How is sport employed as a vehicle for redefining gender identity in Islamic Societies

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9826 words
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The attached essay uses as its founding premise the notion that sport can be a liberator in oppressed societies. Although sport and athletics have historically been a male oriented domain, the increase in female participation within certain societies where the gender divide is entrenched in what is perceived as outdated dogma by Western standards, has led to a new enthusiasm among women to attempt to narrow the gender gap that exists in their societies. There is some evidence that women living in closed societies whose attitude to sports and participation therein is positive, carry on to achieve other goals outside the sporting arena.
Introduction

Sport has long provided the potential to break down barriers. It is perhaps a measure of developed societies that the gap between the achievements of the men and women in competitive sport is a constantly narrowing one. This ideal of sport as a liberator is taken for granted in some societies, but in others is occasionally used as a repressive tool. This paper will focus on the Islamic world, where women in sport is a concept which remains suppressed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the region.

August 2009 marked a victory for many female athletes around the world as female boxing was finally accepted as an Olympic Sport. Furthermore, the regulatory head guard meant that Muslim women could participate while abiding by religious dress requirements. Boxing is one of the many sports that Muslim women are now partaking in, enabling them to recreate or rewrite certain gender boundary lines. By charting the advances of Muslim women’s participation in sport, this paper will seek to review the key concerns facing a Muslim woman’s involvement in sport and the ways in which they use their position as a sportsperson to manipulate the rules of society and to rewrite predetermined gender boundaries. Extensive variation across the Islamic world and its Diasporas will provide the necessary comparisons allowing for a rich analysis of the local and global aspects that either hinder or encourage women. Particular attention will be given to international sporting bodies such as FIFA (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association) and the IOC (International Olympic Committee) that have provided unrivalled levels of support.
Many of the women in this study see themselves, or are seen as being ‘on the margins of mainstream sport’ (Hargreaves: 2000). This paper seeks to explore how these women view themselves and consequently create personal and collective identities through sports, thus enabling them to reconstruct certain boundaries and recreate or even abandon certain loyalties. The subjects of this study are women who have been active agents (Hargreaves: 2000) in navigating around various social and religious fences and manipulating specific discriminations in order to attain their current position, whether that means redefining an Islamic dress code or demarcating new sports activities in which women are allowed to partake.

Women are gradually carving out prospects and opportunities in the sporting world despite the limitations of Islam. However, as the levels of both training and instruction are improving, women are finding it increasingly difficult to balance both their religion and their identity within the world of sport. The predicament lies in the numerous, valid, ways in which the Quran can be interpreted. A specific reading can, on the one hand, permit Muslim women to participate in global competitions against athletes from all over the world. On the other hand, however, it can limit them to taking part in single sex competitions only with no men present enabling these women to abide fully by their version of Islam. (Hargreaves: 2000)

Sexual segregation in sport can, nonetheless, have a positive outcome. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has studied the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin tribe in Egypt whose women have much greater levels of freedom arising out of the separation of male and female worlds. Abu-
Lughod believes this ‘allows for the development of social responsibility.’ (Abu-Lughod: 1985) The women’s community is run virtually independently from the larger community; the women manage their daily chores and run their households with little or no intervention from the men. Most importantly it is the women within these communities who are honoured with passing on the lessons of morality and decency to the younger women, thus giving them a sense of agency. By contributing substantially to the conservation of cultural values the “women can come to see themselves as responsible moral beings and not powerless pawns whose only hope for gain lies in the manipulation and subversion”. (Abu-Lughod: 1985)

This paper examines the evidence and literature used, and will outline the key questions and suppositions provoked by this topic. There is not a vast amount of literature readily available on the subject of Muslim women participating in sport, and large amounts of what has been written is not in widespread publication. Indeed, it was only in July 2010 that the first book dedicated entirely to the subject (Muslim Women and Sport) was published. The book provides a wide range of accounts stretching from the Muslim Diaspora in Germany to narratives of female athletes in Iran, and challenges many of the base stereotypes concerning the frontier between East and West, Islam and Christianity. Jennifer Hargreaves is another pioneer in the field who offers an impressive insight into the so-called ‘marginalised’ groups of females who participate in sport, ranging from the Australian Aboriginals to the Muslim women in the Middle East. The internet is another source of considerable importance providing journalistic accounts and access not only to local and national news stations, but also global and international sites, which may offer very varied views on the same topics. A critical aspect is that women’s sport receives much less media coverage than men’s, which is not unique to the Islamic world. It is, however, heightened in the Muslim world where a woman cannot be televised unless she is wearing the correct dress.
The aim of this study is to answer the stereotypical questions that the issue of Muslim women partaking in sports raises. Can a Muslim woman participate in sport? Can she take an active role? How does Islamic dress affect her performance? How does sport affect these women? Does it have a positive effect on their lives? This paper seeks to answer these first by looking at the relationship between sports and national identity and the ways in which these women, who are perhaps defined by others as living on the margins of society, seek to use sport to carve out an identity. The second section of this paper looks at the rapport between gender identity and sport, and the influences played by religion, history and the media.

