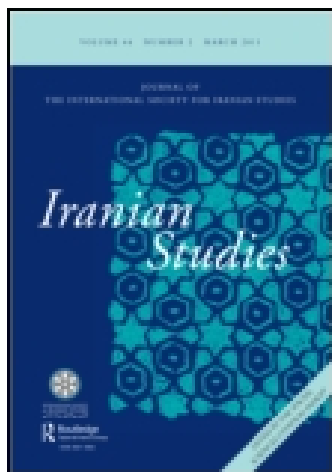


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Iranian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cist20>

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Published online: 07 Aug 2013.



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To cite this article: Hamidreza Mirsafian, Tamás Dóczy & Azadeh Mohamadinejad (2014) Attitude of Iranian Female University Students to Sport and Exercise, *Iranian Studies*, 47:6, 951-966, DOI: [10.1080/00210862.2013.823790](https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2013.823790)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2013.823790>

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Hamidreza Mirsafian, Tamás Dóczy and Azadeh Mohamadinejad

Attitude of Iranian Female University Students to Sport and Exercise

Women's sport has always been a challenging subject in Muslim countries and Muslim women have had to face various constraints regarding their participation in sport and exercise, which also influence their attitudes to sport. This study aims to explore the attitude of Iranian female university students toward sport by survey method (N = 1,120) and qualitative interviews (N = 50). The results indicate that the majority of the participants have negative attitudes to sport, and accordingly they do not practice it. Various macro-, meso- and micro-level factors were found as perceived barriers. From the results it can be concluded that the media as a tool for raising awareness to providing role models and shaping the social values of mainstream society does not take a positive role in order to develop the culture of women's sport, and to change the attitude of female students and their social environments to sport in Iranian society.

Introduction

Sport and exercise play a vital role in the physical, mental, emotional, social and psychological development of both male and female participants. In spite of the general agreement with this concept, many societies have not yet guaranteed equal rights and opportunities to men and women in sport and exercise. Muslim women constitute one of the groups whose participation in sports and exercise is limited to a certain degree since it is affected by religious regulation.¹ According to this religion women are encouraged to do sports and exercise as a source of recreation and enjoyment in order to maintain healthy lifestyles but they might be involved only in certain sports and only in a special way. For many Muslim women religious beliefs and values give meaning to the ways in which they structure and approach their life; Islam is a fundamental aspect of their identity.²

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¹Mousa Abu-Dalbouh, "An Investigation into Secondary Students' and Teachers' Attitudes towards the Teaching and Learning of Physical Education in Jordan" (PhD diss., Durham University, 1997).

²M.Y. Khan et al., "Female Students' Opinion about Women's Participation in Sports," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 2, no. 9 (2012): 275–83.

In terms of their attitudes to women's sport and exercise, Muslim countries may be grouped into three categories. The first category is comprised of those Muslim countries where the Islamic dress code is not required for the participation of women in sports, regardless of the level of sporting competition. Therefore, in such countries women are not obliged to follow the Islamic dress code during sporting activities, including competition, they can follow the international patterns. We can give the example of Turkey in this regard. The second category is comprised of those Muslim countries that are moderate, meaning that women are allowed to take part in nearly all sports, but at the same time Islamic dress codes are prescribed for them. These countries do not accept the international dress code, and this fact limits their female athletes' opportunities for participating in international competitions in several sports. We can give the example of Iran and Pakistan in this regard. The third category constitutes those Muslim countries that do not allow their women to participate in sports publicly, due to religious obligations, traditions, beliefs, rules and regulations of their own country. Saudi Arabia, Brunei and Qatar are the Muslim countries which did not allow their women to participate in international games including the Olympic Games until 2012. For the first time in Olympic history Saudi Arabian, Bruneian and Qatari female athletes participated at the 2012 London Olympics.³

Muslim women's roles differ depending on country of origin, social class, religious orientation, culture, gender norms and family support. All of these factors shape different attitudes and beliefs on athletics and physical education. For some, participating in sports comes without many obstacles, but for others there are many challenges. Muslim women face various hurdles in engaging in sports, including dress codes, attitudes toward the body related to privacy and modesty, mixed-gender classes, exercise during the month of fasting (Ramadan), limited resources, and restrictions in extra-curricular activities due to cultural and religious reasons.⁴

Although, the situation of women is different in various Muslim countries in both recreational and competitive sports, generally it is not hard at all for girls to participate in sport and exercise until their puberty. Several Islamic governments provide them with sporting facilities which can be used just by them and under certain conditions even by women.

The present study focuses on the attitudes of female Iranian Muslim university students to sport and exercise. To study the situation of sport for women in Iranian society and within it at Iranian universities may be useful in understanding the situation of Muslim women in sport, since Iran is a country in the "middle" category of Islamic countries in terms of the restrictiveness of their regulations on female sport. Nevertheless, inside Iranian society families also diverge in how they perceive their daughters' participation in sport, which means that more restrictive and more liberal approaches are present at the same time.

³Ibid.

⁴T. Benn and S. Dagkas, "Young Muslim Women's Experiences of Islam and Physical Education in Greece and Britain: A Comparative Study," *Sport, Education and Society* 11, no. 1 (2006): 21–38.

