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Muslim female athletes in sports and dress code: major obstacle in international competitions

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Abstract

Sport and physical activities in Muslim nations are believed to be male dominated institution and girls often confronted with considerable challenges, deprived them from taking part in International competitions and Olympics Games. Prohibition is mainly because of dress code and some restrictions laid down in religion, for which Muslim nations don't allow their girls to compete in International and Olympic games. Under these alarming conditions attempt has been made to address those issues faced by Muslim girls in sports competitions and to find out the middle course acceptable to western and Muslim nations' sports organizations influencing governments to encourage girls' participation in International sports competitions. In near future, it is hoped that scholars will conduct further research on this important topic. It is just an initial opening of this difficult and delicate subject to elaborate it for the convenience both conflicting nations world over.

Keywords: Sports, Dress code, International competitions

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

This study was carried out through survey, interview, video conference and adopting descriptive research method among Muslim girls based on their experiences encountered to them while taking active part in competitive sports and undertaking physical activities in schools and colleges practiced in a conservative environment dominated by rigid religious leadership and to determine the percentage of girl's participation in sports and other physical activities. A modified outdoor games assessment questionnaire (ODGAQ) annexure-I and 18-points questionnaire on the perception of Muslim athletes regarding dress code at international competitions were developed to survey Muslim athletes determining their involvement in physical activities. The data was collected from 400 female athletes selected (n=100) each from capital cities of Lahore (Punjab), Karachi (Sindh), Peshawar (Khyber-Pakhtoonkhua) and Quetta (Baluchistan). Four provincial head quarter administering questionnaires and interviews conducted randomly from female athletes who participated in their high schools and colleges in the mentioned capitol cities of provinces in Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

In tradition bound societies of Muslim world, most of the girls express immense importance to the ways in which they structured and moved toward their life, following religious beliefs and values, as to them it is the fundamental aspect of their identity, and approach to

sports and other activities often determined on religious, cultural and ethnic factors. Islam promotes good quality health and acquiring fitness encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles.

However, there are some religious aspects which discourage the girls taking part in sports competitions publicly and describe how sports can be practiced maintaining the sanctity of girls as preached by religious leaders of the nation, following their faith, not engaged in mixed gender sports and the environment to follow dress code, which ask for covering the body structure of girls, which require immediate consideration for change to satisfy both western and Muslim world during international sports competitions.

Due to misinterpretations of religion and lack of awareness on religious matters, many Muslim girls have been prevented to participate in sports competitions. One of the leading apprehensions for taking part in competitive sports is they hesitate from a fear of discrimination may face negative attitudes from the society and religious leaders in relation to their beliefs and cultural needs prevalent in the society.

The leading social scientists, Bailey, Morley & Dismore (2009) have rightly discussed which features specific characteristic of girls' development, describing physical reasons why children like or dislike physical education and sports considering their physical condition, fitness and movement skills related to personal interactions, social behaviors and social development, such as, children's self-perception of intention to compete, cooperate with a teacher, mix up with other learners, meet with friends, playing with teammates, and adequately meet with emotional responses concerning attitudes, self-esteem, anxiety, stress and other mental state of affairs such as depression and happiness. In the emotional domain reflecting relaxation, expression of one's emotions, boredom, feel better, lifestyle domain reflects the children's perceptions regarding opportunities to engage in physical activities and emphasizes general lifestyle dispositions.

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Dress code

Undoubtedly, sports play an important role in the lives of many girls in Muslim countries, from rowing and football in Iran, to sprinting in Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco and Pakistan, and basketball in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, few girls are able to take their enthusiasm for sports to the top level due to legal prohibitions, social stigmas, or girls having limited opportunity to engage in sports competitions. In some of the Muslim countries even watching live competitive sports is forbidden for women and not allows girls' to participate in the Olympic Games, have received heavily criticism for its discriminatory policies against women athletes. Some years ago, their Ministry of Education rejected proposals to introduce physical education for girls in the school system; and girls were not allowed to join gyms unless they cater specifically for them, which are very few and far away from schools and homes. In these societies girls were also banned to visit sports stadiums to cheer on their favorite teams.

