

The Expression of the Hijab in American Sports Culture

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Abstract: Many sports in the West, specifically in American culture, permit religious symbols and practices. Yet Muslim women have been subject to discrimination, bigotry, and disrespect for wearing or wanting to wear a hijab. This study uses philosophical theory, data, and cultural information to explore the stigma behind Muslim women in America and their participation in the sporting activities that are held here. This piece explains how the hijab's true meaning is dismantled through American culture and the religious meaning behind it, argues why it should be allowed in sporting events, and suggests ways to prevent discrimination against Muslim women who just want to play the sports they love.

Keywords: Religious freedom, diversity, Islam, Muslims, women, sports

Introduction

Picture this: it is a crisp fall day, and your soccer team is getting ready for its state championship game. Right before the game begins, your coach gathers your team into a huddle to begin a prayer. No one questions it; everyone follows suit because in your household, praying before anything is normal. After this prayer session, the game begins, but is quickly halted after one of the refs asks a Muslim girl from the opposing team to remove her headscarf. He says it violates conduct and is a distraction to himself and other players.

How is this okay? How is it possible that a whole team can vocally express their faith, but this Muslim girl cannot even do it silently? For many years, this has been the harsh reality for many Muslim women, and as a result, this topic has become even more complicated to navigate. The focus on gender equality, religious tolerance, and cultural awareness have changed minds and made the world more respectful, empathetic, and understanding.

In sports, however, there have been many restrictions on who can/cannot play, what is allowed in gameplay, what religious beliefs are socially acceptable, and more. For Muslim women, specifically, the wearing of the hijab has been frowned upon in the world of American sports. In many countries and cultures, the hijab is understood to be a symbol of beauty, expression, peace, and grace. Yet too often in the world of sports, people view the hijab as a restrictive mechanism, one that might get in the way of proper and fair gameplay. As a means of religious expression, it is important that the hijab is allowed in all sporting activities. Although some see athletics and religion as separate entities, and although there is a common misconception of the true meaning of the hijab in American culture, I believe the hijab is a form

¹ A special thank you to professor Kilgallen, for pushing me beyond my limits. This piece has helped me find a joy in writing, and I am so grateful to be able to share it with all of you.

of religious expression for Muslim women; it is important that they are able to live their faith, while also being able to play the sport they love.

The intersection of sports and religion has existed since the first civilization. Scientists argue that primitive humans have been playing sports for centuries, when belief systems were embedded in society. These primitive humans revolved their physical activity around their religious beliefs, and evidently these two entities were bound to clash to some degree. As humanity advanced and society became more inclusive, it became clear that religion and sports have significant overlap. If the expression of religion represented ideals about Christianity and pushed for an extremely American nationalistic agenda, it was supported in sports. In other words, the expression of Islam on major sport platforms (up until recently) was a big no-no.

Twentieth century America was a prosperous time in the world of sports: baseball dominated the nation, and Americans of all ages were eager to come together to experience the familial aspect of the fanbase. On the other hand, this was a complicated time for men and women of color, Muslims, and more. Basically, anything that did not fit the white, Christian, male stereotype of the era was seen as lesser than. Nowadays, this idea has been completely transformed (to a certain extent) as more Muslim women (and women in general) participate in sports. As religious tolerance grows and more people become inclusive of other differences, it is more accepted for women to play sports with their hijab, but some argue that it promotes the wrong message.

Many non-Muslims, according to “National Geographic,” say the hijab “is a political statement,” one that might contradict its true meaning; when in reality, it is a symbol of “modesty: that will make for greater purity” (Qur’an), allowing Muslim women to wear the badge of their faith proudly and openly wherever they may be, whether it be at the grocery store or on the soccer field. While it is evident that Muslim women are being included more in American society, it does not necessarily prove that their participation in sports is not affected by the hijab or their personal (and religious) decision to wear it.

The Cultural Divide of the Hijab

For many years, the stigma behind Muslim-Americans has been relevant, but these feelings were of course intensified during this current century as the war on terror began to dominate politics. Because of the political intensity, the identity of Islam has been masked, with many Muslims feeling lost, useless, and unable to fit into modern American society. Much of the negative connotation that comes with the hijab is a direct result of this cultural divide, as many Americans feel it oppresses women, leaving them misunderstood from its true meaning (Droogsma).

This idea is seen in drastic numbers with respect to sports; as more Muslim women join sports, the cultural divide between Americans and those of Islamic faith has increased, and many Americans are clearly not in favor of allowing the hijab in sports. According to a survey from Tylt, 34.4 percent of participants believed that hijabs should be banned from sports, as they “are a

symbol of oppression,” and although 65.6 percent believed hijabs should be allowed in sports, this does not eliminate the other vast groups of people who believe it should be banned. The recurring problem seen over time with respect to this issue is the cultural aspect: many people see the hijab as an automatic gateway to oppression, although the Qur’an and those of Islamic faith say differently.

