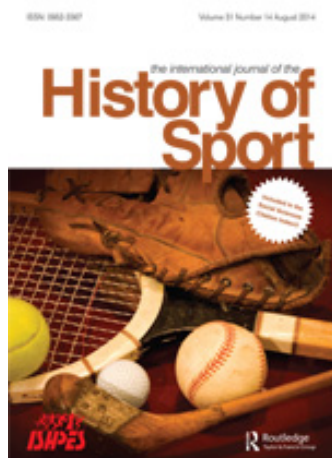


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### World Cup Football as a Catalyst for Change: Exploring the Lives of Women in Qatar's First National Football Team - A Case Study

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## World Cup Football as a Catalyst for Change: Exploring the Lives of Women in Qatar's First National Football Team – A Case Study

Kelly Knez<sup>a\*</sup>, Tansin Benn<sup>b</sup> and Sara Alkhaldi<sup>c</sup>

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In 2012, five Qatari women participated in a qualitative research study, which aimed to explore the negotiation of opportunity to be members of Qatar's first national women's football team. Qatar is a conservative Islamic country which is experiencing rapid modernisation. Part of this modernisation includes the increasing visibility of sport, for example the successful bid for the 2022 men's Football World Cup. In response to this bid, the first Qatari women's national football team was established in 2011. The project was positioned within a social constructivist framework. Five out of 12 squad members, over the age of 18, volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interview questions probed the women's experiences and influences on their opportunities and journey to membership in the national team. From a thematic analysis, issues such as the management of gender norms and the influence of significant others dominated the data. This research indicated that the women's agency enabled them to manage their situation with a range of strategies and to change attitudes towards women footballers. The winning of the bid to host the men's World Cup has been a catalyst for change in making spaces for Qatari sportswomen.

**Keywords:** Qatar; women; sport; Islam; football

### Introduction

The research was conducted during a period of rapid change and modernisation in Qatar, a wealthy and conservative Islamic country. Following the successful bid to host the men's FIFA 2022 World Cup, the first Qatar national women's football team was established, and alongside it a national-level football competition for Qatari women. The first members of Qatar's national women's football team were pioneers, in a country where female elite sport was still in its infancy. It was within this context that three women, two white 'western' and one Qatari, collaborated in a study to explore the lived experiences of the volunteer participants who were members of Qatar's first national women's football team. Cross-cultural research such as this poses particular challenges, and highlights the complexity of the process. Considerations included the necessity to understand the situation in terms of historical, social, political, economic and cultural context, and to plan with sensitivity the more practical issues of data collection and interpretation.

The paper is structured in three sections. The first section provides a contextual background to the research setting (Qatar) and locates the project within the current body of literature surrounding Islam, women and sport. This is followed by a detailed account of the theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning the study, including issues and dilemmas stemming from cross-cultural research. Finally, the voices of the five

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pioneering Qatari women are foregrounded in the themes arising from the data analysis. These are narratives surrounding (1) Qatari women's bodies: a contested site? (2) patriarchy: challenges and contradictions and (3) (re)constructing gendered norms and beyond the family. To conclude, the authors draw attention to the women's agency, support mechanisms and strategies that enabled them to negotiate, where necessary, their membership of Qatar's first national women's football.

## Context

### *Qatar – A Brief Overview*

Qatar is a wealthy conservative Islamic country, which is currently experiencing rapid growth and modernisation. The evolving trajectory of Qatar from a largely nomadic Bedouin society towards a knowledge-based economy has been purposefully orchestrated by the country's ruling family, and is credited to the visionary Sheik Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, previous Emir of Qatar, and father to Sheik Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, current Emir of Qatar.<sup>1</sup> With a total population of approximately 2.02 million,<sup>2</sup> of which only 12% are citizens, Qatar is facing extraordinary challenges in modernising while maintaining a strong national identity based upon traditional cultural beliefs and values. At the same time, the Qatari population is also experiencing an unprecedented rise in the rates of obesity and diabetes. This has been largely attributed to the shift away from a traditional diet to one based on poor nutrition and a change from the daily routines and regimes of tribal cultures to affluent, urban cultures, characterised by inactivity. Sport, used here as an umbrella term much like physical activity, presents itself as an attractive panacea to both the modernising project of Qatar and the current health status of its citizens.

Qatar has two guiding documents that outline the pathway for necessary changes required to shift from a petrochemical-based to a diversified knowledge-based economy by 2030.<sup>3</sup> While ambitious, these frameworks have been carefully constructed to allow for Qatar to develop holistically, accounting for principles of social justice and core Islamic values. Within these documents, sport is credited with the potential to 'act as an inspiration for an active and healthy society' and as an enabler for Qatar to achieve the aspirations of the Qatar National Vision 2030.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, using sport to facilitate nation-building is not new.<sup>5</sup> However, of particular interest to us, as feminist researchers, is the way sport has been positioned as an enabler for both family cohesion and women's empowerment, sitting alongside: economic diversification; population diversification and Qatari employment; environment and natural resource management; education and training; and health care. The importance of understanding the Islamic, Arabic, Qatari context and the positioning of women and sport within that situation was key to embarking on this study.

### *Qatar and Sport*

In 2010 Qatar was awarded the rights to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. While this event has gained the most international media attention in recent years, Qatar has been hosting international sporting events, including women's events for several years. More notable are the men's and women's international tennis events with the women's tournament known as the Qatar Total Open, a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) championship that has been held in Doha since 2001. Additionally, the Tour of Qatar cycling event, with the parallel Ladies Tour of Qatar, has been held since 2009. Despite this, however, it was only in response to the successful 2022 World Cup bid that the first Qatar national women's football team was established, and alongside it a national-level football competition for

Qatari women. It would seem that, in this instance, World Cup Football has the potential to act as a catalyst for change among Qatari women, in relation to their participation in formal organised sport at a national and international level.

