

## **“Sport Performance of Muslim Women and Different Constraints in Their Way to Participation in Sport”**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to examine the available literature in perspective of sport performance of the Muslim women at the arena and the different constraints preventing them from involvement in the sport. Considerable amount of literature is available about the female participation in sport leisure but very limited literature is available about the Muslims women and their involvement in sport. This exploratory study is aiming at to describe the different aspects of the problem. In Muslim countries the general concept of the masses in connection with sport is that it has been man dominated and man oriented activity. A number of socio-cultural, religious, economical, physical and psychological constraints prevent the female folk to appear at the sport arenas at the national and international level competition. An attempt has been made to explore those common issues faced by majority of the Muslim women in their way to participation in sport. Recommendations have been put forth for the improvement of situation with reference to female participation in sport. To bring substantial positive change in the state of affairs, more work is needed and it is hoped that this work will definitely open ways for the future researchers.*

**Keywords:** Women, Islam, Sports, Participation, Dress-code

## 1. Introduction

It has been a matter of common observation, particularly in the Muslim world, that sport is generally considered as male oriented and male dominated activity whereas female are confronted with a number of constraints and hurdles in their way to participation in sport.

In this study we will examine the nature, intensity and genuineness of the constraints, with focus upon the religious aspect of the problem, that impede the way of the women from participation in sport. There are a number of challenging questions with reference to Muslim women's participation in sport. These questions include,

- a) What does Islam says about female participation in sport?
- b) Does our Islamic culture allow free interaction of female with male?
- c) Does our social system afford new roles for our female?
- d) Is the existing sport infrastructure sufficient enough to accommodate the female?

Need of the hour is to examine the existing scenario in connection with Muslim female participation in sport in relation to its conformity with the religious, socio-cultural and psychological perspectives of the society. In this study, all out efforts have been made to examine the existing literature and find out answer to the aforementioned questions.

Throughout the world, in man-dominated Muslim societies, the question of participation of female in sport is confronted with different types of controversies and disagreements. People are generally divided into different classes like feudal, upper, middle, lower, educated and non-educated, rural and urban, religious and so called advanced entities. There exists visible difference of opinion between the viewpoints of the aforementioned classes and sections of population with reference to female participation in sport. In the holy Quran, in Sura An-Noor, it is stated that female is allowed to interact with, talk to and see those male relatives who are not permitted to marry her, which includes her father, brother, paternal-uncle, maternal-uncle and grand-father. Religion oriented people discourage the female participation in sport on account of open and liberal nature of sport. Islam does not allow any female to openly perform in front of or interact with the male who is "*na-Mahram*" (*a man who is allowed to marry her*) for her. On account of un-Islamic playing dress, open mixing of male and female, the Muslim religious scholars dislike the pattern and method of participation of the Muslim women in sport, so they strongly criticize their participation in sports (Di-Capua 2005). Islam disallows free interaction of male and female in all matters including sport and recreation. In Islam, female participation in sport is allowed provided it is carried out in privacy and wherein no male interfere in the conduct and organization of the activity. With reference to female participation in sport, it is said that "To participate in sports women need to be out of sight of me" (Kay, 2005). There exist a number of religious, socio-cultural, financial, physical and psychological hurdles in the way of Muslim women with reference to their appearance in the sport arena. In light of the existing literature, different aspects of the problem are looked into to know the actual situation in perspectives of female participation in sport.

## 2. Islam and Sport

The word Islam stems from the Arabic word "*Salama*" which stands for peace and safety, and the person who follows the ways and life-style of Islam is called Muslim. About the position of play in Islam, the holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have said, "*Entertain [yourselves] and play, for indeed I dislike harshness to be seen in your religion*" (Suyuti, al-Jami). Islam favours good health and accordingly healthy and fit Muslim is considered to be better than the weaker one. Regarding health and fitness, the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said: "A strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer" (Sahih Muslim). Islam encourages both male and female to be active in practical life so that to have good health. Participation in sport is not against the spirit of Islam and "*sharia*" (Islamic code of life) provided a few Islamic principles with reference to participation are complied with accordingly. These principles are, a) covering the hair and all other obligatory parts of the body during playing, b) avoidance of mixing of the male and female during the course of playing and c) avoidance of gambling in playing and, d) paying due attention to "*Fard*" (obligatory religious practices like five times daily prayer, fasting in the month of *Ramazan*, *Hajj* etc). The holy Prophet (PBUH) himself and his companions participated in walking, running, wrestling, swimming, archery, spear-throwing horse-racing and camel-racing. These sporting events were carrying significance from the perspectives of health and fitness with reference to taking part in "*Jihad*" (the holy battle fought for the cause of Islam).