Of course, there are potential safety concerns in physical activity with someone having anything on their head (including helmets, which have caused numerous injuries over the years), but most people, as shown, do not see safety as the number one cause for banning the hijab. It is clear that it is a means of misunderstanding and lack of inclusivity of Muslims in American culture and one that prohibits this example of religious freedom and self-expression.

Fashion Expression in Sports and Religion

Clothing, uniforms, garments, headpieces, and more, are major components of expression in the worlds of religion and sports. The idea of fashion, in and of itself, has been a means of representing identity for centuries, and this is no different in today’s time period. Items that were used long ago still have the same relevancy in today’s society, whether they are used in sport, religion, or everyday life. Although such items like a soccer uniform and a winter scarf are extremely different, their innate ability is to express and relay some sort of message to others. A soccer uniform might be tight fitted in order to help an athlete move easier, whereas a winter scarf is big and fluffy in order to keep a person’s neck warm in the cold. This simplistic idea can be transferred to the hijab as well, for it is an article of clothing used to express one’s faith.

Of course, the feelings that come with the hijab in American culture affect those who wear it proudly every day, even if clothing items give insight to one’s identity and self-expression (Johnson, Lennon, & Rudd). Sports, however, should be an open playing field where athletes from all over can wear whatever they want while being able to play the game they love. “It is at the intersection of fashion, sports and self-expression that a great story can be shared,” according to Madison Hager of “The Intersection of Sports & Fashion: A Platform for Expression.” This, unfortunately, has not been the case for many Muslim women across the United States as their hijab has been prohibited from many sport games.

This is a problem, but the root of it lies in the cultural atmosphere in this country, and the only way to fix this is to be more inclusive of those who are different. According to Kristen Cook, writer of *Uncovering the Evolution of Hijabs in Women’s Sports*, many schools are becoming inclusive of the hijab in sports by encouraging athletes to wear it, even if they are not necessarily Muslim; this helps to break the barrier set by American culture that puts the hijab in a separate category from sports. Even though the role of the hijab is symbolically religious, this project set forth by these schools shows that any article of clothing can be present in sport games, especially if there is religious meaning behind it.

Religious Dimensions

The hijab is a part of the ethical dimension of religion, the one that focuses on behavior in the living world. The ethical dimension uses the idea of ritual and worship in order to promote religious beliefs and practices.

Religious aspects, like the hijab, are inevitably a part of the moral code, or ethics, of that particular religion. For Christianity, many Americans (and even those across the globe) are more open to seeing its religious symbols, whether it be a cross around someone's neck or rosary beads hanging in someone's car; Islam does not receive this luxury. For Islam, it is required for Muslim women to wear the hijab because it is a symbol of purity, as spoken about in the Qur'an; this is an ethical rule that they must follow.

Likewise, because the hijab is inevitably a symbol of Islam, it falls under the material dimension of religion as well. This dimension focuses on materialistic aspects of religion that aid in representing beliefs, rituals, worship, and practice. The physical components of one's faith, (in this case, the hijab), fall under this category and are resources that allow people to connect with their beliefs in a palpable way. The concept of free religion is specified in American culture, as it is a facet of the First Amendment. While it might be true that America stresses the importance of religious tolerance, it does so to a certain extent, as Muslim women are subject to discrimination in games and events. This is a direct result of American culture being misinformed and uneducated about the true meaning of the hijab.

The True Meaning of the Hijab and Philosophical Theories

Because many people in American society attach negativity with the hijab, it is important to understand the true meaning of it from a religious aspect and how it helps shape the identity of many Muslim women. The Qur'an describes the hijab as a form of modesty; it is something that allows Muslim women to feel pure, clean, and untainted. Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychology, explained religion in simple terms: "[religious people] place great emphasis on doing things in a patterned, ceremonial fashion; [they] also feel guilty unless they follow the rules of their rituals to perfection" (Pals 64). Here, Freud says that patterned behavior is almost innately necessary in religion because it causes people to feel some sort of guilt if they are not following the rules of their religion. This is the case with the hijab as it is a major asset to the rules and regulations that Muslim women must follow, according to the Qur'an. Freud goes on to discuss the ideas that relate to human behavior: he says, in basic terms, that following religion would ultimately provide a reward for accepting the societal expectations of the world. This idea, again, shows how the meaning of the hijab coincides with religious beliefs, and is not, as most Americans think, a subjectification or oppression of women. The true meaning has often been masked by cultural shift, change, and divide, and as more people become educated, this can be eliminated. Freud's interpretation of religion, along with the other people discussed in Pals'

novel, help educate those who are not confident in their knowledge about other cultures, religions, and beliefs.