Qatar is one of the last countries of the world to enter women in the Olympic Games, sending its first female delegation to the Summer Olympics of 2012. The position of women in Qatar is often viewed from the outside as one that is bound by religious and patriarchal constraint, reinforced by the invisibility of women from much of the international sporting world. From within Qatar, however, one starts to appreciate the enormous changes that Qatari women are experiencing and very often facilitating. Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Missned, mother of the current Emir, has been instrumental in driving change, creating real and tangible opportunities for Qatar women. Not only has Sheikha Moza positioned herself as a role model for Qatari women, but also she has driven the continuing development and expansion of Qatar's Education City, which is home to campuses of leading (western) international universities. The number of Qatari women graduating from university exceeds the number of Qatari men,<sup>6</sup> and Qatari women are increasing their visibility within the business world. Considering the enormous change that Qatari women have experienced in one generation, it is not surprising that their emergence on the international sporting stage has been delayed.

### *Islam, Women and Sport*

The women in this study identified themselves as Muslim and the Islamic context is pertinent to grounding the study. Globally, Muslim women have a long and rich history of participation in sport. There is documented evidence of the Prophet Mohamed challenging his wife, Aisha, to a running race, with Aisha winning and subsequently being challenged to a second race.<sup>7</sup> Participation in sporting activities is not un-Islamic and yet Muslim women do face discrimination and relative invisibility in the field.<sup>8</sup> Within the academic literature, Sfeir provided the first comprehensive account of women and girl's participation in sport and physical education across 29 predominantly Islamic countries prior to, and during, the 1900s.<sup>9</sup> Stemming from this seminal work was the identification of a formalised physical education curriculum for girls across all listed 29 countries. Although women's representation at the Olympic Games was low during this period, Sfeir highlights the strong presence of women at other international events such as the African, Asian, Arab and Mediterranean Games. Researchers have explored more recent accounts of Muslim girls and women's participation in sport including Canada,<sup>10</sup> Australia,<sup>11</sup> Asia,<sup>12</sup> Egypt,<sup>13</sup> Northern Europe,<sup>14</sup> the UK<sup>15</sup> and, in Benn et al.,<sup>16</sup> across 14 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Collectively, these accounts provide a rich appreciation of the diversity contained within Muslim women's experiences of, and participation in, sport. Understanding such diversity is complex.

The issue of Islam, women and sport participation has been examined by several researchers and authors including Islamic feminists, who have been engaged in a reinterpretation of authentic texts from a female perspective.<sup>17</sup> The consensus is that nothing in Islam prohibits girls' and women's participation in sport provided they are modest in dress. However, definitions of 'modest dress', the complexities of religion, cultural and political overlays, and differences in embodying faith in both public and private ways all influence diverse realities for Muslim women and sport around the world. There are multiple ways in which Muslim women can and do manage, interpret and negotiate religious and sporting identities in their sports participation. Examples include the Olympians of Morocco in western style dress, the elite athletes of Iran where the

wearing of hijab (head covering) is compulsory and the elite Muslim sportswomen of Turkey where the hijab is banned.<sup>18</sup> All of this indicates that any study of the lives of Qatari sportswomen should be approached with attention to the context, the time and place in which those lives are lived.

### *Qatari Women, Religion, Culture and Sport*

Understanding Qatari women's participation in sport is challenging due to the lack of empirical research that focuses solely on the Qatari population. It is important to note here that while Qatari women are both Muslim and Arab, their cultural values, practices and beliefs significantly differ from many other Arab countries and in many ways from neighbouring Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries. Much like the neighbouring GCC countries of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait, Qatari society is deeply rooted in both Islamic and tribal traditions. However, despite this, different processes of acculturation ensure that cultural and religious variations exist between these GCC countries, reflected in part through the way women from these countries engage in and with sport. While literature from Qatar is sparse, there is a small yet significant body of work that has been written by GCC women about GCC women's participation in physical activity, foregrounding the intersections of gender, culture and physical activity within the region and highlighting the multiple ways in which women negotiate this.<sup>19</sup>

Diversity of experience is in close proximity between Gulf countries. Al-Ansari<sup>20</sup> from Bahrain, with over 25 years' experience in sports leadership in her country, detailed the long history and pioneering women who helped to establish opportunities for girls and women in schools, communities and high-performance sport in her country. In contrast, Al-Sinani and Benn,<sup>21</sup> from Oman, described more recent nuances of Islamic and cultural influences on girls and women in sport in a country known as the most 'closed' country on earth prior to 1970. Provision of private spaces for participation has encouraged more Omani women to participate in sport; however, national and international competition have been more problematic because of the accompanying public visibility of women's bodies. Examples of international competition are evident from the early 1990s, with representation at events such as the Islamic Women's Games in Tehran and the GCC Women's Games, which started in Kuwait in 2008 (with a delegation of 62 from Oman). The unique feature of these types of events is that they 'meet' Islamically appropriate requirements that safeguard women-only spaces and employ female officials. The first female Omani Olympian was 16 years old when competing in Beijing in 2008, and while media and sponsors were very positive, there were differing views among Omani people about women's participation and, importantly, visibility at an international level. Such contrasting examples of sport participation in Bahrain and Oman indicate the necessity and challenge of understanding the cultural context of Qatar and the positioning of women in that society.

