

2018

Uncovering the Evolution of Hijabs in Women's Sports

Kristen J. Cook

Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/grad_rev



Part of the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cook, Kristen J. (2018) Uncovering the Evolution of Hijabs in Women's Sports. *The Graduate Review*, 3, 62-67.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/grad_rev/vol3/iss1/13

Uncovering the Evolution of Hijabs in Women's Sports

KRISTEN COOK

Introduction

The use of veils or hijabs among women in Islamic cultures can vary depending on the specific location in the world or the beliefs of different Muslim families. The reference to hijabs can be found throughout the Qu'ran, the religious text of Islam, especially in Verse 33:53 "a'yah" (verse) of the hijab "when ye ask [the Prophet's wives] for anything ye want, ask them from before a hijab: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs" (Ruby, 2016, p. 56). This verse is one of many suggestions in the Qu'ran for Muslim women to wear hijabs to "veil" or "cover" themselves from other men aside from their family members or husbands. In terms of the definition of hijabs in society, 19th-century scholar William Lane described his exposure to hijabs during his many years in the Middle East as "a thing that prevents, hinders, debars, or precludes; a thing that veils, conceals, hides, covers, or protects, because it prevents seeing, or beholding" (Ruby, 2016, p. 55). Although wearing a hijab during certain activities, such as sporting events, could appear as an obstacle, the Qu'ran does not suggest that

Muslim women refrain from participation in sports but instead promotes a balanced life. With this understanding of the religious connection between Muslim women and hijabs, as well as the general message of the Islamic religion for a balanced life, one must next look at society's perspective for Muslim women's inclusion in sports while wearing a hijab.

In today's society, Islam has become a dominant religion in many countries, as have the cultural traditions that many Muslim men and women follow. According to an article in *The Muslim World*, "Muslims have become visible actors not only in sports but also at school and at work, in big cities and smaller towns" (Ali, 2005, p. 515), encouraging the prevalence of women wearing hijabs in a variety of different settings. A study featured in the *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* researched the perceptions and opinions of 15 Arabic-Muslim women in Malaysia toward their involvement in physical activity and sports. The study included surveys with a list of questions related to sports involvement and possible reasons why the women may not participate in sports. The results from the study showed that 14 out of the 15 participants responded with a positive aspect to liking sports, "However, this study found that the culture (ethnic) that includes parents, dress code, and family is the main reason [that] prohibited them from sports participations" (Sofian, Omar-Fauzee, & Abd-Latif, 2010, p. 370).

Problem

The research in this study will feature the evolution of hijabs in women's sports across the world in

terms of players' safety and sport associations' regulations for recreational, collegiate, and professional athletes.

Player's Safety And Sport Association Regulations

For some athletic associations, the regulation against wearing a hijab falls under the rule against wearing any headpiece to encourage players' safety. The idea of a hijab or another head scarf becoming unwrapped could pose the risk of strangling the individual wearing it, or even the possibility of other athletes slipping on the hijab if it were to fall off during a sporting event. Officials in Canada imposed strict regulations for young girls in recreational sports to reduce the risk of injury while wearing hijabs. In Montreal, a girl wearing a tae kwon do was asked to leave a tournament because five out of the six girls on the team were wearing headscarves and refused to remove them (Montgomery, 2007). In Calgary, a fourteen-year-old girl was ejected from a soccer game for the same reason of refusing to remove her hijab, along with an eleven-year-old girl in Winnipeg who was removed from a Judo competition. According to the head of the legal committee for Judo Canada, Telly Mercury, a change from an international level within different sports will have to be made regarding the hijab. According to Mercury, items like the hijab cannot be taken "for safety gear and try them out on young people. You have to have some research done on it and all the rest of it, like they do for hockey helmets" (Montgomery, 2007, para. 13).

For high school athletes in many schools, the ability to wear a hijab during sporting events is up to

the National Federation of State High Schools Association (NFSHSA), which prohibits headwear, with the exception of medical, cosmetic, or religion-related garb that has been approved by the state, following documented evidence of a need for the headwear. In March 2017, high school student Je'Nan Hayes was removed from a regional final basketball game in Gaithersburg, Maryland, due to an official's strict adherence to the NFSHSA's guidelines (Lynch, 2017). Hayes, a junior at Gaithersburg High School, had played 24 games that season leading up to the finals with no issue regarding her hijab, until the referees for the regional title requested authorization for the headwear, as stated by the rulebook. According to Bill Reinhard, spokesman for the NFSHSA, "the officials made a strict interpretation of the National Federation of State High Schools' playing rules for basketball instead of the spirit of the rule designed to ensure safety and competitive fairness" (Lynch, 2017, para.11). However, a set of consistent standards and guidelines for all officials to follow could defer the issue of wearing hijabs during sporting events altogether.

