

Iranian Women, Sport and the Hijab Issue

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Abstract: This short study discusses important issues of Muslim women in their participation in sport, taking Iranian context as an example. Iranian women have to face many challenges in sport, especially the hijab issue. The Qur'an and Hadith shows the importance of sport for human socially, physically and mentally. The Shari'ah also approves all kinds of athletics and sports in order to demonstrate superiority, strength and skill that would be mentally and physically useful for health and human life. Now-a-days, Iranian Muslim women are competing in sports more than there have been in the past and recently, they have achieved satisfactory results in many national and international games. Unfortunately, Iran Muslim women athletes have so many issues to deal with in their participation in national and international sports events because of their veil (hijab). We find that Iranian Muslim women excelled in national and international games despite strict adherence to religion, culture and Iranian legal requirements.

Key words: Muslim women, sport, religion, Qur'an, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Theories of women and sport are quite abundant, including theory linking sport and religion (Benn *et al.*, 2011; Al-Ansari, 1999; Pfister, 2003). Over the centuries sport has been regarded, as universal activity devoid of religious demand. But now-a-days, the issues of sport and religion and in particular the involvement of sport women from some religious background have attracted different thinking. International sport bodies have to grapple with this issue. Benn *et al.* (2011)'s book on Muslim women and sport is an important literature discussing the underlying concept of the participation of Muslim women in sport. It contains several articles analyzing the theories and examples from Islamic countries. Islamic feminism offers a way to understand and empower Muslim women by recognizing that a faith-based approach is the only way forward for many women (Jawad, 1998). Islamic feminism explicates the perspective of women who do not hesitate to criticize and challenge the Islamic patriarchal authority (Jawad, 2009). Through reinterpretation of Islamic texts from female perspective, proponents of Islamic feminists have helped Muslim women to re-enter a more public life, pursuing equality in Islamic framework (Wadud, 2006). This helped Muslim women in sport to distinguish religious from cultural barriers (Sfeir, 1985; Daiman, 1994; Al-Ansari, 1999). Islamic feminists are giving legitimacy to social action by Muslim women in public lives including participation in sport. Muslim

women and girls have to manage their Islamic identities and participation in physical education and sport activities, dependent on the context in which they find themselves (Benn *et al.*, 2013).

The linking of women in sport and religion is a tricky issue. The Islamic religion prohibits women to expose their uncovered body to the male other than their mahrams. In modern sport where the attire of the women sport persons being subjected to market demand and manipulation, women participation in sport, especially from some Muslim countries is seems to be attacking the norm in a male dominated and Western sporting authority. Muslim women express their femininity in a different way, in fact in a way that is a horror to some Western perspective. The dominant Western image of Muslim women portrays them as (Siraj, 2012):

As passive and docile, subject to patriarchal traditions and lacking any active agency to change their condition. Invisible in the public domain and trapped within the family framework. Their lives are seen as unfree and exposed to domestic exploitation (Ansari, 2004)

The participation of Muslim women in sport is to challenge the portrayal of perceived Muslim women, as being passive and docile as put by Ansari. However, their sport participation is still subject to religious belief in which the meaning of being feminine is not shaped around the exposure of the beautiful body.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology is primarily qualitative. Generally in legal research, data collection relies on primary and secondary data. Primary data refers to legislation, parliamentary hansards and court cases from home and foreign countries. Secondary source refers to publication such as articles journals, books, students thesis and official documents. For this research, primary data was analysed based on rules of interpretation such as literal, golden, mischief and purposive rules. Finally, all data collected was analysed using 4 legal research method, namely: Historical, jurisprudential, comparative and analytical and critical method. This method is also called content analysis, although it is not based on coding as usually done in other social science or economic research. This legal technique of data collection is mostly made in the library, on-line and government departments. For this study, the researchers rely heavily on materials such as journals, sport magazines and books publications. For reference to Islamic source, the Al-Qur'an and Hadith are the primary materials.

Background; Muslim women athletes in major sport events: The Olympics is the largest global event with international distinction. Athletes around the world begin the event by presenting the flags of their countries which identify their culture, country and beliefs. Cultures and social merits are demonstrated through their flags, clothes, sporting fields and behaviour. Sports activities, such as swimming, riding, shooting, running and boxing require physical distinction and interpersonal skills. However, introducing athletes by their name and their flag is an indication of cultural representations in terms of race, religion and gender. The flags of Muslim countries may represent the participation of Muslim men and women in the Olympics in various events but Muslim women athletes participate in a very small number of events (Akhtar, 2012). Muslim women want to show that they are Muslim first and athletes second (Spicer, 2012). The participation of Muslim women athletes in sporting events, such as the Olympics is a manifestation of policies about portraying Islamic values regarding women, sports, physical health and society. Despite the many limitations on Muslim women who observe Islamic dress code standards, they continue to compete on the global stage.