Many conservative Muslim leaders advocate women's participation in sports. Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, has been a strong proponent of girls' sports in Iran. As a result of her efforts, the first Islamic Women's Games were launched in 1993. Since then it is organized regularly in Iran. She also promoted women's sports leagues and took initiative to develop more sports activities and fitness centers in Iran. Girls can still only pursue sports in the absence of men or when wearing hijab (head covering), or other forms of wearing dresses suitable to Muslim fraternity. In 2009, Iran Football Women Team visited Pakistan to participate at Women Football Championship; followed Islamic dress code wearing hijab used full sleeves long shirts fully covered body and performed exceedingly well by winning the championship. This provides evidence that covered dress is not the hindrance in sports competitions.

Sports facilities for individual and team sport do not always appreciate the need for modest dress. As per Olympic Dress Code, girls often wear western dresses, which are the major hindrance for Muslim girls to wear it publicly before male audience. This is the main reason that majority of the Muslim nations do not participate in International and Olympic games. In this connection, it is proposed that the dress in sports competition to Muslim female athletes may be allowed which may be suitable to them according to their norms, values and religion and also acceptable to Olympics Games and International Organizations.

It is unfortunate to observe that Muslim nations at international competitions have produced very few known international female athletes in the past and present. The visibility of Euro American girls participating in sport help to break barriers and make the environment more comfortable for female athletes. In recent years Muslim girls like Leila of Qatar, Gold Medalist of Commonwealth Games held in London and Naseem Hameed Siddiqi of Pakistan, the Gold Medallist of South Asian Games held at Dacca emerged as the role models for Muslim girls in Track & Field events. In the past years many Muslim women had excelled extremely well and won Gold Medals for their nations in various International and Olympics games, such as LAILA ALI of USA daughter of the legendary Muhammad Ali is a former professional boxer who retired with a 24-0 record. She has held three world titles and has made many television appearances, wrote a self-help book and has a line of make-up and beauty products, HASSIBA BOULMERKA of ALGERIA won her country its first Olympic gold medal, in 1500mt. at Barcelona in 1992. She was the second Muslim woman ever to win

an Olympic gold, after Nawal el Moutakawel. RANIA EL WANI, Swimmer of EGYPT has participated in three Olympics. She won medals at the 1990 African Championships, also in 1991, 1995 and 1999 African Games. ROQAYA AL GASSRA of BAHRAIN won a gold medal in the 200m sprint and a bronze in the 100m at the 2006 Asian Games in Doha. She has also won medals at the Asian Indoor and Arabian championships. She was the first female athlete to run in a hijab at the 2004 Olympics, and was the flag bearer for Bahrain at the 2008 Olympics. KIRAN KHAN of PAKISTAN, a record-holding swimmer has represented her country at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and at Asian and Commonwealth Games. SHEIKHA LATIFA BINT AHMED AL MAKTOUM of UAE having won numerous medals at regional equestrian championships, she competed in the 2008 Olympics and before that won a team bronze medal at the 2006 Doha Asian Games. More recently she won an individual silver medal at the 2010 Asian Games. SHEIKHA MAITHA BINT MOHAMMED BIN RASHID AL MAKTOUM of UAE, a martial arts champion won the +60kg karate silver medal at the 2006 Doha Asian Games. She was a taekwondo competitor at the 2008 Olympics, and was the first Gulf woman to carry her nation's flag at the Olympics. NAWAL EL MOUTAKAWEL of MOROCCO won the 400m hurdles race in 1984 in Los Angeles, becoming the first Muslim woman to earn a gold medal at the Olympic Games. She was also the first Muslim woman elected to the International Olympic Committee in 1997. She won the Laureus Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. RUBAB RAZA of PAKISTAN was her country's first female Olympic swimmer, competing at the age of 13 in the 50m freestyle at the 2004 Athens Games. She won two silver medals and one bronze at the 2004 Islamabad South Asian Games. She is Pakistan's youngest Olympian. GHADA SHOUBA of SYRIA won a gold medal at the 1996 Olympics at Atlanta in the heptathlon and former basketball player also won medals at several Asian and World Games over the years.

