

Through Rose-Tinted Glasses: Muslim Women Sport Managers In Malaysia

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Abstract

'Modern sport' has been held to be one of the derivative of the Modernity agenda (Hargreaves, 2001), a tidal wave of intellectual and political change that swept most of the Western Europe in the 17th century. Few societies had resisted the transition to Modernity as the Muslim. Modern sport poses challenges to Muslim athletes, in that it conflicts with Muslim practices (Haji Omar & Gilbert, 2000). Women issues on the other hand took shape amidst the typically patriarchal policy development processes, whether it is within the religious, socio-legal, cultural, economic or political context (Abdullah, 2003; Omar & Hamzah, 2003). In the study of women, few would draw much controversy than the study of Muslim women. The image of a '*burka*'-clad individual isolated from the rest of the world is perhaps the most common association made of a Muslim female. This paper would focus on ascertaining the role of Malaysian Muslim women through evaluation of the experiences of Muslim women as sport managers within the structure of the local sport governance. The discourse would also draw on the literatures of the women and sport in the West as comparison (Radzi 2006; Riphenburg, 1998; Roded, 1999; Sfeir, 1985; Stowasser, 1998; Walseth & Fasting, 2003)

Key words

muslim women, sport management, Malaysia

Introduction

This paper would focus on ascertaining the role of Malaysian Muslim women through evaluation of the experiences of Muslim women as sport managers within the structure of the local sport governance. Focusing the discussion on women is deliberate, as Muslim women continues to be

viewed with a mixture of interests and apprehension by the West, as evidenced by the proliferation of works on the subjects, both by Muslims and Non-Muslims. The most visible feature of a Muslim woman is the wearing of the veil, a choice that some writers (Mernissi, 1991; Moghissi, 1999) claim as a political symbol rather than a very individualized and conscious expression of personal freedom. Wearing the veil in these 'modern' times is akin to preserving antiquated customs, claimed some critics of the veil. The debate continues today and the choice a Muslim female makes in relation to what she chooses to wear still intrigues many. The same choices a Muslim woman made are then contrasted against the process of engagement in modern sport when she chooses to participate. Often time modern sport would dictate the outcome of such choice, but we have also seen in international media where veiled Muslim women were making their presence felt such as in the Asian track sensation. Ruqaya Al-Ghasra from Bahrain who wore an 'Islamic' sport wear competed and won on the track against non-veiled Muslim and non-Muslim athletes in the 2008 Asian Indoor Championship.

The Study of Women and Sport

The study of women and sport is a growing research area in the west and has increasingly become an area of research interest in many other parts of the world. In earlier literatures done by western scholars the image of Muslim women was portrayed as meek, docile and oppressed on their part and the Muslim society as anti-development and repressive in its treatment of Muslim women. Modern sport, on the other hand was constantly used internationally as a gauge to measure the level of development of a particular nation, as evidenced from the history of the international Olympic movement¹. To date, literatures on Muslim women are expanding (Abdullah, 2008; Abdullah, 2009; Charrad, 2001; Cooke, 2001; Karim, 1992; Kaya, 2000; Khan, 1995; Mernissi, 1991; Mir-Hosseini, 2003 ; Moghissi, 1999; Mojab, 2001). Mir-Hosseini, Comparable developments are observed in the growth of literatures on Muslim women in sport (Benn, 1996; Brownfoot, 2003; Daiman, 1995; Hargreaves, 2001;

¹ Al-Tauqi, M. (2003). *Olympic Solidarity: Global Order, The Diffusion of Modern Sport and the Hegemony of the Olympic Movement*. Loughborough University, Loughborough. p.17.

Ibrahim, 1997; Ishak & Abbas, 1996; Knop, Theebom, Wittcock, & Martelaer 1996; Radzi, 2006, 2010; Sfeir, 1985; Walseth & Fasting 2003). It must be pointed out that the studies cited are mainly of Muslim women and sport movement in the Middle East (Egypt, Turkey and Iran). In contrast, similar researches on South East Asian Muslim women are not as manifestly documented (Ishak & Abbas, 1996; Radzi, 2006) and a similar condition is observed in Malaysia. As such, this article is important in that it attempts to discuss the experience of Muslim women engaging in modern sport within the confines of the Muslim majority community. In addition it is hoped that this article would contribute to the enrichment of literatures on Muslim women and sport in South East Asia, and in particular, Malaysia.

Women and sport issues have become mainstream in recent times and were also discussed and formed part of the global agenda for women's emancipation and empowerment. The rights to partake in sport activities by women are unequivocally a matter of international concern as evidenced by flourishing global women sport movements such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Women and Sport Commission, the International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG), the Women Sport International (WSI) and other similar establishments. These international women sport groups have one thing in common: they claim to push for the modernization agenda of all women for the right to participate in sports at various levels and in the process become champions of women's voices the world over, including Asian and Muslim women. What they fail to recognize is that women themselves are not homogeneous and the effort to 'modernize' all women through sport may be met with some resistance by women themselves, especially with so little understanding of and about the women's conditions from other jurisdictions (Hargreaves, 1999).

