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# Winning the Game: Muslim Women and Sport

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# Winning the Game: Muslim Women and Sport

## **Abstract**

Female Muslim athletes face a number of obstacles when playing sports, both at home and abroad. For example, those who wear hijabs may be banned from playing a sport in certain countries or international arenas because their headscarves are deemed unsafe by the organization's standards. By contrast, they may be required to wear a headscarf in other countries if they wish to compete publicly. By examining case studies from a variety of sports and countries, this paper explains how female athletes have worked to overcome these obstacles and fought for equality and the right to join the game.

## **Keywords**

Islam, Women, Muslim, Sport, Hijab

## **Disciplines**

Islamic Studies | Sports Studies | Women's Studies

## **Comments**

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## Winning the Game: Muslim Women and Sport

by Claire Benstead

Thanks to the internet, it would be very difficult to escape the most recent news involving the hijab: the recent release of a Barbie “Shero” doll wearing a hijab and modelled after US team Olympic medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad. The upcoming release of the doll has sparked both excitement and outrage. Many are in support of the representation of the hijab, especially on an athlete, while some believe it will endorse so-called extreme Islamic ideologies. Unfortunately, this controversy is hardly a new phenomenon. Female Muslim athletes have faced adversity wearing the hijab in sports for years

The setting is June 2011. The Iranian women’s football team has walked onto the field only to be disqualified from competing against the Jordanian women’s team. The reason? The headscarves Iran required the women to wear did not adhere to FIFA safety standards. The issues did not end there, though, as the Iranian team was prevented from competing in the 2012 Olympics and FIFA did not lift the hijab ban until the Jordanian Prince Ali bin Al-Hussein campaigned for the rights of female athletes to wear headscarves. The controversy of this one game brought to light the barriers female Muslim athletes have been facing for years. The combination of Western social norms, patriarchal social standards, and colonial ethnocentrism have resulted in a tangle of obstacles women must overcome. On the international stage, Muslim women are expected not to veil, while in certain Middle East countries, women are required to veil. And when these women actually succeed in changing sports laws regarding headscarves, the men are often credited with the success. From high school to professional, Iran to Australia, athletes who veil have dealt with their practices being both outlawed and required, both

culturally marginalized and standardized. As a result, these women have found ways to navigate the obstacles of being a Muslim athlete.

The modern controversies surrounding women in sports can be traced to the origins of Islam. The rights of women in the history of Islam have never been secure. In the early days of Islam, Mohammed stressed that, spiritually, man and woman were equal before Allah: “the holy texts proclaimed man and woman as equals in all essential rights and duties” (Benn 2010, 29) Socially, women received more rights and privileges. Mohammed denounced female infanticide and women were involved in the battles his followers fought. However, as Islam spread across the world, acculturation resulted in adoption of local political and social ideas, and gradually Muslim women lost their freedoms:

With time, the rights embedded in early Islam gradually underwent steady erosion due to complex historical, cultural, and political factors. Women’s rights deteriorated under circumstances such as increasing patriarchal domination and acculturation...Hence, religious principles became confused and intertwined with cultural overlays. (29)

Relatively recently, a new interest in religion and faith in a modern world has resulted in new interpretations and voices in Islam. Admittedly, extremist views— those held by the Taliban and ISIS, for example—have continued to constrain women and erase their voices. On the other hand, Islamic feminism arose in the 1980s. New interpretations of the Quran and Hadith promote and support women’s rights (30-31). This new wave has grown in popularity as the number of educated Muslim women has increased. Religious scholars continue to reinterpret the Quran and Hadith in ways that promote gender equality.

One interesting aspect of early Islam was the importance of sports, namely swimming, shooting, and horse-riding. According to Benn, “There is nothing in the Quran or Hadith that explicitly precludes men’s or women’s participation in physical activities” (32). Mohammed stressed the responsibility to care for personal needs, including staying active and healthy as long

as faith is maintained as primary focus. Even Iran, considered to have a conservative approach to Islam, encourages both genders to participate in physical activities (Pfister 2010). Support for physical education can be found in religious texts. And given that all Muslims are expected to seek knowledge, this means that girls and boys are both entitled to physical education equally. Difficulties arise when certain understandings of modesty and physical activity do not intersect. Due to the ambiguity of the Quran and Hadith, scholars and local cultures are able to interpret their teachings to their own cultural benefits. Recently, Islamic feminism has focused on improving “the position of women in many fields of life, while upholding respect for authentic Islam” (Benn 2010, 30). This includes the recent increase in Muslim women participating in sports.