Collecting accurate data on the numbers of Muslim women participating in sport is extremely difficult, considering many women are not at liberty to openly discuss their status as sports players. The major obstacles faced by Muslim women wishing to take part in sport are not massively different from those faced by women everywhere. The main hindrances are: dress code (certain sports require uniforms that could be deemed immodest); facilities (there must be a prayer room accessible for those Muslim women who observe prayer times; parental approval (many of the Muslim women who have succeeded in the sporting world have done so on account of their parents support); lack of sexually segregated arenas; lack of role models; traditionalist views (namely that a woman’s job is within the home looking after children) and finally a lack of sporting information made available to women serves as a huge impediment to women’s access, since they remain ignorant of the available choices. (Sporting Equals: Promoting ethnic diversity across sport and physical activity. Muslim Women and Sport.) Fortunately, there has recently been an increase in women’s employment within the sporting sector, permitting them to break down certain barriers and gain access to the community via slightly different methods.
It is of note that the majority, if not all, of the women in this study are urban dwellers of the middle and upper classes. These women generally live in circles where acceptance of female athletes is perhaps slightly higher than lower classes or those living in rural areas. Many societies do not consider sporting activities to be of much importance. Rather than being seen as a beneficial pastime for the body and the mind, sporting activities are regarded as being unimportant and rather low ranking hobbies. Ironically, sports can also be judged as lavish pursuits set aside only for those who can afford it since admission into sports clubs can often be expensive. Finally there is the notion that sport may seem like a trivial pursuit for some countries where “there is a risk to personal safety, or where poverty and illiteracy are widespread.” (Al-Sinani, Yousra & Benn, Tansin & Jawad Haifa: 2010)
Collective Identity

Taking part in a sports team or even competing in an individual sport can offer an individual a sense of identity that is different from their everyday persona. It can provide them with a newfound sense of agency and autonomy. International sports bodies such as the IOC or FIFA encourage the creation of national identity through sporting events. This section seeks to examine the notion of a collective or national identity formed around sports and the ways in which these new found identities can generate agency amongst groups of people who see themselves, or who are seen, as living on the margins of society. Audience participation also plays an important role since sport has the power to instil national pride in those who are watching.

How have other marginalised sports teams opened up the gates for Muslim women’s participation in sport? How do women recognise themselves and how do they create personal and/or group identities through sport? Can women achieve a sense of national identity through sport or is this reserved only for men? In order to consider women’s sense of identity in connection with the nation, it is also important to look at men’s sense of national identity that is formed whilst doing sports, of which there is a much wider range of literature.

Sociologist Tamir Sorek has studied the ethno-national conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians on the football field and in the boxing ring. He has examined the ways in which these young men use sport as a means to demonstrate masculinity and to assert their identity. He believes that sports “provide members of national minorities, and especially men, the opportunity to boost their national and masculine pride.” (Sorek: 2009) He makes special
reference to the Arab Israelis who view the boxing ring as a way of restoring their emasculated image, by allowing them to take part in an aggressive and competitive endeavour that does not involve the state in any way. Sorek’s account of young males caught up in the conflict and the ways in which they deal with their aggression is a multi-faceted report. He refers to sports as being ‘ethnically blind’, a notion that could perhaps be applied to the Muslim women who wish to take part in sporting activities. A woman’s relationship with the nation, however, is not as straightforward. The role played by women with regards to nationalism is intricate and paradoxical. Deniz Kandiyoti states that nationalist movements request women’s contribution to communal life by ‘interpellating them as ‘national’ actors, mothers, educators, workers and even fighters.’(Kandiyoti: 1996) Conversely it is also the same nationalist movement who will restate the culturally acceptable border lines that women cannot cross. The image of the woman has almost become synonymous with the home and therefore with the nation. However, the women in this study are striving to try and achieve a national identity independent of this stereotype.

Sociologist Kristin Walseth carried out her field work amongst the Muslim Pakistani Diaspora in Oslo. She dwelt extensively on her notion of ‘imagined communities’ drawn up amongst the youth population, a community greatly facilitated through sports (Walseth: 2006). Walseth suggests that diverse notions of community and belonging can be produced through sport, and she explores a continuum ranging from the idea of collective identity equated to belonging to an ‘imagined community’, to a more individualistic approach with focus on the comradeship within a sport group. Another convincing argument put across by Walseth is the notion of sport as a ‘place of refuge’ for the women. She uses the Foucoulidian
term ‘heteropia’\(^1\) to enforce the idea that the female Muslim Diaspora in Norway use sports in order to rewrite the rules of their everyday existence. Thus sport becomes a space within which they have greater levels of freedom and independence. Walseth is careful to remind us that there is no direct linear linkage between sports and the feeling of belonging or freedom; instead she is simply highlighting the positive aspect of physical activity. This concept of sport creating a sense of belonging amongst team mates and a ‘heteropia’ of sorts is reinforced by Loïc Wacquant who describes the gym in the Black ghetto of Chicago as “a relatively self-enclosed site for a *protected sociability* where one can find a respite from the pressures of the street and the ghetto, a world into which external events rarely penetrate and onto which they have little impact.” (Wacquant: 2006) Wacquant highlights how sport can offer a shelter from the outside world, a sanctuary from everyday life.

This theory of sport providing a ‘free space’ and sense of belonging amongst the participants has been developed by various charities including CPAU (Co-operation for Peace and Unity Afghanistan) which amongst many other things has developed a programme called Fighting for Peace, encouraging young Afghan girls to step into the boxing ring. The project is intended to further the rights of Afghan women through sports, particularly boxing. Boxing may seem like a strange choice of sport for a charity promoting peace building. However, the programme is not intended to encourage hostility amongst the women but rather conversely it

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\(^1\) Foucault explains that all spaces exists in a certain relation to each other and to the social structures of power, describing heterotopia as every schism between real and ideal social spaces. Although heterotopia exists in relation to social power, Foucault asserts that heterotopia is a kind of neutral zone beyond the dominion of conventional social structures of power and power relations. In other words, between real social and Utopian space lies heterotopia, a collective of material and conceptual social spaces that gerrymander around the jurisdictions of normal social structures of power (Foucault’s Heteropia: The “Other” Spaces Between What is Real and Utopian)
is employed to make these women feel empowered and self-assured. Boxing, of all sports, is the one which most strongly opposes the stereotypical image of the passive veiled Afghan woman as it is a “tough sport that requires physical and mental tenacity and the ring becomes a metaphor for the challenges faced by the women in their daily lives.”