In the 2012 London Olympics, 44% of the athletes were female and >3000 Muslim women participated (Pillow, 2012). It was the 1st time that such a large group

of Muslim women participated in the Olympics. Some Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Brunei, brought female athletes to the Olympics for the 1st time. Historically because of their traditions and religious beliefs, Muslim women could not participate in sports for years. They endured many problems in their attempts to compete in the 2012 Olympics to represent their countries. Previous Olympic committees did not allow Muslim athletes to wear the hijab in most sports fields, such as swimming or soccer. Since 2012, however the committee has begun to allow women athletes to participate on the global stage with the hijab. Spicer (2012) noted, Muslim women's participation in 2012 London Olympics is the start, not the goal. However Anneke (2012) noted, the recent decision by FIFA to allow the headscarf on the soccer field came too late for the Iranian soccer team; despite the fact that they were considered to be a strong team and capable of making a difference on the Olympic stage. There were objections from some quarters regarding the wearing of the hijab: The ban was cheered by footballers around the world, some of whom such as the Australian Assmah Helal wore the hijab through choice (Khaleeli, 2012).

In the 2012 Olympics, women from different Islamic nations competed while wearing the hijab to represent their religion and culture in a male-dominated context with respect to women's rights. The United Emirates and Iran sent women athletes in weight lifting and table tennis. Pakistan sent a female swimmer and runner. For the 1st time, Afghanistan sent Sadaf Rahim, a female boxer. Algeria and Turkey sent women's indoor volleyball teams. Total 34 female athletes from Egypt and 5 from Palestine participated in the 2012 Olympics. Fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad was the 1st Muslim woman to represent the United States wearing the hijab. She said she chose the sport because it allowed her to cover her body without altering the uniform. Aya Medany from Egypt, considered not competing at all in the Olympics because female swimmers in her event had to wear suits that left their necks, arms and legs uncovered (Khaleeli, 2012). However, there were supporters of the special attire worn by Muslim women athletes. Spicer (2012) referred to Nur Suryani Mohamed Taibi (from Malaysia), as not only an exemplary sports woman from a Muslim nation but possibly as the most pregnant athlete to compete, as she was expected to give birth any day now. Zulfiya Chinshanlo from Kazakhstan won the 1st gold medal in weight lifting.

Muslim athletes goal for their participation in the 2012 Olympics was to stand up and compete on a global

stage at the highest level of the world's sporting arena. The Olympics philosophy is equality and the female Muslim athletes felt that their participation in the Olympics was the 1st step towards the right to be accepted while maintaining their religious and cultural differences. The Iranian female athletes who participated in the 2012 Olympics, in addition to winning medals, represented Islam and Iranian culture with their hijab.

The best victory for the Iranian female athletes was in the Paralympics where the female athletes exhibited excellent performance. Zahra Nemati won the gold medal in archery and Sareh Javanmardi received a bronze medal in shooting. After the 2008 Olympics in Peking, the Iranian Olympics committee paid less attention to paralysed female athletes and believed it was a waste of time and money to invest in female athletes in the Paralympics. It was a struggle for Iranian feminists and officials in the sports ministry to convince the Iranian Olympics Committee to find new talents and to invest in paralysed female athletes. Sima Limoochi (a member of the Women's International Paralympics Committee and member of the National Paralympics Committee 2012) said, many of the medals won by the Chinese athletes in the Olympics were by women. Also women athletes (not male athletes) from other countries achieved more medals than athletes from Iran. That's why the Iranian Sports Ministry should invest more in paralysed female athletes. There are cases of paralysis in Iranian schools who have the talent to be champions in the Paralympics (Akbari, 2012).

