

Women Participation in Muslim Countries in terms of Empowerment and Constraints: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles. Sports and recreation that bring relief to the body and soul are not only permissible in Islam but also desirable for all, without any kind of gender discrimination. However, Islam limits how sport can be practiced, such as Muslim women are not permitted to participate in mixed-gender sports. Numerous Muslim women have been barred from or have felt unfit to participate in sports due to religious misinterpretations or just a lack of awareness about the legal status of women's participation in sports. This research paper references the Holy Qur'an and Hadith as evidence for the importance of exercise and fitness for all including women. A historical overview shows that women's participation in sports has evolved differently in various regions and countries. There is a lot of literature concerning female participation in sports for leisure, but there is little material concerning Muslim women's participation in sports. Sport is, generally, considered a man-oriented and man-dominated activity in Muslim countries. The purpose of this research is to describe the various facets of the situation. For a long time, Muslim Female athletes have been unable to compete at the national and international levels due to a variety of socio-cultural, religious, economic, physical, and psychological barriers. But as of recent studies, Muslim women have achieved outstanding results at the national and international level despite limitations and constraints. This study will examine the engagement, constraints, and perceived limits of women of Muslim countries in physical activities. Additionally, the paper will explore the sports performance of Muslim women as well as analyze initiatives of Muslim countries aimed at encouraging women to engage in sports. In the end, recommendations will be given to improve the scenario of female participation in sports in accordance with Shariah.

Keywords: Women, Sports, Constraints, Empowerment, Performance, Initiative, Muslim Countries

Introduction

Islam, as a revealed religion, has balance and equilibrium in its teachings and philosophies. It is based on Quran and Sunnah which are the

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primary sources of Shariah. Islamic ways of life based on Quran and Sunnah have the biggest influence on Muslim's daily lives, encompassing their attitudes about their bodies, health, sport, and recreation. Islamic culture is based on Quranic rules and regulations. In addition to being exposition, explanation, and guiding light to social, cultural as well as other aspects of human life, Quran provides legislation and practical examples to meet material and spiritual needs of Islamic society. Islam emphasizes the importance of good health. Sports can also be leveraged as a mean of maintaining and improving one's physical condition. There appears to be no harm in participating in sports for both genders. Differed interpretations of Qur'an are linked to contrasting opinions about women in social structure, particularly regarding women's bodies, including arguments either for or against women physical activities.

In sports, Muslim women are a heterogenous entity as women sport is not unitary. Many Muslim women have been succeeded in manipulating power structures and relationships to promote their cause; others are still struggling for freedom and autonomy but are unable to obtain it. ¹ So Muslim women sports have enormous differences between ideas, concepts, and practices. In Muslim world sport is aforethought as a man-dominated and masculine activity, as a result there is much literature available on men participation in sports but there is a little work found on Muslim women participation in sports and recreational activities. Sport prepares people for real-life scenarios by preparing them to deal with a variety of situations. Sport and physical activity participation provide opportunities for social interactions, solidarity, fairness, nationhood, and community trust.² Women in sports, are usually observed, to possess a higher level of self-esteem and confidence, lesser anxiety, as well as a healthier lifestyle.

Islam and Women's sports

Islam mandates healthy lifestyle and makes it a religious duty. Certain physical activities are essential for Muslims which require a healthy and strong body, such as Five prayers in a day, tawaf (Circumambulation around Kasbah), sayee (walking during Umrah), a-month long fasting and actions of Hajj (pilgrimage). Though Islam provides certain criteria for unfit and unable persons, but it is a common endeavor that physical strength is required to follow Allah's orders. Allah has given due importance to healthy mind and bod. Thus, when Talut's leadership was objected and questioned by people, the prophet of time said, as in Quran "Their Prophet addressed them as follows: "Allah hath appointed Talut as king over you." They said: "How can he exercise authority over us when we are better fitted than he to exercise authority, and he is not even gifted, with wealth in abundance?" He said: "Allah hath Chosen him above you, and hath gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess."³ Here the term "Bodily prowess" shows the importance of fitness and health along with character and

