

EQUALITY AND SOCIAL MISSIONS: MUSLIM WOMEN AND THEIR OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the opportunities of Muslim women to participate in sport and physical activities and the barriers they face in competitive sport as well as in sport for all. Although there has been an increase of female athletes from Islamic countries in the last decade, Muslim women are still a small minority among the competitors in international sport events such as the Olympic Games. In many Islamic countries, numerous girls and women do not have access to physical activities and/or physical education. However, we have to be aware that the situation of women and women's sport is different depending on countries, cultures, social backgrounds and religious orientations. The second part of the article focuses on backgrounds and reasons for the marginalization of Muslim women in sports. It is argued that not Islam per se, but traditions, environments and (economic) conditions may prevent girls and women to participate in sport (for all). At the end, the article refers to a workshop about "Muslim Women and Sport" and quotes significant parts of the declaration "Accept and Respect" which emphasizes the opportunities of Muslim women (and men) to enjoy physical activities.

Key Words: *Muslim women, Olympic Games, Sport for all, Islam, Gender relations*

EŞİTLİK VE SOSYAL MİSYONLAR: MÜSLÜMAN KADINLAR VE SPOR VE FİZİKSEL AKTİVİTELERE KATILIM FIRSATLARI

ÖZ

Bu çalışma Müslüman kadınların spor ve fiziksel aktiviteye katılım fırsatlarını ve yarışma sporu ve herkes için sporda karşılaştıkları engelleri incelemektedir. Son on yılda İslam ülkelerindeki kadın sporcuların sayısında artış olmasına karşın Müslüman kadınlar Olimpiyatlar gibi uluslar arası spor etkinliklerine katılan yarışmacılar içinde hala azınlıktadırlar. Pek çok İslam ülkesinde çok sayıda kız ve kadın fiziksel aktiviteye ve/veya beden eğitimine erişim sağlayamamaktadır. Bununla birlikte kadınların durumlarının ve kadınların spora katılımının ülkelere, kültürlere, sosyal arka plana ve dini yönelimlere göre değiştiğinin farkında olmak zorundayız. Çalışmanın ikinci bölümü sporda Müslüman kadınların marjinalleşmesinin arka planına ve sebeplerine odaklanmaktadır. Sadece İslamın kendi başına değil, geleneklerin, çevrelerin ve (ekonomik) koşulların, kızların ve kadınların (herkes için) spora katılımını engelleyebildiği ileri sürülmektedir. Son olarak çalışma, "Müslüman Kadın ve Spor" konusunda bir çalışmaya değinmiş, Müslüman kadınların (ve erkeklerin) fiziksel aktivitelerden zevk almaları için fırsatları vurgulayan "Kabul Et ve Saygı Göster" Bildirgesinin önemli bölümlerini aktarmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müslüman kadınlar, Olimpiyat Oyunları, Herkes için spor, İslam, Toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkileri

Equality in sport - does it exist? Competitive Sport

Women were "late-comers" in sport as their participation in the Olympic Games shows clearly. In 1896, they were excluded, but since the Olympics in Paris (1900) their participation rate grew slowly, but continuously. The gradual increase in the number of women competitors obscures the fact that a woman's chance of participating and competing in sport and in the OG depends to a large extent on her nationality as well as her cultural and religious background. Traditionally, Islamic cultures do not prioritise sport and thus the numbers of Muslim athletes at the OG were and are quite low. In 2008, 427 men, 6 % of the male athletes, and 98 women, 2 % of the female athletes,

from Islamic countries ¹ competed at the OG, a very small number in the view of the fact that around 20 % of the world population adheres to Islam.

With regard to the participation of women, some progress occurred in the last decades: Of the 160 NOCs which took part in the Seoul Olympics, 42 (including 21 Islamic countries) sent only male athletes (Hargreaves, 1994). In Barcelona 33, in Atlanta 28, and in Sydney only 9 NOCs did not include women in their teams. In 2008, only three delegations (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait) were "men only". For the first time Oman and the United Arab Emirates sent women to the Olympics, Jordan's delegation consisted of three men and four women and the North African nations inc-

luded a considerable number of female athletes, even a volley ball team (Bannayan, 2008).