Modernity and Sport

What is considered 'modern' according to Hamilton (1992), are summarized in four broad areas of intellectual approaches: anti-clericalism, pre-eminence of empirical, materialist knowledge, enthusiasm for technological and medical progress and lastly, a desire for legal and constitutional reform. Habermas (1985) contends that the very idea of modernity

is tied intimately to the development of European art while Tibi (2001) argues that the map of the modern world was in fact, shaped by European expansion. The so-termed ‘New World’ was determined using the European and Western gauge: modernity, which includes the processes of globalization and universalization, two distinct processes that are often overlooked and confused with each other (Albrow, 1997; Eisentadt, 1966) in (Kiely & Marphleet, 1998) defines modernity as

The process of change towards those types of social, economic and political systems that have developed in Western Europe and North America (Eisentadt, 1966, p. 1).

Eisentadt’s definition suggests that to be ‘modern’ and ‘developed,’ nation states or societies must initiate a changing process that replicates the social, economic and political systems such as those in place in the Western world. What Eisentadt did not mention was the packaged-deal that comes with ‘modernity,’ which includes among other things, capitalism (Giddens, 1990), industrialization, rationalization (McClelland, 1992) and secularism (Hamilton, 1992). Thus far, the notion ‘modernity’ only appears to be confined to the Western philosophies. The question at this point would be, could the notion ‘modernity’ embrace any scientific culture other than the Western culture and claims it to be also, modern? Bauman (1987) cited in (Hamilton, 1992, p. 367) raises his concern that

With pluralism irreversible, a world-scale consensus on world-views and values unlikely, and all extent *Weltanschauungen* (world-views) firmly grounded in their respective cultural traditions: communications across traditions becomes the major problem of our time. This problem does not seem temporary anymore: one cannot hoped that it’ll be solved ‘in passing’ by a sort of massive conversion guaranteed by the unstoppable march of Reason. Rather, the problem is likely to stay with us for a long, long time.

One of the manifestations of a transcendental, modern universal values

shared by many parts of the world is of course, sport.

Sport in its informal, unstructured forms, be it individual or collective activities has been documented throughout the history of many ancient cultures and societies. Bandy (2000) indicates that these activities are more akin to physical recreation than sport as an endeavor it is known today, claiming also that such endeavor is actually “a creation of the nineteenth century.” This is not to say however that sport as an activity was virtually non-existent prior to 19th century and the Enlightenment Era. Through archaeological findings we now know that ancient forms of sports existed within a particular society as a reflection of the economic, social, political status and geographical locality of the society itself, most often closely related to religious rituals and celebrations. This sport spectacle is known as the Ancient Olympics.

Although initially the Ancient Olympics began as a pagan ritual in honour of Zeus at the great temple in the middle of a religious sanctuary, it attracted delegations from every corner of the Greek world, ranging from priests and priestesses, athletes and merchants all thrown together at Olympia, at the confluence of the rivers *Kladeos* and *Alpheios*, the site of the first Olympic games in 776 BC. By 600 BC athletic events were included such as the pentathlon, boxing, wrestling, horse races, foot races and others. Warring city-states would cease fire under the sacred truce *Ekecheiria* as a gesture of reverence and to allow the games to continue unhindered. The importance and economic significance of the rituals were clearly manifested through the depiction of the immense size of the Olympic stadium (with a seating capacity of 40,000) as evidenced from archaeological artifacts. The games also attracted spectators and participants from the Greek colonies around the Mediterranean Sea, an early demonstration of colonial hegemony through sports. Under Alexander the Great and the Romans, the sports were allowed to continue flourishing and were even plagued with symptoms of modern day sport paradoxes such as commercialization and sensationalism that eroded the value system and religious significance of the games. The games were ended by the decree of the Christian Emperor Theodosius I in 393 AD and the Olympic complex were ordered destroyed by Theodosius II circa 426 AD, the final chapter of the ancient games firmly sealed (Jackson, 2001).

The modern Olympic was the brainchild of a French patrician, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The initial idea for de Coubertin's Olympic re-

vivalism stemmed from a project to incorporate sport and physical activities into an educational system, his concern for the physical condition of the youth and their ability (or inability) to face the challenges of life and finally, his own passion and fascination with the success of the Ancient Greek in combining sports activities with religious rituals that resulted into the growth and strength of a city-state civilization. Through his idealism and tireless efforts, the first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896. He presided over the IOC until 1925 and died in Geneva in 1937. To de Coubertin, the Olympic movement has been a long and difficult journey and will continue to face challenges in order to perpetuate, when in 1920 he stated with a foresight:

Olympism is a silent mechanism whose wheels do not creak and whose movement never stops, despite the fistfuls of sands people casts at it, as persistently as ineffectually, to try to prevent it from working (Durantez, 1997, p. 56).