Like Freud, many other philosophers had their own interpretations of religion that relate to the meaning of the hijab. Émile Durkheim, famous sociologist, explained religion as the establishment of values that help people show unity through a group, according to Pals. The monograph also explains Durkheim's intense feelings about religious symbols: they give people a sense of identity. Muslim women feel connected to their religion through their headscarf; the hijab gives Muslim women their identity, helping them to express who they are.

Freud's view, along with Durkheim's, demonstrates how important the hijab is on a social, religious, and personal scale; their inclusion in American sporting events is necessary, for it makes Muslim women who they are. The true meaning of the hijab is not only a symbol of modesty as the Qur'an explains, but also a symbol of identification; it connects Muslim women to their beliefs in a non-verbal way. When this idea is misconstrued, it leaves room for segregation, bigotry, and discrimination to occur against Muslims, particularly in sports, where many women are targeted for their headpieces.

Potential Solutions

In recent years, many efforts have been made in order to help Muslim women feel included in the world of sports. Because the hijab is a religious symbol, more people are becoming tolerant to allowing it in games, activities, and events. Although there has been some progress, this is still a major issue that affects Muslim women all over the United States.

In order to combat this issue, large corporations like Nike have designed a hijab that is fit for athletics, making it easier for Muslim women to practice their religion freely while eliminating the stigma behind the possible safety precautions of the hijab. Emily Dawling, author of the article, "The Sports Hijab Dividing Opinions," explores this invention on a larger scale and demonstrates how it gives Muslim women an even greater opportunity to be included in sporting events, saying, "little steps in improving access to sports for Muslim women...can only be a good thing." The inclusion of a sport-friendly hijab makes it easier for Muslim women to perform without the excuse of it being a safety hazard because with this specific hijab, *it is designed for athletics*. In Dawling's article, it is clear that there has, of course, been much backlash towards Nike for this invention:

Some say the brand is gaining limelight where other companies have been pioneering for years, and some say that by catering to the market for modest wear and modest fashion, the brand is normalizing, even supporting female oppression.

Yet the religious reasoning behind the hijab is not an oppression of women, as many in western culture believe; rather, it is a symbol of purity. Of course, numerous people feel indifferent on this subject, but the Qur'an explicitly states the true meaning of the hijab, with many women attesting to its validity, is a form of empowerment that helps Muslim women feel confident and

comfortable in their own skin. The veiling of the hijab is something sacred and personal to Muslim women, and with an invention like the sport-friendly hijab, it makes it easy for them to practice their faith while participating in American sports.

Zeina Nassar, a German boxer, proudly wears the sport-friendly hijab. This hijab is perfect for physical activity and prevents any safety hazards due its tight fitted material. Zeina, along with other popular Muslim athletes, such as figure skater Zahra Lari, runner Manai Rostom, weightlifter Amna Al Haddad, and fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad support the hijab promoted by Nike because it allows them along with other Muslim women to feel confident in their skin while playing their favorite sports; likewise, it allows them to express themselves through their religious beliefs.

To these athletes, this is a significant landmark in sport history because it eliminates the stigma behind the hijab and promotes inclusivity: "It means the world to have the leading sport brand in the world come up with a product like this," Rostom said. "It's not just speaking to athletes but speaking to the whole world that Nike supports all athletes to literally go out there and Just Do It" (Stanglin). Nike has taken great strides to eliminate the long-standing feelings towards Muslims and the hijab, and their work in regard to the sport-friendly hijab has made many Muslim women feel included in physical activity and in American sports.

Conclusion

Inclusion, acceptance, and tolerance are integral to a free society. As cultural norms change, the world learns to become more diverse, colorful, and fluid. Sporting events should be collective and inclusive ways to get physical exercise or be entertained. The hijab is a representation of religion and should not be prohibited when it comes to sports.

The major issue with the conflicted feelings about the hijab in sporting events is the fact that there is a lack of understanding in American culture; many Americans are uneducated on the true meaning of the hijab, making it easier to discriminate against and bully those who are Muslim. This is seen specifically in sports, with women being subjected to religious intolerance and bigotry. As people learn more about other nations and start to focus on the essence of human life, this barrier can easily be broken, and sporting activities will be a place of harmony for all walks of life. Both religion and athletics are major factors of societal structure and can work together when the barrier within culture is eliminated.

The beauty of sports is represented through skill, hard work, talent, and participation; it does not see the hijab. As famous Muslim athlete Amna Al Haddad said: "Sports can't tell whether you're Muslim, Jew, Christian, Arab, African American, Atheist or one's sexual orientation. It knows talent, whether you can perform or not. This is what makes sports beautiful" (Dawling).

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