Women's sport in Iran. The population of women in Iran is about the half of the total population (37.2 million). Also half of the population is under 27 years of age.⁵ Compared with other Muslim countries, women's sport in Iran has a long history. Iranian women participated in various international competitions from 1964. For instance, in 1974 the Iranian women's fencing team won the gold medal at the Asian games held in Tehran. It was the only gold medal that Iranian women athletes have ever been able to win in international competitions. Iranian women also had the opportunity to participate at the Montreal Olympics in 1976.⁶

Women's sport in Iran is a special case, because the Islamic revolution in 1979 changed the relevant regulations dramatically. Prior to the revolution, women were allowed to wear sports clothes similar to the international trends, could freely participate in sport together with their male counterparts and could be taught by male instructors.⁷ Swimming, volleyball, tennis and gymnastics were the most popular sports for women at that time. However, since the revolution female sport in Iran has been affected by Islamic rules and regulations; the post-revolution attitude of Iranian governments towards women's sport was to steer women into Islamically appropriate sporting activities.⁸ Women are expected to be present in all walks of public life in the identity of "Muslim women." This also means that when engaging in competitive or recreational sporting activities, they are expected to keep to the Islamic dress codes.⁹ This means that women in Iran cannot follow the international standards and international regulations related to sport clothes. They must participate in sport according to the Islamic dress codes—that is, they should cover their head, arms, legs, etc.¹⁰ Following this rule, they can participate in many kinds of recreational and competitive sport activities. There are only some sports, such as boxing or wrestling, which are considered dangerous and thus are banned for them. Most women in Iran tend to participate in leisure sport activities and sport for all.¹¹ Most of the women who take part in sport do aerobic and fitness, and other popular sports are swimming, volleyball and badminton.¹² Also, in spite of the changes in women's sport since the revolution, Iranian female athletes have participated in various international competitions, such as Asian Games and Olympics in various sports

⁵Statistical Center of Iran. http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/0/Files/abstract/1390/sarshomari90_nahaii.pdf [In Persian] (accessed January 15, 2013).

⁶Gertrud Pfister, "Women and Sport in Iran: Keeping Goal in the Hijab," in *Sport and Women: Social Issues in International Perspective*, ed. Iise Hartmann-Tews and Gertrud Pfister (London, 2003), 207–23.

⁷M. Koyagi, "Moulding Future Soldiers and Mothers of the Iranian Nation: Gender and Physical Education under Reza Shah, 1921–41," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 11 (2009): 1668–96.

⁸Maryam Koushkie Jahromi, "Physical Activities and Sport for Women in Iran," in *Muslim Women and Sport*, ed. Tansin Benn, Gertrud Pfister and Haifaa Jawad (London and New York, 2011), 109–24.

⁹M. Kāshef, "Negāhi Dobāreh Be Varzesh-e Bānavān," *Payām-e Zan* 55 (1996): 20–23. <http://www.hawzah.net/fa/magazine/magart/3992/4005/22352> (accessed December 17, 2012).

¹⁰Jahromi, "Physical Activities and Sport for Women in Iran."

¹¹A. Naghdī, E. Balālī and P. Īmānī, "Mavāne' e Farhangī Ejtemā'i-e Moshārekāt-e Zanān Dar Fa'āliyāt-hā-ye Varzeshī," *Zan Dar Tose'e Va Siāsat* 9, no. 1 (2011): 147–63.

¹²Pfister, "Women and Sport in Iran: Keeping Goal in the Hijab."

(e.g. shooting, fencing, rowing, horse riding, taekwondo, track and field, soccer, volleyball, badminton).¹³

In terms of regulations for female participants, they have two possible ways of participation in sports: either in public, obeying the Islamic dress codes (e.g. football, cycling, mountaineering, running, etc.), or in private spaces to which men have no access to (e.g. volleyball, basketball, table tennis).¹⁴ The case of swimming is particular in this context, because although it is considered an indoor and outdoor sport, it is an exclusively indoor sport in some Muslim countries.

There have been many attempts at improving the participation of women in sport and exercise in recent years. One of the pioneers of improving women's sport in Iran is Fa'ezeh Hashemi, daughter of the former president. She was the head of the women's sport organization and vice president of the Iranian National Olympic Committee.¹⁵ She tried to find ways of legalizing women's sports by making them compatible with Islamic laws. Her efforts resulted in women's sport being accepted at governmental level.¹⁶ Also, her actions as the president of the Islamic Federation of Women's Sport (IFWS) to improve women's sport, such as organizing the Women's Islamic Games in 1993, permission for a women's futsal championship, and trying to solve the problems concerning women's biking in Iran made a significant impact on the attitude of women regarding sporting activities. In addition to this, her launching of the first and only newspaper, *Zan*, which included a page devoted to women's sport can also be considered as an important milestone in the media representation of female sport in Iran. However, the IFWS was closed after some years due to financial problems.¹⁷ The political marginalization of Mrs. Hashemi in the early 2000s meant that one of the most important advocates of women's sport was lost.

