

Gender Participation and Islamic Guidelines in Sports

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Abstract

Gender participation in sports within Muslim societies is shaped by the interaction between contemporary athletic practices and Islamic ethical principles. Islam promotes physical activity, health, and strength for both men and women, recognizing physical well-being as an essential component of a balanced life. However, sports participation is guided by Islamic guidelines that emphasize modesty, dignity, privacy, and moral conduct. These principles influence how gender participation is structured, particularly in relation to dress codes, gender interaction, and the sporting environment. The foundations of Islamic perspectives on sports participation through references to the Qur'an, Hadith, and scholarly interpretations, while also addressing the distinction between religious teachings and culturally imposed restrictions. It explores challenges faced by Muslim women and men in accessing sports opportunities, especially in professional and competitive settings influenced by global norms. The discussion highlights contemporary adaptations, including modest sportswear, gender-segregated facilities, and inclusive policy frameworks that aim to align religious observance with active participation. Islamic guidelines do not inherently restrict gender participation in sports but rather provide an ethical framework that can support inclusivity and empowerment when applied with contextual understanding. Thoughtful interpretation and policy development can help create equitable sports environments that respect both religious values and gender participation.

Keywords: Gender participation, Muslim societies, harmonize, globalization, Islamic ethical principles

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Introduction (Tamheed)

Gender participation in sports is a significant issue in contemporary Muslim societies, where modern athletic activities intersect with Islamic teachings. Islam places great emphasis on physical health and strength while upholding moral and ethical values. The participation of men and women in sports is therefore guided by principles such as modesty, dignity, and social responsibility. Understanding these guidelines helps clarify misconceptions and promotes balanced participation within an Islamic framework.

Research Background and Significance

The issue of gender participation in sports has gained increasing attention due to global discussions on gender equality, health, and social inclusion. Within Muslim societies, this issue is often viewed through both religious and cultural lenses, sometimes leading to misconceptions about Islamic teachings regarding women's and men's involvement in physical activities. Historically, Islam has encouraged physical fitness, strength, and well-being for all believers, as evidenced by prophetic traditions that support activities such as running, swimming, and archery. Despite this, social norms and cultural practices in some communities have limited sports participation, particularly for women, often attributing these restrictions to religion.

This research is significant because it seeks to distinguish authentic Islamic guidelines from culturally constructed barriers, providing a clearer understanding of Islam's position on gender participation in sports. By examining religious sources alongside contemporary realities, the study contributes to academic discourse on Islam, gender, and physical education. The findings may help educators, policymakers, and sports institutions develop inclusive and faith-sensitive sports environments that respect Islamic values while promoting physical health and social empowerment. Furthermore, the research addresses a critical gap in literature by offering a balanced perspective that supports ethical participation without marginalizing either gender, thereby encouraging sustainable and equitable sports practices in Muslim societies.

Review of Literature

Existing literature on gender participation in sports within Islamic contexts reflects a growing interdisciplinary interest spanning Islamic studies, sociology, and sports sciences. Classical Islamic scholarship emphasizes the importance of physical health and strength, drawing upon Qur'anic guidance and Prophetic traditions that encourage activities such as archery, swimming, and horseback riding for both men and women. Scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Qayyim highlighted physical well-being as essential for fulfilling religious and social responsibilities.

Contemporary studies explore how Islamic principles—particularly modesty, privacy, and ethical interaction—shape sports participation. Researchers note that Islam does not prohibit women's involvement in sports; rather, limitations often arise from cultural norms and patriarchal interpretations rather than religious doctrine. Studies by modern Islamic scholars argue for contextual interpretation (ijtihad) to address changing social environments, especially in organized and professional sports.

Empirical research highlights challenges faced by Muslim athletes, including dress code regulations, gender-mixed facilities, and media representation. Several studies document adaptive strategies such as modest sportswear, women-only training spaces, and policy reforms by international sports bodies to accommodate religious diversity. Literature also underscores the role of education and institutional support in normalizing gender-inclusive sports participation.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests a consensus that Islamic guidelines provide an ethical framework rather than restrictive barriers. However, scholars emphasize the need for continued research to bridge the gap between theory and practice, particularly in developing inclusive models that harmonize religious values with modern sports participation.