knowledge. As in Sahih Muslim “A strong believer is better and is more lovable to Allah than a weak believer”⁴ So, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as well as his companions took part in many physical and recreational activities such as horse-riding, racing, wrestling, camel riding, archery, spear-throwing and running games etc. The holy Prophet (PBUH) himself and his companions participated in walking, running, wrestling, swimming, archery, spear-throwing, horse-racing, camel-racing and hunting etc.⁵ These sporting events were carrying significance from the perspectives of health and fitness with reference to taking part in “Jehad” (the holy battle fought for the cause of Islam). These sporting events were noteworthy from the standpoints of health and fitness in relation to participating in “Jehad”. Islam supports for optimum health and physical fitness. As the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used to plead from Allah “I beg your protection from impotence (ajz), idleness (kasl), cowardice (jubn), miserliness (bukhl), and weakness (harem),”⁶

Sports participation of women is contingent on the faith that Islam is a “religion of firmness, constancy and serenity” which signifies a great deal of appreciation and apprehension for the healthful mind and body for both men and women. Muslim Scholars widely acknowledge sports participation benefits for health maintenance and development, as Quran says, “O those who believe, do not make unlawful good things that Allah has made lawful for you, and do not transgress. Verily, Allah does not like the transgressors.”⁷ So, it’s not lawful to forbid women from sports participation. In his life, Holy Prophet (PBUH) endorsed women participation in sports, as Aisha (R.A) narrated: “ While on a tour with Holy Prophet (PBUH), I had a race with him, and I outstripped him on my feet.” Later, when I put on some weight, I again had a race with him, and he exceeded me. He said: This is (the revenge) for that outstripping.⁸

Though there is a lot of discussion about this hadith in jurists regarding female limited participation in sport such as this incident took place when the caravan had gone ahead and there was no one except Holy Prophet (PBUH) and his wife, Hazrat Ayesha, they were alone. This cannot be done in the presence of anyone else because it is against modesty, but it indicates that the Prophet (PBUH) was not against women sports.

“Every game an individual assumes is futile except for archery, training one's horse, and playing with one's wife”⁹ the Holy Prophet (PBUH) stated with reference to female recreation.” Islam allows women sports but with certain limitations. At present, Women's engagement in sports is discouraged and criticized by many conservative religious folks due to the liberal nature of sport such as there is open mixing of both sexes and non-Islamic dress pattern etc. In all aspects, including sport and recreation, Islam stresses on gender segregation. Women participation in sport is permitted in

Islam as long as it is done secretly and without male interference in the conduct and organization of the activity.

The status of religion is the most important among all other social or cultural establishment in Islamic civilizations and Muslim countries, and it plays a crucial role in the lives of Muslims. Islam's effect can be seen in all aspects of a Muslim's life, whether it's sports or any other endeavor. A study analyzing 100 fatwas related to sports published in Islamic websites of Arab countries between 2001 and 2009 shows that some sport activities of present years challenge traditional Islamic teachings and customs. Thousands of Fatwas have been issued in response of queries about legitimacy of sport activities that show the significance of sports among Muslim.¹⁰ When it comes to female engagement in sports, significant debate and disagreement is observed between various classes and groups of society such as lower, middle, and elite class, so-called liberals, conservative group, Islamists, and secularists etc.