Nevertheless, in spite of all efforts, only around 10 percent of Iranian women participate in recreational and competitive sporting activities.¹⁸ The results of many studies indicated that with increasing age the cardiovascular ability of Iranian females reduces, so that the ability of a seventeen-year-old girl is lower than that of a nine-year-old girl.¹⁹ Contrary to expectations, the participation of married women in various forms of physical activity is higher than that of single women, perhaps because they are encouraged by their husbands to keep fit.²⁰ Most of the sports facilities in Iran are used separately by men and women. In most cases, the

¹³Jahromi, "Physical Activities and Sport for Women in Iran."

¹⁴Pfister, "Women and Sport in Iran: Keeping Goal in the Hijab."

¹⁵Houchang E. Chehabi, "The Juggernaut of Globalization: Sport and Modernization in Iran," in *Sport in Asian Society: Past and Present*, ed. James Anthony Mangan and Fan Hong (London, 2003), 275–94.

¹⁶J. Steel and S. Richter-Devroe, "The Development of Women's Football in Iran. A Perspective on the Future for Women's Sport in the Islamic Republic," *Iran* 41 (2003): 315–22.

¹⁷Farheekhtegan. <http://archive.is/Klk0> [In Persian] (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹⁸M. Monazami, S. A'lam and S.N. Shetab Būshehri, "Ta'yyn-e A'vāmel-e Moasser Bar Tose'e-ye Tarbiat Badāni Va Varzesh Bānavān Jomhūri Eslāmi Iran," *Modīriyat-e Varzeshi* 10 (2011): 151–68.

¹⁹Department of Physical Education, Tehran province.

²⁰Monazami et al., "Ta'yyn-e A'vāmel-e Moasser Bar Tose'e-ye Tarbiat Badāni Va Varzesh Bānavān Jomhūri Eslāmi Iran."

sports facilities are available for women in the first half of the day. Men usually use the facilities in the evening and night.²¹

Regarding budget allocation and media representation, women lag far behind men in Iranian sport. Only 30 percent of the budget of each sport federation is related to women's sport.²² However, even this amount is not entirely allocated to female sport.²³ Women's sport is covered by the media (TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, etc.) to a much lower extent than men's sport.²⁴ An almost negligible 2 percent of sports programs and sports news are related to women's sport.²⁵ The media, especially the television channels in Iran are not allowed to cover women's elite sport events unless they use the dress codes based on Islamic regulations.²⁶ Therefore, sponsors do not usually support female sport, either. In spite of making many plans and programs for improving women's sport in the country, the rate of participation of women in recreational sporting activities is relatively low due to the special social and cultural situation.²⁷ The rate of participation and success of Iranian female elite athletes at international competitions and Olympics is also very low compared to their male counterparts, or female athletes in other countries.²⁸ The reason behind this phenomenon can be found in some regulations in female sport. They are not allowed to follow the international dress code, they must not have male coaches and they cannot participate in many sports in the presence of males, making them inevitably underrepresented in international competitions.

Women in university sport in Iran. Women constitute approximately half of the students at Iranian universities.²⁹ Female students have relatively higher chances to participate in sport and exercise than non-student women of their age. The opportunities for them to participate in indoor activities are almost equal to those for male students. They can participate without dress codes in those activities; however, men are not allowed to be present. Women's opportunities for participating in outdoor sporting activities on the university campus is low, even if they follow the dress codes. Many studies indicate that the lack of awareness of women about the benefits of physical activity, as well as social restrictions and cultural problems, are the most important

²¹Naghdī et al., "Mavāne'e Farhangī Ejtemā'i-e Moshārekāt-e Zanān Dar Fa'āliyahā-ye Varzeshī."

²²National Management Office and Sports Development of Iran.

²³Women's Sport Development Office of Iran.

²⁴M. Morādī, H. Honarī and A. Ahmadī, "Barresī-e Naghsh-e Chāhār Gāneh-ye Resāneha-ye Varzeshī Dar Tose'e-ye Farhang-e Varzesh-e Hamegāni," *Modīriyat-e Varzeshī* 9 (2011): 167–80.

²⁵Monazamī et al., "Ta'yyn-e A'vāmel-e Moasser Bar Tose'e-ye Tarbiāt Badanī Va Varzesh Bānavān Jomhūri Eslāmī Irān."

²⁶Donyā-ye Eghtesād, "Description of Women Sports Development in Iran." http://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/Default_view.asp?%40=64664 [in Persian] (accessed December 12, 2012).

²⁷Monazamī et al., "Ta'yyn-e A'vāmel-e Moasser Bar Tose'e-ye Tarbiāt Badanī Va Varzesh Bānavān Jomhūri Eslāmī Irān."

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Fars news. <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8907270354> [In Persian] (accessed January 10, 2013).

reasons affecting the participation of women in sport.³⁰ Various studies indicated that more than 60 percent of female Muslim university students do not participate in any sporting activities.³¹

In a study on Iranian Muslim students' attitudes and motivations Azizi et al. disclosed that the attitudes of the respondents were negative.³² Although the majority was aware of the value and effect of sport and exercise on the human body and they had sufficient free time, most of them preferred to participate in other leisure activities and not in sport. They reported that social and cultural factors, laziness and the lack of positive experiences are the major barriers to their participation in sports.