Research Questions

- What is the Islamic perspective on gender participation in sports?
- What challenges do Muslim women face in sports participation today?
- How do Islamic guidelines influence opportunities for male and female athletes?
- To what extent do cultural practices affect gender participation beyond religious teachings?
- How can sports policies be adapted to align with Islamic values while promoting inclusion?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine gender participation in sports within the framework of Islamic guidelines. Data is collected through an extensive review of primary Islamic sources, including the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as classical and contemporary scholarly writings. Secondary sources such as academic journals, books, and policy reports on sports and gender studies are also analyzed. Content analysis is used to interpret religious texts and scholarly opinions, while a comparative approach helps distinguish Islamic teachings from cultural practices. This methodology enables a balanced and contextual understanding of gender participation in sports.

Aims & Objectives

- To examine Islamic teachings regarding gender participation in sports.
- To identify cultural and social factors affecting male and female athletes.
- To analyze challenges faced by Muslim women in sports participation.
- To explore strategies for aligning sports practices with Islamic guidelines.
- To provide recommendations for inclusive and faith-sensitive sports policies.

Introduction

The present study aimed to explore the dynamics of gender participation in sports within the framework of Islamic guidelines, focusing on both theoretical and practical dimensions. Specifically, the research sought to examine the Islamic perspective on physical activity for men and women, identify cultural and social factors influencing gender participation, analyze challenges faced by Muslim athletes particularly women and explore strategies and policies that harmonize sports participation with religious values. To achieve these objectives, the study employed a qualitative research approach, drawing upon primary sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as secondary sources including contemporary scholarly writings, research articles, and reports on sports and gender studies. Content analysis was used to interpret religious texts and scholarly opinions, while a comparative framework helped distinguish authentic Islamic guidelines from cultural practices that often impose unnecessary restrictions. The methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of how religion, culture, and modern sports practices intersect, providing insights into both theoretical perspectives and real-world challenges.

A comprehensive review of literature revealed that Islam fundamentally encourages physical fitness, strength, and overall well-being for both men and women. Prophetic traditions highlight activities such as archery, swimming, and horseback riding, which were promoted for health, discipline, and social preparedness. Contemporary Islamic scholars

emphasize that these principles are not limited by gender and that participation in sports is permissible provided moral boundaries, modesty, and ethical conduct are maintained. The literature also underscored the tension between religious guidelines and cultural practices in many Muslim-majority societies. While Islamic teachings support equitable participation, patriarchal interpretations and sociocultural norms often restrict women's access to sports. These findings highlight a clear distinction between authentic religious guidance, which promotes physical and moral development for all, and societal practices, which sometimes impose unnecessary limitations.

Analysis of contemporary challenges in sports participation further illuminated the practical difficulties faced by Muslim athletes, particularly women. Issues such as mixed-gender facilities, inappropriate dress codes, and public exposure through media and competitions often conflict with Islamic principles of modesty and privacy. Additionally, social attitudes and family perceptions in certain communities can discourage female participation, further limiting opportunities despite religious permissibility. Conversely, the study also identified adaptive strategies adopted by Muslim athletes and institutions to navigate these challenges. Examples include the development of modest sportswear, gender-segregated training sessions, women-only sports facilities, and policy interventions at organizational and governmental levels. These strategies demonstrate that religious observance and active sports participation are not mutually exclusive but can coexist when guided by informed interpretation and contextual application of Islamic principles.

Islamic Perspectives on Sports Participation

Islam places significant emphasis on the holistic development of an individual, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Physical activity, including sports participation, is therefore seen as an essential aspect of life. The Qur'an and Hadith provide guidance that encourages Muslims to maintain a healthy body and engage in activities that enhance strength, stamina, and overall fitness. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized the importance of physical health by advocating activities like swimming, horseback riding, and archery, which not only develop the body but also instill discipline and perseverance. These practices highlight that Islam supports physical activity as a means of maintaining vitality and serving both personal and communal responsibilities effectively.

The encouragement of physical fitness in Islam is gender-neutral, recognizing that both men and women are responsible for maintaining their health. Women are equally encouraged to participate in activities that promote strength, flexibility, and overall well-being, provided that they observe Islamic guidelines regarding modesty. Historical accounts show that Muslim women in early Islamic societies engaged in physical training, archery, and other exercises. This demonstrates that Islam does not restrict physical activity based on gender but rather frames participation within ethical and cultural norms that respect dignity and privacy. Modern applications of this principle include women-only sports facilities or times, ensuring that physical fitness opportunities are accessible while maintaining religious principles.