The Olympic Movement today is facing tremendous challenges and changes and displays an amazing ability to adapt successfully to the different requirements of the times it is operating in. As an international sport organization it had evolved into powerful, multinational sport supremacy. In the international sport scene, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as a sport organization and the Olympics as the product has been in existence for more than a century and had firmly entrenched itself as a major sporting institution. Fay (1998) considers two factors when attempting to define what international sport is:

- a) The degree of regularity with which action by an organization is focused on international activity
- b) The context in which a person or organization operates within the sport enterprise.

Both factors appear to be in congruence with the activities of the IOC, in fact the second factor seems to deal more with the structure of the global sport industry. While the IOC are quite clear cut a case, Fay cautions the relative difficulty of determining or assessing an organization that is engaged in international sport but operates “almost exclusively in

one nation or are only occasionally involved with international athletes or clients.” As a crude description, international sport could be seen as a forum where national sports interface with other national sports in the spirit of continuous sportsmanship.

Roche (2000, p. 99) states that international mega-events, in this case the Olympics, ‘played an important role in the development of both national and international politics and culture in the West from the late 19th century.’ Further, Rowe (2003) argues that the phenomenon of sport (in this instance, the Olympic movement) has been consistently presented as a prime instance of the gathering force of globalization and universalization, especially by extending, reconfiguring and replicating national cultural (typically Western) practices as a global phenomena (Rowe, 2003).

Modern Sport and Women

A different picture is presented when it comes to women participating in sport. Interestingly, women’s involvement in sport in the West is not as developed as we would have expected. In fact, women’s involvement in sport has been slow to flourish compared to men’s participation at almost every level of sporting activities. The first Olympic games of the modern era in 1896 were not open to women owing to de Coubertin’s stance that the Games should traditionally remain a ‘eulogy to male sport’ (Bandy, 2000). However, slow but steady progress have been made by women after the 1900 Olympic Games which saw women participating at the Games for the first time. In 1995, The IOC issued a policy targeting at increasing the participation of women leaders in National Olympic Committees (NOC) across the globe to 20 percent by the year 2005. This is done on the premise that when more women are visible at the executive levels, changes will come in other aspects as well, especially at increasing women’s involvement in sport.

As recently as 2003, a UK Sport strategy document reiterated the findings of the Brighton Conference which stated that ‘Women are under-represented in the leadership and decision making of all sport and sport-related organizations’ (White & Kay, 2006, p. 465). Some writers observe that sometimes sport is being used to emancipate women at the turn of the 20th century (Kay, 2008). The strategy employed by the

women's movement in sport is similar to their mainstream counterparts: through the governance aspect of getting their voice heard.² They choose to be included in the decision-making process of international and national sport governing bodies by. Additionally, global network among women sport leaders must be maintained in order to disseminate the reform movement to other women as well. One of the main findings in the research report undertaken jointly by the IOC and Loughborough University's Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy was the importance of networking support among women sport leaders across the globe (2004). The 21st Century seemed to hold more promises of changes to come for the benefit of women in sports. However, available data indicate little change in sports governance. Women's involvement as executive committee members of the IOC only began as recently as 1981 during President Samaranch's tenure. As at 2000, the IOC currently has 113 active members. Similarly, IOC Commissions and Working groups have included more women than before, enabling their direct contribution to all issues and policies which the IOC is working on. Another record for the IOC was clocked when Anita DeFrantz became IOC Vice President in 1997 for the first time in the history of the Olympic Movement (2000). The Global women's sports movement is still working in earnest to lobby for more women at decision-making positions in international and national sports federations. Clearly, the struggle is not over yet.

Perhaps what we are seeing in sport is the reflection of what happens outside the world of sport. Modern Western society ironically, still saw women being discriminated against when it comes to leadership issues, and women (and men as well) reacted to this inequitable conditions with varying degrees of intensity. One such reaction is the development of feminist theories that seek to challenge the equity of the modern social order, to provide a solution to the problem of subjugation. The term 'feminist' was first used in the West in the 1890s (Elliot & Mandell, 1998) to describe an alternative political strain that sought to depart from the mainstream, ultra-misogynistic and capitalistic, 'modern' political, sociological and economic theories. The movement's major critique of the modernity project is that in the process of modernization, 'mankind'

² Sporting Equals. (n.d.). *Sporting Equals: Muslim Women in Sport*. (n.d.). Retrieved 12 July 2010 from <http://www.sportingequals.org.uk>

had failed to consider and include the experiences of women and consequently, women are systematically and continuously oppressed, neglected and marginalized in almost all spheres of private and public life. Feminists often argue that this injustice is not the intended outcome of the 'Enlightenment Era' as it would otherwise render the term a mere paradox.

The issue at this juncture is, while western women in general are struggling to gain equal access into sports through participation and leadership, the fate of groups such as Muslims and especially Muslim women were even more marginalised if we are to look at the international sport scenario, partly due to the universalistic, Eurocentric approach of modern international sport itself. Could a Muslim society be considered a modern society in the light of what Hamilton (1992) had earlier described?