Muslim women's attitudes towards sport and exercise. In general, Muslim women had a lower rate of participation in sports compared to women of other religions.³³ This is the situation even with Muslim women living in European countries, mainly because their families oblige them to follow the religious traditions. Moreover, Muslim women are reluctant to attract the attention of other people when they participate in sport, or they are afraid of being ridiculed because of their customs. In Europe they do not face discrimination in sport as women, but rather as ethnic minorities.³⁴ On the other hand, in some countries, such as Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Norway, in order to address the issue of social exclusion, Muslim women have come to be an important target group of sport-based social interventions.³⁵ In spite of all efforts, many young Muslim women have negative attitudes to sport and exercise. For instance, Muslim girls in the UK seem to have negative views regarding physical education in school. Duvall et al. indicated that physical education in school evoked negative feelings among Muslim girls regarding sports and led

³⁰M. Ehsani, "Level of Sport Participation for Women in Iran and Leisure Constraints," *Journal of Humanities* 12, no. 3 (2005): 15–28; F. Fattahi Masrouf, F. Tondnevis and A.A. Mozafari, "Investigating of Leisure Time Activities in Female Students at Iran's Islamic Azad University," *European Journal of Experimental Biology* 2, no. 4 (2012): 1062–70.

³¹Tayyebeh Bakhshiniā, "Barresi-e Naghsh-e Edārāt-e Tarbiat Badani-e Dāneshgāhā-ye Zanjān Dar Nahve-ye Gozarān-e Oghāt-e Ferāghat-e Dāneshjūyān-e Dokhtar" (PhD diss., University of Tehran, 2004); Ehsani, "Level of Sport Participation for Women in Iran and Leisure Constraints"; Nasrollāh Farajollāhi, "Jāyghā-e Tarbiat Badani Dar Gozarān-e Oghāt-e Ferāghat-e Dāneshjūyān-e Dokhtar-e Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān" (Master's diss., University of Tehran, 1994); S. Seyyedzāde and M. Āghāpūr, "Barresi-e Mizān-e Alāgh-e Dāneshjūyān-e Dokhtar-e Sāken Dar Mojtame'-e Fātemiyyeh Be Varzesh," *Fashnā-meh-ye Pazhūhesh Va Varzesh* 2 (1999): 88–99.

³²B. Azizi, M.J. Farāhāni and M. Khabiri, "Barresi-e Naghsh-e Dāneshjūyān-e Sāken Dar Khābgāhā-ye Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān Be Varzesh-e Hamegāni," *Modiriāt-e Varzeshi* 2, no. 8 (2011): 75–91.

³³Sporting Equals, *Faith, Religion and Sport* (2009). <http://www.sportingequals.org.uk/PICS/Faith%20and%20Religion%20in%20Sport%20FINAL.doc> (accessed December 19, 2012).

³⁴European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Racism, Ethnic Discrimination and Exclusion of Migrants and Minorities in Sport. A Comparative Overview of the Situation in the European Union," 2010. http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1207-Report-racism-sport_EN.pdf (accessed January 10, 2013).

³⁵Tamás Dóczi et al., *Creating a Level Playing Field—Social Inclusion of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Sport* (Brussels, 2012).

to a decreasing participation at post-school age.³⁶ The researchers found that environmental and cultural boundaries determine young Muslim women's attitudes.

Similarly, a study on female Muslim students in Greece and England revealed that, although the students' attitudes towards physical education were positive, their participation in extra-curricular activities was very limited. The Greek Muslim female students did not mention religious or cultural factors as reasons for non-participation. The British respondents referred to cultural rather than religious barriers to their participation, particularly in relation to their gender.³⁷

De Knop et al. as well as Fleming and Khan also found that young Muslims do express positive attitudes toward sport, but routinely give religion a higher priority.³⁸ All such views are underlined by the results of a study on young Muslim Canadian women. What is noteworthy is that in discursively constructing "appropriate" physical activity spaces for them, young Muslim Canadian women make no appeal to a gender equity discourse that would make evident the fact that, within their communities, boys get more opportunities than girls.³⁹

In traditional Muslim societies attitudes and perceived barriers to sport can be quite different from those prevailing in western countries.⁴⁰ A study on the attitude of young female Muslim students in Jordan indicated that they hold positive attitudes towards participation in sport and exercise. Furthermore, they consider sport as having great significance and value in increasing leadership proficiency.⁴¹ However, concerning their low participation, parental influence dominates, and Muslim parents do not encourage their daughters at all in practicing sport, or taking up the option of PE in further education. In a study on female Muslim students in Pakistan, Khan et al. discovered that Muslim women had positive attitudes to sport and exercise and they would have liked to be involved in them. However, cultural factors forbade them to participate in sport.⁴²

Objectives

Given the special situation of female Muslim students concerning their participation in sport and exercise in Iran, including at Iranian universities, and the lack of research

³⁶Lynne Duval, June Sampson and Eunice Boote, *Perceptions of Local Women about Physical Exercise Provision in Shelton, Tunstall, Burslem and Longton* (Stoke-on-Trent: Staffordshire University, 2004).

