 81,  
82, 370, 387, 396  
Basketball 22, 53, 61, 64, 114,  
153, 210, 211, 215, 226, 231,  
233, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239,  
240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245,  
247, 250, 251, 252, 254, 255,  
256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261,  
265, 276, 277, 291, 328  
Beijing 163, 346, 347, 401  
Bhutto 96  
Body 13, 14, 27, 31, 35, 46, 58,  
61, 62, 64, 70, 87, 100, 104,  
111, 112, 117, 119, 120, 126,  
129, 130, 133, 136, 137, 138,  
139, 140, 150, 152, 157, 162,  
212, 214, 226, 238, 240, 249,  
276, 284, 309, 337, 339, 344,  
353, 354, 356, 357, 385, 387,  
396  
Brighton Conference 83  
Campaign 12, 24, 48, 78, 160,  
183, 185, 186, 187, 189, 191,  
192, 193, 194, 270, 274, 291,  
305, 347, 381  
CEDAW 274  
CFA 21, 248  
Chador 17, 81  
Citizenship rights 67, 179, 193,  
272, 307  
Civil society 26, 44, 52, 75, 84,  
97, 146, 308  
CNEPS EBC 22, 244  
Coaching 211, 212, 241, 295,  
331, 372, 386, 390  
Collective actions 34, 35, 180  
Common actions 34, 49, 51  
Common good 44  
Cricket 40, 55, 204, 210, 211,  
212, 213, 215, 217, 218, 219,  
221, 222, 226  
Cultural norms 47, 62, 256  
Cultural imperialism 46, 62  
Cultural Imperialism 69, 170, 367  
Cycling 80, 276, 372  
Declaration 8, 83, 373, 385, 389,  
391, 392, 394, 401  
Democracy 41, 49, 55, 58, 75,  
103, 106, 180, 193  
Dress codes 15, 17, 18, 31, 32,  
33, 45, 88, 93, 94, 95, 105,  
116, 188, 293, 296, 297, 298,  
303, 305, 306, 320, 321, 323,  
342  
Empowerment 18, 26, 35, 53, 56,  
64, 103, 137, 199, 201, 283,  
284, 299, 308, 375, 383, 385  
Equestrian 268, 278, 375  
Exclusion of Muslim women 33,  
98  
Exclusionary practices 35, 84,  
100, 304  
FA 22, 299, 303, 304

FAC 20, 221  
 Feminism 12, 263, 270, 367  
 Fencing 60  
 FIFA 22, 53, 61, 62, 63, 70, 72,  
     147, 152, 166, 168, 171, 182,  
     185, 186, 194, 224, 228, 229,  
     263, 303, 304, 305, 309, 310,  
     372, 380  
 Football 2, 19, 43, 48, 49, 53, 55,  
     56, 61, 62, 63, 65, 76, 97, 146,  
     147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152,  
     153, 154, 155, 156, 158, 159,  
     160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165,  
     166, 167, 168, 170, 171, 175,  
     176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181,  
     186, 188, 189, 190, 191, 193,  
     194, 195, 206, 210, 211, 215,  
     217, 219, 224, 226, 232, 233,  
     234, 243, 244, 248, 249, 256,  
     257, 258, 259, 260, 263, 264,  
     276, 286, 290, 296, 300, 303,  
     305, 332, 338, 341, 352, 372,  
     383  
 Framing 46  
 Freedom Stadium 5, 176, 177,  
     183, 189, 190  
 Gender Testing 8, 338  
 Globalization 64, 124, 227, 230,  
     254, 261  
 Gramsci 51, 69  
 Hashemi 81, 85, 89, 90, 92, 93,  
     97, 102  
 Headscarf 16, 110, 114, 115, 134,  
     160, 287, 293, 301, 304, 381,  
     383  
 Heterosexual appeal 122  
 Heterosexuality 122  
 Hijab 32, 45, 46, 61, 63, 67, 70,  
     82, 93, 100, 103, 110, 115,  
     152, 154, 160, 168, 174, 178,  
     184, 188, 276, 287, 290, 292,  
     293, 297, 300, 301, 302, 304,  
     309, 380, 383  
 Horse riding 319  
 Human rights 10, 11, 14, 24, 26,  
     30, 34, 52, 84, 106, 275, 278,  
     284, 308, 339, 351, 387, 397,  
     404  
 IAAF 22, 342, 350, 351, 353, 356,  
     358, 360, 361  
 Ideological 44, 46, 49, 85, 175,  
     200, 354, 359, 364, 379, 400,  
     404  
 Ideology 10, 32, 49, 52, 58, 59,  
     63, 64, 67, 85, 102, 106, 113,  
     119, 120, 122, 137, 139, 155,  
     160, 175, 176, 178, 180, 191,  
     192, 227, 246, 324, 341, 350,  
     365  
 IFWS 22, 90, 95, 96, 100, 103  
 Imperialism 45, 46, 53, 54, 55,  
     56, 62, 67, 75, 81, 85, 164,  
     204, 402  
 Indonesia 10, 31, 32, 45, 46, 70,  
     71, 72, 364  
 Informal movements 49  
 INSEPS 22, 248  
 Integration 52, 263, 264, 277, 364  
 International Women's Islamic  
     Games 4, 77, 79, 80, 92, 93,  
     95, 99, 100, 103, 105, 288,  
     290, 295  
 IOC 22, 53, 70, 83, 84, 91, 92,  
     103, 229, 268, 309, 327, 346,  
     349, 362, 369, 372, 387, 396,  
     397, 398, 399, 401, 402, 403,  
     404  
 Iranian Physical Education  
     Organization 93  
 Islam and sport 86  
 Islamic Countries Solidarity 72,  
     85, 86, 87, 89, 92  
 Islamic fashion 125