Women have had to overcome many barriers to be accepted within the sporting world, particularly Muslim women who often find themselves facing a greater risk. Events organised for other groups of people who are sometimes deemed as ‘marginalised’, such as the Paralympics or the Visually Impaired football league may well have served as incentives for women who had previously considered themselves unable to enter the sporting world. The Homeless World Cup, for example, is a tournament held annually in an attempt to unite homeless people all over the world to ‘represent their country and change their lives forever.’ (http://www.homelessworldcup.org/) The impact has been tremendous with an incredible 73% of the people involved making significant changes to their lives. Events such as this give women the confidence necessary to strive ahead. The power that sports can provide is indisputable. Girls Kick It is a charity organisation based in Uganda that works with young women living in internally displaced persons camps. The war in Uganda has severely traumatised the population, and at present the women are not provided with many opportunities to take part in recreational activities. Girls Kick It endeavours to engage the local women in tackling major issues facing the Ugandan population such as HIV/AIDS, nutrition and peace building. ‘Girls Kick It puts programming first and utilises the power of sport to compliment ongoing efforts to train, educate, empower, and unite the people of Uganda.’ (http://www.girlskickit.org/)
Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of the former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, is a key figure in promoting Muslim women to take part in sports in Iran. She maintains that sport “gives us more confidence and improves our social skills. If we push against tradition in other sports, it will pave the way for reform in other areas.” (Hargreaves: 2000) In Iran, sport, namely football, has developed into a symbol for social change. Iranian women are using sport as a means to fight back, whether they themselves are playing football or simply watching. Babak Fozooni describes football as a “tool of resistance to the regime” (Fozooni: 2004) as it is perceived as a symbol of western culture. Football is just one of the many sports that Iranian women have become involved in. The list includes taekwondo, basketball and fencing and is constantly growing. Iranian women have to fight clerical resistance to obtain their freedom and this “struggle has fostered a combative collective identity that is jealously guarded by the Iranian women who see themselves as champions of freedom against Islamic tyranny.” (Fozooni: 2004) Fozooni also argues that for these women, being involved in a sports team provides the needed emotive nourishment which is often missing from the lives of these women who are limited in their daily existence by a fairly oppressive regime. Paradoxically, however, it is this very rigid regime that has also led to certain advances for female football players in Iran. The law stipulates complete segregation of the sexes which as a result makes space for women as coaches, referees and administrators and it also allows the players to wear less constrictive clothing as no men can be present.

Football is an immensely powerful and empowering tool in many countries; from building a national identity, to enabling peace building, to creating major icons. It is a universal sport and has the power to unite people living under all conditions. The beauty of the game is that
very little is required to play, thus allowing people everywhere to take part. It is increasingly used by numerous charities as a means of educating people. By involving people in a sport, they are not only taught how to interact with others, but such involvement can also lead to greater self confidence and a sense of self-empowerment particularly amongst women. Furthermore, as a spectator sport, football has left a huge imprint on a global scale, of which the World Cup is the pinnacle. This has allowed people from all ranks of society to celebrate and support national pride in unison.

The advance being made by women is sparring debates on their position within society. The traditional notion of the woman representing the home and embodying perfect national culture is making way for the newly educated woman who accordingly represents a scale of modernity. It must be noted that the majority of the women in this assessment are of the younger generation. However, when discussing ‘youth’ as a category it is important to avoid stereotypes and not to portray elders as ‘conservative’. The youth population is often viewed as ‘social shifters’ thus more likely to modify their outlook and opinions. This view does not approach youth as passive victims of a rigid regime, but rather as producers of cultural forms desperately seeking to recreate their identities and rewrite the rules of society. The youth are seen to be the most impressionable people in society. In Iran, for example, the youth have become a target for islamisation and are also viewed as an index of the success of the Islamic Republic. This very notion of youth as ‘social shifters’ has led to an increase in female participation in sports, amongst many other things, but it is also this very notion that instils fear of the system. Despite often being referred to as “builders of the future by the power elite, the young are also stigmatised and feared as ‘disruptive’ agents who are prone to radicalism and deviation.”(Bayet & Herrera 2010)
The concept of collective identity has been advanced by social anthropologist Oskar Verkaaik, who carried out his fieldwork with the youth in Pakistan. By researching the turbulent history of the Muhajir Qaumi Movement, one of the most significant religious nationalist movements in postcolonial South Asia, Verkaaik examines the link between the large scale ethnic rebellion and what he labels as “fun”. He believed that “‘fun’ gave the young party members and supporters a sense of agency that enabled them to identify with the movement... They felt like active participants in such activities rather than passive consumers or onlookers.” (Verkaaik: 2004) It is this notion of rebellion against authorities and doing it in conjunction with many other people of one’s age group that provides the young women in this study with the strength required to face the struggles with more zest. The collective identity created amongst Muslim women who wish to take part in sports, and are thus seen to be rebelling against the regime, can be linked to this same notion of ‘fun’ experienced by the Pakistani youth.
Body and Gender Identity

Sport is generally considered to be a masculine domain. This concept is not unique to the Middle East. Women everywhere have to conquer various obstructions in order to prove themselves worthy, whilst women in the Middle East have the added hurdle of religion. How do Muslim women negotiate the rulings of Islam on sport? What role does clothing play and is the fashion industry beginning to tailor to the needs of these women? How does media coverage affect these women? Does it facilitate things or hinder them? Are there certain sports deemed female appropriate? For Muslim women wishing to participate in sport the Quran is considered to be the marker of what is right and wrong, the measure of morality. However, the Quran can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways, all of which being perceived as valid. It is this delicate ambiguity of the Quran and the Quranic readings that allows people to manipulate and navigate their way around certain obstacles.