Women in Sports; Constraints and challenges

Constraints are those elements that limit how often, how intensely, how long, or how well an individual participates in recreational activities. Participation is usually inhibited or hindered by constraints.¹¹ Women from Muslim states face not only religious and cultural difficulties, but also living conditions, legal bans, and discrimination, which may hinder them from participating in sports, particularly in international competitions.¹² Religious values and ideas offer validity to the ways in which many Muslim women organize and approach their lives. Islam is a significant part of their identity, and religious, cultural, and ethnic issues all influence the way they approach sports. Muslim women face many obstacles and impediments in their way to participation in sport on account of a misconception that “sports are forbidden (Haram).¹³ A survey among Pakistani female students regarding sports participation shows that religious restrictions are not a major constraint for them to participate in sports rather most of the female experience lack of support from family and society, lack of facilities and socio-cultural constraints.¹⁴ Women are supposed to have more households responsibilities as compared to men such as childbirth, childcare and house chores etc. A survey-based research paper illustrates that Arab Muslim almost 98% women are inclined to sports but 80% mentioned that their cultural and ethnicity issues discourage them from participation in sport.¹⁵ With reference to Muslim countries, many Muslim women have been barred from participating in sports activities or have deemed unable to do so due to religious misinterpretations or just a lack of information. Because of their religious or cultural demands, many women are fearful of being discriminated or encountering bad attitudes from society.¹⁶ Islam does not allow free mixing of men and women. So Muslim women need a female only sports-environment. Parents approval, transport are also some

constraints faced by women in sports. Another major constraint is financial support and budgetary issue for women sports. In 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2005, Women Islamic Games were organized in accordance with Islamic teachings under “Islamic Federation of Women Sport” (an Iranian Initiated platform for women sport in 1990 headed by Fazeah Hashmi) ¹⁷, but unfortunately the Federation was shut down due to unpaid budget by National Olympics Committee.¹⁸ So, Muslim women have potential but lack finances and facilities to play at national and international level.

A myriad of religious, social, cultural, financial, physical, and psychological obstacles and constraints are observed on the issue of Muslim women's appearance in sports. Different facets of the issue must be investigated to have a better understanding of the current situation in terms of female participation in sports.

Hijab and sports-attire of Muslim women

Modest dress is requirement for a Muslim woman to participate in sports and physical activities, but it is sometimes not accepted on international and national level. At times, Muslim women can't be a part of international games without wearing their specific western-style uniform (which is forbidden in Islam if it reveals their body). Muslim women face this issue and barriers off and on for example Amaiya Zafar was disqualified from Sugar Bert Boxing National Championships USA 2016, because she was not agreeing to participate without her Hijab. There are many more women who faced barriers due to western cultures or uniforms.¹⁹ At present, French Hijab banned has also excluded Muslim women from sports participation that is worsening the situation.²⁰

According to Pfister, Hijab and dress-code of Muslim women is the most debated issue in sports entities. In traditional Islamic countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, Hijab is compulsory to participate in sports and recreational activities in public. There is no compulsion of Hijab in Oman, still the females participating in sports choose to cover their head and bodies in physical activities in public. In Iran, women take part in various sports like running, biking, soccer, cricket, shooting and even swimming in modest attire. It clearly shows that physical activities are not particularly hindered by hijab or modest dress. Although a range of Muslim women choose to partake in women-only games or sports environment so that they may remain serene by attire and mixed gender surroundings.²¹ There is a significant number of Muslim women who prefer to wear Hijab and are not, necessarily, interested in “western-centric lifestyle”.²² With the rise of women-participation in sports in Muslim countries, the hijab has grown into an intellectual battlefield where socio-cultural wars are being contested. Many Middle Eastern countries mandate Muslim women to cover their hair at public athletic activities, while Turkey expressly restricts the hijab from being worn in competitive sports. Saudi Arabia and Iran are significantly

more restricted about women sportswear whereas Lebanon is a progressive and revolutionary country in terms of women's attitudes and attires.²³

It shows that each Muslim country regarding participation of women in sports, has its own set of values and views in terms of religion, gender, culture, history, tradition, governance, and customs.