Ethical considerations are central to sports participation in Islam. The principles of modesty, dignity, and moral conduct guide how Muslims engage in physical activity. Modesty, or *haya*, requires individuals to dress appropriately and behave respectfully during sports, avoiding actions that could lead to immodesty or inappropriate interactions. Dignity emphasizes respect for oneself and others, ensuring that competition does not foster arrogance, aggression, or harm. Moral conduct encourages honesty, fairness, and teamwork, aligning sportsmanship with Islamic values. This ethical framework ensures that while sports

can be competitive and physically demanding, they remain spiritually and morally constructive.

Furthermore, sports in Islam are not merely for personal gain or entertainment; they serve broader societal purposes. They strengthen community bonds, foster cooperation, and develop qualities such as resilience, patience, and leadership. Participation in sports can also enhance mental health by reducing stress and promoting a sense of accomplishment, aligning with the Islamic principle of preserving both mind and body.

Gender-Specific Guidelines and Interpretations

In Islam, participation in sports and physical activity is encouraged for both men and women, but it is framed within ethical, social, and religious guidelines that take gender considerations into account. These guidelines focus on maintaining modesty, dignity, and moral conduct while allowing individuals to benefit from physical exercise and competition. The approach differs for men and women, reflecting historical, cultural, and jurisprudential interpretations.

Women's Participation

Women's involvement in sports is permissible in Islam as long as it respects principles of modesty (*haya*) and privacy. Islamic teachings emphasize covering the body appropriately and avoiding clothing that reveals the shape, while ensuring comfort and safety for physical activity. Additionally, women are encouraged to engage in sports in private or segregated environments to avoid unnecessary exposure to unrelated men. This can include women-only gyms, swimming times, or designated spaces in sports clubs. Historical accounts indicate that women in early Islamic society, including the Prophet's family and companions, engaged in horseback riding and archery while observing modesty and privacy, demonstrating that physical activity was supported within culturally appropriate frameworks. Contemporary scholars reinforce these principles, emphasizing that women's participation should be facilitated without compromising Islamic guidelines, and that sports can empower women physically and mentally while nurturing health and resilience.

Men's Participation

Men are encouraged to participate actively in sports, but with a focus on ethical conduct and personal responsibility. Islam emphasizes that men should avoid arrogance, aggression, or harming others during competition. Sports should promote fairness, teamwork, and self-discipline, reflecting the broader moral teachings of Islam. Men also bear the responsibility of setting positive examples for younger generations and upholding community values while participating in sports. The Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) guidance on physical training, including swimming, horseback riding, and archery, illustrates that men's engagement in sports was both for personal health and the preparation of skills useful for communal and defensive purposes.

Classical vs Contemporary Interpretations

Classical Islamic scholars generally focused on modesty, gender segregation, and the prevention of immoral behavior in sports. Their interpretations were shaped by the societal norms of their times, emphasizing that sports should not compromise religious obligations or propriety. In contrast, contemporary scholars address the modern context, recognizing new sports environments, mixed-gender settings, and professional competition. While maintaining the core principles of modesty, ethics, and moral conduct, modern interpretations provide practical guidance for women and men to participate safely, effectively, and respectfully in diverse sporting arenas. This includes allowances for sportswear designed to comply with modesty standards, structured women-only sessions, and clear ethical frameworks for mixed-gender or public competitions.

Cultural Practices vs Islamic Teachings

Islam encourages physical activity and sports for both men and women, emphasizing health, strength, and ethical conduct. However, across many Muslim-majority societies, cultural practices and patriarchal norms often create barriers to women's participation in sports, leading to misconceptions about what Islam permits. These restrictions are frequently attributed to religion, though they are more accurately reflections of local traditions and gendered social expectations rather than Islamic teachings.

A common misconception is that Islam forbids women from engaging in physical activity or public sports. In reality, Islamic texts and historical accounts demonstrate that women actively participated in physical training, archery, swimming, and horseback riding, provided modesty and privacy were observed. The Qur'an encourages believers to preserve their physical health and strength, and Hadith literature records examples of women in the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) era engaging in sports for fitness and self-defense. These sources highlight that Islam supports women's physical activity when conducted within ethical guidelines.