Modern Sport and Muslim Community

Waardenburg (1996) observes that in many Muslim countries, rational modernity started in the 19th century (Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia and Iran) and from there spread out to the rest of the Muslim world through colonialization. The impact of rational modernity, until then a close link with colonialization, continued to be felt in those countries long afterwards. The post-colonialism rational modernity Waardenburg claims has grown more detached from specifically Western value. One of the manifestation of a transcendental universal values shared by many parts of the world is, of course, sport.

Islam had always viewed health and physical movement as undeniably important to the well-being of humans, both physically and spiritually. The Prophet Muhammad was known to involve himself in a game of wrestling. He was also known to favour "My healthier, stronger people over my weaker." A general glance at the Five Pillars of Islam would reveal that two of the Pillars are concerned with health and human movement/kinetics. The Pillars are the obligatory five times a day prayers (human movement) and the fasting in the Muslim month of Ramadan, from dawn until dusk (bodily health). Apart from the spiritual nature of the prayers, the substantial acts of prayers are physical in nature, and could be regarded as the simplest form of exercise where everyone could do it, five times a day, for approximately ten to fifteen minutes each

time. Fasting, for example, as well as functioning as a lesson in humanity, has been scientifically known to detoxify and reenergize the biological function of the human body, after one whole year of rigorous activities.

There is, however, no direct provision with regard to sport available in the Primary source of Islamic Law (the Qur'an). However, there are several prophetic traditions (Hadiths) that recorded sport-like activities in which the Prophet and his wives participated, in particular Saidatina Aishah. In addition, the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (*al-Qawaid-ul-Fiqhiyyah*) which falls under the Secondary sources category, provides for a more detail look at the provisions with regard to Muslim women's involvement in sport. In relation to sport and sporting activities, the legal maxim provides that from the first Legal Method of *Al Umur bi Maqasidiba* which translates as "Each Matter is based on it's particular objective" comes the Legal Maxim *Al-aslu fil-asbyaa' al-Ibahah* which translates as "The norm in regard to things are that of permissibility." Permissibility in other words is the natural state and will therefore prevail until there is evidence to warrant a departure from that position. This legal method affirms that in the matter of sport and sporting activities the original state of the matter is that of permissible in the absence of any legal provisions that expressly prohibits the matter. Based on this legal method, sport and sporting activity is permitted in Islam as there are no textual and contextual evidence from both the Primary and Secondary sources of the Islamic law that expressly or implicitly forbids or prohibits its existence.

However, although originally sports and sporting activities are allowed in Islam, the same activities could be going against the principles of Islam when there are external (or internal) elements that could render it prohibited (*haram*). This is termed in Islamic Jurisprudence as *haram lighairih*. For instance, horse race on it's own is permissible, but if the horse race was implicated with betting or gambling elements, the race is now considered *haram lighairihi* which goes against the Islamic Principles. This is interesting as horsemanship is one of the activities being endorsed by the Prophet as required skills of early Muslim communities based on the benefits that could be derived from the activities.

Modern Sports and Muslim Women

The question at this point is, in the absence of anecdotal and empirical evidence, to what extent are Muslim women's involvement in sports is allowed by Islam? An analysis of the Primary and Secondary sources of the Islamic law would establish the extent of the permissibility. As such Muslims, including Muslim women are allowed to partake in sports or engage in sporting activities, be it for recreational, healthy lifestyle or competitive purposes.

In the discussion of women's engagement in sports during the era of the Madinan society in the Islamic history, there are not many incidents that point to the involvement of Muslim women in sport save for the prophetic traditions that depicted the activities of the wife of the Prophet Muhammad himself, Saidatina (Our Lady) Aishah who engaged herself in a footrace against the Prophet more than once. Comparatively based on historical accounts and prophetic traditions, evidence showed that Muslim women were clearly playing an active role in the nation-building process. Noble Muslim women such as Saidatina Khadijah, Asma' bintu Abu Bakr', the wife of Abdullah bin Mas'ud and many others were business women, agriculturalists and industrialists of their times, dividing their times between their occupation and their homes. They also contributed to the household income and were involved in decision-making processes that concerned their occupation and household management.

From this analogy, we could also apply the same principle to the involvement of women in Islam. The permissibility of sport in Islam is due to the absence of explicit legal provisions that prohibit sport in addition to the benefits that could be derived from sporting activities. Islam encourages sport for all members of the community, as evidenced from the Prophetic traditions that enjoin the teaching of sporting skills of swimming, archery and horsemanship to Muslim children without differentiating between sons and daughters. However, if the engagement in sports by Muslim women entails the exposure of *aurat* (a concept of Muslim's chastity and modesty that applies to both genders) for example, then the originally permitted activity becomes prohibited by that particular exposure. As such, sport in its own accord is permissible in contrast to wine-drinking activity or eating the flesh of swine, which is originally prohibited. However the permissibility of sport could be abrogated by ex-

ternal elements, as evidenced by the action to expose one's *aurat* while competing in sport.