DISCUSSION

Most of the Islamic scholars describe religion as the reason for banning girls' participation in sports competitions for its complexes and complications. In fact many Muslim countries do permit female athletes, with various degrees of restrictions on dress codes and what events are open to girls in sports. Indeed, many Muslim countries not allow female participation in competitive sports. The girls from Tunisia, for example, well represented at the recent Olympic Games, competing in track-and-field, canoeing, fencing, judo, table tennis, tennis, taekwondo and wrestling. Indonesia has sent 161 men and 68 women to 12 summer Games. Morocco, deserves praise for sending 11 women out of their 38-member delegation, Pakistan sent 3 girl-Athletes along with small male contingent at Beijing Olympics last year.

Every citizen firmly believes in the benefits derived enormously from sports, which parallels with universal concept of quality health, self-confidence, forward to success and overall happiness of the individuals. It doesn't matter what an athlete wears to play but what benefits she gets from the sporting experience. United States struggled for decades to provide women with equal opportunity in sporting events, and effectively overcome the prejudices and extremist discrimination that kept women's sports exposed in the world community to deal with in modern times. In order to maintain unity and deliver possible humanity matters world over, 21st century is believed to be the excellent period to unveil the

myths and issues concerning dignity of girls' participation in sports competitions especially Muslim nations' world over.

Improvement in health

In the ethnic minority communities of UK, it is found that their participation is well below the national average as 12.5% of Asian women do enough exercise each week to benefit their health compared to 18.8% of White women (3 x 30) minutes as mentioned in Active People Survey 2007. This clearly demonstrates a need for specific interventions to be developed to ensure that Muslim women specifically have the opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity, and also boost associated health benefits from sports and other physical movements.

In addition, sports organizers consider how to design programs in order to appeal Muslim girls and the attitudes of girls towards sport and physical activity, which requires increasing the number of participation at international competitions and Olympic Games. The Comparisons between Muslim girls' attitudes towards sport in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have provided interesting results. In traditional Muslim societies attitudes actually are far more positive towards physical activity and sports than in the UK. Young Muslim girls belong to conservative families in UK seem to have negative views regarding teaching physical education and gender courses in schools.

Several studies under taken help to demonstrate that young Muslim girl's attitudes towards sport and fitness activities in the UK heavily influence the way activities are delivered; considering whether due regard is given to cultural sensitivities prevalent in the society. Islam promotes quality health and fitness and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain healthy lifestyles. Muslim girl's attitude towards sports is certainly affected because of having very few popular role models in participating Muslim nations at International competitions.

The studies carried by the group of students of the Centre for Physical Education, Health & Sports Science, University of Sindh, Jamshoro in March, 2011 revealed extensive parental influence on girls' involvement in sport and over their lives as it alleviate the extent to which young Muslim girls find the way between their family identity and the experiences they are exposed to in daily life. The sports organizers need to consider the importance of obtaining family permission for girls' participation when developing programs of sports and physical activities for them.

Separate prayer and wash rooms

In addition, separate facilities also essentially required such as need to provide clean water available to them and thoroughly flush after using the WC. And the provision of a prayer room or quiet area is required as most Muslim girls observe prayer during specified times in the day. Further, following necessary issues is resolved before competitions for providing convenient environment to female participants, such as:

- Make sure the changing rooms, showering and WC facilities are safe and security arrangements and prevalent environmental conditions are not overlooked.
- Sign plates are placed on doors when female sessions are in practice.

- If female competitors object cameras should be turned off when sessions take place.
- Ensure that female staff is on duty and female lifeguards or security guards are provided to female competitors.