For professional athletes, the exclusion of hijabs in sports has reduced participation for many individual players and teams in advanced playing fields. In 2010, the Iranian women's soccer team was faced with a dilemma of not participating in games due to their inability to wear hijabs, as enforced by the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Singh, 2012.). In an attempt to avoid wearing a hijab, while still following the Iranian law of covering their hair, ears, and necks, the women's football team

opted to wear caps on their head and turtlenecks under their uniforms. Although this option for coverage did follow Iranian law, it did not follow the regulations enforced by FIFA, and the team was forced to forfeit an Olympic qualifying game against Jordan. The Iranian team's then central midfielder, Katayoun Khosrowyar, described the regulation as an ultimatum, "Either we take it off or we don't play, and obviously no one will take it off" (Singh, 2012, para. 8).

By 2012, FIFA had lifted its ban for women wearing hijabs during soccer games, creating new opportunities for female soccer players to compete in the London Olympic games. Along with FIFA, other international sporting associations have adjusted their regulations to allow hijabs in the 2012 Olympics. In 2011, the International Weightlifting Federation allowed females athletes to cover their arms and legs, as well as the option of wearing a hijab during competitions. Other athletes embraced the new regulations such as judo player, Wodjan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim, and Saudi Arabian runner, Sarah Attar, as well as countless other athletes who were able to compete in the games for the first time while wearing a hijab (*Guardian*, 2012).

According to The International Basketball Federation (FIBA), athletes are prohibited from wearing any "equipment (objects) that may cause injury to other players", including a hijab (Blumberg, 2016, para. 2). This regulation prevents any headwear from being on a professional basketball court, including other religious-related garb such as turbans or yarmulkes and also prevents many talented players from being on a

professional basketball court, as well. *The Huffington Post* recently reported the global efforts being made to adjust the regulations to include such headwear as an exemption from the previously stated rules by FIBA. According to *The Huffington Post's* article, the Council on American-Islam Relations (CAIR) has been working with female Muslim basketball players, as well as members of congress, to find a solution for FIBA to lift the ban permanently (Blumberg, 2016). In 2014, as an attempt to find a compromise, FIBA agreed to a two-year trial period in which players were able to wear hijabs and silk turbans during selected competitions. Unfortunately, the trial period ended in August 2016, and a final decision was not made in time for female basketball players to wear hijabs at the Olympic games. CAIR's National Communications Director Ibrahim Hooper expressed that "The only determining factors for athletic participation should be skill and hard work, not what is worn on one's head", while FIBA refused to comment to *The Huffington Post* regarding the article (Blumberg, 2016, para. 6).

Attempted Solutions

Although many athletic associations around the world are making adjustments to their rules pertaining to the inclusion of headwear on the playing field, some athletes are having to modify their athletic choices to include hijabs regardless of sport regulations. For example, United States' Olympic fencer, Ibtihaj Muhammad, chose fencing as her sport for the fact that she could cover her head and wear her hijab during fencing matches, since all athletes must cover their faces with fencing uniforms to participate in the matches (*Guard-*

ian, 2012). Although this option may have benefitted Muhammad as far as choosing a sport that she excelled in, some female athletes may not be as successful and should have the opportunity to try other sports without their hijab being a concern. For some athletes, the inability to wear a hijab could restrict them from participating in any sport, which is why a consistency among sporting standards and some type of compromise could adjust the inclusion of hijabs in different sports across a variety of playing fields.

In June, 2017, a high school in Portland, Maine became the first known secondary school in America to not only allow the use of hijabs among student athletes, but to embrace the head wear by offering a school specific hijab to match their team uniform. The movement to include hijabs within the school's athletic teams was introduced by the two captains of the school's tennis team, Anaise Manikunda and Liva Pierce, who began an online campaign to fundraise money to have the hijabs custom made for the school's athletes (Payne, 2017). Although neither Mainkunda or Pierce are Muslim, both students found the inclusion of hijabs among student athletes to be so necessary that they chose private fundraising for the additional cost to avoid any possible controversy among taxpayers due to the religious representation connected with hijabs. The attempt by the high school students to include hijabs for their classmates to wear during sporting events not only increased a concept of inclusion but also increased players' confidence during games due to the performance-based design of the headwear.