In this issue, the solution to the problem is not through the condemning of the sport activity itself but in finding alternatives for Muslims, including women to participate in sports while at the same time eliminate abrogating external elements. One example is redefining sporting regulations that require exposing the Muslim athlete's modesty and other similar instances.

In recreational sport participation, a Muslim's involvement is voluntary and is not tied down by any structured sporting regulations. In this instance, if the recreational activities are implicated by external elements that go against the Islamic legal principles, the Muslim woman who is already involved must be able to distinguish these elements and refocus her activities based on her earlier intention of participating for life preserving benefits as enjoined by Islam. Again, this relates to the choices that Muslim women face. In a community such as Malaysia, where Muslim forms the majority of the population, it is unfortunate that a Muslim woman must choose as such.

As mentioned earlier, sport is therefore an activity permissible in Islam, although Abdalati (1975) did attach some considerations a Muslim must take into account before involving with any sporting activity. Contemplation to engage in any sport activities must be made in relation to Islamic principles, for example Muslims must not expose their modesty in revealing sport attires. Islam has specific guidelines on what is considered modest attire and what is not. This may appear to be nonsensical to a Non Muslim but to a Muslim there is an underlying wisdom to the principles if one so chooses to seek for it, or would just rather adhere to the principles and accept as Divine Ordination.

The Qur'an and the Sunnah are replete with references to sport. It must be pointed out however that although sport during the times of the prophet and modern, Western sport activities are in vastly different formats, the principles, goals and spirits of sports for Muslims ought to remain the same. In the Qur'an, in Surah Yusuf verse 17, the brothers of the Prophet Yusuf were saying their father, the Prophet Ya'qub

“O father, we went racing with one another” (12:17).

The term '*nastabiq*' in the original Arabic clearly refers to a type of competition the brothers claimed they participated in (Hendricks, 1998). In the collection of Hadiths of both Bukhari and Muslim, it was recorded that when the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) entered Medina after the Hijrah from Makkah, the Ethiopians celebrated his arrival with a display of their prowess at spear throwing. The Prophet himself was, as mentioned earlier, an excellent wrestler by the fact that he had beaten Rukana, the master of wrestling at the time. It is also fascinating that as a result of his defeat, Rukana embraced Islam.

On the other hand, 'Modern sport' has been argued to be one of the derivatives of the Universalist agenda. Modern sport came to the Muslim communities through colonialization and subsequent 'modernization' attempts (for example Malaysia and Brunei under the British and Indonesia under the Dutch). While making outstanding progress in other public spheres such as administration and commercial sectors, the participation of Muslim women in sports is, by Western standard, dismal and uneven (Sfeir, 1985). Many studies in this area are dedicated to finding out the 'constraining' factors that Islam/Muslim communities have over Muslim women.

A study by Walseth and Fasting (2003) on Egyptian women interpreting Islam's view on physical activity and sport, summarizes that especially in Egypt, the engagement in sports by women in Muslim society is rather complex. Walseth and Fasting observe that while Guttmann (Walseth & Fasting, 2003, p. 56) emphasizes that doing modern sports today is a totally secular phenomenon, the informants in the research indicate that their engagement in modern sports was "because they want to please God." The study found that Muslim women, particularly those who interpret Islam to be a political ideology find a non-secular relationship between sport and Islam. The informants believed that Islam encouraged their involvement in sports and it relates to the concept of 'Ibadah (Worship) whereby they believed that by participating in activities that are encouraged by Islam will increase their chance of getting into heaven. The complexities mentioned by Walseth and Fasting in their study are rooted in different interpretations of the legal provisions within the Muslim societies and the Muslim world. The intricacies of interpreting the sources of Islam (and the Sharia'), the Qur'an, The Prophetic Traditions (Hadiths) and other secondary sources that were often so-

cio-culturally influenced should also be taken into consideration. The realities of Muslim women's lives are intertwined within these circumstances and must be addressed accordingly. In the face of a modern and secular phenomenon, Egyptian Muslim women appear to take refuge in their own understanding and interpretation of the Sharia.

In a study by Radzi (2006) which highlighted the experiences of Malay Muslimin³ and Muslimah⁴ athletes in elitist, competitive sports describes that although the setting of the sports is steeped in Western conception and ideals, Malay Muslim athletes appear to overcome the odds of preserving the Malay Muslim identity while at the same time participating in the event, in particular, the 22nd SEA [South East Asian] Games. The experiences illustrated in this project vary considerably. Some Muslim athletes claimed that they do not face much difficulty adjusting themselves in a regional/international event while others struggled in order to be able to still compete without compromising their faiths in the process.

These differences of difficulty level faced by the respondents could be attributed to many factors: level of Islamic education, family background and many others. One thing is clear however, that a Muslim athlete could not tolerate the total abandonment of Islamic principles and belief system while competing in an international event. The intricacy of generalizing the experiences of the Muslim athlete in this research echoed that of Walseth and Fasting's research. Hitherto, the area of research on Muslim women athletes/participants is still under researched to be able to give us a bigger picture on the condition of their participations and perceptions towards those participants. As there is very little data on Muslim women athlete/participants, there is still fewer research on women sport managers.