Discussions of Qatari women's participation in sport cannot be removed from the way women's bodies are positioned within local culture. Traditional Qatari culture reinforces the practice of gender segregation through the regulation of both space and the covering of women.<sup>22</sup> Government public-funded schools are all single sex, many institutions have separate facilities for men and women, and where separate facilities do not exist, separate lines for queuing and waiting are often present. Gender segregation is also practised within most Qatari families; for example, from the age of 11–13 years, a Qatari girl will begin to wear the abaya (long black coat-like garment), and some will continue to do so in the

presence of all males, except her father, her brothers and eventually her husband and sons.<sup>23</sup> As an outsider, this practice can be difficult to understand; however, the authors suggest that the abaya, and indeed the veil that is worn by many Muslim women, has become an overdetermined signifier of both identity and agency. As Dwyer illustrates,<sup>24</sup> the clothing of Muslim women (and the authors add Qatari women) is read through essentialised lenses that seek to explain the lived experiences of these women through a binary opposition between 'traditional' and 'western'. In this sense, for many outsiders, Qatari women are presumed to be oppressed – forced into submission through religion and patriarchy. As an insider, however, a veiled woman commands different treatment compared to the unveiled. She respects herself, she brings respect to her family and subsequently is afforded respect from those she interacts with in her day-to-day living. The abaya is also a signifier of social status, through which a Qatari woman can legitimise herself as a true citizen of her country, thus marking herself as different to the majority of expatriates who reside in Qatar. The practice of gender segregation through the regulation of space and clothing is not necessarily experienced as subordination by Qatari women, but rather as an expression of their power. That is, through the embodiment of dominant cultural practices, Qatari women are afforded symbolic belonging. Discarding the abaya and adopting sporting clothes could be seen as a challenge to Qatari women's sense of belonging and to the expectations of others. Similarly, stepping into more public visibility, through media coverage of sporting events, for example, may also be seen as challenging the *status quo* and the embedded symbolism of belonging as Qatari women.

The complexity of local Islamic, Arabic, Qatari culture, and the position of women and sport in that context, has been explored to underpin key understandings for the study. Such situational knowledge was considered vital to ensuring appropriateness of theoretical and methodological grounding for the design, implementation and interpretation of the research into the experiences of Qatari women in the country's first Women's National Football team.

### Theoretical Considerations

Embedding the study in social constructionism focuses on the constructions of meaning and the influences of significant others in the lives of the Qatari women in the first national football team. The socialisation process is a means of acquiring identity shaped by the situation in which we live. This is learned through developing *cultural* understanding, including gendered roles, values, beliefs and behaviour. Culture refers to deep internalisation of ways of being and seeing the world. Many describe the concept as shared assumptions, values, beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and communicative codes operating at many levels; culture is learned.<sup>25</sup> Figurational sociologists such as Norbert Elias<sup>26</sup> would describe cultural influences as contributing to the constant state of flux in the ongoing and dynamic process of identity formation. In his theory, Elias described the complexity of multiple layers of identity and how individuals manage this in relation to context. For example, in the course of a day a woman might define herself as mother, friend, daughter, wife, athlete or worker. Prominence of identity affects the 'unwritten' rules of behaviour, such as dress codes, use of language and rituals of interaction. Goffmann<sup>27</sup> referred to this as the 'Presentation of self in everyday life'.

Learned cultural identity both shapes and is shaped by living, and is the means by which people come to understand the world around them and their place within it. Culture has an interpretive function for members who belong to the group, which bring particular meanings and ways of seeing.<sup>28</sup> Schools, families, sport and religion are all imbued with

cultural significance through which traditions and practices are both transmitted and transformed. It is in culture that meaning is reproduced, and when influences from different contexts overlap there can be conflict. For example, contested views of the body, performativity, visibility, discipline and control permeate many cultures,<sup>29</sup> including Qatari society. Rapid modernisation is ensuring traditional and Islamic customs and practices inherent in Qatari culture are constantly challenged by globalisation and westernisation.<sup>30</sup>

Garrett<sup>31</sup> described bodies as both 'inscribed with and vehicles of culture'. This is significant when seeking to understand the sport participation patterns of Qatari women, where control of the body may be contested between traditional Islamic and western sporting cultural contexts. For example, the women in this research have entered the modern game of football, which has its roots in the west and as a 'man's game', all of which could be problematic for the first Qatari women to make a national team.

Bourdieu<sup>32</sup> uses the term 'habitus' to describe aspects of culture which explain how people imbue life customs, preferences, tastes and behaviours. It is a term that explains similarity and difference, insider/outsider positions and the spaces in-between these extremes, recognising deep internalisation of ways of being and seeing the world. Elias<sup>33</sup> used the term in a slightly different but not contradictory ways. He referred to 'individual' and 'social habitus', the latter meaning 'self- image' and social make-up, the learned accomplishment of using the body in socially acquired preferred ways, body techniques, internalising an individual make-up that is shared with certain others and that 'grows out of the social script': '... cultural knowledge is a matter of *habitus*, which cannot be acquired except by living'.<sup>34</sup> The experience of being within the group gives members a frame of reference that permeates, often subconsciously, every facet of people's lives. It would take much time and insight for any outsider researcher to begin to develop understanding when crossing cultural boundaries. The life experiences of the two western researchers started to take them down this path. It was the Qatari researcher who, with her habitus, brought cultural validity in terms of cultural knowledge, language skills and nuanced understandings and interpretations of the lived experiences that Qatari women negotiate within and across time and social spaces, within their country.

In underpinning the study with social constructionism, the authors aimed: to avoid unhelpful comparisons of the lives of the Qatari women with those of Muslim women in different social, economic and political situations; and to acknowledge the centrality of context in shaping and reshaping the women participants' experiences as members of Qatar's first national women's football team.

### Methodological Considerations

Initially, two white western women discussed the possibility of a study focusing on the life experiences of Qatari women football players. However, the polarised life experiences of researchers and participants would be criticised by some as problematic. Indeed, the researchers were conscious of the potential problems, for example linguistically, culturally and in assumptions about relative freedoms of women in sport. A collaboration of insider/outsider researchers was developed to work through the dilemmas presented in inter-cultural research. A partnership with a Qatari researcher was initiated during the early stages of the study to improve the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. The methodological issues presented in this project are not unique. Relatively recent concerns in social science research, particularly in developing countries, have focused on issues of power and decades of inappropriate research designs, methods and



interpretations by white, western researchers crossing cultural boundaries.<sup>35</sup> The core concern is the ‘... institution of research, its claims, its values and practices and its relationship to power ... as an institution of knowledge that is embedded in a global system of imperialism and power’.<sup>36</sup> Ways of working collaboratively with communities across cultural boundaries have proved more successful in increasing understanding of different realities.