Modesty is an important aspect of Islam, but in accordance with Islam’s ambiguity, modesty is up to individual interpretation. Appropriate apparel varies widely across the world and among individuals, depending on the society and perceived level of devotion to Allah. Some women may choose to wear a hijab, or headscarf, and cover their arms and legs. Others may go as far as the burqa, covering the entire body and hiding the eyes behind a cloth grill. For many Muslim women, the choice to veil is based on country of origin, social class, traditional customs, and/or level of education (Harkness 2011, 65). For some, wearing the hijab “represents important political, cultural, religious, and social meanings” (Alamri 2013, 422). In fact, a Middle Eastern “sports team can include as many countries of origin as it has players” (Harkness 2011, 65). In Turkey, the headscarf has been banned in sports. Somali women usually prefer “long dresses that cover the whole body” (Alamri 2013, 423) while Bosnian Muslim teens tend to prefer Western style clothing. In Iran, the general rule for being in public is that “the entire female body must be covered by wide robes with the exception of the face, hands, and feet” whereas men are required

to “cover their bodies from the navel to the knees” (Pfister 2004, 212). Some women only participate in sports when the areas are sex-segregated, while some do not mind playing in the presence of men. Some choose to play in Western clothing, others in traditional Muslim clothing. Depending on the country, some may choose what they wear and others may be required to maintain a basis of modesty. Too often, though, Islamic modesty clashes with Western expectations.

In Western culture, Muslim athletes face pressures to perform in sports without their standards of modesty. Most sports require high visibility of the body (Benn 2010, 33). Unlike many Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, where Islam is a major cultural group, Muslims in Western countries are often a minority. In the United States, Muslims make up about one percent of the population. Alamri refers to a multitude of studies in Western countries that claim Muslim students face greater difficulties in being accepted into the dominant culture: “It is very difficult for female Muslim students who observe the *hijab* to fully engage socially in Western public schools” (2013, 423). For many Muslims, identity is primarily from being Muslim rather than country of origin or even country of residence. Because being Muslim is such a strong component of their identity, students often struggle to fit into Western culture. A strong example of this is in Australia, where high school students often drop out of sports because they are not allowed to wear their clothing of choice or play in sex-segregated groups (423). This is a part of Australia’s hostility to Muslim practices and attempts to assimilate new immigrants. When it comes specifically to sports, “dress code, privacy in changing rooms, mixed sex activities, and a lack of knowledge about Islam requirements from teachers are examples of the problems” (423). As a result, Muslim families react by maintaining their practices and traditions, even if this

means “increasing numbers of Muslim parents...withdraw their daughters from sporting activities in Western schools” (423).

On the international scale, sport associations are often composed of European males and have historically discriminated against Muslim ideals. Even Muslim men in Iran must choose to violate their dress code in order to compete in football (Pfister 2004, 210). Muslim women must make decisions based on apparel: can they find a way to compete in modest clothing? if not, should they negate their faith and wear Western uniforms or should they just not compete at all? Many sports federations do not allow headgear of any kind, citing possible injury (Alvarez 2017). This rule inherently negates the hijab, forcing women to choose between faith and sports. Historically, Muslim women have competed internationally. The Iranian Olympic Council sent athletes to the 1964, 1974, and 1976 Olympics (Pfister 2004, 207). The International Olympic Committee attempted to pressure Qatar, Brunei, and Saudi Arabia to send female athletes to the 2012 Olympics—the same Olympics that FIFA prevented the Iranian football team from competing in (Prouse 2013, 25). In 2016, Amaiya Zafar was barred from competing in the Sugar Bert Boxing National Championships in the United States because she refused to compete without her hijab (Alvarez 2017). This is just one example of many in which Muslim women have encountered barriers from Western cultures.