Female officials / organizers and coaches

The real threat to the female participation occurs from not having female coaches and organizers in the Islamic nations. In the absence of female officials the parents usually reluctant to permit or do not allow their girls to participate in sports competitions in fully male dominated environment. Female should be trained as an official, organizers and coaches so that participation may be increased at national and international levels.

Parental approval and environmental conditions

It is very important for young girls whose parents need to understand the benefits of sports allowing them to participate in and out of school activities and feel comfortable ensuring that the environment is safe for physical activities and sports. The safety of the girl participants is important to prevent them from racially or ethnically motivated incidents; security measures are necessary to provide safety in stadiums, gyms and playing grounds during coaching & training, and competitions.

Transport facility

It is appropriate for girls to access services locally as most of the participants may not have access to transport and reluctant to use public vehicles to undertake training and coaching in the evening as parents may have reservations and stop their girls to send them to Gymnasiums and playing grounds. The schools, colleges and other institutions participating in sports competitions may provide convenient transport facility to female competitors.

Designing programs for muslim girls

Sport and physical activity providers need to respect religious difference, which is important for Muslim athletes as it is often overlooked by the organizers and discriminate against on the pretext of religion and beliefs as religious and cultural barriers make it difficult for Muslim athletes to participate in sports competitions as girls often lacking understanding of their necessary requirement around clothing privacy, not allowing male members in restricted playing area and prohibit girls dressing and wash rooms.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded from discussion that sports play important role in the lives of many girls in Muslim nations participating from rowing and football in Iran, to sprinting in Bahrain, Qatar, Pakistan, Morocco, and basketball in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, very few girls are able to take their enthusiasm for sports to the top level due to legal prohibitions, social stigmas and limited opportunities available in the society. In some countries, even watching live competitive sports is forbidden for girls. Muslim girls and participation in competitive sports is banned in some of the Muslim nations due to their religious beliefs, which is believed violating Islamic teachings; although it also firmly

believes in promoting quality health for male as well as female members of the society. The girls may participate in sports competitions with condition to observe Islamic teachings acceptable to learned religious leadership specially wearing dress/ costume such as normal Track Suite with long bottom, covering head, loose shirts covering their hips during training and coaching, and competitions, not mix up with boys after contest is over. If followed, there would be favorable chances of acceptance to all concerned parties i.e. girl-athletes, organizers, parents and religious leaders as

it almost completes all necessary requirements of Islamic teachings that restrict girls from taking active part in sports competitions, providing separate facilities of gymnasiums and playing grounds for girls' sports coaching and competitions, and as compared to rigid policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the position of Pakistan is slightly liberal participating in national and international competitions. But situation in Khyber-Pakhtukhuwa and Baluchistan is different where 85% population of Peshawar city and 82% of Quetta city are reluctant to allow their girls to participate in sports competitions.

(Annexure-1)

Out door games assessment questionnaire (ODGAQ) on Muslim female athlete in sports competitions

Sr. No	Questions	Sindh Province (Karachi City)			Punjab Province (Lahore City)			KPK Province (Peshawar City)			Balochistan Province (Quetta City)		
		Agree	Not agree	Un-certain	Agree	Not agree	Un-certain	Agree	Not agree	Un-certain	Agree	Not agree	Un-certain
1	To take part in outdoor games is physically harmful for female students	10	88	02	07	91	02	25	70	05	35	59	06
2	Religion does not allow female students to take part in outdoor games.	20	70	10	06	90	04	53	22	25	49	31	20
3	Outdoor games have adverse impact on femininity of female students	46	40	34	09	79	12	21	33	46	43	49	08
4	Sports girls should be brought up in a societal tradition to become a good house wife	40	50	10	55	25	20	83	09	08	87	03	10
5	Extensive physical exercises have adverse impact on delicate female organs in the long run	40	60	10	11	81	08	77	19	04	73	11	16
6	Girl's participation in out door games is considered to be necessary for physical fitness.	65	25	10	89	02	09	35	49	16	29	35	36
7	Participation in out door games makes un-attractive and not good-looking.	10	70	20	23	70	07	49	31	20	67	09	24
8	Girl's participation in out door games makes them agile and active.	72	24	04	88	10	02	77	08	15	69	11	20
9	Regular exercise can provide opportunity for physical fitness.	78	15	13	90	08	02	55	15	30	65	15	20
10	Girls from subcontinent and middle east nations usually avoid out door sports competitions in hot summer season.	51	30	19	68	12	20	78	12	10	69	19	12
11	Euro-American and Asian nations have summer weather prefer out door sports competitions.	80	18	02	70	20	10	63	27	10	71	09	20