It was with commitment to sensitivity of context and the importance of insight into the culture and values of people in Qatar that the two white, western (UK and Australia) researchers and the Qatari researcher embarked on a collaborative study. The Qatari colleague brought many skills: the ability to communicate in Arabic (Qatari dialect) and English, to undertake face-to-face interviews establishing greater confidence with insider knowledge of cultural meanings and to help with translation and interpretation. The biographies of the white researchers are also key to rationalising the study, one having lived and worked in the country of Qatar for five years, the other having spent time as a researcher in neighbouring Oman and other Middle East countries including Syria, Libya, United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Such life experiences can lead towards a global mindset, which includes sensitivity to cultural diversity, ability to exchange ideas and concepts across borders and balance local and global needs. According to Marquardt,<sup>37</sup> these characteristics are essential for those who work across national and cultural boundaries in the twenty-first century. In collaboration, the three researchers embarked on an interpretive, qualitative study to increase understanding of the life experiences of women in the first Qatari women’s football team regarding sport and gender, culture, religion, family and social interplays.

Why are such studies of interest internationally? Because so little is known about Qatari women nationals, their lives, the role of sport and the interplays of gender, culture and religion in what might be described as one of the more progressive GCC countries in the field of sport.<sup>38</sup> The recent successful sporting bids, the hosting of mega sporting events and the development of Al Jazeera Sport are carving Qatar a place within the global sports community. While this is forward-looking in some ways, acceptance onto the world stage of sport also requires scrutiny of gender equality and human rights issues related to opportunities for all in the sport area.

### ***Insider/Outsider Researcher Debate***

The current methodological position of collaboration between insider (Qatari)/outsider (western) researchers was chosen to counter the criticisms of outsider researchers crossing international and cultural boundaries, for example: ‘The “outsider-researcher” is a social intruder, and there is a serious need to explore its implications for cross-cultural research’.<sup>39</sup> Shah<sup>40</sup> acknowledges that all qualitative research has an intrusive dimension but that there are particular issues for ‘outsider researchers’ who choose to move across multiple boundaries to seek understanding of lives that are different to our own. These can include differences of ethnicity, religion and nationalities between participants and researchers, where life experiences, patterns of perception, values and beliefs that influence meaning and behaviour are polarised. For the two western researchers conducting a study in Qatar, the context would be described by Barna<sup>41</sup> as a ‘difference-based’ context. Most problematic in difference-based studies are potential problems of power differences which can disadvantage the researched by failing to recognise the significance of history and situation, for example the white/black experience, young/old, able-bodied/disabled, Muslim/non-Muslim. While any cross-cultural study raises

epistemological and ontological questions for the researcher, failure to embark on the journey closes the possibility for development of global knowledge.

The reality of today is a world of uncertainty, in which our lives are increasingly interdependent. The effects of politics, war, instability and poverty connect all people in some way, even across commonly called 'divides' of East/West, Global North/Global South countries. For that reason research needs to cross multiple boundaries but with emotional intelligence that centres on respect: '... it is about travelling sensitively, judiciously, continually being aware of your limitations, reflecting critically ...'.<sup>42</sup> A cultural affinity or at least sensitivity and awareness of difference in choice of strategy and its use are required in attempting cross-cultural research.<sup>43</sup>

There needs to be realism as there are aspects of other cultures and lives that are accessible and some that are not, for all researchers. To borrow Kluckhohn and Murray's dictum (modified to avoid the now sexist language related to 'man'),<sup>44</sup> there are layers of ways of 'knowing' about any other human beings, because each one of us is in some way: like all other people; like some other people; like no other person. Researching from a position of 'sameness', where some characteristics are similar such as language, cultural background, age and sex, or 'difference', both have advantages and disadvantages, for example in the ability to be detached and objective for insider researchers and the challenge of gathering and interpreting data from the outside. Hence collaboration of insider-outsider researchers in cross-cultural studies offers a way forward in terms of genuine partnership, shared ownership, exchange of skills and shared problem-solving. Such a strategy can push boundaries of knowledge with sensitivity, hence the approach chosen for the Qatari women footballers' study. This is not a new idea but remains underdeveloped in the field of qualitative sport research.

## Method

The interpretive paradigm, through which the multiple realities of Qatari women footballers and their subjective experiences could be realised, was the starting point for the study.<sup>45</sup> The paradigm is premised on the understanding that social meaning is based in human action, that people are not just passive recipients of external actions but are creators of their own realities, interacting and interpreting the world in which they live. A qualitative method using in-depth interviews<sup>46</sup> was considered the most appropriate approach to capture Qatari women's accounts of their life experiences leading to their selection for the national football team.

Central to this project was the importance of disrupting western assumptions and values, legitimising local contextual knowledge and practices, and working with and alongside local communities. As previously discussed, working with a Qatari colleague was central to this ambition. Before any research data collection commenced, appropriate approvals from within the Qatari community were carefully negotiated and sought. This included permission in principle from the president of the Qatar Women's Sport Association, support from the captain of the team and also support from the head coach (a non-Qatari woman). It was only after these conversations and meetings were had, and approval letters signed, that the two co-researchers who were located in Qatar, attended a competition game by invitation of the head coach. Concluding this game, in the changing rooms, both co-researchers met with 12 eligible participants (over the age of 18, and holders of a Qatari passport), to discuss the project in detail. This was an important opportunity for the participants to understand the cross-cultural nature of this research. Transparency was essential in order for the participants to fully understand the realities of

the study that while a Qatari woman would be conducting the interviews with them, non-Qatari women were also significantly involved with this project and would be working with the life stories they shared with the Qatari interviewer.