Despite this, patriarchal cultural norms in various regions have imposed restrictions that go beyond Islamic requirements. In some societies, women are discouraged or even prohibited from participating in public sports due to concerns about modesty, gender mixing, or family honor. These norms often prioritize controlling women's mobility and visibility rather than addressing any genuine religious injunction. As a result, women may lack access to sports facilities, organized competitions, or coaching opportunities, leading to underrepresentation in national and international sports.

Case studies from Muslim-majority countries illustrate this dynamic. In Afghanistan under Taliban influence, women's access to sports was severely restricted, even though Islamic teachings permit physical activity with modesty and privacy. In contrast, countries like Iran and Malaysia have implemented women-only sports programs, segregated swimming times, and modest sportswear, aligning cultural practices with Islamic principles and allowing women to participate safely. Similarly, in Egypt and Turkey, female athletes have increasingly gained visibility and support, demonstrating that cultural flexibility can enable women's sports participation without violating religious guidelines.

Challenges in Modern Sports Context

While Islam encourages physical activity for both men and women, modern sports present unique challenges that require careful navigation to balance religious principles with professional and competitive environments. Globalized sports often involve gender mixing, media exposure, and commercial sponsorships, which can conflict with Islamic guidelines on modesty, dignity, and ethical conduct. For female athletes, these challenges are particularly pronounced, as participation in public or international competitions exposes them to scrutiny that may conflict with cultural and religious expectations.

Professional and Competitive Sports

Competitive sports often require participation in mixed-gender events, media interviews, and public performances, which may pose ethical concerns for observant Muslims. Women athletes must navigate the balance between pursuing excellence and maintaining modesty. Similarly, sponsorship deals and commercial pressures can create situations where clothing, behavior, or promotional activities contradict Islamic principles. While Islam does not forbid competition or professional advancement, it emphasizes that personal integrity and adherence to ethical conduct should not be compromised for fame or financial gain.

Modest Sportswear and International Regulations

One of the most visible challenges in modern sports is adapting sportswear to meet both Islamic modesty requirements and international regulations. Some sports require tight-fitting uniforms for performance or safety, creating tension for observant Muslim athletes. Innovations in modest sportswear, such as performance hijabs, full-body suits, and breathable clothing, have helped bridge this gap, allowing athletes to compete while adhering to religious guidelines. International governing bodies, including FIFA and the IOC, have increasingly recognized these accommodations, enabling wider participation of Muslim women in global sports.

Psychological and Social Barriers

Beyond physical and regulatory challenges, female athletes often face psychological and social obstacles. Cultural pressures, societal scrutiny, and the fear of criticism from family or community can discourage participation. Many women must overcome stereotypes that frame sports as “male activities” or that question the appropriateness of public competition. These barriers can affect confidence, motivation, and mental well-being, highlighting the importance of supportive networks, role models, and inclusive policies that align cultural practices with Islamic teachings.

Adaptive Strategies and Best Practices

To overcome the cultural, social, and religious challenges associated with sports participation, Muslim communities and institutions have developed adaptive strategies that align with Islamic principles while promoting inclusivity and empowerment. These strategies focus on maintaining modesty, ethical conduct, and dignity, enabling both men and women particularly women to participate in sports safely and confidently.

Gender-Segregated Facilities and Women-Only Programs

One of the most effective strategies is the provision of gender-segregated facilities or women-only programs. This approach respects Islamic guidelines on modesty and privacy, allowing women to train, compete, and develop their skills without compromising their religious beliefs. Examples include female-only gyms, swimming sessions, and martial arts classes, where instructors and participants are all women. Such environments not only enhance comfort and participation rates but also foster community support and mentorship among female athletes.

Policy Reforms in Educational and Sports Institutions

Institutional reforms have played a crucial role in encouraging Muslim women’s sports participation. Schools, universities, and national sports organizations have introduced policies to accommodate modest sportswear, provide women-only training times, and encourage female coaching staff. These reforms also include awareness campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes and promote the health, mental, and social benefits of sports for women. By integrating these practices into formal policies, organizations create systemic support that reduces barriers and empowers women to pursue sports professionally and recreationally.

Successful Examples of Muslim Female Athletes

Numerous Muslim female athletes have demonstrated that it is possible to compete at the highest levels while adhering to Islamic principles. For instance, Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad became the first American athlete to compete wearing a hijab, inspiring Muslim women worldwide. Similarly, Iranian football and volleyball teams have adopted modest uniforms that comply with international regulations, allowing participation in global competitions. These examples highlight the effectiveness of adaptive strategies, showing that religious observance and professional sports achievement are not mutually exclusive.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Ensuring that sports participation aligns with Islamic values requires thoughtful policies and practical strategies that promote equity, inclusion, and empowerment for all participants. Such approaches must balance the encouragement of physical activity with ethical, cultural, and religious considerations, creating an environment where both men and women can engage in sports safely and confidently.