Such attempts to include the hijab and other headwear in sporting events has become more attainable with the efforts made in March, 2017 by athletic wear giant, Nike. Nike initially partnered with the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) as the main company for products and marketing as well as apparel, footwear, and equipment for FIBA's largest competitions, including the FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup (Davidson, 2017). This release of the Pro Hijab opens doors for many Muslim women who may have not previously competed in any sports simply because of the concern that may have lied within not being able to wear a hijab during athletic events.

Since developing the Pro Hijab, Nike has wasted no time in sharing the new standard in athletic wear for Muslim women with the Winter Olympics as a showcase. Twenty two-year-old figure skater Zahri Lari qualified for the Olympic games in 2017 as the first Emirati competitive figure skater, as well as the face for the Nike Pro Hijab (Murdoch Smith, 2017). Lari was featured in *Vogue* magazine, Nike photo shoots, and even a Nike commercial to demonstrate the beauty and athletic abilities that can be associated with hijabs in sports. When describing the Pro Hijab, Lari explains her reaction, as well as other Muslim women's reactions, as "so surprised and happy to see such a large company, like Nike, do something like this to cater specifically to Muslim athletes." (Murdoch Smith, 2017, para. 4).

Conclusion

Nike's designs and attempts such as those made by the

high school tennis team captains to provide hijabs for all female athletes could broaden the playing fields of all female sports while simultaneously broadening the inclusion of all female athletes. The revision of sporting associations rules and regulations could be the next step to create a consistent set of guidelines for sporting officials to follow in order to increase opportunities for athletic success for young girls playing on recreational teams for fun, as well as grown athletes who have worked their way to the Olympics. The religious connection between the hijab and the women who wear them can make a hijab seem like a part of daily life and even a part of women's personalities, in general. Including equipment, such as the Nike Pro Hijab or other performance based hijabs could adhere to Muslim women's beliefs while still reducing the risk of injury for athletes, so that Muslim women can participate in sports as any other female athlete would. The goalkeeper for Jordan's national soccer team, Reema Ramounich, provided a determined comment for athletic equality pertaining to women wearing hijabs with her statement, "I'm not thinking about what I'm wearing, and what kind of message I'm trying to reach the people. I'm only there because I love this game, and I want to play"(Singh, 2012, para. 16).

References

- Ali, S. (2005). Why here? Why now? Young Muslim women wearing Hijab. *The Muslim World*, 95, 515-530.
- Benn, T., Pfister, G., & J. Haifaa (Eds.) (2011). Muslim women and sport. *International Studies in Physical Education and Youth Sports Series*, 24.
- Blumberg, A. (2016, August 11). What is the Hijab and why do women wear it? In *Arabs in America*. Retrieved March 7, 2017.
- Davidson, K. A. (2017, March 7). Nike Pro Hijab gives important validation to Muslim women athletes. In *ESPN*. Retrieved March 21, 2017.
- G2. (2012, July 24). Women: Let the games begin: Allowing Muslim women to compete in hijabs inspires girls to play sports *Guardian* (London, England), 13.
- Lynch, J. (2017, March 16). Hijab rule keeps junior from playing in regional title basketball game. In *CNN*. Retrieved May 12, 2018.
- Montgomery, S. (2007, December 3). Sports groups debating whether hijabs are a hazard. *Globe & Mail* [Toronto, Canada], A11.
- Murdoch Smith, L. (2017, December 1). Nike Pro launches the first sports Hijab with UAE ice skater Zahra Lari. *Vogue UK*, 16.
- Payne, M. (2017, June 8). Maine high school reportedly first in U.S. to provide Muslim athletes sport hijabs. In *The Washington Post*.
- Ruby, T. F. (2006, January). Listening to the voices of hijab. In *Women's Studies International Forum*,

29(1), 54-66.

Singh, V. (2012, March 03). Rules board to consider ending ban on hijabs. *The New York Times* (1923-Current File).

Sofian, M., Omar-Fauzee, U. P. M., & Abd-Latif, R. (2010). The perspective of Arabic Muslim women toward sport participation. *J Asia Pacific Studies, 1*, 364-377.

About the Author

Kristen is pursuing her Master of Science in Adapted Physical Education program in the spring of 2018. Her research proposal was completed in the fall of 2016 under the supervision of Dr. Deborah Sheehy, who introduced her to the many different approaches to research. She completed her undergraduate degree in December 2017 and began a Master of Education in the Special Education program in the spring of 2018.