A view of the medal count shows the marginalization of the teams from Non-Western countries. In Beijing, few delegations shared the medals: 10 of the more than 100 teams gained 65 %, and 15 teams 75 % of the gold medals. With few exceptions the successful teams came from Western industrialized countries.²

Turkey was the most successful Islamic country at the Beijing Games with 8 medals, four of them won by women: 2 medals were gained by the female long distance runner of Ethiopian origin Elvan Abeylegesse, a Turkish woman was also successful in weightlifting, another in Taekwondo. In addition, there were two more female medal winners from Muslim countries, an Algerian judoka and a Moroccan 800 m. runner. Despite these successes, this overview shows clearly that the marginalization of Muslim women in the OG is a serious issue.³

Sport for all

Little is known about physical activities and sport for all among girls and women in Islamic countries. A first overview will be available next year, when the studies of scholars of various Islamic countries about women and sport in their home countries will be published in a book (Benn et al., 2010). It can be assumed that sport for all is not wide spread in Islamic countries and that girls and women take even less part in sport than boys and men. We already have information about Syria, one of the Islamic countries, where women have the same (formal) rights as men. Nearly 9 % of young men and less than 2 % of young women

(19 - 25 years of age) are members of a sport club (Karfool, 2009).

Despite the numerous barriers that exist, women in Islamic countries have managed to become successful athletes, even in assertive sports like karate or taekwondo. This is especially true in the case of Turkey where the separation of State and religion and the Westernization of the middle classes in large cities provide a positive climate for women's sports (Pfister, 1997). According to Koca and Hacisoftaoğlu (2010) who draw on information from the Turkish Government Agency for Sports, the number of female athletes has increased threefold since 1997. Currently, 13 % of the 420,000 elite athletes are women. Most of the 57,000 sports women of the 23 million female population (15-64 years of age) compete in volleyball (approx. 11000 women), taekwondo (9,000), basketball (5,000), karate (4,000), and 2000 or less in swimming, kickboxing, handball and judo. One example of women overcoming barriers in sports is that of the Turkish elite athlete, Hamide Bıkçın Tosun, a bronze medal winner in the 2000 Olympic Games and a mother, who covers her hair in daily life and, to the extent possible, also during Taekwondo competitions.

Another example is that of the Syrian female athletes who compete in national and even international competitions, mostly in Pan-Arabian, Asian or Mediterranean tournaments and championships. Successful female athletes, as the Syrian Ghada Shouaa a track and field athlete, and winner of the heptathlon in the 1996 Games, are treated as heroines (Karfool, 2009). The same is true for Malaysian athletes (Wirdati, 2006) and sports women from many other Islamic countries.

These success stories should not hide the fact that women in Islamic countries are a small minority in the competitive sports arena. They remain marginalised when compared with male athletes and are often stereotyped as unfeminine and bad Muslims. They lack resources and facilities and face resistance based on religion, tradition and culture. Structural and economic problems impede sports development in many Islamic countries but women more than men are affected in many ways and to a much higher degree (Benn et al, 2010).

Much more information is available about the participation of immigrant women and girls in sport and physical activities. Do immigrant girls and women have the opportunity to participate in physical activities in Western countries? There is no question in all European countries that girls from ethnic minorities have to participate in physical education at school. How Muslim girls like physical education, what they experience and what effects it has, has not been in the centre of scholarly attention. However, it seems that PE does not further sport interest and engagement among Muslim girls. Muslim girls do not develop a close commitment to sport. This can be seen by looking at the participation of immigrant women and girls in physical activities inside and outside of sport organizations. The majority of immigrant girls and women with an Islamic background are not active in sport.

Backgrounds and Reasons

The Prophet and Women's Sport

In examining the question of how sporting activities in general and Muslim girls' and women's participation in sport in particular are influenced by religion, it

must be stated first of all that there is no general prohibition of sport in Islam, and that this applies to girls' and women's sport too.⁴ Islamic sport scientists, both male and female, emphasize that health and fitness are important for men and women alike and should be sustained by sporting activities. It was repeatedly pointed out in this connection that Mohammed had advocated living a healthy life and had recommended running, horse-riding, swimming and archery⁵. Leila Sfeir and others concluded from this that originally Islam was positively inclined towards women's sports. Sfeir writes: "Islamic religion in no way tries to depreciate, much less deny sport for women. On the contrary, it attributes great significance and function to physical strength and sport activities. Islam is a constant concern with one's body, cleanliness, purification and force, with segregation of the sexes. But certain religious elements, such as Islamic fatalism and Hindu mysticism, have been dominant factors in controlling general access to sport."⁶

After studying Islamic sources and authorities Daiman (1995) even arrives at the conclusion that sport ought to be obligatory for women on health grounds. Nevertheless, in some countries women's sport is regarded as being irreconcilable with Islamic values and the traditional and culturally rooted concept of femininity, which restricts women's actions to the home and family (Sfeir, 1985).