Five young women agreed to participate, provided consent, and followed through with the interviews. Participants were interviewed by the Qatari female co-researcher about their opportunities and experiences leading up to, and during their membership within the team. Interviews lasted from 35–50 minutes in duration, and were conducted at a location convenient to the participant. Topics explored during the interview included: cultural attitudes towards girls and women playing sport in Qatar; individual experiences with sport and football; people who were influential in their sporting development across time; the intersection of religion and local culture with women's sport participation, and perceptions of the effect of Qatar winning the world cup on Qatari women. Interviews were conducted in local Qatari dialect and transcribed and translated into English by the interviewer. Ethics for this research project was approved by Shafalla Ethics Board, Doha, Qatar.

The Qatari co-researcher conducted the initial data analysis, by shaping and sharing personal narratives of each of the participants with the co-researchers. Here she also highlighted individual differences and common themes emerging from the interview transcripts. The thematic approach was chosen because it offered an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative. The process involved identifying patterns of consensus and contradiction in the data and inductive and deductive analysis.<sup>47</sup> Initially a detailed discussion between the three authors was held where taken-for-granted cultural assumptions were questioned and contextualised. The interview transcripts were then re-read, and coded along the themes outlined by the Qatari co-researcher. In addition to this, the researchers also worked with a small number of Qatari women who, as critical friends, reviewed sections of the manuscript. These efforts were included to improve the validity of the research. The researchers were conscious of their own understandings of the world and the way they have been shaped by their own histories. Merita Meta<sup>48</sup> captures such concerns in her reflections on research in New Zealand: 'We have a history of people putting Maori people under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define'. Cognizant of the power to 'define' the experiences of the participants in this study and the context in which they lives; the premise behind co-collaboration and extended reviewing of the paper was an attempt to substitute a western lens for that of the community at the center of the study.

The themes that emerged through the analysis of data shape the following results and discussion and are: (1) Qatari women's bodies: a contested site? (2) patriarchy: challenges and contradictions and (3) (re)constructing gendered norms and beyond the family.

## **Outcomes and Discussion**

### ***Qatari Women's Bodies: A Contested Site?***

The social construction of women's sport for Qatari women, and the conservative boundaries that contain it, are maintained through a complex interplay of religious and cultural norms that are blurred and often contradictory. All of this affects the socialisation of Qatari girls in terms of dispositions towards participation in sport and physical activity. The 'regulations' surrounding Qatari women's engagement in physical activity vary from family to family, as does the 'source' of such regulations. For some families a conservative interpretation of Islam reproduces beliefs regarding participation, while for other families, cultural norms and values are more dominant than religious.

In Qatar the hijab is worn in public and the women in the study discussed how they resolved the combining of religious and sporting identities through adoption of the hijab and modest dress codes. All of the young women in this study identified Islam as being supportive of Muslim women's participation in sport on the condition that conservative clothing, including the hijab,<sup>49</sup> was adopted. As Aljohara and Noora explain:

Aljohara: Honestly, I know a lot of people with a negative point of view about girls playing sport, they don't accept it.

Interviewer: This rejection, is it from a cultural perspective or because of Islam?

Aljohara: Customs and traditions, and half (of the community) say it is not allowed in Islam.

Interviewer: We are in a conservative society and as Qatari girls wearing hijab do you feel we can play sport and respect our religion, customs and traditions?

Noora: Yes of course! If she loves the game she can play football and respect her religion and customs and traditions. At the end we are Muslims and we shall respect our religion, and that is what we are doing now – we are wearing conservative clothes when we are playing.

Interviewer: The rejection of girls playing sports, is it from a cultural perspective or because of Islam?

Noora: Customs and traditions – if they look at it from an Islamic perspective, we can convince them easily that we will be wearing conservative clothes.

Such views concur with the literature on Islam, sport and women and the experiences of others, for example in Iran and Bahrain, choosing to, or being required to, embody religious and sporting identities. In Qatar the learned social script of the participants resulted in choices to be modest in dress code in public situations to safeguard their identities as Qatari women in a context that imbues such symbolism. They regarded this as a way of persuading wider Qatari society that it was possible to be 'good' Qatari women and sportswomen, that is modest and covered while participating, thereby seeing themselves as opening possibilities for others to follow.

The Qatari participants managed cultural and religious clothing requirements and gender organisation issues for women's participation in sport according to public or private spaces. For examples, they adopted the hijab when competing in a public forum and therefore when they would be visible to men. In private, 'male-free' zones, such as their training ground and for some competitions, they discarded the hijab and full-length arms and legs covering in favour of western style kit, shorts and tee shirts, with no hijabs. Such private spaces were usually an outdoor football pitch that was protected from the 'male gaze' via both a high solid wall and security measures that enforced a ban on men entering the space, as well as mobile phones and cameras. Public/private gender enactment was occurring, which not only facilitated, but also sustained participation in competitive football for the women in Qatar. As with the Omani women and the necessity for 'safe-spaces' discussed earlier, dress code management, embodied in learned social habitus, was an essential strategy for safeguarding Islamic and cultural principles to enable women's participation in that societal context.

More challenging to the participants was the negotiation of media interest and coverage of both membership in the team, and performance in international competitions. While most Qatari women enjoy full participation in public life, deep attitudes still prevail regarding women's appearances within the media. While photography is becoming more acceptable (e.g. newspapers, advertising, billboards), recordings that capture movement of the body, for example during training or competition, are still considered taboo:

Bint Alzaeem: ... and a lot of families refuse (girls/women playing) because football is a famous sport and matches will sometimes be aired on TV.

Interviewer: ... what does your family think about (you playing) sport? Your mother and your father?

Aisha: At the beginning my family didn't accept me playing football as you will be photographed, but they saw how much I loved being a part of the club, and they allowed me later on to play.