There exists consensus among the Muslim scholars regarding the benefits of participation in sports regarding the upkeep and development of health as the Holy Quran declares that “Do not forbid good things which Allah made lawful, and do not transgress that Allah has not transgressed” (Al-Maida: 87).

### 3. Islam, Women and Sport

The issues associated with female participation in sport in perspectives of Islam have been discussed by a few scholars like Kay, (2005), Livengood and Stodolska, (2004) and Martin and Mason, (2003). In Islamic societies, the status of religion is the most vital amongst all other social institutions and carries significant place in the lives of Muslims. The influence of Islam reflects in all walks and all matters of the Muslim’s lives either it is sport or any other undertaking of the life. In Islam, female has been granted special position. There are special Islamic codes with reference to women’s life pattern, nature of the relationship with relatives and others, status in the society, and so on. So far as sport for female, Islam and “sharia” are concerned, these are not contradictory to one another rather Islam promotes sport among female provided a few Islamic principles with reference to female participation in sport including maintenance of “Hijaab” (covering of the hair, face and other secret parts of the body), obeying clothing code, avoidance of gambling, joint playing session of the male and female and attention to timely discharging *Fard* are complied with accordingly. Irrespective of participation in sport, with the onset of puberty, Muslim girls begin to veil *hijab* during routine activities where there is presence of non-*Mehram* male. In the field of playing, if all the competitors, spectators and organizers are female and no non-*Mehram* is watching the activity, then no *Hijab* is required (Siddiqi, 2003).

Islam advocates in favour of good health and sound physique. Sayyiduna Zayd ibn Arqam (RA) narrates that the holy Prophet (PBUH) used to say (in prayer): “I seek your protection from powerlessness (*ajz*), laziness (*kasl*), cowardice (*jubn*), miserliness (*bukhl*), and weakness (*harem*).” With reference to the protection and promotion of health the Prophet (PBUH) has further said: “Our bodies have rights upon us, our eyes have rights upon us, so give everyone his due right” Ibid, Hadith No. 186, 188, 193. At another occasion He (PBUH) has stated that, “Taking proper care of one’s health is the right of the body” (Bukhari). About the health and fitness of the holy Prophet (PBUH) Tabrani and Tirmidhi report “His (PBUH) stomach and chest were in line.” It reflects fit health and ideal posture of Him (PBUH). In the same context the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) has suggested the following to the fellow Muslims.

*"Take benefit of five before five:  
your youth before your old age,  
your health before your sickness,  
your wealth before your poverty,  
your free-time before your preoccupation,  
and your life before your death"*

*[Hadith- al-Haakim, al-Bayhaqee, Saheeh (source: E Islam 2010)].*

The above discussion proves that vitality of health is acknowledged in Islam. And for the upkeep and maintenance of health sport can be used as a medium. For both male and female, there seems to be no harm in doing sport. With reference to female sport, the holy Prophet (PBUH) is also reported to have said, “Every game a person plays is futile except for archery, training one’s horse and playing with one’s wife” (*Sunan* Tirmidhi, Musnad Ahmad, Sunan Ibn Majah). It means that female sport is endorsed by the holy Prophet (PBUH). As reported by Ayesha, once the holy Prophet (PBUH) entered into the running competition with her (Ayesha), which she won but later on when I put on some weight, we ran again, and this time He, (the Prophet PBUH) won the race and said, “This is the revenge of the first race; now they are level” (Abu Dawood). 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). Several scholars say that Islamic teachings advocates and encourages sports activities for physical development of both genders (Mahfoud, 2011). No doubt, in Islam male and female have got equal rights, but there are more restrictions for female with reference to her participation in sport as compared to male (Beiruty, 1997; Medjadji, 2007). As discussed earlier, female competitor has to veil her hair and body with loose clothing which covers exact figures of her body (Medjadji, 2007). But male covers his body from navel to knee. In Islamic culture, female has got special dignity and honour and she is always required to take care of that. *Muslim women are permitted to do sport activities, besides they must be conscious to secure their dignity and admiration*, (Mawlawi, 2005).