Empowering Muslim Women in sports; Initiatives and Performance

Though there has, been many controversies and debates regarding women participation in sport and recreational activities in Muslim countries, but in recent years, there has been a significant growth and development in female-sports. Many Muslim countries somewhere between feminists and Islamists debates, are empowering women, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia women are participating in physical activities. Irani women have been allowed to participate in international games in compliance with modest dress code since 1980. Women's games of international level were also initiated by Iran providing female-sports a milestone. Competitive and top-level competitions for women accompanied by science and sex-segregation paved the way to empowerment.²⁴ Women in Iran are taking part in shooting, karate, chess, horse-riding, and football etc. A powerful wave of women's sports movement can be noted in Iran, in the past few decades.²⁵ Women's roles all over the world especially in South Asia and Middle East are changing rapidly and vividly. Women have played an important role in the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and other countries in the region that has empowered the women.²⁶

Pakistan has also provided facilities for women sports and now it has exceeded women national teams for badminton, boxing, cycling, hockey, judo, karate, shooting, squash, swimming, tennis, and cricket etc. In district Swat of NWFP Pakistan, sports facilities have been provided to displaced women for a peaceful mind and healthy body with the help of US embassy' Public affairs section in 2008. Swat Youth Front (SYF) initiated the project "Sports for Peace" for peace building and facilitating women friendly space for sports.²⁷ In his Ph.D. dissertation, Ghaneemah Mohammad Al-Othman Al-haidar comments "Since 1990, Kuwait schools, colleges and universities are actively modifying curriculums and introducing programs regarding women sports. Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is introducing policies to encourage women sports. In Kuwait, there are Public Authority for Youth and Sports (PAYS), Sports for all department (SFAD), Youth Centre's department and women's sports for all centers that are promoting female participation in sports as well as providing them with more facilities. Women-only gyms and sports centers are also built under certain initiatives.²⁸ Various Muslim countries has adopted initiative of "Sports for all" and sports has become a popular recreational activity. Muslim countries, under this initiative, are supporting a wide range of sport activities of females, and

facilities under governmental or non-governmental organizations are being provided.²⁹

Despite numerous hurdles and constraints, Muslim females from different countries have achieved outstanding results in international tournaments, winning Gold Medals for their country in various international sport events such as Olympics, Commonwealth Games, World Championships and Asian Games, among others. Though it's not been long since Muslim women began participation in various international sports competitions, they have shown their existence by giving remarkable performances. The general public's awareness of this issue is growing, and Muslim female participation in sports is increasing. Here are some well-known Pakistani Muslim sports women who have represented their country in major international sporting competitions:

In Asian games, Pakistan's women cricket team won gold medal in 2010 and 2014. Kiran Khan, the first Pakistani woman to win a gold medal in swimming at the South Asian Games, has six international gold medals to her credit, and she also competed for Pakistan at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Naseem Hameed Siddiqi is the agile woman of South Asia and a gold medalist in the 100-meter sprint at the Asian Games. She dominated in performance at the 2010 South Asian Games in Dacca, where she hoisted the Pakistani flag. On 19 May 2013, Samina Baig got the honor of first Pakistani women to conquer the highest summit of the world Mount Everest (29,029 ft or 8848 m). 13 years old, Rubab Raza, Pakistan's first Olympian and youngest swimmer competed in the 2004 Athens Olympics.³⁰

According to Getrud Pfister, the first cohort of female Olympians from Islamic countries achieved distinction primarily on their presence in the Games instead of their performance.³¹ But a significant number of Muslim women have distinguished themselves in the world of sport. Following are sports achievements of Muslim countries women:

1. In 1936, Halet Cambel of Turkey became the world's first Muslim woman to contest in Fencing in the Berlin Olympics.
2. By representing their nation in the London Olympics 2012, Sarah Attar and Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim from Saudi Arabia made their names in sports history.
3. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, Bahrain's Ruqaya Al Ghasara became the pioneer Muslim woman to participate with full hijab. She achieved gold and bronze medals in the Asian Cup in Doha in 2006 in the 200 and 100 metre sprints, respectively.
4. In London Olympics 2012, Khadija Mohammad became first Muslim female lifter from Gulf countries to represent United Arab Emirates.
5. Al Houby, a pioneer Palestinian woman to scale six out of seven world's highest summit. "We are here, we exist, and we have

reached the highest places on Earth!” she gave the message at the summit.