A similar condition is observed in the west. A brief analysis (from 1998 to 2010) of the Journal of Sport Management publication, a prominent journal in sport management study based in the US yield less than 10 researches done on the subject of women in sport employment. Moore, Parkhouse and Konrad (2001) when discussing the status of women managers in the US Sport industry admit that there exists gender inequality

³ Arabic - Muslim Men

⁴ Arabic - Muslim Women

in terms of employment advancement opportunities. According to Moore et al. (2001, p. 51)

The gender inequalities shown in the managerial rank of sport organizations are affected by the (HRM) systems ... the result is sex segregation of the labor force and substantial earnings and differential between women and men.

While women are making strides in other professions, women in sport management are still struggling to make their presence felt⁵. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is also very few information on Malaysian women sport managers prior to this article. What we do have is the condition of women in general which is discussed in the following section.

Malaysian Women: Current Condition

It is an undisputed fact that women play a major role in Malaysia, understandably as they form almost 50 percent of the country's population. In 2003, the population of Malaysia was 23 million with a projected increase of 28 percent (32 million) by 2015. The ethnic composition of the Malaysian population in 2003 is as follows: *Bumiputra*⁶ 62 percent, Chinese 24 percent, Indians 7 percent, Others 1 percent and Non Citizen 6 percent (UNDP 2005). As for population by gender, in 2003 the National Department of Statistics cited the population sex ratio was 104 male for every 100 female (2004). Malaysian women also have a higher life expectancy of 75.25 compared to Malaysian men (70.69) (UNDP, 2005). In terms of contribution to the labour force, in 2002 women accounted for 35.8 percent of total labour participation rate with almost 3.4 million women in employment (National Department of Statistics, 2004). In Malaysia today, it is acceptable that women now generally

⁵ Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. (2007). *Women 2000 and Beyond: Published to Promote the Goals of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action - Women, gender equality and sport*. New York: Author.

⁶ Malay - Sons of the Soil (Original Settler)

work alongside men in various aspects of life, be it economics or politics (Ishak & Abbas, 1996). The demands of modern life in contemporary Malaysia could be said to have initiated this change of situation, as traditional societal life indicates that a woman's place is at home (Omar & Hamzah, 2003).

Overall, Malaysian women could be said to have a comfortable existence in Malaysia, although there are still areas that could be improved upon. With policies that are sensitive to the needs of women in general, the government continues to find ways that could further assist the women in general. The establishment of the National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) is an example of some of the governmental efforts towards that end. Malay Muslim women play a major role in the development of the newly industrialized Malaysian Nation. However, the legacy of patriarchal society and western segmentation of Muslim could not be totally eradicated. Many Malay Muslim women are still having taxing, dual-role responsibilities: at home and in the office and with little choice, they are expected to soldier on, whatever the circumstances. Ariffin (2000) further adds that the position of Malay Muslim women in Malaysia could be improved especially with a good, women-friendly legal system and the implementation of a just Muslim Family and Personal Laws. With regard to engagement in sport and other physical activities, there are evidences that point to the active role Muslim women play as athletes and participants but very little on women sport managers.

Muslim Women Sport Managers in Malaysia: Perceptions and Experiences

Ishak and Abbas (1996) conducted a study on Malaysian women's leisure time and space. While not distinguishing Malay Muslimah from women of other faiths, the study observed that generally Malaysian women devote little time to physical leisure activities. However, compared to their predecessors, Malaysian women are 'better off' as they now have more leisure activities to choose from although it (the leisure activities) may be more costly than those practised by their predecessors. For their conclusion, Ishak and Abbas (1996) considers whether or not the active participation of Malaysian women in the employment sectors was actually

a bane rather than a boon for local women involvement in sports. As women became more work-driven, they begin to have less leisure time as more often than not, women still have household chores and childcare responsibilities to attend to in their non-working hours. As a result, the priorities given to sports will be diminished compared to and in favour of household and childcare responsibilities.

Women partaking in organized sports and sports associations are still lower than their male counterparts. The Office of the Sport Commissioners in August 2004 gave the total membership of Peninsula Malaysia's sports associations/organizations as 262,889 of which almost 35 percent of the members are women (91,174). However at this point there are still no comprehensive data in relation to the numbers of women holding leadership positions at those sports associations/organizations. A summary from a survey conducted on women sports executives at all 1365 registered national and state levels, sports associations and/or organizations in Peninsular Malaysia regarding the profile of women sports managers in Malaysia is illustrated in Table 1. below:

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Malaysian Women Sport Managers.

| Survey Population | National and State level sports associations in Peninsular Malaysia <i>Total Questionnaire sent out : 1365 Total accepted: 353 (26%)</i> |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Age range | <i>40-49 years old (28%)</i> |
| Ethnic group | <i>Malay (67%)</i> |
| Religion | <i>Islam (69%)</i> |
| Marital status | <i>Married (52%)</i> |
| Dependants | <i>No children (52.8%)</i> |
| Education | <i>First Degree (46%)</i> |
| Employment sectors | <i>Public (71%)</i> |
| Participation in competitive sports | <i>No (75%)</i> |

It appears that a woman sports manager in Malaysia today is a middle-aged Malay Muslim female. She is married, educated with an average of a bachelor's degree, and with no childcare responsibility presently. She is also working in the public sector and interestingly, has no experience in competitive sports.