³⁷Benn and Dagkas, "Young Muslim Women's Experiences of Islam and Physical Education in Greece and Britain."

³⁸P. De Knop et al., "Sport and Ethnic Minority Youth," *Journal of Comparative Physical Education and Sport* 17, no. 1 (1995): 12–23; Stephen Fleming and Noor Muhammad Khan, "Islam Sport and Masculinity: Some Observations on the Experiences of Pakistanis in Pakistan and Bangladesh in Britain," in *HPER—Moving around the 21st Century*, ed. Pat Duffy and Liam Dugdale (Champaign, IL, 1994), 119–28.

³⁹N. Jiwani and G. Rail, "Islam, Hijab and Young Shia Muslim Canadian Women's Discursive Constructions of Physical Activity," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27 (2010): 251–67.

⁴⁰Y.I. Qureshi and S.A. Ghouri, "Muslim Female Athletes in Sports and Dress Code: Major Obstacle in International Competitions," *Journal of Experimental Sciences* 2, no. 11 (2011): 9–13.

⁴¹Abu-Dalbouh, "An Investigation into Secondary Students' and Teachers' Attitudes towards the Teaching and Learning of Physical Education in Jordan."

⁴²Khan et al., "Female Students' Opinion about Women's Participation in Sports."

on the topic, this study focuses on this social group's attitudes to sport. The paper is based on research which was carried out with the objective to explore the attitudes of Iranian female university students to sport in the city of Tehran. Moreover, it is aimed to gain insight into the factors behind the students' attitudes, which, in many cases act as barriers to their participation in sport. The main research questions are as follows:

- What are the attitudes of female Muslim students to sport and exercise?
- What is the relationship between female Muslim students' attitudes to sport and exercise and the frequency of their participation in such activities?
- What is the relationship between female Muslim students' attitudes to sport and the level of education they are enrolled in?
- What are the major factors that affect the female Muslim students' the attitudes to, motivations for and participation in sport and exercise?

Methods

This study was conducted among female Muslim students enrolled at Tehran's universities ($n = 13$) in January 2013. In order to gain quantitative and qualitative data, a survey was carried out and in-depth interviews were conducted.

Survey method.

Sampling. The samples for the survey were selected from all of the female Muslim students studying at universities in Tehran ($n = 67,751$) by stratified random sampling. The data collection was conducted at each of the following universities in a four-week period; Allameh Tabatabai, Alzahra, Amir Kabir, Kharazmi, K.N. Toosi, Shahid Beheshti, Shahid Beheshti Med Sci, Shahid Rajaei, Sharif, Tarbiat Modares, Tehran, Tehran Art, and Tehran Med Sci. The major characteristics of the sample are as follows: $n = 1,120$; age range 18–40 (mean = 24.9; SD = 5.1); level of studies: BSc ($n = 580$; 51.8 percent), MSc ($n = 376$; 33.6 percent), and PhD ($n = 164$; 14.6 percent). The sample of this study represents fairly the total population according to university, the level of study, and religion.

Instruments and measurements. Based on the aim of the study, a questionnaire was created with two distinct parts. The first part requested demographic information, such as age, religion, educational level, and frequency of participation in sport and exercise (not at all, once, two or more times per week). For the second part, a revised and developed version of Kenyon's attitude scale toward physical activities (ATPA) was employed.⁴³ ATPA contains multiple sub-domains that reflect comprehensive components or functions of physical activity, and measures the attitude of

⁴³G.S. Kenyon, "Six Scales for Assessing Attitude toward Physical Activity," *Research Quarterly* 39 (1968): 566–74.

people within six dimensions.⁴⁴ This scale has subsequently been modified and used for various groups of people in several studies.⁴⁵

Statistical analysis. The descriptive and inferential statistics (t-test, MANOVA) were used to analyze the data.

In-depth interviews. In order to get a better insight, the quantitative data of the survey were supplemented by in-depth interviews ($n = 50$) with female Muslim students in different educational levels at all of the selected universities. The interviewees were asked about the following topics: frequency of participation in sport, their attitudes to sport and exercise, their leisure time activities and how their opinions influenced their participation in sport in a positive or negative way. The results of the interviews then underwent qualitative analysis, with primary focus on the potential barriers to sport and exercise as perceived by female Muslim university students in Iran.

Results

Participation in and attitudes to sport and exercise. Two-thirds of the students did not participate at all in any type of sport. 15.4 percent of them reported participating once a week, whereas 18 percent of them participated two or more times per week. The results indicate that they predominantly approach sport and exercise as hard and strenuous activities, which are not a source of pleasure. Sporting activity and exercise as tools for improving health and fitness are the second, whereas improving social interaction and communication with others is the third most important factor determining the female students' attitudes to sport and exercise ($p < 0.05$).