Gender Roles

In Islamic cultures the situation of women is influenced by the importance of the family, which is the focus and the centre of men's and women's lives and which is more than the sum of its mem-

bers. Age and sex determine one's social position in the family as well as in society and the strictly hierarchical organisation of the family plays an important role in Islamic cultures, which are based on a strict division of labour according to sex. The husband is the head of the family, who has the right and the duty to control and "protect" the female family members. The social and cultural superiority of men is connected with the concept of honour and a specific regulation of sexuality⁷.

In Islamic ideology sexuality has a place only inside marriage. Sexual relations outside marriage are strictly forbidden and severely punished. Female sexuality is controlled by a segregation of the sexes - either with the help of walls - women had to stay in the house and/or are not allowed to participate in (physical) activities together with men - or with the help of the scarf or veil.

Virginity is absolutely required of Muslim girls, even in families which do not normally follow Islamic laws strictly. It is quite impossible to find a husband for a girl who is not a virgin. Numerous rules and regulations are intended to guarantee that girls do not lose their virginity: the main strategy is to keep girls under control and to prevent contacts with boys and men.

The prestige and the position of a family are dependent on "honour", and honour also means the ability of the head of the family or its male members to fight or avenge aggression and abuses. The relations inside and outside of the family are based on the concept of honour which forces its members to take over specific roles and duties, but guarantees, in return, support and protection, and also gives social prestige. Central to the "honour" of a

family is the faithfulness of wives to their husbands and the virginity of daughters (Sfeir, 1985; Daiman, 1995). Every action and every sort of behaviour that might endanger the good reputation of the female family members has to be avoided. The husband and other male members of the family have the duty to protect the honour of the family and the right to control the female family members and to sanction transgressions.

The female body and covering the body plays a central role in Islamic discourses and practices. Moral integrity requires for women to cover their bodies including the hair. However, attitudes and practices connected with the body and the scarf differ considerably among Islamic cultures, but also among individuals. If and how a woman covers her head depends upon various factors. She can be forced to wear a scarf by the family or the environment, she can decide to do it out of various reasons, as part of her religious belief, as protection, as a cultural custom or as political signal. Many women, i.e. in Egypt or Turkey, also those who define themselves as good Muslims, decide not to cover their hair. Muslim feminists even claim that neither the Koran nor the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet, prescribe the wearing of a scarf. According to them, the dominance of men and the gendered directives in all areas of society are to be attributed, not to religion, but to a mixture of Islam and patriarchal traditions.

Barriers in Islamic Countries

Not only the rules of the religion, but also the culture, the living conditions, legal prohibitions and social stigmas may prevent Muslim women from participation in physical activities and especially from

participation in sport competitions (Pfiester 1997; 2003). An example of the problems which Muslim athletes may face is the case of the Afghani runner Mehbooba Andiyar who sought asylum in Norway because she got death threats from extremists although she competed in a hijab.⁸

In many Islamic countries, women's sport is confronted with numerous concrete difficulties, ranging from the lack of girls' physical education at school and the limited opportunities which women have of practicing sports, of training and competing. The law of the segregation of the sexes and a scarcity of sport facilities often leads to the exclusion of women from opportunities to engage in sporting activities and especially sport competitions.

Barriers in Western Countries The Situation of Immigrant Women

Immigrants have to live and to "function" in their new society. They are confronted with Western lifestyles, body ideals, practices and movement cultures whose adaptation would mean not only changing behaviour patterns but also breaking with deeply anchored cultural norms and values which can lead to various conflicts.

Female immigrants are not only confronted with the problems connected with the adaptation to the living conditions in a foreign country, but they face specific expectations and demands because they are women. As already mentioned, in Islamic cultures, the enactment of gender, gender images and identities are to a high degree influenced by the beliefs and laws connected with the body. One of the most visible signals of the gender arrangements is the covering of the body. It is especially the body of immigrant girls and women which is a contested terrain⁹.

In addition, it must be taken into consideration that immigrants living in foreign countries have to construct a new identity, the identity of an immigrant, and this can lead to insecurities and identity conflicts. Therefore immigrants often adhere to traditional values much more strictly than they would have done in their home country.¹⁰ Islamic communities in Western countries seem to exert high demands on the conformity of their members, and Muslim families are in many ways dependent on their neighbourhoods and networks.

Immigrant girls in Western countries have to live in different cultures. Scholars observed that the dilemma of Turkish girls is that their parents teach them the culture of their home country with the importance of religion, the patriarchal structures of the family and the concepts of honor. At the same time, outside their homes and especially at school, they learn about the culture of a Western country with its focus on individual freedom and gender equality.