6. At the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, Morocco's Nawal El Moutakawel became the first Muslim woman to win a gold medal in the 400 metre sprints.
7. At the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, Hassiba Boulmerka was the first woman from Algeria to compete in the olympics in the 1500 metre race and won a gold medal.
8. Dr. Rania El Wani holds the distinction of having competed in three separate Olympic Games in the discipline of swimming.
9. On May 18, 2013, Raha Moharrak, a 27-year-old graphic designer from Saudi Arabia, became the first and youngest Arab woman to summit Mount Everest.
10. Marina Volnova participated in the London Olympics for the first time in the Wrestling category for Kazakhstan.
11. Egypt sent 36 Muslim women to the London Olympics 2012, making it the largest female delegation ever sent by a single country.
12. During the London Olympics 2012, Muslim women won 18 medals in various events.³²

Despite the numerous obstacles and constraints, women in Muslim countries have achieved success and fame as athletes, even in combat arts such as karate or taekwondo.

Tokyo Olympics 2020-2021-Female Muslim Participants-Empowerment and Initiatives

The empowerment of women and their development in sports is shown by the initiatives taken by Muslim countries. Slowly but steadily women participation in sports is increasing. A decade ago, it was mere a dream for some Muslim countries women to participate in Olympics or International competitions and the number of Muslim women players sent to Olympics was very few as compared to others, but now the scenario is changing, and initiatives are empowering women players. International Olympic 2020 were delayed in 2020 due to coronavirus and are scheduled from 23 July 2021 to 8 August 2021. There is a significant number of females in Tokyo Olympics this year coming from Muslim countries having various backgrounds and diverse cultures.

Turkey: In Turkey, women sports are especially popular because of secularism and westernization of culture. Turkey, a secular Muslim state, has sent 14 female players in women’s volleyball team to Tokyo Olympics 2021, Japan. Last month this team called “Sultans of the Net” won Women’s National League tournament and on July 25,2021 it had tremendous victory over China. On this eve, they were applauded by many people including Turkish President but once again the debate arose about their attire and

modest clothing. As a tweet of Islamist Ihsan Senocak, who once got suspended from Turkey's General Directorate of religious affairs, went viral that "Daughters of Islam must be the Sultan of beliefs, modesty, and moral values of Islam, not the Sultan of sports. They must wear a modest outfit instead of getting victim to western culture".³³

Afghanistan: In Afghanistan, women sport is not particularly liked rather sports women often face threats. But at present liberal Afghan women take it as their right to participate in sports. Even this year at Olympics, Afghan women are competing. Negara Shaheen, an Afghan born woman, on July 28, 2021 made her debut in women's Judo in Tokyo Olympics representing the Refugee Olympics Team.³⁴ On the same day, Masoumeh Alizada, (dubbed as the Little Queen of Afghanistan) a 25-year-old Afghan refugee and road cyclist, rode during Women's individual time trial.³⁵

Iran: Hanieh Rostamian, an Iranian shooter is sent to Olympics 2021 as flagbearer of Iran.³⁶ Iran allowed their women to participate in Olympics and National Olympic Committee introduced official ceremony uniforms that is a modest attire, which consist blue sky long garment and white trouser and headscarf for women.³⁷

Pakistan: Pakistan has sent three women Najma Parveen, Mahnoor Shahzad and Bisma Khan to compete in athletics, badminton, and swimming games respectively.³⁸

The rising number of female Olympians creates the impression that a woman's potential to partake in and excel in sports, especially at the Olympic Games, is greatly influenced by her cultural and religious context and environment. Some Muslim countries allow their women to participate in games unconditionally, but a few countries still consider it inappropriate for women to take part in sports and they only allow such activities under certain conditions.