The Islamic concept of hijab: The theoretical discourse on hijab in Islam is not difficult to summarise because it is clearly ordained in the main books of Islamic teaching, the Qur'an and Hadith. However, hijab in Islam has various meanings and connotations. In a modern sense, the hijab has been interchangeably referred to as a veil or as women's clothing. However, this is not necessarily correct because the Qur'an talks about the hijab in a wider context. In most cases, the Qur'an uses the word hijab in a metaphysical sense. In this sense, when a person cannot differentiate between good and evil, then he is being prevented (hijab) from seeing good teachings. For example, the Qur'an states:

They say; our hearts are under veils (concealed) from that to which thou dost invite us and in our ears is a deafness and between us and thee is a hijab (41:5)

In another verse, the Qur'an states between them shall be a veil and on the heights will be men who would

know everyone by his marks: They will call out to the companions of the Garden, peace be upon you: They will have entered but they will have an assurance (thereof) (7:46). Verse 33:53 also refers to hijab in this instance, someone who asks something from the prophet's wives must ask it from the hijab (meaning a curtain that separates the prophet's wives and the person). The question proposed regarding this verse is as whether the rule applies only to the Prophet's wives or whether it applies equally to ordinary women. Many scholars believe that the rule applies equally to ordinary women because the Prophet's wives are role models for all Muslim women. In short, the hijab is referred to as something that prevents, hinders, debars or precludes; a thing that veils, conceals, hides, covers or protects because it prevents seeing or beholding. The hijab also means a partition, a bar, a barrier or an obstacle (El Guindi, 1999; Hilal, 2012). However over the centuries, the hijab has been primarily associated with Muslim women's clothing.

Human not only use clothes not only to protect the body from heat and cold but was also a manifestation of the art and culture of the people. This can be observed in the history of classical Greece, in the Byzantine Christian world, in Persia and in India. By the 7th century in North Africa, a long dress similar to the Turkish caftan with or without a cap was worn by men and women. History shows that all over the world, people used to wear traditional long and decent clothes and irrespective of religion and culture, women used to wear long and loose clothes. Catholic women cover their body and hair while in church. However, people now believe that the hijab was created by Muslims. The hijab is a veil that covers the hair and neck and Muslim women can only expose their face and hands (up to the wrist). Muslim women are required to observe this rule in the presence of non-related adult males. Women in Saudi Arabia have gone to the extent of covering their entire body. To the majority of women in Malaysia, the hijab is a covering for the body except the hands (up to the wrist) and face. Thus, when referring to Muslim women's clothing, the hijab may carry different meanings depending on the culture.

The hijab is considered protection and Allah prohibited women from intermingling between the sexes to ensure their chastity, privacy, respect and femininity. The authority for observing hijab is stated in the Holy Qur'an (24:31). Modesty is the primary purpose of wearing the hijab or veil because modesty proceeds from Iman (belief). This is why when Allah (SWT) commands women to observe hijab, Allah (SWT) says: And tell the believing women (An-Nur 24:31).

Allah says, ‘O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their outer garments above themselves (when they go out). That is better so that they may be recognized and not molested. And Allah is forgiving, merciful (Al-Qur’an 33:59). Allah’s Messenger (SAW) said any woman who takes off her clothes in other than her husband’s home (to show off for unlawful purposes) has broken Allah’s shield upon her. This hadith was narrated by Abu-Dawud and At-Tirmidhi

It is argued that the purpose of the hijab in Islam is to organise sexual relations between men and women to prevent the misuse of women, as a sex commodity and to assist women in enjoying their rights. The hijab has an effect on the family unit, as well as on society. At home where the hijab is respected and honoured, family members show kindness, helpfulness and peace towards one another. Because of the separation of the 2 sexes of non-mahrams, crimes of a sexual nature have no chance to fester within the family unit. The Islamic hijab provides much more than a mere physical cover. It is a cover that acts as a repellent for every type of crime and vice that destroys the individual and the society.

However, there are strong views that the hijab prevents women from exercising or participating in sporting events. Thus, innovations have been made in designing suitable hijab for Muslim sports women. Research shows that women have been put off sports because of clothing and others have been excluded from sports because of what they wear. New types of sports hijab have been useful. The importance of hijab wearing athletes, as role models should inspire many women and girls (Tarlo, 2012).

The main reason for objecting to the use of the hijab in sports is that it may endanger athletes lives. However, the 2012 Olympic has proven that the hijab does not endanger athletes lives and ensures that they are comfortable during events. Most Muslim countries involved in the 2012 Olympics designed suitable and professional sports attire. FIFA was the only committee in the Olympics body that has yet to accept the hijab for Muslim women in future Olympics. It is argued that if sports authorities care about sports, they should allow all athletes worldwide to share their values in sports on the global stage. There were other barriers than the dress holding women back but it was important for women to have a choice. A way has been found of combining women’s passion for sport with their passion for their faith and the sports hijab will certainly aid women’s participation in sports at all levels (Akhtar, 2012). The