It is the woman’s body that is at the heart of the cultural dispute in Islam and Muslim women participating in sport epitomise this dispute. The contest over the female body lies within the Islamic concept of modesty. In theory, the notion of modesty concerns both men and women equally. However, in reality it has become a means to control the female body which has resulted in great emphasis being placed on the way a woman is dressed. Due to the importance placed on the female body and consequently traditional dress, in many countries the notion of women taking part in certain sports is considered to be conflicting with what Islam deems to be the correct vision of femininity. Gertrud Pfister draws attention to the notion of virginity and explores the idea that certain physical activities may damage the hymen, thus providing another motive for the anxieties which are often linked with women
taking part in sports. (Pfister: 2000) There are a small number of successful Muslim sportswomen. Although this number is increasing, those who have managed to succeed often find it very difficult to balance both sides of their identity: their Islamic morally pious identity and their identity as an athlete. Nawal El Moutawakel for example, a Moroccan runner, who was one of the very first Muslim women to win an Olympic medal, won huge appraise from the West and by more tolerant Muslims as a heroine who presented great possibilities for the female sex. In opposition to this, however, she was written off as corrupt and immoral by the more traditional Islamic communities. (Hargreaves: 2000) This is unfortunately a common battle faced by Muslim women wishing to participate in sports.

Islamic sporting events, where men and women are rigorously segregated, are held all over the Middle East. The easiest alternative for a Muslim woman who aspires to involve herself in a sport is by competing with female-only clubs. These events provide huge opportunities for many women and have also come to be seen as models for the progress of women’s sport, in addition to being celebrated as indications to the rest of the world that Islam is a ‘forward looking community that protects and nurtures its women.’ (Hargreaves: 2000) The concept of sexual segregation for sporting events has provided many women with greater opportunities, for they can play the game with much greater degrees of freedom.

The increasing globalisation of sport is perceived to be a menace to a variety of traditional values, from the demonstration of regional and nationwide cultural identities to the conventional portrayal of gender identities. Rod Brookes believes that “sport plays a key role in legitimising particular ideologies around masculinity and femininity that support the domination of women by men.” (Brookes: 2002) However, as women are gaining more
achievements in sport they are confronting these principles and navigating away from the restricted vision of male physical aptitude. This does not imply that discrimination between men and women within sport does not exist. The media plays a key role by focusing almost exclusively on male sports and leaving women’s sporting events almost marginalised. Under the assumption that “identification with role models in the media is likely to encourage children to participate, then girls are far less likely to feel encouraged, because they will encounter few role models.” (Brookes: 2002) The excessive exposure of sportmen in relation to the disproportionately low underexposure of sportswomen emphasises the notion that women in sport are infrequent.

Another facet brought to light by the media’s representation of sport is the emphasis that certain sports are concurrent with a certain gender, creating an ideological division between sports deemed as female compatible and those that are considered to be exclusively for men. Sports which are said to be suitable for women are typically not team sports. They are sports where the required features are usually style or grace, such as tennis or ice skating where there is no physical contact and women can sustain their ‘feminine’ conduct. Sports deemed as ‘male appropriate’, however, tend to represent the prevailing features of ‘masculinity’, team sports which are aggressive and where the men can demonstrate their physical prowess. Excelling in sports is seen by many as the pinnacle of hyper masculinity. There is common belief that the media plays an ever increasing role in advancing gender equality. The setback with this form of progression in the Islamic countries of the Middle East again reverts to the notion of the female body. “Representations of women participating in sport [in the media] are more acceptable only when they are more stereotypically feminine and emphasise sexuality.” (Brookes: 2002) This is where the dilemma lies, for the Islamic sports player, for whom body image is of utmost importance.
Modesty is a very important concept within Islam; it is read and construed by people in varying ways. Walseth and Fasting did a study in Egypt, a secular country which thus permitted them to examine a full range of women, ranging from the extremely pious, who wear the nikab and are completely covered, to the secular who do not wear the headscarf at all. The interviews revealed an assortment of readings from the Quran, and the ways in which they serve as obstructions to women taking part in sports. The main topics of concern being the “veil, gender segregation, the concept of ‘excitement’ (non-sexual movements) and the power relationship between women and men.” (Walseth & Fasting: 2003) The veil is a much debated topic within many sectors of society, including sport. Some international sports boards allow for women to cover their heads whereas others do not, therefore impeding the participation of Muslim women who wear the hijab. The women interviewed all recognised the fact that within Islam it is preferable to wear the veil. A number of the informants viewed this as an obstruction to sport participation, either because the sport would not allow for the veil or because the veil that they wore, which as well as covering their heads also covered their shoulders and chest, therefore making it almost impossible to take part in any sport. The result being that the women who wore this style of veil were required to either do physical activities at home, or in sexually segregated gyms or studios.

The informants of the study from all categories acknowledged that Islam had an affirmative outlook regarding sport, and made references to particular hadiths and readings of the Quran, with specific allusion to health concerns. However their attitude concerning sports in which they participated or the competitions in which they could compete were very different. The women who wore the nikab or krimar had very distinct stances on the notion of ‘excitement’.
These women believed that all sports or physical activity could induce excitement if men were watching; they thus believed only in taking part in physical activities that took place in sexually segregated arenas. In secular Egypt however these women found it difficult to find segregated training areas and thus found that they often had to resort to doing sport at home, and were therefore not able to take part in competitive sports. The women who either did not wear the veil, or who wore the hijab, took part in competitive sports as their interpretations of Islam did not oblige them to fully cover nor did it impose complete sexual segregation upon them. Furthermore their notion of ‘excitement’ was not as severe and therefore did not raise any obstructions to their involvement in sport. These women however, were faced with very different barriers, for example the struggling power relationships that exist, between men and women, within the sporting world which is still deemed by many as an overwhelmingly masculine domain.