The results of the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for the frequency of participation in sporting activities and exercise indicate considerable differences

⁴⁴The questionnaire's dimensions: *social* (physical activity as a social experience: sports, games and other forms of physical recreation whose primary purpose is to provide opportunities for social participation—that is, to meet new people and continue personal friendships), *fitness* (physical activity for health and fitness: participating in physical activity primarily to improve one's health and physical fitness), *vertigo* (physical activity as a thrill but involving some risk: activities that provide some risk to the participant such as thrills and excitement through speed, acceleration, sudden change of direction, and exposure to dangerous situations), *aesthetic* (physical activity as beauty in human movement: activities which are thought of as possessing beauty or certain artistic qualities such as ballet, gymnastics or figure skating), *catharsis* (physical activity for the release of stress and tension: participation in physical activity to get away from the problems of modern living; to provide a release from pent-up emotions) and *ascetic* (physical activity as prolonged, hard, and strenuous training: activities which require long periods of strenuous and often painful training).

⁴⁵D. Clement, D. Brooks and B. Wilmoth, "Parental Attitudes towards Physical Activity: A Preliminary Analysis," *International Journal of Fitness* 5, no. 2 (2009): 1–11; W. Liu, J. Wang and F. Xu, "Middle School Children's Attitudes toward Physical Activity," *The ICHPER.SD (The International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance) Journal of Research* 3, no. 2 (2008): 78–85; J.M. Marthys and C.D. Lantz, "The Effects of Different Activity Modes on Attitudes toward Physical Activity," *Iowa Association of Health Physical Education, Recreation and Dance Journal* 31, no. 2 (1998): 24–6; A. Mozafari et al., "Tosif-e Negaresh Va Gerayesh-e Mardom Be Fa'aliathay-e Harkati Va Varzeshi Dar Jomhuri-e Eslami-e Iran," *Olympic* 49 (2010): 69–81.

between the students in their attitudes to sport and exercise, according to the frequency of their activity. Students who never participated in sport reported viewing sport as prolonged, hard, and strenuous training as well as an activity providing opportunities for improving social interactions, whereas those who participated two or more times per week in sport and exercise showed more positive attitude to sports as a tool for improving health and fitness, releasing stress and tension, participating in beautiful and artistic activities (e.g. ballet, gymnastics, figure skating), and as an activity including thrills, speed and risk than other students ($p < 0.05$). On the other hand, the results of the MANOVA revealed that students studying at various educational levels did not show differences in any of the attitudinal dimensions ($p < 0.05$).

Perceived barriers to sport and exercise by female students. The results of the interviews by the female students revealed some perceived barriers to participation in sport and exercise. Most interviewees reported having a good knowledge about the benefits of sport and exercise for the human body. They also seem to be aware of the moral and mental aspects of sport in human life. However, most respondents (73 percent) reported that they did not participate in any type of sport. They preferred to be involved in other leisure activities instead of sport:

I don't like to do the hard motions. Other activities, such as walking in the streets and window shopping with friends are more attractive for me.

I don't like to participate in sport, to be honest; I prefer not to eat any food for 10 days instead of participation in PA for one hour because sport is hard.

Students reported interrelated social, cultural, structural, and personal factors affecting their attitudes and, thus, their participation in sport.

Social factors. The negative attitudes of people in society to women's sport affect the sporting behavior of the interviewees. Female students also reported that their involvement in sport and exercise would be prohibited by the government based on some unwritten regulations:

People think that the women who are playing sport at the parks, or walking in the mountains with sport clothes (and with hijab) are too easy, or in a better situation they just think that those women lack religious beliefs.

We couldn't freely run or play sport in the street or parks because we are afraid the police officers arrest us. We have hijab but most of the times we don't prefer to play.

On the other hand, engaging in social interaction is reported by some of the students as a factor in favor of practicing sport and exercise, since it gives them an opportunity to see other girls in a different way:

I participate in gym in fitness class for showing my abilities (my body, my makeup, and clothes) to other girls.

My fitness class is like a fashion salon. Every girl wears good brand clothes. They come with good makeup. Before going to the fitness class, I usually take a shower and make my hair in good shape. Honestly, I don't go there for sport, I go there because that place is different from society. Music, dance, makeup, not hijab.

I have not heard about other social benefits of sport than meeting and finding new friends, wearing fashion sport clothes, learning about the new fashions in the media. We would have a good time there.

Cultural factors. The cultural constraints in women's sport in Iran are mostly related to the issue that people view sport as a masculine activity, suitable only for men. This concept very much affects the attitudes of families with female children. Most of the students reported that their families directly or indirectly prohibited their participation in sport, or put obstacles in the way of their involvement.

I really like biking from home to university but my brother doesn't let me. He doesn't like that people see it when I ride the bicycle.

My parents don't prohibit me to participate in sport activities, however, they don't completely support me, and in their idea sport is for men.

We don't have a gym in our neighborhood and my mother doesn't let me go to the gym which is far from our home. She always says play sport at home.

In addition, the families' lack of information about different types of physical activity and sports increases their negative attitudes to women's sport:

My mother prohibited me to participate in sport activities. She told me that if you participate in sports and risky and dangerous actions, such as gymnastics, you may lose your virginity.

Hijab (Islamic dress code). Another important factor which prevents female students from practicing sport and exercise is the Islamic dress codes. Participating in outdoor sport and exercise with the adaptation to this dress code is hard, especially during hot seasons of the year. Also, changing the hijab before and after activities is not pleasurable for the female students:

Physical activity with hijab is really hard for me. The body temperature goes up in that time because I must wear long sleeve shirt and long pants below my knees, and scarf (hijab).