Result indicates that the Karachi and Lahore cities have almost similar response on outdoor games assessment questionnaire where as Peshawar and Quetta cities have the different opinion. However, athletes have shown their positive approach towards healthy activities.

(Annexure-2)

Questionnaire on the perception of Muslim female athlete in sports competition regarding dress code

Sr. No	Questions	Sindh Province (Karachi City)			Punjab Province (Lahore City)			KPK Province (Peshawar City)			Balochistan Province (Quetta City)		
		Agree %	Not agree %	Un-certain %	Agree %	Not agree %	Un-certain %	Agree %	Not agree %	Un-certain %	Agree %	Not agree %	Un-certain %
01	Parents permit to participate in sports competitions and other physical activities.	70	25	05	85	10	05	40	58	02	31	50	19
02	Teachers' support taking part in sports competitions and other physical activities.	63	30	07	68	22	08	45	35	20	22	30	48
03	Neighbors and relatives support girls towards physical activities and sports competitions	59	31	10	70	23	07	42	18	40	25	40	35
04	Religious leaders dislike girls' participation in competitive sports and other physical activities.	75	20	05	60	21	19	90	10	0	85	15	0
05	Friends and Peers encourage girls' sports competitions and physical activities	77	20	03	80	15	05	50	30	20	35	45	20
06	Teachers and parents like to have separate Gyms and playing fields for girls.	53	40	07	45	55	0	87	03	10	89	11	0
07	Would you like to prefer Hijab / cover head while participating in sports?	69	21	10	72	18	10	91	09	0	93	04	03
08	Female sports should be separately organized	75	20	05	79	10	11	98	02	0	99	01	0

	from male sports.												
09	Male family members have been participating in sports competitions during school/ college days	76	21	03	80	15	05	55	35	10	63	17	20
10	Do you think that banning Hijab during competitive sports is discrimination against Muslim female athletes / undemocratic?	89	04	07	93	04	03	97	03	0	99	01	0
11	Do you think attitude of the female trainees with male coach is positive and responsible?	75	20	05	77	13	10	43	37	30	53	43	04
12	The attitude and behavior of the male coach is impressive and democratic to trainees.	81	09	10	79	12	09	49	31	20	57	13	30
13	Attitude and approach of male members of the family is favorable.	72	18	10	75	16	09	35	55	10	31	59	10
14	Hijab does not effect on sports performance.	86	12	02	89	09	02	98	02	0	99	01	0
15	Do you think dress which is covered your body along with Hijab should be recognized internationally for Muslim female athletes?	93	04	03	91	05	04	99	01	0	97	02	01
16	Do you think that by covering your body and taking hijab there would be less resistance to your participation in sports from families?	85	05	10	89	06	05	98	01	01	91	02	07
17	There should be separate / special dress code for Muslim female athletes during international sports competitions.	81	09	10	79	08	13	97	01	02	93	03	04
18	Special sports dress code should be designed by international authorities for Muslim Female Athlete which may not hinder sports performance and not violating Islamic values.	79	03	18	73	07	20	97	02	01	99	01	0

Table shows that the all four capital cities given their highest score on the issue have normally preferred Hijab during competitions and are of the opinion that separate sports should be organized for female athletes and on point-14 they have expressed for combined approach and feel that performance is not effected while wearing hijab, on point 15 again the respondent have the same opinion and on point 18 the athletes desired that dress code should be designed by international authorities which may not hinder sports activities and Islamic values.

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