Islamic fundamentalism 115, 125  
 Islamic ideal 57  
 Islamic schooling 51  
 Islamic Sport Gears 4, 100  
 Judo 110, 216, 263  
 Kuwait 84, 90, 149, 161, 400  
 Leadership 44, 50, 68, 83, 206,  
 269, 281, 285, 306, 316, 325,  
 373, 390, 394  
 Let Her Get Fat 49, 270  
 LGBTTIQ 22, 355  
 London Olympics 61, 78, 161,  
 257, 271, 339, 380, 388  
 Martyrs 94  
 Modern nation states 44  
 Modernity 17, 32, 44, 53, 85,  
 113, 116, 117, 124, 136  
 Modernization 72, 144, 195, 197  
 Modesty 39, 45, 53, 56, 58, 59,  
 60, 64, 67, 102, 112, 129, 130,  
 132, 134, 151, 152, 154, 157,  
 284, 296, 319, 320, 323  
 Morocco 10, 168, 235, 252, 369  
 Multiculturalism 60, 286, 308  
 Muslim Women's Olympics 4,  
 75, 77, 78, 79, 80, 85, 89, 90,  
 92, 286  
 Mustafa Kemal 118  
 MWSF 23, 286, 287, 291, 294,  
 295, 296, 297, 299, 303, 304,  
 305  
 Nation Building 4, 43  
 Nationalism 5, 175  
 NGO 23, 24, 259  
 Nigeria 16, 32, 46, 149, 161, 171,  
 234, 235, 265  
 Nike 101  
 Ninja (Ninjutsu) 301  
 Ninjabi 302, 303  
 Niqab 33, 300, 301  
 Non-organized movements 50  
 Obesity 270  
 Offside 190  
 Olympians 120, 381  
 Olympics 2012, 7, 52, 106, 267,  
 268, 271, 296, 339, 347, 380  
 Olympic games 78, 80, 85, 91,  
 92, 108, 216, 324, 396  
 Pakistan 10, 13, 16, 24, 26, 27,  
 30, 40, 90, 96, 97, 147, 198,  
 210, 212, 216, 229, 341, 365,  
 371, 373, 382, 383  
 Palestinian Territories 168  
 Panahi 190  
 parliament 198  
 Participation in sport 24, 37, 49,  
 62, 63, 71-72, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79,  
 82, 83, 88, 93, 95, 96-99, 103, 111,  
 112, 114, 118, 137, 139, 179, 185,  
 192, 193  
 Physical Education 6, 23, 70, 86,  
 93, 142, 207, 209, 247, 309,  
 336, 384  
 Piety 69, 141, 143  
 Political Islam 72  
 Pseudo-science 58, 104  
 Public life 14, 15, 34, 35, 36, 43,  
 45, 47, 48, 52, 55, 57, 77, 78,  
 80, 81, 88, 102, 104, 105, 174,  
 180, 187, 192, 193, 198, 201,  
 228, 273, 274, 285, 293, 299,  
 306, 331, 339, 340, 341, 392,  
 403  
 Public resistance 122  
 Public space 11, 14, 23, 30- 35,  
 39, 41, 42, 44, 46, 49, 73, 81,  
 87, 90, 94, 115, 116, 125, 143,  
 164, 165, 166, 168, 172, 178,  
 179, 181-211, 215, 248, 254,  
 281, 285, 300,  
 Public Visibilities 5, 124  
 Qur'an 55, 231, 260, 273, 310  
 Recreation Centers 5, 126, 128