I hate that I should wear the hijab after swimming and go back to the street in summer, the weather is hot and it is so hard for me, therefore I prefer to do other activities. I don't have a good feeling in sport, I hate sweating, and I even hate walking in high speed because I hate sweating. I wish I could walk or go jogging with sport clothes.

Some of the participants reported that hijab has a negative impact on their motivation to participate in sport and exercise, in spite of being unfit:

I don't care about the people's idea about my unfit body shape. Because, my body is covered by hijab and nobody can see it.

In this country the nice woman is who has a good face and good makeup, and good and fashionable clothes. Body shape and fit body are not important, because nobody can see it. It is covered by hijab.

Structural factors. The lack of sports facilities, the restricted times for women to use the existing ones, and especially the lack of adequate outdoor sports facilities suitable for women are the main structural factors affecting female students' participation in sport and exercise:

Sport is hard not only because of the nature of the activity but also due to the time when women can participate. Most of the gyms and clubs are open for women from morning until noon; it is difficult for me to participate because I have some classes at university.

Everything is for men in this country, if they had to participate in sport with hijab, and participate only in the morning, they wouldn't participate at all in sport.

Participating in sport with hijab is really uncomfortable especially in parks and nature and in the direct sun light. I wish we had special places for women sport in nature where we could play without dress codes.

Media. The media, especially TV programs, also have an impact on the female students' attitudes to sport and exercise. Several interviewees complained about the lack of proper information about women's sport, and the lack of coverage of various types of female sport competitions and championships:

TV doesn't show any sport programs about women. There are no educating programs related to women's sport. We have only a sport news program, five minutes a day, when the reporter reads the results of women's championships, without any image or video about that news.

I usually watch the scientific and medical programs on TV. There are only a few programs related to the benefits of sport for women.

Personal factors. Some of the students reported some intrapersonal factors affecting their attitude to and participation in sport and exercise. They mentioned laziness, the lack of sporting habits, and the impact of traditional and stereotypical ideas on them:

Honestly, I feel lazy for going to the gym ... oh, putting on clothes and hijab, after that going to the gym, putting on sport clothes, and finally, again putting on hijab ... it is awful. I wish I could go to the gym from home with my preferred sport clothes.

I don't participate in sport because I am afraid to gain too much weight when I leave sport.

Some of the married students reported that they participated in sport more frequently after getting married than before that time. They argued that their body shape is important for their spouse:

I have been married for 2 years. I go to the gym because my husband wouldn't like a fat wife.

I wouldn't like my husband to go to other women; therefore, I participate in fitness class to have a good body shape. Honestly, exercise is hard for me but I should participate.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that the majority of female Iranian university students have negative attitudes to sport and exercise; they do not practice them. In their view sport and exercise are hard and strenuous activities which are not pleasant, and are mostly associated with men. These findings do not support the results of some research conducted either in other Muslim or non-Muslim countries about the involvement of Muslim women in sport.⁴⁶ On the other hand, they are consistent with the findings of a few other studies.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Abu-Dalbouh, "An Investigation into Secondary Students' and Teachers' Attitudes towards the Teaching and Learning of Physical Education in Jordan"; De Knop et al., "Sport and Ethnic Minority Youth"; Fleming and Khan, "Islam Sport and Masculinity"; Jiwani and Rail, "Islam, Hijab and Young Shia Muslim Canadian Women's Discursive Constructions of Physical Activity"; Khan et al., "Female Students' Opinion about Women's Participation in Sports."

⁴⁷ Azizi et al., "Barresi-e Naghsh-e Dāneshjūyān-e Sāken Dar Khābgāhhāy-e Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān Be Varzesh-e Hamegāni"; Duvall et al., "Perceptions of Local Women about Physical Exercise Provision in Shelton, Tunstall, Burslem and Longton."

In recent years, many attempts have been made at universities to increase the participation rate of women in sport and exercise. Among other things, sports facilities were opened for their use, special recreational programs targeting women were launched, and women's championships in various sports were organized. However, in spite of all attempts, most female university students' attitude to sport and exercise did not become more positive, since their social, cultural, and religious environment has not changed. This issue can be considered from different perspectives. It is obvious that on the macro-social level the general attitude of Iranian society to women's sport is not positive. Several cultural and social restrictions are present in Iranian society which greatly contribute to the negative attitudes of female students to sport and exercise.⁴⁸ The main problems include: the survival of old beliefs, old values, norms, and traditions; the compulsory wearing of the hijab, the acceptance of legal inequalities between men and women in Iranian culture, the domination of males in most areas of society, the identification of sport as a masculine activity, and, as a consequence, the overall negative attitudes of people to women's sport.

The national media policy also contributes to the formation and the development of female students' attitudes to sport and exercise. All kinds of media in Iran, especially television, only cover men's sport. At the Iranian universities, in accordance with the mainstream electronic media, there is very little advertising covering women's sport. Consequently, female students are usually not informed about the possibilities for participating in sports activities. The fact that the research data do not show significant differences in terms of the level of education (BSc/MSc/PhD) indicates that the attitudes and/or awareness of female university students related to sport do not change as their studies progress.