Zainab: They (parents) didn't refuse the idea of me playing football with the national team ... they refused the idea that I would be photographed for newspapers or to be on TV ... they encouraged me to play football as long as it is not serious.

Although the media was identified as something that required careful negotiation, it was not always portrayed as a constraint. The participants spoke in various ways about the struggles the team had in gaining legitimacy within the Qatari community, not only in terms of acceptance of women's participation, but also for others to view the team as a genuine international team. The media was identified as a potential facilitator for community acceptance.

Interviewer: Do you feel that the media encourage the women's national football team?

Aljohara: Yes, for sure. In every trip (away) we have media personnel that will interview us and take photos.

Interviewer: How has the World Cup coming to Qatar changed Qatari women's sport? Is this change positive or negative?

Bint Alzaeem: Positive.

Interviewer: Do you feel that the media is supporting the women's national football team?

Bint Alzaeem: Yes, it supports the national team, for example we have been photographed for 2022, and also they write about our team.

Interviewer: How can we change this idea of (cultural) rejection?

Aisha: If families see us on TV wearing conservative clothes, they will be encouraged, a lot of people and mothers have told us that.

Through agency, as membership of Qatar's first women's national football team, the women in this study were using the media to enhance both the credibility and professional status of the team. Despite strong cultural taboos surrounding the photography of Qatari women, the participants in this study were able to negotiate actively shaping the reporting and visibility of their achievements by engaging with the media. They also became skilled in persuasion where there was family resistance to media exposure. They were extending their skills and becoming agents of change by engaging with media processes in a positive way, aspiring to open possibilities for other Qatari girls and women and to challenge and change negative cultural attitudes towards women and sport in Qatar.

In summary, culturally, Qatari women are considered to be 'carriers' of the values and belief systems within society, and the honour and respect of their tribe/family. Tensions arise when possibilities exist for this to be compromised and the first Qatari women footballers risked compromise by entering new and publically visible territory. This is further complicated with the blurring of boundaries between religious and cultural practice. Despite this, however, the young women in this study were able to skilfully position themselves, from within, in such a way, as to challenge these boundaries without disrupting religious norms, and by pushing the boundaries and taboos surrounding cultural

beliefs and media constraints. While the families were key contributors to shaping the women's identities the women participants were also agents of change, using persistence and persuasion to change negative attitudes towards women's participation in sport. Gaining the support of their families was the enabler that became essential to the women's success as they faced much community opposition as is seen in the following section.

### *Patriarchy: Challenges and Contradictions*

Patriarchy runs deep within Qatari society, a legacy of a complex tribal system spanning well over a thousand years. Within this system, strong gender roles are assigned to both men and women, with men typically holding positions of authority within the family, and the community more broadly. Marriage can also change life expectations and possibilities for Qatari women. These culturally reproduced gender roles also shape how values, attitudes and behaviours are developed in young Qatari women, for example in terms of dress codes, rituals of faith and cultural expectations including gender positioning. Again this reflects the significance of socialisation into specific gender roles and expectations, including into ways in which women's bodies are predominantly private entities and cultural demands for women to uphold family honour through body modesty are maintained. Such patriarchal values are disrupted when Qatari women move into the public sphere of sport, particularly football, as a space seen globally and historically as a place invented by, reserved for, and maintained by men.<sup>50</sup> Speaking of encouragement in the field of sport for women, and football in particular, Noora said: '... in sport yes, football no ...'. It is a space that women in all countries have had difficulties breaking into. All of the participants in the study spoke of the negative perceptions of women and sport held by many members of the Qatari community, as illustrated by Bent alzaem and Noora here:

Interviewer: Before the World Cup bid win, what attitudes did Qatari women have about Qatari women playing sport?

Bint Alzaem: People rejected the idea of girls playing football. The majority refused and rejected the idea (of) girls playing sports and especially football. Some of my aunts said that sports are not for women, it is only for men, but I told them sports are not only for men and we can play too ... I faced negative people, but I didn't care as long as my parents and uncle were supporting me. It was my aunts who refused the idea of me playing as it created a bad reputation for girls, but I 'told' her that playing football is a hobby.

Interviewer: How did you convince her?

Bint Alzaem: I told her that I don't care about what people are saying and that I am playing football in my conservative clothes.

Noora: My brothers ... my eldest brother is a bit afraid of my reputation, as some people think that if a girl is playing football she is 'boyah' (like tom-boy) ... he knows I love football. He doesn't want me to stop playing, and I see him coming sometimes to my matches.

Within the text above it is evident that the footballing women faced much opposition, from men and women within and beyond their families. Opposition was linked to concerns of masculinisation and the perpetuation of patriarchal values of female-appropriate activities which did not include sport. Justifications of negativity centred on fears of the women developing a 'bad reputation', meaning being identified by others as not conforming to dominant notions of dress codes, modest and appropriate behaviour. This reflected how deeply family honour was invested in women's bodies and the importance of preserving propriety by adherence to socio-cultural norms and gender hegemony. State moves to

bring sporting events, including international women players, to championships in Qatar are changing attitudes towards traditional gendered notions of physicality, masculinity and femininity but the greatest struggles and successes are by these emerging Qatari women who are making changes from within and finding ways to negotiate issues of patriarchal and cultural resistance by pushing the boundaries.

While the participants were faced with patriarchal assumptions about their participation in sport, it is important to note that not everyone was 'against' their membership in the national team. Eventually all of the women had a strong supporting network behind them who not only approved of their membership, but were also active 'enablers'.

Interviewer: . . . besides school, clubs and home, what other factors have influenced you?

Bint Alzaeem: Home, even if I didn't go to the club, I will be playing with my brother and I really benefit from his experience as he is a football player.

Interviewer: First, what does your family think about sport, for example, your father and mother and sisters?