Body modesty is of crucial concern when discussing women’s participation in sport. It is important to assess the function played by the hijab, which is worn by some Muslim women who see it as critical in maintaining religious adherence. The hijab has become a global marker of religious identity, bearing numerous different meanings for both the women who wear it and those around them. “The hijab is seen by some as essential to religious observance, by others as a political statement, and by others as a response to a repressive imposition.” (Benn, Tansin & Jawad, Haifa & Pfister Gertrud, Introduction: 2010) The significance of the hijab is amplified greatly when referring to the sporting world which often demands highly inappropriate clothing (according to Islamic standards) and where the female sports player’s body will be highly visible. It follows that Muslim women’s participation in the sporting arena can be severely compromised for the reason that the “dominant
The issue of morality also lies at the heart of the debate surrounding the female body and sexuality. Women are seen as inherently less moral than men particularly with regards to the notion of sexuality. (Abu-Lughod: 1999) Consequently, to maintain a woman’s sexual decency and thus to keep her moral compass in line, it is the men, who are seen as morally supreme, who are given the authority to exert control. This control enables the men to make decisions concerning the women’s leisure activities. Most of the barriers faced by the informants of Walseth and Fasting’s interviews appeared to be a direct or indirect result of ‘Islam’s view of women and their sexuality.’ (Walseth & Fasting: 2003) Lughod’s study of the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouins of Egypt is very revealing with regards to the notion of morality and the role it plays in day to day life. Women are seen as being inherently morally inferior to men, Lughod describes the system of morality applied by the Awlad ‘Ali’s as the “basis for hierarchical social divisions that exist in the Bedouin social system.” (Abu-Lughod: 1999) Women’s sexuality is the basis for their moral inferiority and their link with reproduction, which despite being an extremely positive phenomenon is undeniably stained by its relation to menstruation and sexuality.

The veil has caused much furore within the sporting world, whether it is a re-design of the hijab which allows women to partake in physical activities more comfortably, or international bodies banning the veil. There are a number of sports where the necessary attire can easily be
remodelled to conform to Islamic standards and for those sports where the uniform is considered ‘un-Islamic’ women are beginning to come up with alternatives. There are now a variety of designers who are working on the ‘sports hijab.’ Following the banning of several Muslim girls from competitive sports tournaments, allegedly for safety concerns associated with wearing the hijab, Canadian designer Elham Seyed Javad decided to take the cause into her own hands and designed a ‘sports hijab.’ The sleek hijab formed part of a sports shirt worn underneath the necessary uniform and permitted these girls to continue with their sport of choice. She has coined the sports hijab as a ‘Resport’ and believes that it “helps to integrate, rather than exclude certain communities in society.” (Chung : 2009) Aheda Zanetti has taken the notion of the sports hijab one step further and has created the ‘burqini’ a swimsuit that has been adapted for women who wish to cover themselves. Her mission was to design sportswear that was in accordance with Islamic principles, which would therefore give Muslim women the option to participate in an even larger range of sporting activities including swimming.

While some sports embrace the hijab, others categorically refuse it; boxing is a sport that in recent years has attracted many female participants. It is an extraordinary achievement in the ascent of women in sport that the 2012 Olympics will include female boxing. This will even include a group of Muslim Afghan women who thanks to the ‘Fighting for Peace’ program sponsored by CPAU, have been training in the hope that they will achieve a place in the Games. Mirwais Wardak, who runs the Fighting for Peace programme in Kabul reasons that the team are challenging the preconceived notions about how Afghan women should behave

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2 Sura Al-Shawk, a Swiss citizen of Iraqi nationality, was banned from playing basketball competitively when wearing the hijab because it “could increase the risk of injury and the sport has to be religiously neutral” (Muslim Women in Sport blog)
through peace building. The IOC stipulates that a head guard must be worn to compete, which facilitates things for the Islamic fighter who wishes to wear a headscarf, and the IBA (International Boxing Association) has also acknowledged that Muslim women will be able to take part in the 2012 Olympics while abiding by their religious dress codes. Nonetheless boxing, with its hugely aggressive elements, is still considered to be solely a man’s game. Internationally, women such as Leila Ali (Mohammed Ali’s daughter) have begun to pave the way, but it is merely a stepping stone in the right direction. The women competing in boxing in the 2012 Olympics have a large burden to carry in order to prove themselves.

Unfortunately not all sports have been as openly accepting of the hijab and many women, across the globe, are constantly facing battles concerning their religious dress, whether it is for safety regulations or because the sport practises a religiously neutral system. It is however a measure of the transformation undergone by women in sport that such a debate even exists; just a few short decades ago it would have been unthinkable to discuss women boxers at the Olympics.

In addition to problems faced by Muslim women pertaining to religious observance of dress codes, some also choose to maintain religious observance to prayer times and fasting during Ramadan. Those Muslim women who abide by prayer times, five times daily, may be apprehensive to practise sport in an arena without facilities for prayer times, however this is a hurdle which is easier to address than the month long fast of Ramadan. Aside from the obvious physical rigours related to not eating until sunset, this thirty day fast can cause great unease for the Muslim athlete, often leading them to question the compatibility of professional sport and Islam. Many international sports stars have had to come up with compromises which allow them to maintain respect for both aspects of their identities; the Muslim and the athlete. Franck Ribery, a French footballer who converted to Islam has stated
that “on free days I fast, but when I have to play I do not fast.” (Puck Kristina, *To fast or not to fast*)