Furthermore, women in Iran do not have any "role models" to admire.⁴⁹ In sport also there are no models such as female champions, famous and popular athletes, since the media only cover the training, competitions, and everyday lives of famous male athletes. As mentioned before, the only program related to women's sport on Iranian national TV is the brief sports news showing no pictures or videos of female athletes' performances and their sporting behavior.

The situation is similar also on meso- and micro-levels. The regional and local community sports organizations function on the basis of the dominant cultural principles in society and in line with them they do not really support women's sport. They do not ensure adequate sports facilities for women. The majority of sports facilities in Iran are used by men and women at separate times. The discrimination and inequality between men and women can be witnessed in the allocation of time for the sports facilities. Generally, the facilities are available for women only during the first half of the day, from morning until noon and for the other half of the day they are

⁴⁸S. Fathi, "Tabyyin-e Jāme'e Shenākhtī-e Moshārekāt-e Varzeshī-e Dāneshjūyān," *Pazhūheshnāme-ye Olūm-e Ejtemā'i* 3, no. 4 (2010): 145–73.

⁴⁹M.K. Shavarini, "The Role of Higher Education in the Life of a Young Iranian Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (2006): 42–53.

used by men. At the Iranian universities the division is different; most of the sports facilities are available to women two days per week.

Families in Iran also respect the prevailing cultural and religious values and norms; consequently most of them have negative attitudes to women's sport. Old beliefs and traditional bias against women's sport on the one hand, and inequality between boys' and girls' roles in the family on the other, also affect young women's attitudes to sport and exercise. Moreover, most families are lacking information about the true nature of sport, and their knowledge about the benefits of sports and exercise for women is deficient. These factors also hinder the proper shaping of the young women's attitudes. This explanation is supported by the interpretation of previous research results.⁵⁰

The support of families is especially important. Several studies indicate that women who participate in sport usually have greater social support from their family compared to non-athlete women.⁵¹ The positive attitude of families, especially men (father and brother) to sport and exercise would be crucial to enhance the participation of women at Iranian universities and in the wider society as well.⁵²

Finally, the analysis of the findings showed that the *social* aspects of sport have a different role in the Iranian society, and probably in other Islamic countries, than in the Western world. Many Iranian female university students prefer to participate in sport and exercise because it offers opportunity for social interactions. However, this general motivation has a special meaning here. Sport for Muslim women, at least practiced in closed halls, offers a scene where they have a chance for self-expression, to show their otherwise obligatorily hidden beauty (e.g. fit body, clothes, hair, makeup, etc.) to other women, without having to wear the hijab.

Conclusion

A universal picture seems to be widely accepted in the Western world about Muslim women's sport. In this paper an attempt was made to show the complexity of this issue. First, an unambiguous distinction was made between Muslim countries concerning their policy related to women's sport, which varies from ensuring free participation in all kinds of sport for women, through limiting their right to practice certain sports and to practice sports without respecting the Islamic dress code, to restricting women's involvement in many ways, especially limiting the places, the times, and the clothes they are allowed for sports and preventing them from competing in international elite sport.

⁵⁰ Abu-Dalbouh, "An Investigation into Secondary Students' and Teachers' Attitudes towards the Teaching and Learning of Physical Education in Jordan"; Pfister, "Women and Sport in Iran: Keeping Goal in the Hijab"; Naghdī et al., "Mavāne' e Farhangī Ejtemā'i-e Moshārekāt-e Zanān Dar Fa'āliāthā-ye Varzeshī."

⁵¹ Naghdī et al., "Mavāne' e Farhangī Ejtemā'i-e Moshārekāt-e Zanān Dar Fa'āliāthā-ye Varzeshī."

⁵² Fathī, "Tabyyin-e Jāme' e Shenākhtī-e Moshārekāt-e Varzeshī-e Dāneshjūyān"; Naghdī et al., "Mavāne' e Farhangī Ejtemā'i-e Moshārekāt-e Zanān Dar Fa'āliāthā-ye Varzeshī."

Then, on the basis of an empirical investigation among female university students, the contradictory nature of sports policy in connection with women was discovered in Iran, where, on the one hand, certain efforts are made to increase the proportion of women participating in sport while, on the other hand, a considerable proportion even of female university students is physically inactive for religious and cultural reasons. There are many kinds of barriers to sport participation perceived by female university students at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, but most of them are rooted in the prevailing cultural and religious values and norms and lead frequently to the women's negative attitudes to sport and exercise. This certainly has a negative effect on the efficiency of the programs aimed at increasing the sport participation of women. Although some female university students admit that they are lazy, it is obvious that their reluctance to be more active physically is not a personal failing but originates from the role expectations set up by Iranian society towards women. The source of the problem is that inequalities between men and women in Iranian culture are still accepted as an unquestionable fact.

The final conclusion of this study is that since sport is a mirror of society, there can be radical changes in women's sport only if the general attitude of Iranian society to women's sport changes, and both society and sport as a social institution are further modernized. Sport in Iran does not have to follow the Western pattern; it can preserve its national characteristics based on long traditions. However, the internal transformation of traditional views about gender roles is a precondition to women's enhanced participation both in society and sport.