#### **4. Constraints in the way of Women's Participation in Sport**

On account of socio-cultural restrictions, Muslim female is confronted with a number of constraints and impediments in her way to prompt participation in sport. Muslim women face much more obstacles in their participation in sport as many people believe that "sports are *haram* (forbidden)" (Klein, 2007). Different studies have been conducted focusing upon different constraints to female participation in sport. "*Lack of time, lack of knowledge, overcrowding, long distance to activity areas, family problems, and lack of money and companion are indicated as the most significant recreational constraints in many studies*" (Hoden, 2010; Kara and Demirci, 2010; Scott and Mowen, 2010; Stanis et al., 2010). In addition to the above, "*fear of assault, lack of facility, gender, race, high entrance fee are some other factors affecting participation of different groups of people in recreational activities*" (Attarzade and Sohrabi, 2007; Mozafari et al., 2010; & Shores et al., 2007).

With reference to gender base thinking of the female, some studies have shown that on account of being female, they are less likely to participate in sport. Females usually participate in physical recreational activities less frequently than males (Attarzadeh and Sohrabi, 2007; & Mozafari et al., 2010). In the same context Pittman et al., (1999); and Virden and Walker, (1999) have concluded that *female have more responsibility than males for their families so they keep themselves busy with housework and they fear from assaults and being raped*.

Financial hardships are also responsible for none or less participation of female in sport. As a matter of fact, in majority of the Muslims families, females discharge the house-hold responsibilities and they have nothing to do with the earning of the livelihood. Male has always been in the driving seats in connection with earning and controlling financial matters of the families. On account of lack of authority in the dispersal of the financial resources, female can not spend money for taking part in any sport. Being dependent on their husband, it has always been difficult for women to have money to spend on recreational activities (Deem, 1986; Jackson and Henderson, 1995).

Economic status and income level of the families are also amongst the main determinants of participation in sport. Being amongst the most significant recreational constraints, level of income plays a more important role in participation of people in recreational activities than gender, age, race, and educational level (Shores et al., 2007). People having high income level participate in natural sports more frequently than those in low income level, respectively (Kara and Demirci, 2010).

"*Socio-cultural constraints provided an umbrella under which, other constraints are experienced*" (Little, 2002). Religious and socio-cultural restrictions, mixed gender sport, playing dress code, general trend of the masses towards female sport and limited resources are some of the basic constraints to women participation in sport (Dagkas et al, 2010). In this connection Shawn, (1994) has concluded that Muslim women are confronted to a number of constraints as compared to men regarding their participation in sports.

#### **5. Performance of Muslim Women in the International Sport Competition**

Surpassing numerous constraints and obstacles, Muslim women have registered splendid performance record in the international competition and they have won Gold Medals for their countries in different International sport competition like Olympics games, World championship, Commonwealth Games and Asian Games etc. Though the story of appearance of the Muslim female in the different International sport competition is not so old yet they have proved their existence by registering their outstanding performance. Awareness of the masses in this regard is expanding in a progressive manner and level of the Muslim female participation in sport is also moving forward. Muslim women have got the requisite caliber and required standard of talent to compete at the international sport arena and dominate in performance but the principal hindrances in their way are;

- a) Female performance in front of male spectators and organizers and
- b) The approved dress-code of the different international sport bodies.

On account of these two aforementioned impediments, authorities of the Muslims nations have always been reluctant to send their female sport participants to represent their country in the international sport competition. At present, there is notable appearance of the Muslim women in different sport events including Athletics, Cricket, Basket Ball, Badminton, Boxing, Fencing, Foot Ball, Karate, Mountaineering, Swimming, Table Tennis, Volley Ball, Weight-Lifting and so on. Let us have a look at some of the world reputed Pakistani Muslim Female players who have upheld their national flag in the community of nations at various international level sport competition.