Resistance 17, 33, 35, 41, 55, 93,  
 105, 107, 122, 123, 124, 126,  
 139, 140, 159, 164, 166, 170,  
 174, 192, 193, 194, 214, 273,  
 330, 341, 343, 345, 362, 365,  
 380  
 Revolution 32, 71, 94, 108, 142,  
 169, 170, 173, 196, 228, 308  
 SAARC 23, 216, 217  
 Saudi Arabia 32, 46, 49, 50, 52,  
 58, 61, 63, 78, 84, 106, 156,  
 161, 166, 191, 268, 270, 271,  
 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277,  
 278, 279, 280, 281, 285, 323,  
 341, 375, 380, 396, 400, 402,  
 404  
 Secular state 133, 227, 251  
 Senegal 10, 13, 21, 22, 23, 30,  
 58, 64, 161, 171, 214, 231,  
 232, 233, 234, 235, 238, 239,  
 241, 242, 243, 244, 246, 248,  
 249, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255,  
 257, 258, 259, 260, 262, 264,  
 265, 266, 400  
 Sexual harassment 122, 133,  
 187, 191, 303  
 Sexual objects 62, 318  
 SIBAC 23, 236  
 SICAP 23, 236  
 Skiing 101  
 Soccer 27, 55, 65, 114, 132, 146,  
 155, 165, 167, 212, 271, 332,  
 333, 337, 338, 372  
 South Africa 10, 65, 82, 107, 161,  
 179, 265, 302, 310, 343, 344,  
 347, 352, 353, 357, 359, 387,  
 396, 398, 399  
 Sport as Public Space 4, 47  
 Sport gear 57, 93, 175, 373  
 Structural (impediments,  
 inequality) 230, 251, 253, 331  
 Swimming 88, 101, 111, 114,  
 125, 127, 130, 136, 210, 211,  
 212, 215, 218, 224, 225, 242,  
 268, 297, 321, 323, 324, 326,  
 328, 371, 373  
 Taekwondo 80, 211, 222, 374  
 Tehran 24, 42, 55, 57, 77, 79, 90,  
 93, 94, 100, 107, 177, 178,  
 191, 195, 286, 290  
 Tennis 114, 151, 210, 211, 215,  
 216, 233, 243, 268, 305, 319,  
 326, 385  
 The Gülen Movement 144  
 Title IX 27, 149, 150, 169, 170,  
 205, 228, 331, 332  
 Track and field 225, 233, 234,  
 326, 327, 328, 361  
 Transnational movement 33,  
 253, 374, 376  
 Turkish Islam and the Secular  
 State 144  
 UNICEF 23, 153, 171  
 UNIFEM 23  
 United Nations 23, 35, 53, 55,  
 199, 392, 401  
 United States 23, 27, 68, 162,  
 171, 195, 244, 256, 265, 320,  
 321, 336  
 Veiling 17, 24, 31, 33, 36, 41, 63,  
 64, 110, 112, 126, 151, 283,  
 340  
 Volleyball 114, 121, 123, 210,  
 215, 217, 233, 234, 243, 334  
 Weight lifting 217  
 WEMC 23, 24, 173, 203, 229, 283  
 White Scarf Women 182, 190  
 WLUML 4, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18,  
 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31,  
 32, 35, 36, 41, 79, 114, 143,  
 173, 283, 378  
 WNBA 23, 256

Womanhood 48, 57, 65, 66, 122,  
132, 147, 155  
Women referee 86, 92, 93, 97,  
154, 220, 228, 229, 230, 231,  
232, 233, 234, 235, 242, 269,  
347,  
Women's body 66, 137  
Women's football 65, 147, 148,  
150, 161, 162, 167, 168, 248

Women's Sports Foundation  
151, 154, 171, 289, 298, 299,  
385  
Wrestling 25, 80, 215, 223, 232,  
233, 239, 247, 249, 251, 261,  
266







*Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts* provides an urgently needed analysis of the bravery and creativity exhibited by women in the realm of sports. Through focused case studies, the volume tracks the many sophisticated, context-specific, and constantly evolving strategies of resistance deployed by women. Integral to their struggles for full inclusion in competitive sports, as both players and spectators, is their claim to full and equal citizenship. The edited volume evinces the various ways women negotiate political and ideological boundaries as they politicize and subvert spaces normally considered outside the realm of state politics in order to bring about gender equitable opportunities while at the same time redefining women's roles in society. Hoodfar and her colleagues contribute a groundbreaking analysis of the landscape of gender and sport in diverse Muslim contexts, covering Saudi Arabia, Iran, UK, Europe and North America, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Senegal. Each contributor illustrates how women debunk exclusionary masculinist logics in sports that are justified by nationalism, religion, and modernism. They also expose how objectifying and sexualizing policies and tactics are imposed by both international mega sport organizations and Islamist regimes.

*Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts* is a long awaited work that challenges the reductive work that continues to be produced about *Muslim women* in sport. The book is written in an accessible manner and is a timely resource for teaching, serving scholars interested in women's sport and resistance, as well as cultural and post-colonial studies. It is also an inspiring resource for feminist activists working in diverse contexts.

Manal Hamzeh, Associate Professor of Women's Studies, New Mexico State University author of *DeVeiling Pedagogies: Muslim Girls and the Hijab Discourse* by Information Age Press (2012).