Immigrant girls have to integrate ambivalent, even contradictory expectations, deal with the stigmatization, and develop different identities than they would have done in the home country of their parents. Most girls develop, in some way, the above mentioned hyphenated-identities; they are, for example Turkish-German or German-Turkish. They create new cultures by mixing cultural ideals and practices of the home-country with the mainstream culture in the country in which they live. Most immigrant girls also manage to adapt to different demands according to the situation, they learn to change from one culture to the other, from the German school to the Turkish family.

But immigrant girls and women in Western countries are not one single group; on the contrary, their aims, identities, experiences and conditions of life vary considerably according to their home cultures, their social class, and their religious orientations.

The Hijab and Sport

In Western countries, the scarf is a visible and highly contested sign of „otherness“. But, as already mentioned, the scarf also shows that cultural symbols have various and ambivalent meanings. To wear a scarf can be a fashion or a habit, it can be a religious duty, but a scarf can also be the expression of gender hierarchy and the suppression of women.

Barriers For Sporting Activity

If Islamic law does not forbid girls to be active in sport, why do so few girls participate in sport? Even if formal barriers for doing sport or becoming a member of a sport club may not exist, it is not easy for people from ethnic minorities to take up sport. For various reasons, immigrant girls and women can have difficulties integrating into groups of the mainstream population. They tend to have a network of friends of their own from which they get social support. And the immigrant cultures favour specific body and beauty ideals which can be a combination or a mixture of traditional and Western ideals and practices. An athletic lifestyle or a muscular body may not fit in, for example, with traditional Pakistani or Somali ideals of femininity and may also not meet the “taste” of the “Danish-Turkish” or “German-Turkish” population.

However, there are still other barriers which make it difficult for females with an

Islamic background to take up sporting activities. In general, it may be assumed that many immigrant families are oriented, to a greater or lesser extent, towards traditional gender roles rooted in religious beliefs. With regard to sport engagement we have to take into consideration, as already mentioned, the high importance of the family, the traditional gender roles, and the rules connected with sexuality, or more precisely the importance of virginity for girls.

These norms, values, attitudes and behaviour patterns influence, if not determine, the physical culture of many Muslim girls and women. The law on covering the body is a problem in many sports, and the demand for the segregation of the sexes makes it impossible for religious girls and women to train or practise sport with boys or men.

Participation in sport can also lead to conflicts in immigrant families because it creates situations in which girls and women are outside the control of the family. A pilot study in Denmark showed that it is also the “gossip”, the fear losing one’s reputation, all in all the pressure of the Muslim community which prevent the participation of girls and women in sport. It is often a dilemma for immigrant girls “that their parents teach them the culture of their home country... At the same time, outside their homes and especially at school, they learn about Western culture with its freedom and equality. ... Obsession with virginity leads to severe restrictions of personal freedom and personal development “.11

A further problem, already mentioned above, is that girls and women in immigrant families often have a high burden of housework, which leaves little time and energy for sport activities. Whereas in

the extended families in Islamic countries mothers, aunts and grandmothers share house work and childcare, in Western countries these duties are often done by the wives alone.

In discussing the reasons for the abstinence of immigrant girls and women from sport we must also take into account their social situation. With regard to education and income, but also with regard to “cultural and symbolic capital” immigrants tend to be marginalised in Western societies. And we should not forget that a clear correlation between social class and participation in sport and physical activities can be observed also in Western countries.¹²

Perspectives

What possibilities do we have, then, to support the participation of girls in physical activities? It must be stressed again that immigrant women - like the female mainstream population - come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have a wide variety of needs. It should be regarded as a principle that sport - its conditions, its contents and its aims - must be oriented to the needs of these different groups of girls. Socialisation, life circumstances as well as experiences and expectations must all be taken into consideration. Concepts and programmes should follow the principles of equal rights, equal status, equal opportunities and inclusion as well as acceptance and tolerance.

Accept and respect - a declaration about Muslim women and sport

As mentioned above, there are many reasons for the marginalisation of Muslim women in the world of sport, among them the rigid rules of modern sport as well as

the interpretation of Islamic laws and restrictions because of cultural traditions.

The growing tensions between the Muslim and the Western peoples and, at the same time, the lack of understanding of the gendered discourses and practices in both worlds make intensive dialogues and cooperation necessary. However, we have to keep in mind, that Muslim women are not a homogeneous group and that there is a huge variety in the way they face and solve demands of religion and/or culture. These demands and restrictions may be rooted in traditional and patriarchal discourses and practices, but problems arise as well from sport institutions, reaching from the federations to the mass media trying to enforce rules and regulations which contradict religious observance.