hijab does not imprison women behind 4 walls or force them to stay at home and not participate in sporting events. The hijab is a garment of respect, protection and support for women to demonstrate their abilities in society through clean relations between the 2 sexes and is a manifestation of fashion and art that shows women’s beauty from deep inside the mind to the body.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Iranian Muslim women and sport: Maryam Jahromi is a leading scholar in the field of Iranian women in sport. Her chapter, physical activities and sport for women in Iran is an outstanding writing on such issue (Jahromi, 2011). She outlines the history of Iran and its current politics that influence the treatment of women in physical activities such as sport in Iran. There are many challenges that Iranian women have to face in their daily public lives. The Iranian constitution and law encourage women to be involved in sport and give them the same chance to participate in sport events. But for Iranian women to achieve the same goal and result as their male counterpart there is still a long way to go (Ali, 2010). Iran is one of the Muslim countries which follow Islamic law and principles in many subjects to a high degree.

The Iran’s government after the Islamic revolution in 1979 continues to pay attention to sports and indeed encourage Iranian (men and women) to participate in sports from school to university to prevent unhealthy and criminal tendencies in society (Beheshti, 2009). All sport fields are available for men and women in Iran from chess to football. Even sometimes women compete against men in events which women’s power (as weaker sex) is not important, for example in equestrian events. Many critics in non Muslim countries believe that the veil (hijab) of Muslim athletes women in Iran prevent their opportunities and development in relation to other Muslim nation, such as Syria, Algeria which all produced female Olympic champions in track and field (Jahromi, 2011). However, the current scenario shows that most of Iranian Muslim women athletes and their families prefer to have hijab because of the demand of religion and culture. Their families do not like women to show their body in sports events and public areas. Of course there are some feminists in Iran who complain about hijab and they believe women can be active in society and special sports activities without the traditional attire. Writings on Iranian women’s fight for liberation (including sport) in the post Iran revolution era abounds (Farhi, 1994, 1998; Halper, 2005). The biggest critic of the women liberation in Iran is Mehranguiz Kar (feminist lawyer and women activist) and she on one occasion has said: Sport could not provide any real liberation as long as women are forced to compete in scarves and long coat.

The Iranian penal code follows the Shari'ah. According to the Quran and Hadith and coupled with the expectations of public interest, culture and national law, it is necessary for Iranian Muslim women whether they are athletes, coach or manager to wear the hijab. Consequently, any women who break the Islamic rules for example not wearing the hijab in public will be punished as an offender under criminal law. They must cover their whole body (except face and hand) in outdoors sport activities. However in indoors event, they are permitted to wear like other athletes in non Islamic countries but men are not allowed to watch them. Despite the required strict compliance of Muslim attire on Iranian athlete's women, they have on many occasions impressed the sport world by winning major sport competitions, such as the Asian games and other world competitions. Women's sports in Iran have strong background.

After Iran Islamic revolution on February, 1979 according to the Iran constitution, the Islamic government must provide opportunities to the people of Iran to achieve Islamic values in the formation of family, society, education as well as sports for men and women equally (Farhi, 1994). The Iranian constitution 1979 provides that:

Member of the Iranian people, both men and women are protected equally before the law and enjoy all the same humanitarian, political, economic and cultural rights under the protection of our system of Islamic principles

Taherian (1991) said: Since Islamic revolution in Iran, women have been more successful than men in many fields like media, education, economic, sports because of the special characteristic of their gender. In 1986, the Iranian government established a research center for athlete's women in Tehran to identify the average age of women's interested and participated in sports in Iran and also to deal with women's issues in sports. Table 1 shows the percentage of Iranian women's participation in sport.

The study found that 5% of women participated in sport is between the age of 12-16; 40% between the age of 17-21; 45% between the age of 22-26; 3% between the age of 27-31; 4% between the age of 32-36 and 1% between the age of 37-41. While women in the West are still active in sport between the ages of 27-31, the majority of women in Iran have already retired from sport.

Table 1: The percentage of Iranian women's participation in sport

Age range	Percentage
12-16	5
17-21	40
22-26	45
27-31	4
32-36	1

Many Muslim feminists who are also out spoken Member of Parliament in Iran have helped Muslim women in sports to distinguish religion from culture barriers through understanding that Islam never forbids sports for women and there is no restriction in participation in any sport fields and games. Faezeh Hashemi started the pan Islamic women's competition in Iran in 1993. She said women became more self confident, bolder. They learn how to cooperate with others and work in group and it can be a very effective role in women's participation in society. In 1994, Faezeh opened the first public cycling facility for women in Chitgar and organizing clinic for women who want to become soccer, coach and referee.