Conversely to the issues arising from Ramadan, sexually segregated arenas have permitted many Muslim women to thrive in the sporting world. The Solidarity Games, organised by the Iranians, have played a significant role in enhancing the role of women in sport in Muslim countries. In order to overcome the complexities faced by Muslim women who struggle between their aspirations to compete in sporting competitions and sustain their religious observance, the Women’s Sports Solidarity Council was formed, headed by Faezeh Hashemi. This body worked in conjunction with the International Olympic Committee and ultimately came up with the idea of an Islamic women’s sporting event, which allowed women to compete freely whilst maintaining religious modesty. The stated aim of the occasion was to fortify solidarity among Muslim women. The object of the 1993 games was to show that “sport for women who are Muslim can be organised within the context of their religious beliefs and that women in Islamic countries are not excluded from sport but are encouraged to participate.” (Steel and Richter-Devroe: 2003) This event as well as promoting excellence in female sporting events, also promoted sports as a means of change and education, and promoted debate on the subject. In major sporting events Muslim women remain relatively invisible, this typically being the result of social, political, economic and educational issues, but there have also been a “small number of high-profile cases of women’s admonishment by conservative clerics for participating in sport with apparent disregard to Islamic requirements for body comportment.” (Al-Sinani, Yousra & Benn, Tansin & Jawad Haifa: 2010) The Solidarity Games have accordingly provided huge opportunities for Muslim women in the sporting world; the first ‘Muslim Women’s Olympic Games’ held in Tehran in 1993, saw representatives from twenty different Islamic countries taking part. Not only have these
games provided huge inspiration for the athletes, the female-only associations have also
thrived, and many job opportunities have been created. “Organisations give us some
autonomy. On the one hand we may appear to be subservient, but within our own spaces we
are in control and can make some impact.” (Steel and Richter-Devroe: 2003)
**Islam, Women and Sport**

In order to fully understand the struggles faced by Muslim athletes it is important to understand the role played by Islam and to recognise the different ways in which these women choose to practise their religion. Sport today has become a vehicle for developing diplomatic relations between countries; athletes’ become ambassadors, representing their countries. In view of the fact that sport has become an international product, accepted globally and used globally for recreational or character building purposes, it is therefore of importance to understand what Yousra Al-Sinani (Al-Sinani, Yousra & Benn, Tansin & Jawad Haifa: 210) has coined the ‘Islamic dos and don’ts in sports’ allowing the athletes to maintain adherence to the Divine principles of Islam. The term ‘Muslim women’ has been used to comprise all women who follow religious observance to the Islamic faith. Akin to every religion, Islam has many strands and is practised and observed in many different ways. K.Walseth and Fasting have reduced this down to four main components, which they term: fundamental Islam, secular Islam, traditional Islam and modern Islam. (Walseth and Fasting: 2003) Secularism and fundamentalism provide two opposing views on the role played by religion within society; secular Muslims believe religion to be a private matter whereas the more fundamental Muslims believe religion to be a divine tool for governing society. There are also traditional or modern Muslims who characterise the differing ways in which Islam can be construed. They believe that whereas the ‘traditional’ Muslims want to maintain the way Islamic scholars have deciphered Islam in the past, the more ‘modern’ Muslims believe there is room for new interpretation. For many of these women, Islam is seen more as a guide, a set of values and ethics that provides a collective template for succeeding in everyday living.
However it is this commitment to faith that can be seen as a hindrance to women’s participation in sport, for according to some scholars no other recreation should take priority over the spiritual and religious responsibilities. (Al-Sinani, Yousra & Benn, Tansin & Jawad Haifa) There is great diversity amongst Muslim women today regarding their religious choices; their preference for wearing the hijab, their observance of prayer times or even their adherence to Ramadan. These differences occur as a result of diverse living economic, social and political situations in which these women find themselves. There is great variety amongst Islamic cultures, who although share the devotion to the five pillars of faith, also retain vast distinctions regarding the interpretation of the texts, this however does not affect the authenticity in any way. This paper has shown that there are Muslim women who take part in sport while fully adhering to religious observance (either by keeping their bodies covered while taking part in a sport, or choosing only to participate in fully sexually segregated arenas) and there are others, those who are more secular, who either fully accept westernised sporting clothes or who have found ways to navigate their way around the system. All of the women consider themselves Muslim and their religious observation of secular or fundamental Islamic values is not measurable in a meaningful way. Most are simply trying to redefine themselves and are struggling to find the balance between their dual identities comprising of both ‘Muslim woman’ and ‘athlete’.

There is however nothing in the Quran or Hadith that overtly prohibits either men’s or women’s participation in physical activities, on condition that faith is always prioritised.( Al-Sinani, Yousra & Benn, Tansin & Jawad Haifa) In Isa Muhammad Maishnu’s ‘Analytical study of sports development as viewed from an Islamic perspective’ he analyses fatwas given by two well known Islamic scholars who both came to similar conclusions. Sheikh Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid explicitly states that “If the purpose of the sport is to prepare
the body to be fit to carry out the duty of jihad so as to make the word of Allah supreme, then
sport is essential” (Maishnu: 2009), however both scholars concur on the notion that if in
order to participate in a sport it necessitates doing something deemed *haram*, (anything
forbidden in Islam is deemed haram) specifically anything that could frustrate Islamic
obligations, namely prayer times as well as bodily modesty or mixing of the sexes, then sport
is judged to be *haram*. Both clerics also state that sports should not be damaging or
dangerous at any point for the participant.

Islam does not inhibit sport; in fact physical well being and health are strongly encouraged by
the teachings of Islam. This notion of physical capability is often linked to the missionary
aspect of Islam, for it takes a healthy and physically fit body to execute the teachings of the
Divine guidance of Islam. (Maishnu: 2009) The anxiety arises when women, Islam and sport
are concerned for the combination of these three concepts deepens the tensions between
religion and politics and between religious and secular values. (Benn, Tansin & Jawad, Haifa
& Pfister Gertrud- intro: 2010) Jennifer Hargreaves took her analysis of this extremely
conflicting notion to Iran, where many women are constantly striving to find a middle
ground. Their argument for female participation in sport is established on the belief that Islam
is a “religion of ‘balance and equilibrium’ which embodies a reverence and concern for the
healthy female body.” (Hargreaves: 2000) Women, in Iran, have been employing sport as part
of the reformist movement, using it as a vehicle for cultural reform, and there are currently
more women taking part in sport than ever before, with many schools even offering sporting
programmes for young girls.
Football