Conclusion

Islam is a divine, dynamic, and balanced religion integrating all aspects of human nature. All natural and innate human needs, as well as paths to purity, contentment, and worldly and elsewhere prosperity, have been addressed in the divine and eternal teachings of Islam.³⁹ Islam gives significant importance to sport and recreational activities to promote health and fitness which is desirable for all men and women. But Islam put certain limitations on both men and women, so environment, dress-code and mixed gender sports are also taken into consideration. Muslim women possess the ability and talent needed to play in international competitions and excellence in conduct, however the main roadblocks in their way are that women must perform in front of a crowd of male onlookers and recruiters, and worldwide sport bodies' accepted dress codes. Because of the two constraints, Muslim governments have historically been hesitant to send their women athletes to compete in international sports competitions. Currently, Muslim women can

be seen competing in a variety of sports such as basketball, fencing, football, karate, weightlifting, cricket, boxing, badminton, and cricket. In Muslim countries, the issue of women participation in sports is fraught with disputes, conflicts, and controversies of various kinds but now a days various initiatives are being taken by Muslim countries to promote women participation in Sports such as women from Saudi Arabia and Iran are participating in national and international sports and physical activities but with proper attire and certain limitations. So, with globally changing sports arena, various Muslim countries are also making significant changes in reference to women sport.

Recommendations

After careful analysis of various factors and the current situation in Islamic countries about women involvement in physical activities, it is proposed that Islamic intellectuals' views on the subject be considered, and one must adhere to Islamic doctrines as well as the progressive socio-cultural ethnicities. Women should engage in sport activities When the scenario is in accordance with customs, socio-cultural norms, societal values, and family status. Women must follow Islamic attire covering head and a flowy dress to conceal their body parts properly. Furthermore, while training and coaching, as well as active tournaments, female sports should always be kept out of sight of men. Beijing Olympic Games can be utilized to make evident to fresh Muslim women that hijab (covering of head) doesn't really prevent them from getting ahead in life and sports. Developing long-term behavioral changes and raising women participation levels needs recognizing and sharing these positive representations of Muslim women from Islamic countries. When designing courses, sports authorities should consider the need of securing family interest for female inclusion. Cultural and educational institutions, the media, the school, and the family must coordinate to adopt a recreational education that is harmonious with Islamic Shariah law, as well as society's culture and traditions.⁴⁰

There is dire need to respect religious difference in sports field that is particularly important in case of Muslim women, as they often face discrimination and mistreated by providers and the sensitivity of requirement of clothing, privacy, and single-sex provision for them is hardly understood. First, Islamic provisions should be taking into consideration and then these guidelines cake play sports more accessible for Muslim Women: Women-only training and coaching sessions can be arranged in which they will be guided about importance of exercise, sports, and recreational activities. Experienced sports women trainers can be hired to help beginners. Positive imagery and certain sessions held to provide supportive environments for women can promote women sports. At national and international level, Muslim women should be permitted a wide range of dress code so that she may cover her body according to the demands of Quranic provisions. Strict

action should be taken if women are mistreated, harassed or face religious discrimination. Authorities must ensure that male cannot attend or accidentally walk in women sports field as it may cause problem. Muslim countries are responsible for the safety of their women athletics they must make changing rooms, private room and sport environment is protected and cannot be overlooked. Only female staff, coaches and lifeguards should be on duty if women are playing, and cameras must be off to avoid inconvenience. Governments of Muslim countries are recommended that standard sport infrastructure be established solely for women sport consumers at least at respective district headquarters. These facilities must include appropriately featured training circuits (where women are disguised from men), exercise rooms, auditoriums, jogging tracks, recreational facilities, and health centers. Islamic provisions should not be considered as barrier to women participation in sports because Islam promotes a peaceful, healthy, and positive lifestyle. But Islam mandates certain traditions and regulations to be followed.⁴¹ It is the greatness of Islam that it complies with human instinct and Shariah injunction about female sports are in accordance with psychological, intellectual, communal, emotional, spiritual, and artistic components of women's nature.

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