A work shop in Oman - sponsored by the Sultan Quaboos university and supported by IAPESGW (International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women) provided the opportunity for a cross-cultural discussion and an exchange of knowledge, opinions and best practices based on openness, the willingness to learn, and the attempt to understand each other. Sixteen scholars (including me), 15 women and one man, of physical education, sport and Islamic studies, and leading practitioners, gathered from 14 countries across Europe, the Middle and Far East (Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, South Africa, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom), not to ‘represent’ their countries but as interested individuals, engaged in the field, who wanted to share culturally and nationally diverse experiences. Some women were

atheists; many were religious with different ways to practice their faith. Some wore Western clothes and hairstyles; others observed the Islamic dress code.

The purpose of the group was to identify means of improving the opportunities of Muslim women in and through sport and physical education. The discussions were very controversial as were the perspectives, priorities, questions and answers. Dialogue across cultural and national boundaries requires abilities to see the world as the “others” see it, but often ethnocentric positions prohibit this change of perspectives. Is a balance between global values and cultural diversity possible?

In order to avoid the dilemma of universal versus culturally specific human values we chose to emphasize the freedom of choice and listened to Islamic feminists who shared with us an insight into the ways that scholars were framing empowerment for Muslim women from inside of the religion. Such a faith-based approach is for many women the only way of overcoming difficulties and obstacles. But choice should also be possible for those women who re-interpret Islam, adapt the rules to modern life and can combine their religion with Western dresses and elite sports. This is an option in (many) Islamic countries, as the participation of female athletes from Indonesia, Tunis, Morocco, Algeria and Turkey in the 2008 Olympics showed.

However, also the focus on choice has its weaknesses, because it leads to the structure/agency dilemma: Are women (and men) really free to make decisions about their lives or are their choices determined by culture and society?

It took one exciting week to come to a consensus and draft the following declaration. The most important sentences are:

DECLARATION “ACCEPT AND RESPECT”

1. Islam is an enabling religion that endorses women’s participation in physical activity.
2. We affirm the importance of physical education and physical activity in the lives of all girls and boys, men and women (more - see addition).
3. We recommend that people working in the sport and education systems accept and respect the diverse ways in which Muslim women and girls practice their religion and participate in sport and physical activity, for example, choices of activity, dress and gender grouping.
4. We urge international sport federations to show their commitment to inclusion by ensuring that their dress codes for competition embrace Islamic requirements, taking into account the principles of propriety, safety and integrity.

This declaration is directed to Muslim and Western countries as well as to religious and sport leaders, to accept the choices of women (and men) and to respect their cultural background. The essence of this declaration can be transferred to other groups or cultures as well. However, modern sport has limited opportunity to accept diversity and include “otherness”. The existence and the fascination of sport are based on equal conditions in order to identify differences and identify the best

athlete. Federations may accept women competing in long trousers, but they do not get a bonus because they are disadvantaged because of their dress. Therefore, the declaration, but also the efforts of all of us should focus on physical education and sport for all: here is place for diversity, inclusiveness, new paradigms and a globalization of best practices.

(Endnotes)

¹ Included are countries with more than 70 % Muslims among the population in Asia and North Africa. The former states of the USSR are not taken into consideration. See for the numbers of male and female athletes in Beijing <http://en.beijing2008.cn/>.

² See the Overall Medal Standings

<http://results.beijing2008.cn/WRM/ENG/INF/GL/95A/GL0000000.shtml>

³ See also many web pages, among them <http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2008/08/14/muslimahs-atthe-beijing-olympics/>.

⁴ On women's sport in Islam, see, for example, Sfeir 1985; Lindsay 1987; Yaldai 1988; Daiman 1995; De Knop P. et al. 1996; Walseth & Fasting 1999; Dahl 2007. See also the literature provided in Benn, Pfister & Jawad 2010.

⁵ Physical activities are mentioned in hadiths. Hadith constitutes the sayings of the Prophet handed down by his followers. The meaning and the importance attached to the individual sayings is a matter of interpretation.

⁶ Sfeir 1985, 300.

⁷ See among others Delaney 1991.

⁸ about Andyar <http://boredmelo.wordpress.com/tag/mehbooba-andyar/>

⁹ See among others, Brainin 1996 on the conditions of life of immigrant girls and boys.

¹⁰ On the norms and rules which determine the lives of Turkish girls and women in German, too, see Spuler-Stegemann 1998; see also Berli-

ner Sportjugend 1998.

¹¹ Bründel and Hurrelmann 1994, 5.

¹² According to Kleindienst-Cachay (1996; 1997) only 23% of girls of lower class but more than 50% of girls of middle class background were members of a sports clubs.

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