Football is undoubtedly one of world’s most popular sports, played by the majority of nations, it is also the most followed and televised sport, with the largest amount of diehard fans. The FIFA World Cup is one of the most lucrative sporting events and serves as a platform for numerous affairs. The most recent FIFA World Cup was held in South Africa, where huge amounts of money poured into the country in a bid to develop and improve local infrastructure prior to the event. Such efforts have huge knock-on effects on local communities. However, football has its origins in the West, and is often portrayed to have a corruptive nature, having associations with over indulgence, fanaticism, hooliganism and excessive alcohol abuse. Conversely the beauty of football is that not much is required to play the game which has greatly facilitated its worldwide proliferation. However, not everyone has the liberty and autonomy to play football whenever and wherever they wish. Women’s football is not accepted at the same level as men’s football, in that there is nowhere near as much media coverage, where viewing numbers, advertising costs and revenue are concerned, and there are no role models for young girls to look up to beyond the local community level. Muslim women have even more hurdles to overcome for many believe that “football and sports are *haram* – forbidden.” (Klein 2007) Sahar El-Hawary has become known as “the pioneer of women’s football in Egypt” (http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-636/_nr-13/i.html), not only did she encourage women to play football in Egypt but she also enabled the Egyptian women’s football team to play on the international scene. She has had to face constant condemnation for her choices, being heavily criticised by religious clerics who deem football as immoral and regard women taking part in the sport as incongruous with the teachings of Allah. As
time has passed El-Hawary has received mounting levels of support, and as public opinion has started to shift in favour of women playing football in Egypt, even the media began to take interest. In an interview with Al-Qantara, El-Hawary stated that “Some of our games have already been broadcast live, like those from the first Arab Women's Football Championship held last April. The championship was truly a massive step towards the emancipation of women. It showed the extent to which the population of Arab countries supports the participation of women in all spheres of society, even in football.”

Historically women have faced constraints on numerous sports, especially those deemed ‘male-appropriate’ such as football, making it much more acceptable and unproblematic for women to take part in sports that are seen to be more feminine, such as tennis or netball. Rod Brookes informs us that “views on natural biological difference were used to justify the exclusion of women from sport. Late 19th century ideologies of femininity defined women in terms of childbearing, and physical activity was seen as something potentially dangerous.” (Brookes: 2002) Women were thus encouraged only to take part in sports that were more ‘feminine’, that is more graceful and poised and less physically challenging. It could be argued that this notion is very much still present in the Islamic world. Nevertheless women have fought back against these restrictions and in Iran in 1998, for example, football was introduced as an official sport for women. (Steel & Richter-Devroe: 2003) Contrary to popular belief, Iran is one of the forerunners in female sports participation. Perversely it is the government’s policy of absolute separation of the sexes that might be said to have resulted in greater levels of freedom for women within the sporting domain.
In addition to moral concerns regarding the visibility of the athlete’s body, there are concerns that taking part in a sport can cause a woman to lose certain aspects of her femininity. There are many stereotypes and stigmas attached to female sports players that paint them as butch, masculine and very often as lesbians. Babak Fozooni explains that “experts are of the opinion that sportswomen lose 50% of their femininity as they have to endure constant and arduous training in order to achieve international standards. Naturally they grow rough and speak coarsely...women must not play football or rugby.” (Fozooni: 2007) C.F.Pelak, in her study of women’s ice hockey in Canada reinforces the notion of the butch female athlete, and points out that the female ice hockey team have been given the extremely derogatory nickname ‘The Mighty Dykes’. This habit of stereotyping female athletes as lesbians is very common and often serves to dissuade women from taking part in certain sports which are conventionally seen to be masculine. (Fabrizio Pelak: 2002)

Sport has also been used as an instrument of resistance in opposition to a strict regime. Iran provides the perfect example; The Islamic revolution in 1979 not only discouraged women from partaking in sport, it also saw a ban on women attending major sporting events as spectators. When the national football team won a match that qualified them to play in the World Cup in 1997 “a group of young women went on the offensive in Tehran when they broke into a stadium which security forces had assigned for men only.”(Fozooni: 2007) Fozooni links this insistence on entering the stadium to an aspiration for a looser dress code and more freedom within society, he links this forced entry with women’s desire for freedom elsewhere. He believes that “Iranian women seem to be using football to invert patriarchal mores,” not only does being involved in a sports team provide the women with purpose and a collective identity, but also by taking part in sport these women are taking greater control of
their lives and are negotiating new identities for themselves. In addition to football, Iranian women take part in at least twenty four other sports.
**Boxing and Combat Sports**

Besides football, combat sports including boxing and taekwondo are gaining increasing popularity amongst women. The more traditional martial arts such as taekwondo are received with much greater enthusiasm by critics than boxing which tends to be viewed by many as an exclusively masculine domain. International taekwondo federations have even allowed women to wear religious dress during competition, thus encouraging women of all faiths to take part. Chairman of the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF), Mr Dae Won Moon, explains that “this measure means that taekwondo is one of the few sports that treat women and men equally in the Muslim world. We believe that our respect for others’ cultures and beliefs will allow taekwondo to enhance its status as an Olympic sport.”