From the survey questionnaires, several individuals were identified and

selected for further interview sessions to probe for more information. When asked about their perceptions on Islam and sports, a wealth of interesting perspectives were able to be sourced out from the selected interviewees. A sports manager asked about the attire of her Muslim athletes said:

No, I do not think it is a problem at all or it poses some sort of hindrance or problems to these women. In UM for example, the majority of the female Muslim athletes are wearing the veil. Even when competing in major events or tournaments. They are actively involved in events such as jogging, running, badminton even going to the gym. Wearing the veil has never posed any problem for them in any way. (Interviewee no. 5, 20 August 2007)

Although it is a common practice for Malaysian Muslim women to wear the veil, the choices were apparently made consciously by the Muslim women themselves. In the sample of interviewees, there are two Malay Muslims who chose not to wear the veil. One interviewee, a public university sports unit director commented on her decision to wear the veil although initially she did not wear the veil while being actively involved in sports.

I am speaking from my own experience however. When I was playing sports in my varsity days, I wore shorts but because of my increased awareness and understanding of my religion that it is a must for them to cover their 'modesty,' to not reveal their hair and wear shorts. As an administrator and coach now, I always remind my subordinates or student-athletes on the matter. We do not encourage them to wear shorts. In fact, we provided them with tracksuits. (Interviewee no. 16, 3 June 2007)

She attributed her 'increased awareness of my religion' as being the reason why she chose to wear the veil. In contrast, another interviewee, a Malay Muslim sport officer, who does not wear the veil, while not be-

ing asked directly about her conscious choice of Islamic attire, illustrated that the choice to wear Islamic attire depended on a situation. In a way this reflected her personal stand about choosing not to wear the veil. She interpreted the choice that having a good intention at heart with positive attitude and aspirations of a Muslim does not necessarily equates wearing the veil

So I said, this comes back to sport, as I said in netball, our girls wear short skirts because that is more convenient, but I did also ask, because I was a bit worried, whether what the girls are doing could be wrong for them in Islam, I did asked some of the persons who are knowledgeable in Islam, Tan Sri Dr. Abdul Hamid Osman, before he became the religious advisor to the Prime Minister, he said the most important thing is what is your intention, if your intention is to wear your brief costume so that you can play better and the idea is to win, so that Muslim women could win, then it is otherwise permissible, but, if you wear the short skirts and all that, and the idea is to show off your beautiful legs and all that then of course it is not permissible, it is haram- prohibited. (Interviewee no. 8, 23 December 2007)

On the issue of women leadership, when talking about the qualities of a woman manager, an interviewee perceived that women are equipped to handle the pressures of work in today's competitive environment. She based these assumptions on the traditional role of women in Malaysian society, that of a household manager.

Women are also becoming very adept with the intense business environment of today. This environment requires that the manager is able to multi-task and with good negotiating and people skills as well as exceptional communication and public relations skills and women managers are providing it. I mean, women have been multi-tasking for as long as anyone

can remember. In this respect I have a great admiration of my mother. Although she is a housewife, you were constantly surprised with her ability to do everything simultaneously and perfectly and just because she did not go to school never meant that she is not an intellectual. She is very sharp, and she is a key decision-maker in the household. So the point that I am trying to make is that these traits came naturally to women, which will become their advantages. Women in my opinion are natural managers. (Interviewee no. 7, 5 June 2007)

Another interviewee, even favours women managers over men, based on the same inherent qualities cited by this particular respondent, that is the manager of the household:

Now, when talking about women managers, sometimes I think women managers are much better than male managers, don't you? (Laughs). I mean, I read somewhere that there has been researches done in the UK or somewhere that stated that women are much better at managing than their male counterparts. The survey asks employers who would they choose to employ and a surprising many said they would much rather employ female managers? Why? Well I think the answer is simple, women are thorough, very careful and reliable. They are the managers of their household, surely, these traits would become handy when applied to a different administrative setting. I am confident that women managers can deliver. (Interviewee no. 1, 4 August 2007)

When asked about how she felt working under a female superior, a Malay Muslim female sports officer she cited that according to her, her new boss is more detailed than a male boss would be.