Iran sport federations had problems sending Iranian Muslim women's team to international games (Fetemeh, 2002). Not only without hijab that the associations could not send them oversea (under the Iranian Islamic law) but also the international sport authorities would not accept them with hijab on reason that hijab is out of standard, as sports clothes (following sports regulations) and could endanger athlete's life. The sport attire with hijab is also seen as a sign of Iran's politic and protest against Western countries and ideologies. But now-a-days, the sport federations after many meetings and negotiations between Iran Sport Organization and International Federations could send Iranian female athletes to compete at international events and Iranian Muslim women have achieved many glories with wearing hijab.

The participation of Iranian women in soccer is a good example of the problem at hand. Soccer is historically and basically a men's game but women have claimed their right to be part of this sport up to the highest level (the women world cup is an example). The sport attire of the women soccer players are of no issue until Iran women soccer team wearing their hijab participated in international games. In 2007, FIFA (the International Federation of Football Associations) placed a ban on wearing the hijab or headscarf during matches due to fears that it could lead to choking. However, during that year FIFA was planning to over turn such ruling in the light of new hijabs designed specifically for Muslim athletes. However no decision was made. In the 2012 Olympic qualifying round, Iranian women soccer team could not compete in the second round qualifying match against Jordan because they refused to remove their scarves. In March, 2012 FIFA's International Football Association Board has lifted a 5 year ban on women soccer players wearing hijab in soccer games. The ban was lifted following the use of special head scarf which was deemed safe for women soccer players, after FIFA's medical committee tested 2 soccer hijab prototypes. A Montreal fashion designer Elham Sayed Javad designed

a special head scars using a custom-made magnetic system that allows it to be opened and released instantly, if the headscarf is pulled from anywhere around the neck (Khaleeli, 2012).

Iranian women do not only play soccer for social but also in competitive matches (Pfister, 2003). The Iran women national team founded in 2005 has won many international matches and played against teams from other Muslim countries. For example in 2005, the women Iran team won 2nd place in the West Asian Football Federation Women's Championship in Amman, Jordan and they achieved the same feat in 2007. Although, Iranian women can choose to play in other feminine sports, they nevertheless strive to play soccer, as soccer is the most popular sport in Iran and to be involved in such sport means that they can be visibly equal to men in terms of rights and freedom. And the fact that about 5000 women gate-crushed into the national stadium to greet the men's Iranian soccer team after it qualified for the world cup is testimony of a fight against marginality in society including sport.

Iranian law for women athletes: Female athletes, including Muslim or non Muslim in Iran have to follow the Shari'ah's rules on dressing/clothing (Tauqir, 2007). The female athletes have 2 ways to participate in sports events.

- Using private facilities and places
- Using public facilities and places with hijab

The only article which is related to sport and sport's person (men and women) mentioned in the Iranian Penal Code is Article 59 (b) is very general (It however does not deal with hijab issue but more on the aggressiveness of sport). Some of the Iranian jurists commented that the articles in the Penal Code cannot be too general, as to let judges and lawyers to interpret the law as they wish (Shokri and Siroos, 2007). Thus recently, the sport authority advice the government to examine and enact specific sports provision with attention to sports disciplinary regulation (Aghainia, 2005). Article 59 states: The following action is not offence: b) The accidents occurred as a result of performing (physical) sports, provided the accident is not caused by violation of the rules that sport and the regulations do not violate the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (Shokri and Siroos, 2007; Aghainia, 2002).

The Shari'ah is against any sports that could endanger human's life. The Iran Penal Code takes the

same stance with the Islamic position on sport. Thus for example, horse racing or boxing is not allowed for Iranian women. According to another article in the Iran Penal Code, i.e., Article 638, female athletes must cover their body (except hand and face) in any outdoor national or international games and they can only be shown in photos or film wearing the hijab. Violation of such provision carries criminal liability. The consequent punishment for women without religious dresses and appears in public is an imprisonment from 10 days to 2 months or fine of 50,000-500,000 Rial (Shokri and Siroos, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The involvement of women in sport in Iran, as the preceding discussion showed underline a different perspective between the Islamic concept of femininity and the meaning of femininity and feminism as expounded by Western theories. The Iranian women soccer team and the head scarf issue that FIFA has to deal with is a testimony of a tension between international sporting norm and religious or cultural demand. Undoubtedly, the linking of women as a theoretical framework in sport and religion is a tricky issue. The tendency of ensuring female athlete appealing to men which is referred to as the feminine apologetic is not necessarily applicable to a country like Iran. Iranian women despite their country's rules on the hijab still maintain their right to participate in sport where sport is seen to be a medium of struggle towards the right of equality and freedom.

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