Noora: They all support me, when I was playing athletics they attended all my games without me asking them to come. And my father is my biggest fan as he is an athlete, used to play football, and also my brother . . . we are an athletic family . . . even at home we don't watch series or any other programmes, we will watch matches or any programme related to sports. There is no rejection that a girl can't play football.

Interviewer: What about your uncles and aunts?

Noora: They also support me, for example if they saw my photo in the newspaper.

Interviewer: Who else encouraged you (to play football)?

Aisha: My grandmother – may her soul rest in peace. She convinced my mother and brothers.

In summary, for the young women, active enablers consisted of mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, sisters, brothers and grandmothers. It was through the support of these significant others that opportunities arose for the participants to both engage in physical activity, and join the national women's football team. Support mechanisms included verbal support, practising with brothers, family members convincing more resistant members to support the women and attending matches. Experiences were diverse generationally and across genders, each family network moving through its own path to being significant supporters. For example, older members convincing younger members and men supporting the women by participating in practices together.

While systems and social structures within Qatar are patriarchal in nature, it is evident from the voices of the young women presented that gendered attitudes towards women's participation in sport are not fixed or static. Challenges to negative attitudes came from within, from the young women themselves, and through the support of significant others, who consisted of both genders, and were represented across three generations. This notion of challenges from within the Qatari community is important for the existence, success and sustainability of the national women's football team.

### ***(Re)constructing Gendered Norms and Beyond the Family***

Opportunities for variations within gender constructions are limited within Qatar, and especially so for Qatari women. As we have explored, gendered norms among Qatari's are maintained through both cultural and religious expectations surrounding what a woman 'should' be. Although cultural expectations surrounding gender are tightly controlled and maintained, they are, in Elias's terms, in a constant state of flux. Indeed, as we have

demonstrated above, opportunities exist for gender reconstructions within culturally sanctioned boundaries. Such possibilities create the spaces that enable sustained and ongoing modifications to the way gender is enacted, especially within a sporting context.

Part of this sustained change thus far has been possible in the lives of the women participants because of the tight support network surrounding each of the participants, such as parents, siblings and aunts/uncles and grandparents, as demonstrated through the talk of the young women. Of course success also can be attributed to state sanctioning in the first instance to create a women's national football team, indicating approval for such a venture at the highest levels. Beyond the immediate family network there have been powerful influential people who have also been key to facilitating the women's lives as Qatari footballers.

Positive school experiences from teachers were influential, supporting Al-Sinani et al.'s<sup>51</sup> indication that school-based provision in Qatar was strong in relation to the rest of the region:

Aljohara: ... I started from when I was little. I played gymnastics, football, everything ... the memory I really love is when I was younger the school gathered all the girls from different sports handball, football, athletics ...

Bint Alzaeem: My best memory is when I was playing with my friends in school and we could play different sports.

Other significant people included their previous coach who, as a non-Arab/Muslim woman, worked to ensure the players respected their culture and religion through encouraging prayer at scheduled times, relationship building with parents, and working towards understanding the players lived experiences beyond the pitch: '... she is more than a coach, she is a friend to us ... she cares a lot about us ... she is really supportive ...' (Noora). Additionally, and instrumental to the participants' perceptions of their success was Ahalm Almana, President of the Qatar Women's Sport Committee.<sup>52</sup>

Bint Alzaeem: ... she always supported us to respect the logo that we are wearing and to behave in a good manner as we are representing our country and everything we will do will affect Qatar.

Her Highness Aljohara, wife of the current Emir of Qatar, was also viewed as a positive influence for her support through attendance at some of the matches played by the women: '... just by coming to our matches that was a huge support from her' (Bint Alzaeem). The support of both immediate social networks and higher-ranking individuals ensured that the young women were not viewed as dissidents within society. This enabled the participants to slowly change the way gender is performed, what gender can 'look like', without being viewed as a threat to Qatari society.

Other ways in which the participants were initiating change from within was through role modelling, or presenting real and lived alternative possibilities for young Qatari girls and women. This notion of being a role model was important for the participants, with a particular focus on the idea of being able to demonstrate to other girls that they can play football, while still following customs and traditions (through the adoption of conservative clothing). Indeed this is a theme that permeated the data set as a whole.

As is evident in the following comments from Aisha, the prospect of 2022 and Qatar's hosting of the World Cup was viewed as positive and all participants' aspirations were modest: '... hopefully they will be better than me by then ...'; and cautious: '... if any girls want to join the team hopefully their parents will accept it ...' (Aisha). Nevertheless, they were aware of their unique positioning and the responsibilities that come with it. They



were also aware that the women's game in Qatar in no way paralleled the men's in terms of social status, resourcing or national approval.

In summary, reconstructing gender norms within cultural boundaries was happening in the lives of the Qatari women footballers interviewed. They recalled the foundations of their roots of their enjoyment in positive school-based experiences in physical education and sport. Their abilities to continue as agents of change were reinforced by the support of significant others in the family and also in the hierarchy of women and sport in Qatar, notably Sheikha Aljohara and the Qatar Women's Sport Committee. Such support enabled and legitimised the footballers in their efforts to reconstruct notions of Qatari women.

In terms of Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup, participants were hopeful of more opportunities for Qatari girls and young women in the future. They wanted to be positive role models. They did not conceal the cultural constraints around parental permission for girls and women in a patriarchal society when it came to competition and public recognition; especially in traditionally male-dominated sports like football, and where women were married. In their journeys to become members of the first Qatari women's football team they had experienced opportunities and constraints created by both men and women, young and old, but the immediate family context was the most important support mechanism for the continuation of their efforts to pursue the sport they loved.