A closer look at FIFA policies regarding hijab helps to illuminate several of the challenges faced by women athletes who wish to wear hijab. FIFA first outlawed headscarves in 2007, determining that headgear was unsafe in the off chance that it strangled a player. This was despite the blatant lack of evidence of players being strangled by headscarves in the past (Hamzeh 2015, 526). In April 2010, the Iranian youth football team was banned from the Junior Olympics because Iran required them to wear the hijab. Eventually, after a series of protests, the

organization allowed them to play with caps instead of headscarves. The following year, the FIFA referee at the Iran-Jordan game claimed that the Iranian team was violating the no headgear rule because the uniform included a white headpiece. Because the match was a qualifier for the upcoming Olympics, the team was also disqualified from the 2012 Olympics in London. Additionally, the Jordanian national team also included three major players who covered their heads. According to a series of interviews of the players, the game was humiliating, and several noted that FIFA was uncooperative before the game. After news of the match spread, many started campaigning for the inclusion of Muslim head coverings, despite the fact that FIFA outlaws any explicitly religious or political symbols on the field. Prince Ali Bin Al-Hussein quickly joined the fight and reconfigured the hijab to be a cultural symbol rather than a religiopolitical one. FIFA capitulated in July 2012 and temporarily suspended the hijab ban until further research could guarantee safety. The ban was fully redacted in 2014 (Hamzeh 2015, Prouse 2013).

This situation was far from simple. The events that followed the controversial game shed light on several underlying social problems. The first and most transparent was the media coverage of the event. Unsurprisingly, the Western media took an anti-hijab view of the event. Alternatively, the Iranian media posed FIFA as imperial (Hamzeh 2015, 520). This bias was not totally unfounded, as Prouse and Hamzeh have both argued. FIFA is the overarching deity in the world of football. Within the international governance lies the law-making body called IFAB. IFAB is composed of eight members, four of whom represent the four British football associations (Prouse 2013, 27). Even though FIFA caters to millions of players worldwide, the rules it must enforce have traditionally been created by Westerners. FIFA's positionality of ensuring a safe game is an output of post-colonialism disguised as true concern and compromise.



First, FIFA and IFAB are dominated by white men and Britain is considered to be the owners of football. The West has also historically viewed Muslim women as helpless and oppressed and has associated the headscarf with a patriarchal society. As a result of years of colonization and attempts to “save” Muslim women from oppression, governing organizations such as FIFA and IFAB continue the legacy of protecting Muslim women from Muslim men. Regardless of what Muslim athletes wanted, FIFA deigned to choose what was safe or not.

This brings up another point of contention in which Muslim athletes were not satisfied, patriarchal social standards. These athletes were not silent after the botched Iran-Jordan game. Many others united with the Iranian team (the Jordanian team especially) and fought for the hijab ban to be repealed. However, at the end of the day, those credited with the success of the repeal were men. The most media-popular advocate was Jordanian Prince Ali Bin Al-Hussein. He was considered the champion of women’s rights and held the influential position of a vice president on the FIFA Congress. Part of this focus was the fact that he was such an influential person who quickly advocated for the athletes. However, these female athletes who also fought hard for their rights were put on the back burner and expected to be grateful that they had a hero (Prouse 2013, 22).

The pressure facing Muslim women athletes to conform to standards set by sports associations is matched by another pressure from within their families or societies - or their own religious beliefs - to maintain certain standards of modesty. In Iran, women must be dressed appropriately in order to leave the house. Their apparel severely limits their options for playing sports and doing other physical activities. For those not interested in competing nationally, adhering to sports federation regulations is not a problem. For those interesting in competing on an international stage, sharia as interpreted by the Iranian government creates several problems.

As discussed, most federations do not allow modest apparel. Additionally, most sporting events are open to both sexes, so competing in a women-only environment where the dress code does not apply is not an option. Swimmers also face additional scrutiny. Najla Al Jeraiwi bought a stock pile of body suits that would allow her to practice her swimming. The problem was that the body suit was banned from world competition (Culpepper 2016). Many women complain that the burkini, a modest version of a bathing suit, is too bulky and heavy to compete in (Harkness 2011, 65). Faye Sultan, an Olympic swimmer, tried to compete in Kuwait but officials shut down the co-ed competition before it began. When she finally obtained permission to practice in the Olympic-sized pool with the men's team, onlookers were at first disapproving (Culpepper 2016). When she competed in the 2010 Asian Games, Mohammed Madouh, a teammate, "wearied of hearing Kuwaiti officials from various sports bemoan Sultan competing 'in a bikini'" (Culpepper 2016) because she wore the international standard swimsuit.

On top of pressure to maintain their faith, women face additional scrutiny from families. As Alamri explains, "According to Islamic rules and practice, males and females are not permitted to intermingle, date, touch, or have intimate relationships or sexual intercourse" with the opposite sex (2013, 425). Modesty is a large component of keeping the honor of the family, and when a woman interacts with the opposite sex more than necessary, she could bring dishonor to the entire family. As a result, "most Muslim families also feel that their daughters should not mix with male students" (425), especially when it comes to sports. When faced with pressures from the West to disregard Islam's modesty values and from Islam's expectations of modesty, female Muslim athletes find themselves in a lose-lose situation.