1. Samina Baig from Pakistan became the first Pakistani woman to conquer the highest summit of the world, 29,029 feet or 8,848 meter high Mount Everest on May 19, 2013.
2. Rubab Raza, the youngest Swimmer (13 years age) and pioneer Pakistani Olympian represented Pakistan in the Athens Olympics 2004. She also has Two Silver and One Bronze Medal to her credit in the South Asian Games 2004 (Islamabad).
3. Kiran Khan is the pioneer Pakistani woman to win Gold Medal for Pakistan in the South Asian Swimming championship. She has won 6 international gold medals for her country; she also represented Pakistan in the Beijing Olympics 2008.
4. Naseem Hameed Siddiqi the fastest women of the South Asia and Gold Medalist of 100 Meter sprint in the South Asian Games 2010 held at Dacca where she dominated in performance and hoisted Pakistani flag at the international forum.
5. Pakistan's Women Cricket Team won Gold Medal in the Asian Games, 2010 and 2014.

In addition to the above, a notable number of Muslim women have so far achieved remarkable distinction in the field of sport. The drop scene of the story of sport performance of the Muslim women is presented as follow;

1. Halet Cambel from Turkey became the ever first Muslim woman of the world to compete in Fencing at Berlin Olympic Games in 1936.
2. Sarah Attar and Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim from Saudi Arabia wrote their names in the history of sport by representing their motherland in London Olympics 2012. They competed in 800 meter race and in Judo respectively.
3. Ruqaya Al Ghasara from Bahrain became the first Muslim lady to compete in full *Hijab* at the Athens Olympics 2004. She has to her credit Gold and Bronze Medals in 200 and 100 meters sprint respectively in Asian Games held in Doha in 2006.
4. Khadija Mohammed from UAE became the First Muslim female weight lifter from the Gulf to represent her country in London Olympics 2012.
5. Al Houby, is the ever first Arab woman from Palestine to scale six out of seven world's highest summits. Her message at the summit was: "*We are here, We exist and We reached the highest points on earth!*".
6. Nawal El Moutakawel from Morocco, became the first Muslim lady in the world to win a Gold Medal in 400 meter hurdles race in the Los Angeles Olympic Games 1984.
7. Hassiba Boulmerka, became the first woman from Algeria who won the Gold Medal in 1500 meter race at the Barcelona Olympic Games 1992.
8. Dr. Rania El Wani, has got the distinction to have represented Egypt in three different Olympic Games in Swimming competitions.
9. The Graphic Designer Raha Moharrak 27 years old from Saudia Arabia became the First and the Youngest Arab woman to scale the summit Mount Everest on May 18, 2013
10. Marina Volnova represented her country Kazakhstan for the first time in Wrestling competition during London Olympic 2012.
11. In 2012 London Olympics, Zulfiya Chinshanlo was the first Muslim woman who won a Gold Medal for Kazakhstan in Weightlifting.
12. Egypt participated in London Olympics 2012 with 36 Muslim women participants which was the largest female delegation ever sent by a single nation.
13. Muslim women have won 18 Medals in different events during London Olympics 2012.

## 6. Conclusions

As a result of this study, some new facts and figures have been revealed which show that the existing position seems to have been moving steadily in the right direction. Though the pace of movement is very slow even then we see some signals of hope and expectations and things are very much positive with reference to Muslim women participation in sport. There is some sort of justified optimism associated with the figures of female participation in the top level sport competition of the world. Let us have a look at these figures. During Atlanta Olympic Games 1996, 26 different countries did not send even a single woman to represent those 26 nations at the world forum. But with the passage of 12 years, the position has changed in a positive fashion and the figure of 26 reduced to only 03 countries namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei, which did not send women sport persons to the arena of the Beijing Games 2008.

The next landmark in the history of women sport was recorded at the London Olympics 2012, when every Muslim majority country sent at least one female to the games to represent their countries at the world's community of the nations.

## 7. Recommendations

After in-depth consideration of the different factors and existing situation with reference to female participation in sport it is recommended that stance of the religious scholars regarding female participation in sport should be given due consideration and all concerned quarter should abide by the Islamic principles as well as socio-cultural traditions of the society. Female should take part in the sport activities as and when situation is in conformity of the traditions, socio-cultural norms, values of the society and prestige of the family.

It is also recommended that female should wear scarf to cover the hair, and use loose dress to veil the body so that different parts of the body are not exposed. In addition to that, female sport should always be out of the sight of men during the course of training and coaching and active competitions as well.

In the end it is recommended to the government to establish standard sport infrastructure exclusively for female sport users at least at each divisional headquarter. These facilities should ensure properly covered training circuits where female are out of sight of male, exercise laboratories, gymnasiums, running tracks, playing spaces and fitness rooms.

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