Aligning Sports Participation with Islamic Values

Policies should explicitly integrate Islamic principles of modesty, dignity, and moral conduct into sports programs. This includes allowing modest sportswear, gender-segregated facilities where necessary, and rules that prevent behaviors contrary to ethical teachings, such as unsportsmanlike conduct or inappropriate interactions. Organizations can establish clear codes of conduct and guidelines for competitions, ensuring that athletes, coaches, and administrators understand how religious and ethical principles inform sports participation. By embedding these values institutionally, sports environments respect faith while fostering personal development and communal cohesion.

Promoting Equity, Inclusion, and Empowerment

Inclusive sports policies empower underrepresented groups, particularly women, by addressing structural barriers that restrict participation. Strategies include creating women-only programs, providing equal access to coaching and training facilities, and actively recruiting female athletes into competitive teams. Equity also requires adjusting sports schedules, uniforms, and competitive opportunities to accommodate religious observances such as prayer times or Ramadan fasting. Such measures not only enhance participation but also contribute to broader societal goals by challenging stereotypes and promoting gender equality.

Role of Education, Coaching, and Community Awareness

Education and awareness are critical to creating sustainable change. Schools and universities should incorporate physical education programs that are sensitive to Islamic guidelines, emphasizing the health, social, and spiritual benefits of sports. Coaches and administrators should receive training on cultural and religious sensitivities, enabling them to create supportive and respectful environments. Community awareness campaigns can further highlight the positive impact of sports participation, addressing misconceptions that restrict women and advocating for inclusion within an Islamic framework.

Conclusion

This study highlights that Islam fundamentally encourages sports participation for both men and women as a means of promoting physical health, mental well-being, and moral development. The Qur'an and Hadith emphasize holistic growth, with prophetic traditions advocating activities such as swimming, archery, and horseback riding to strengthen the body, cultivate discipline, and prepare individuals for societal responsibilities. Ethical principles—including modesty, dignity, fairness, and respect—guide participation, ensuring that sports contribute to personal and communal development rather than merely recreation.

Despite the religious encouragement, cultural and social barriers in many Muslim-majority societies often limit women's access to sports. Patriarchal norms, misconceptions about Islamic restrictions, and gendered social expectations restrict opportunities for female athletes, while men are expected to uphold ethical conduct and serve as role models. Case studies from Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Egypt, and Turkey demonstrate that such barriers are not inherent to Islam but stem from local traditions and societal attitudes.

Modern sports present additional challenges, including mixed-gender environments, media exposure, and international regulations on uniforms. Adaptive strategies—such as modest sportswear, gender-segregated facilities, women-only programs, and supportive policies—have proven effective in addressing these challenges. Successful Muslim female athletes exemplify how faith and professional sports participation can coexist.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- **Promote Gender-Segregated Facilities:** Establish women-only gyms, swimming times, and training centers to ensure privacy and compliance with Islamic guidelines on modesty.
- **Develop Modest Sportswear:** Encourage innovation in performance clothing that adheres to religious requirements while meeting safety and competition standards.
- **Integrate Islamic Principles in Policies:** Sports organizations should embed guidelines on modesty, ethical conduct, and fair play into official rules and codes of conduct.
- **Support Women-Only Programs:** Schools, universities, and clubs should offer dedicated programs and competitions for female athletes to increase participation.
- **Implement Policy Reforms:** Educational institutions and national sports bodies should adopt inclusive policies, including flexible schedules, access to coaching, and opportunities for female leadership.
- **Promote Awareness and Education:** Conduct community campaigns and workshops to challenge cultural misconceptions and highlight the permissibility of sports for women in Islam.
- **Train Coaches and Administrators:** Provide training on religious sensitivity, ethical guidance, and inclusive coaching methods to support Muslim athletes.
- **Encourage Role Models:** Highlight successful Muslim female athletes to inspire participation and demonstrate that faith and professional sports can coexist.
- **Address Social and Psychological Barriers:** Develop mentorship and counseling programs to build confidence, combat stereotypes, and foster a supportive environment for female athletes.

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