As dismal as the situation may seem, many female Muslim athletes have succeeded in playing the sports they love. Take Nada and Najla Al Jeraiwi, for example. The two sisters live in Mishref, Kuwait, and are devoted triathlon competitors. The two wear hijabs under their helmets for the bicycle portion and body suits for the swimming portion. Sarah Attar, a Californian runner, began to train in an abaya as an added obstacle after getting used to it while visiting Saudi Arabia (Culpepper 2016). According to Attar, "It's not the abaya itself is the obstacle, but just making one that's easier to run in" (Culpepper 2016). Rather than choosing a lighter form of dress, she would be more open to a lighter style of abaya. Ibtihaj Muhammed, the US Olympic medalist, chose fencing because it allowed her to compete with the hijab (Alvarez 2017). In Iran, participation in sports has been steadily on the rise. The government has encouraged its citizens to participate in physical activity as a way to be more faithful. Women are able to participate in sports in public that adhere to the dress code; for example, skiing, hiking, jogging, and tennis. If women do not wish to be hindered by the dress code, they may participate in women-only rooms and gyms, or at home (Pfister 2004, 215). In countries where veiling is optional, such as Jordan, athletes may choose to what level they would like to compete. If they are uncomfortable competing in front of men or do not want to dress immodestly to compete internationally, individuals may opt out of official matches or coed events (Harkness 2011, 65).

Muslim women have also made their own way in terms of empowerment and combatting governing associations. They have demonstrated time and again that men do not need to save them. When Pakistani weightlifter Kulsoom Abdullah tried to compete, the US weightlifting organization would not allow her modest outfit to replace a singlet. In response, Abdullah brought the issue to the media in a press release, highlighting the discriminatory act. By doing so

she forced the organization to allow her to compete (Alvarez 2017). Najla Al Jeraiwi eventually received a trisuit from a Spanish company—an Islam-approved competition-standard suit that improved her swim time by 14 seconds. The president of the International Triathlon Union, Marisol Casado, noted that the movement to allow hijab in competition was coming from Iranian women (Culpepper 2016). Cindy van den Bremen designed one of the first sport hijabs and now ships to over 15 countries. According to *Rolling Stone*, “Nike recently announced plans to debut a “Pro Hijab” for Muslim women who compete” (Alvarez 2017). Zahra Lari of the United Arab Emirates successfully competed in hijab at a figure skating competition in Italy. Faye Sultan trained alone for eight years because she could not share the Olympic-sized pool with the boy’s team in Kuwait, before finally receiving permission to practice in the same pool. At first it caused ripples, but eventually caused a shift in general opinion. In response to the lack of opportunities for Iranian women on the international scale, Iran created the Muslim Women’s Games in 1993. Barring men from viewing the events, women were able to compete in usual sports attire. The Games increased in popularity from 1993 to 1997 and again in 2001. Competitors arrived from across the world, including England (Pfister 2004, 217).

The fight is far from over. Female athletes continue to advocate for their rights on and off the field. Basketball players have also petitioned to remove the FIBA hijab ban. Jewish and Sikh women who choose to cover their heads for religious reasons have also joined the fight, as the ban also applies to them. Kulsoom Abdullah noted that “It was not until the Sydney Olympics in 2000, that women first participated in weightlifting” (Alvarez 2017). Evidently, the laws of the sport will continue to change as the sport gains popularity among women worldwide. The triathlon sisters have pointed out the closing of generational gaps: their grandmothers never left the house, whereas their mother’s generation began attending university. Now women in Kuwait

have breached sports. Najla actively helps children learn active and healthy lifestyles at her job. For swimmer Faye Sultan, despite the controversy around every decision she made, “there’s been a real shift in people’s attitude, and the number of women participating is off the charts” (Culpepper 2016). According to her father, “the Elite Swim Team in Kuwait has 850 members, about 400 female” (Culpepper 2016). Ibtihaj Muhammad made history as the first Muslim-American Olympic medalist in 2016. All these women have begun to pave the way for the normalization of Muslim women in sports. The rest of the world has begun to catch on, and hopefully the new release of a Muslim Barbie will only be the start of a new trend of compromise between Islam and the West.

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