## **Conclusion**

This research indicated that the women's agency, support mechanisms and strategies enabled them to negotiate, where necessary, their membership of Qatar's first national women's football team. There were no patterns of consensus regarding gender stereotypes of male domination, highlighting the interplay between cultural and gendered complexities. Participation required individual negotiation, as revealed in each woman's narrative, as they countered acquired notions of gendered expectations of Qatari women through the socialisation process. The women had to challenge societal expectations, cultural norms and behaviours, and devise ways in which they could pursue their sport and maintain their 'Qatari' identities. They negotiated their own spaces in order to gain approval in the process of becoming 'Qatari women football players'. They did this by balancing their participation within the Islamic requirements of dress codes and expected gendered behaviour in public/private spaces.

Qatar is moving through a period of rapid modernisation. Men's sport is well established and the international public face of Qatari sportswomen is in its infancy, with the first Qatari women Olympians appearing in 2012. It is worth noting that western women have struggled for equality in sport for well over a century, including in the modern Olympics after Pierre de Coubertin banned the participation of women in the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. Although much has improved for women in sport internationally, there are still difficulties, particularly in traditional male sports like football, in terms of gaining equity, for example, in terms of social approval, resourcing and media coverage. The Qatari women's struggles are compounded by the rate of changes catapulting the nation into global view. The world the young Qatari is born into is vastly different to that of his or her parents, aunts and grandparents, yet there are efforts to retain Qatari cultural distinction alongside the ongoing process of modernisation. Globalisation challenges this and has ensured increasing awareness of opportunities among the Qatari population. The processes of meeting and resolving tensions, as evidenced in this study, are inevitable. The Qatari women who participated in the study have built on the breakthroughs of all women who have challenged inequality in sport and

are to be commended for creating and sustaining new spaces for the aspirations of Qatari girls and women. They have become part of Qatar's history of women and sport and, in that sense, winning the bid to host the men's World Cup football championships in 2022 has already been a catalyst for change.

Acknowledging the limitations of this study, it remains the first to capture the voices of Qatari women footballers. A culture of participation in research is not yet established in Qatar, and published qualitative research with (and by) Qatari women in the field of sport remains scarce, making the value of this study significant in terms of the collaborative learning processes. Importantly, the study opens up areas for further research and offers reflections on approaches and processes of conducting research that will provide greater depth of insights in future qualitative studies in Qatar.

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### Notes

1. During 2013, Sheik Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani abdicated his position to allow his son, Sheik Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani, to take up the position of ruling Emir. This was the largely anticipated and culminating result of purposeful succession planning between the previous and current Emir.
2. See <http://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm>
3. Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016: Towards Qatar National Vision 2030, Qatar National Vision 2030.
4. Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 (2011, 196–203).
5. Amara, *Sport, Politics and Society*.
6. See Al-Misnad, "The Dearth of Qatari Men." The author here is not to be confused with Sheikha Mozabint Nasser Al Missned, mother of the current Emir.
7. Hadith Book 14, Number 2572.
8. Jawad, Al-Sinani and Benn, "Islam, Women and Sport."
9. Sfeir, "The Status of Muslim Women."
10. Jiwani and Rail, "Islam, Hijab and Young."
11. Knez, "Being Muslim"; Palmer, "Soccer and the Politics."
12. Mitra, "Challenging Stereotypes."
13. Walseth and Fasting, "Islam's View."
14. Strandbu, "Identity."
15. Dagkas, Benn and Jawad, "Multiple Voices."
16. Benn, Pfister and Jawad, *Muslim Women and Sport*.
17. Sfeir, "The Status of Muslim Women"; Daiman, "Women in Sport"; Jawad, Al-Sinani and Benn, "Islam, Women and Sport."
18. El Faquir, "Women and Sport"; Koushkie Jahromi, "Physical Activities"; Koca and Hacisoftoglu, "Religion and the State."

19. See Benn, Pfister and Jawad, *Muslim Women and Sport*, for examples.
20. Al-Ansari, "Women and Sports."
21. Al-Sinani and Benn, "The Sultanate of Oman."
22. In this context, covering occurs through the national dress for women (the long black abaya, or coat-like garment, over the body, and sheila wrapped around the head) and men (long white thawb over the body, with the ghutra held in place by the ogaal on the head). Social sanctions, however, are not as severe should a man choose not to wear the national dress in certain contexts.
23. This practice will vary from family to family, depending on adherence to religious and cultural practices. For example, some Qatari women will also 'unveil' in front of uncles, father-in-laws, etc.
24. Dwyer, "Veiled Meanings."
25. Dahl, "Intercultural Research."
26. Elias, *The Society of Individuals*.
27. Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self*.
28. Dahl, "Intercultural Research."
29. Shilling, *Changing Bodies*.
30. Al-Sinani et al., "Exploring Provision and Practice."
31. Garrett, "Gendered Bodies," 141.
32. Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."
33. Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 182.
34. Shah, "The Researcher Interviewer," 569
35. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.
36. Ibid., ix.
37. Marquardt, "Successful Global Training."
38. Al-Sinani et al., "Exploring Provision and Practice."
39. Shah, "The Researcher Interviewer," 564.
40. Shah, "The Researcher Interviewer."
41. Barna, "Stumbling Blocks."
42. Haw, "Exploring the Educational Experiences," 329.
43. Shah, "The Researcher Interviewer," 558.
44. Kluckhohn and Murray, in 1948, cited in Mennell, "The Formation of We-Images."
45. Blaikie, *Designing Social Research*; Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.
46. Robson, *Real World Research*; Thomas, *How to Do*.
47. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis"; Joffe and Yardley, "Content and Thematic Analysis."
48. Meta, "Merata Mita On," 30.
49. Islamically speaking, hijab refers to the complete attire a Muslim wears to maintain modesty, such as long sleeved pants and shirt, and head covering. In practice, there is much variation in how 'hijab' is both defined and adopted. Here authors are referring to arms, legs and hair covered.
50. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*.
51. Al-Sinani et al., "Exploring Provision and Practice."
52. In 2013, Ahalm Almana was also the recipient of the IOC World Trophy for outstanding contribution to the development of women's participation in sport and sports administration.

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