It is all right. Except that sometimes, a woman is a little bit fussy than man, but I suppose that is normal...Yes, when I first

came in here, I was the only female, for others are male, so, I am adjusting to her way of leadership. She will demand a few things and she will want justification on certain matters. Since she is a senior officer, she could be quite bossy, it is hard to please her. Sometimes I will argue with her but sometimes I do feel that what she is doing is right. The reason why she is angry, she has the right to. She is trying to run things here and everyone needed to cooperate and report to her and she has to make decisions, so I suppose it is just us trying to understand her. (Interviewee no. 6, 13 August 2007)

This interviewee was asked further about the notions of Malay Muslim leadership that seem to favour male leaders

I suppose I saw in my line of work several women who are in power. I think not all women could be in power to lead, as they are emotional human beings, me included and could make foolish mistakes. That is why Allah said that men could be leaders as they have only one lusts, if the government is to collapse it is because of this one lusts, so if they can handle it they will be good leaders. Women have many lusts, so many distractions. If you want to find a good woman leader you must search carefully. The thing is I don't want to say that men make the best leader. I agree that they are endowed with inherent qualities but I suppose individually we all try to be good leaders in our own way. Although I do admit that I could be quite irrational and emotional at times. (Interviewee no. 6, 13 August 2007)

On the issue of leadership qualities, one interviewee does not distinguish from either sex in terms of recruitment requirements, so long as the candidate is able to deliver:

In my opinion, women sports leaders will do just as fine as

men and we should allow them the opportunity. However that said, there is no free ride, they must earn it as much as the men. They must show their capabilities and competencies. I look for this kind of characters in my recruitment requirements, I put aside the gender factor and looked at their skills and competencies, then I know at least I am being fair to all quarters. (Interviewee no. 2, 4 August 2007)

In terms of women's involvement in sport management, the Director of Special projects at the National Sport Center perceived that in terms of sports development, women are making a very slow progress.

I'd say we are moving very slow and by right there should be hundred or more movements in Malaysia but what we have now is very limited and we just have one National Women in Sport Committee we don't have states women and sports committee and that is very bad. (Interviewee no. 10, 7 March 2007)

The interviewee was a former international athlete and is now working as a sports psychologist at the National Sport Institute. She is concerned about the Women Commission work not being able to reach out to many more women across the country:

Because we cannot cover the whole country we can be here but those people in Klang Valley they can benefit from this organization but not throughout the country of course we had seminars and carnivals but I don't think we can reach as far as Sabah, Sarawak, Perlis so there should be such organization all over the country. (Interviewee no. 10, 7 March 2007)

In addition, she claimed that the national sports associations are not concerned about encouraging women in sports leadership, including the women sports associations:

Don't tell me you have 25 places but there isn't one deserving case of women coach there. So things like this as much as I've to say I blamed the women counterparts they don't really grab the opportunity by being aggressive and assertive but at the same time the system aren't supporting enough... Yes, exactly I didn't know in other countries but I think it is a forgotten domain, they didn't bother to encourage women in sports we don't have any NGOs who really take care of involvement of women in sports and even the sports associations be it MAAU, basketball and all that they don't really bother to developed women's leadership in sports because ladies basketball team for instance still hired male coach. Don't tell me this so many years with all the resigned national players we don't have one capable candidate to train to become a coach?. (Interviewee no. 10, 7 March 2007)

The interviews deliberate and discuss the issues of the women sport leadership in Islam as experienced and perceived by the respondents. The exercise managed to map out the similarities and differences of the practices of Islam in relation to women's leadership and illustrate and articulate the Malaysian Muslim women experiences and involvement in leadership in the local sport management.

Concluding Remarks

Clearly, for Muslim women to engage in sports as a participant or as a sports manager there are various considerations that must be taken beforehand. To a Muslim, Islam is a complete set of beliefs where every matter in a Muslim's life is provided with Divine guidelines through the Qur'an and the Sunnah. To a Westerner, it may sound constricting and confining and that a Muslim has no freedom to do whatever she/he chooses to do. To a Muslim, life is balances that must be weighed in very carefully. Muslims have a set of priorities in Life and to be successful in this life is a matter of successfully balancing life's priorities.

On the issue of women's engagement in sports, there are instances

where the notion of 'favourable' is challenged. It appears that while women were making strides in general matters, the same could not be said to the conditions of women in sports. The structural barriers for the engagement of women in sports were present among other political, socio-cultural as well as psychological barriers.

What is clear is that a generalizing assumption could never be made about Muslim women sports managers. What's interesting from the data is that it conforms to as well as challenges general assumptions about Malaysian (especially Malay Muslim) women. Malay Muslim women were considered generally to be more "reserved" and were not expected to engage in sports leadership compared to other Malaysian women. This was clearly not the case as more Muslim women than other women were engaged in sports leadership. One reason could be due to the fact that Malay Muslims account for the largest group in the survey sample, which actually corresponds to the general Malaysian population. At the very least, this article is hoped to encourage discussions and debates about the condition of Muslim women engagement in sports leadership, to find new meaning and evaluations and to suggest new research topics on the field of sports management, with particular reference to Muslim women engaging in sports.

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