



Dr. Suad Joseph
General Editor

Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies, University of California, Davis

EWIC PUBLIC OUTREACH PROJECT

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EWIC Staff Report: Topical Note: Muslim Women in Sports: Participation worldwide

Background

Muslims, both female and male engage in sports. Muslim women, just like women of all other faiths, engage in competitive sports. Physical sports have traditionally been a male dominated realm. Consequently, gender parity is still not a given in competitive sports. The gender imbalance in competitive sports has presented a number of challenges for women regardless of their faith. However, for Muslim women competitive sports may present a number of social and cultural obstacles not faced by secular or non-Muslim female athletes.

Muslim women in the West who wear Islamic dress and who choose to compete in competitive or leisure sports are often confronted by barriers such as dress codes, e.g. short shorts, or no head-coverings. The WISE website,¹ notes in its “Current Issues: Sports” summary that Muslim are impeded in their ability to participate in sports due to issues such as dress codes; attitudes toward body related to privacy and modesty; mixed gender classes and exercising during Ramadan, the month of fasting. Despite these impediments Muslim women continue to participate in all manner of sports. Sporting Equals, working with Muslim Women’s Sports Foundation, identified the following items as being relevant to Muslim women in the United Kingdom who wanted to participate in sports. ²

- Making sure that changing rooms and facilities are safe and private.
- Ensuring that female staff is on duty including female lifeguards.
- Highlight the fact that certain sessions are intended to be supportive environments for female users.
- Have experienced women available to help beginners.
- Arrange for women-only coaching sessions.
- Allow for a wide range of clothing choices.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction as many women enjoy doing sorts that provide for social opportunities.

Sportswear

The fashion and design world is increasingly offering a wide range of sports clothing designed specifically for female Muslim athletes. Two of the more prominent hijab sportswear designers are Cindy Van Den Breman and Elahm Seyed Javad. Dutch designer, Cindy Van Den Breman’s³ ‘capster’ was created to meet the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) criteria. Her designs include includes hijab sportswear designed for tennis, skating, aerobics and outdoor activities. Elahm Seyed Javad, a Canadian designer was inspired to create a line of clothing specifically for Muslim athletes after seeing five young Muslim women disqualified from a Montreal taekwondo tournament due to claims that their hijabs posed safety threats. In response Javad⁴ designed the “ResportOn,” a head covering designed specifically to meet both safety requirements and Islamic standards of modesty. Founded by a husband-wife team in 2007, Modestly Active offers a wide range of swim and sportswear for Muslim women. The company was founded when the couple realized that there was a lack of adequate sportswear for their athletic daughters. French Lebanese designer, Aheda Zanetti,⁵ is the founder of one of the world’s best known swimwear designs; the burkini, a portmanteau of the

¹ <http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/currentissues/sports/>

² http://www.wsff.org.uk/system/1/assets/files/000/000/251/251/ac6234e5e/original/Muslim_women_in_sport.pdf

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2012/jul/23/sports-hijabs-muslim-women-olympics>

⁴ <http://resporton.com/en/a-propos/>

⁵ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/faithfashion/the-business-of-modest-fashion/ahiida/>

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words 'bikini' and 'burqa.' Her swimwear is sought after by both Muslim women and secular women who are in search of sun-safe garments.

FIFA Controversy

In 2007 the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) banned hijab-wearing Muslim women from competing with headscarves on. Ostensibly this was due to claims that the hijab posed safety risks to players. However, this claim was seen as spurious by many.⁶ It was widely questioned whether the ban truly stemmed from safety concerns or if it was instead due to increased levels of Islamophobia or religious discrimination. The ban was met by an international outcry. In 2011 Iran's female football team made international headlines when they were forced to forfeit their qualifying match for the 2012 Olympics against Jordan. The Iranian team was told that they could only compete if they removed their sports hijabs.⁷ Players left the field in tears and subsequently lost their chance to play in the 2012 Olympic Games. In 2010 FIFA attempted to modify the regulations, allowing for women to cover their hair but not their ears or neck. As these designations do not meet the needs of hijab-wearing women, Muslim women did not return to the soccer fields.

There was considerable international concern that the hijab ban was keeping women and young girls out of sports in general. The UN, prominent international soccer players, and FIFA members, including the vice president of FIFA, Jordanian prince, Ali bin Al Hussein all worked together with FIFA to lift the ban. In response to the mounting international concern and pressure the International Football Association Board (IFAB), the arm of FIFA devoted to rules and regulations for the game, voted to rewrite the laws pertaining to the hijab.⁸ In the process of these rewrites FIFA agreed to designate hijabs as cultural rather than religious symbols.⁹ FIFA has regulations banning religious symbols of any type, therefore designating the hijab as a cultural rather than religious symbol opened the sport back up to untold numbers of women. The hijab ban was lifted in 2012 and FIFA approved a design by Cindy Van Den Bremen. The design features Velcro which keeps the head-covering in place and eliminates all concerns that players could be injured by their head coverings.

Popular sports/ 2012 Olympics

Muslim women from all over the globe compete professionally in sports such as soccer; saber fencing; boxing; sprinting; swimming; equestrian racing; karate, basketball; and weightlifting to list a few. They are also competitive rugby players, boxers and race car drivers. In Iran race car driving has become an increasingly popular sport among women. In Palestine, the so called "Speed Sisters" are an all-female race car team who compete against male racers.¹⁰ The first Saudi Arabian to summit Mt. Everest was a woman.¹¹

In the 2012 Olympics Muslims won 65 medals, 18 of those were won by women.¹² Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt and Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, Bahrain, Malaysia all sent female athletes to the 2012 London Olympics.¹³ A total of 65 Muslims won medals at the 2012 London Olympics.¹⁴ Every Muslim majority country in the world sent at least one female athlete to the 2012 Olympics. Two Muslim-majority countries sent women to compete in the traditionally male dominated activities of wrestling and shooting. Malaysia was represented in the shooting context by Nur Suryani Mohamed Taibi who happened to be 34 months pregnant during the games.¹⁵ Kazakhstan sent a female wrestler to the 2012 Olympics, Marina Volnova and Azerbaijan had two award winning female wrestlers, Mariya Stadnik (silver) and Yuliya Ratkevich (bronze).

⁶ http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/28/the_politics_of_fifa_and_the_hijab

⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/sport/football/2011/06/201166124927699569.html>

⁸ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/404321/fifa-lifts-ban-on-headscarves-for-women-footballers/>

⁹ <http://mideastposts.com/middle-east-sports-news-and-analysis/a-cultural-rather-than-religious-symbol-compromise-near-in-hijab-dispute/>

¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/10/palestine-fast-furious-females-20131031313452469.html>

¹¹ <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/130518/raha-moharrak-first-saudi-arabian-woman-summit-everest>

¹² <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/pressreleases/press-releases/uk-mo-leads-record-muslim-haul-of-olympic-medals/>

¹³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/altmuslimah/post/muslim-women-and-the-london-olympics-series-of-historic-firsts/2012/07/27/gJQAxwEwEX_blog.html

¹⁴ <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/pressreleases/press-releases/uk-mo-leads-record-muslim-haul-of-olympic-medals/>

¹⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/17/sports/olympics/17iht-oly17.html?_r=0