(http://muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.com/search/label/Taekwondo) By allowing women to wear the hijab in all taekwondo tournaments and most importantly in the Olympic Games, the WTF is stimulating those women who previously believed that their identity as a pious Muslim could not endorse a dual identity of ‘female athlete.’ One of the first Muslim females to compete in the Olympic Games wearing the hijab was the young Iranian taekwondo star, Sara Khosh Jamal; the first Iranian woman to compete in the Olympics for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Generally the Islamic model of femininity is only comprised of physical activity to a certain extent, so Sara Khosh Jamal was pushing many boundaries by taking part in an overtly masculine sport in the largest international competition; she quickly became a role model for girls in Iran and TIME magazine even listed her as one of the ‘100 Olympic athletes to watch.’ That is not to say that she did not encounter difficulties on her journey; Iran is a strictly Islamic country and a young woman of her age is expected to be looking for an appropriate husband and starting to make a family rather than competing on the international scene in sports. “For some she is a sinner who prostitutes herself in international
competitions, for others she is a national hero, increasing Iran’s glory in the world.”
(www.kickiniran.com)

Whereas women participating in taekwondo have been accepted to a certain degree, owing much to the WTF’s decision to allow the wearing of the hijab, people are not so forgiving when it is a question of women boxing. Women’s boxing, like many other sports in which women participate that are masculine oriented, has on the whole been concealed from history. Boxing, of all the sports in which women choose to compete, is undoubtedly the most contentious. Jennifer Hargreaves argues that it “appears to deconstruct the ‘normal’ symbolic boundaries between male and female in sport – the opposition between masculine and feminine.” (Hargreaves: 1997) Whether one looks at the appeal of boxing: the pure simplicity of the sport, the extreme levels of adrenaline required, the feeling of behaving in a way which far exceeds one’s normal capability; or the extreme danger linked to boxing, it is hard to ignore the fundamentally masculine aspect of it. The very idea of boxing appears to contradict every notion associated with female athletes and their place within the sporting world. Most conventional women’s sports were often founded in opposition to a male sport; not so for female boxing which in its most unadulterated form is essentially a “celebration of female muscularity, physical strength and aggression.” (Hargreaves: 1997) In the past this notion of female muscularity was frowned upon and seen as inherently masculine. This is less of an issue today as this sense of female muscularity provides women with certain empowerment. “It is in particular because ‘women are taught not to be physical’ one of the boxers explained, ‘that it feels good to be in a context where it is acceptable to be physical and to discover a side of ourselves we never knew we had. Getting rid of aggression in a physical way is really liberating and attractive.’ “(Hargreaves: 1997)
Despite Islam not being very accepting of sports like boxing in which you cause physical harm to your opponent, many Muslim women are investing in the sport. According to a juristic rule “There should be neither harm nor reciprocating injury.” (http://www.islam-qa.com/en/ref/10238/Boxing) Further to this, women’s boxing has finally been accepted as an Olympic sport and the International Boxing Association (IBA) has authorised the wearing of the hijab on condition that their faces remain uncovered.
Conclusion

A nation’s attitude toward women in sport defines the moral and developmental cycle that delineates the perception of women in that country in general. It is akin to looking through a keyhole at a society and seeing where it stands on the main issues affecting women in a modernist world.

Sport is by no means the only mechanism for women to narrow the gap between themselves and their male counterparts in society, but it is differentiated from the other routes to rapprochement such as political and intellectual campaigns, by having as a core function an improvement in physical health which creates a significant boost in morale and self esteem.

There are considerable differences between Islamic countries and their attitude to women in sport. Secular countries such as Egypt and Turkey are seen as more advanced by Western standards with regards to the way women are treated, not just in the sporting world but in many professional fields. These countries are, by Western standards, deemed to be more advanced in that they afford both women and men similar if not equal opportunities. Those countries which enforce a strict interpretation of the Qur’an such as Iran and Saudi Arabia produce a different developmental path for women which is often at odds with Western culture. This attitude is at its most extreme when the underlying fundamentalism itself reaches extremes. The period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan was such an example, where sport in any form, as well as just about every other non-domestic activity was prohibited for women. (http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6185.htm)
In the historical context of the last 2 millennia, it is only in the last century or two that the speed of progress has come to define a modern and progressive society. Female emancipation took place in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, and it seems appropriate that the cyclical nature of this progress should now be manifesting itself in the Islamic countries which have tended to be conservative and thus more resistant to change. Sport is a defining route to achievement, and this achievement has historically, since the time of the ancient Greeks, been the preserve of a male centric society. It is a measure of progress in Western societies that now sees men and women playing equal roles in the sporting field, though the empirical data of their sporting achievements remains as the ultimate differentiator of their physical abilities.

In 1896, the first Olympic Games of the modern era took place in Athens. There were no women competitors thus preserving these games as a male display of strength and ability. Sports Sociologist Gertrud Pfister stresses that women were “fit only to crown the heads of victors” (Benn, Tansin, Jawad, Haifaa & Pfister Gertrud, ‘Conclusion’: 2010). The assertion throughout this paper has been that a society that encourages women to excel at sports produces an enlightened and democratic populace, by Western standards. It is perhaps apposite that one of Afghanistan’s only female Olympic runners has very recently declared her candidacy for parliament in her country. Her announcement, made on the 11th September 2010 is full of references to the hardship she endured from the Taliban as an athlete which gave her the will to succeed. (Nakamura: 2010)

Sport is increasingly being used as a means to encourage people, and the number of charities promoting sports amongst marginalised or troubled people is ever increasing. Joseph Alter, in
his study of Indian wrestling, came to the conclusion that “a number of people regarded it as
the most important medium through which to think about themselves and to make sense of
their world.” (Alter: 1992) It is this notion of sport providing answers for people and offering
them the chance to redefine their identity, whether they become a team member or are simply
excelling in an individual sport, which is the main source of inspiration behind these
charities. The Palestinian women’s football team provides a perfect example of this, for them,
“sport has become a social movement for self-determination, agency, peace and friendship in
the lives of the women’s national football team of Palestine.” (Gieß-Stüber Petra, Kremers
Sarah, Luft Steffen & Schaller Jonathon)

Western standards suggest that a free society is a desirable goal, a state where women and
men have equal opportunities and values is the achievable and optimal target. Islam has a
differing set of values which can be interpreted as entrenching the differences between the
sexes. Both value systems have their merits and both are able to co-exist as they have done
for centuries. By Western standards, Islam might be perceived as repressive for women, but
many Muslim women must surely perceive Western ethics and values as far too liberal. The
danger is not in the fact that two seemingly discrete value systems should co-exist, but rather
when one of these cultures attempts to impose its dogma on the other.
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